

Popular Islam and the “vertical of power” during and after Soviet rule

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The USSR declared freedom of speech, of religion, of forming religious associations, and permitted the practice of one’s rites and other activities by religious communities. In practice, the rights and activities of believers were strictly curtailed, churches and prayer houses were destroyed, religious leaders were shot and put into camps.

The most important imperative for Soviet power was to establish its nomenclature in charge in all areas of life. Lenin’s main question was always that of retaining and maintaining power. For this reason, the Bolsheviks had the capacity to be fluid and not always dogmatic in their attitude to religion, and sometimes they even used it.

In the first days after the October seizure of power, the Soviet government issued a decree “To All Working Muslims of Russia and the East.” It promised Muslims the birth of a new world, in which “your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions are free and untouchable. Build your national life freely and without obstacles. Know that these are your rights and that yours and the rights of all peoples of Russia will be defended by the revolution and its organs...”¹

Using such declarations and propaganda, the Bolsheviks attracted a significant part of the Muslim population. In January 1921 a Congress of Peoples of the North Caucasus recognized Soviet power on the condition that its representatives would respect shariat and adat. Avtorkhanov argues that the Soviet Mountain Republic that was the result was “unnatural.” It was represented by flags that bore Soviet emblems but the law of the republic was Shariat law, and public offices were decorated with portraits of Shamil and his naibs rather than that of Lenin, as in every other Soviet republic. Avtorkhanov also points to the deportation of several Cossack stanitsas from the Terek to the interior of Russia while their land went to Chechens and Ingush (who had been driven from the pre-mountain areas in the 19th century).²

After the Civil war, the Bolsheviks began the attack on religious customs of the North Caucasus peoples. At first this policy was masked. A variety of methods were used to discredit religious authorities, alims, preachers, and the attempt was made to promote those who were obedient and corruptible. Terrible waves of violence occurred in the years 1928-1933 and during the Great Terror. In the Caucasus, 4,000 mosques were closed (cf. to 7,000 in the Urals, over 14,000 in the Crimea and Turkestan). Estimates that up to 50,000 mullahs and muezzins perished in camps and prisons (18,000 in the Urals).³

I would like to focus on events among the Chechens, whose resistance to Soviet power is well documented. Their resistance was described as “banditry” even as secret reports made it clear that “these are direct uprisings of entire regions (Galanchozh) in which the entire population is participating in armed activities.”⁴

In the deportation, the spiritual experience of the Chechens deepened, because of the harsh trials they were subjected to and their mystical proclivities. In Sufi brotherhoods, only the morally strongest and most just leaders earned the respect and authority. One example is the *wird* of Vis Hadj Zagiev. In the 1950s, in Kazakhstan, Vis Hadj told his miurids that he had established a spiritual connection to Kunta-hadj, who had given him the task of preaching a “pure path”

¹ Декреты Советской власти. М., 1957. Т. 1. С. 114-115.

² А. Г. Авторханов Убийство чечено-ингушского народа. Народоубийство в СССР, Глава 3, стр3 <http://old.zhaina.com/articles/10/4/>

³ Вооруженное сопротивление Советской власти в Чечне и Ингушетии

⁴ РГВА. Ф.25896. Оп.9.Д.350. Л.31

(«чистый путь»). He promised his followers that on Judgement Day they would enter a beautiful oasis (“Khazrat Moxkh”), always lush and green, the air filled with aroma of lemons – and taught that Allah calls believers to labor. Any job, any work ought to be done in the joyous recognition that it was for Allah – with the exception of work in tobacco factories or in alcohol production. Because of their ceaseless labor and the ease with which they could be mobilized, this group was left alone by the authorities.

After the deportation, official religion in the restored Chechen-Ingush republic was strictly controlled. There was not a single registered mosque (!) between 1957 and 1980, regardless of the great number of Muslims in the republic. Alims, mullahs were strictly controlled, government employees and party members who went to Islamic funerals and weddings were subject to harassment. A secret report for the Central Committee pointed out that Chechen and Ingush believers practiced shariat and sufi rituals like the zikr, and that the members of Sufi Quadiria and Naqshbandi brotherhoods (about 30 in each tradition) did not live compactly, but were distributed all across the republic and that some villages contained representatives of practically all the various brotherhoods. “It is difficult to find villages with less than 1-2, or even more active religious groups. Even the most modest estimates suggest that the republic contains more than 300 sects and groups with more than 15000 members.”⁵

At a time when not one mosque was officially registered (while the republic had two orthodox churches, a Baptist House of Worship), officials were concerned that thousands of men in each village were members in such organizations, and that over 500 mullahs and religious leaders were active. In 1970, their analysis suggested that the absence of a single mosque had “ceased to be a purely religious problem” and was “discussed by wide circles in the intelligentsia, among youth, and not rarely taken by them to mean a misrecognition of their national rights, meaning continued suspicion of them; and it is also this factor on which count certain circles abroad.”⁶

Soviet power established a type of imperial rule in the Caucasus that emphasized outward displays of loyalty and rule of society through bureaucratic and repressive apparatus. Under this system there was very little integration of the population into the Soviet apparatus. There was no rehabilitation after the deportation, Chechens could not register to live in Grozny, were openly discriminated against at work, the men seasonally leaving the republic to work in Kazakhstan and Siberia. Almost to the end of the Soviet regime, no Chechen or Ingush became leader of the republic, even as second-in-command.

In this condition, Islam went underground. The position of Sufi spiritual authorities and of the brotherhoods was strengthened. While no mosque was registered, in 1969, 10 out of 12 villages had half-restored unregistered mosques and mosques that were in the process of being built. A 1969 report complained that religious authorities had a “serious influence on various aspects of the lives of the population. They get involved in private life, dictate certain decisions, and tell believers how to act in this or the other situation.”⁷ In Nazran raion, religious authorities formed a skhod that issued written “Excerpts from the Decisions of the Skhod” such as decrees on the size of restitution in cases of murder (5,000 rubles in 1969), the size of kalym (1,000 rubles and one sheep) and other norms relating to funerals, divorces, blood revenge, and so on.⁸ People created completely parallel structures to the state that decided many issues besides purely religious ones. In 1982 the party boss of the republic, A. Vlasov, was forced to conclude “that

⁵ ЦХСД. Ф. 5. Оп. 62. Д. 38. <http://www.islam.ru/pressclub/histori/sedo4in/> ПолитРу

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ЦХСД. Ф. 5. Оп. 62. Д. 38. <http://www.islam.ru/pressclub/histori/sedo4in/> ПолитРу

⁸ ЦХСД. Ф. 5. Оп. 62. Д. 38. <http://www.islam.ru/pressclub/histori/sedo4in/>

on the threshold of the 7th decade of the revolution there is still no Soviet power beyond Grozny. It is limited by religious and teip leaders who make all decisions in place of Soviet authorities.⁹

The organizations that were supposed to deal with this were extremely varied, but in reality the only important one was the KGB. The Chekists' "religious work" consisted of the construction of a network of informers, harassment, and only sometimes (after the 1970s) open violence.¹⁰ The first mosque was registered in the ChIASSR in 1980s, but persecution continued. In 1986, in the period of Gorbachev's perestroika, the CC of the KPSS issued resolutions such as "About the Intensification of the Struggle with the Influence of Islam," which focused to a large degree on the ChIASSR. Supposedly the number of miurids was reduced between 1981 and 1987 from 10,000 to 5,800 people.¹¹

Difficult to say if these figures are reliable or show KGB reluctance to accept realities of perestroika. The most important point is that the repressive-KGB style approach to religion survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the late 1980s, the KGB "helped" organize various Islamic parties and movements, and actively prepared "cadres" for the mosques that were opening. Centres that dealt with Islamic exchange and study abroad programs were undermined by former KBG employees.

When at the end of the 1980s theologians from the Middle East appeared in the Caucasus, and started to preach, at first cautiously, orthodox Islam, and when full-fledged politicized Islam appeared in the 1990s with the formation of djamaats that saw themselves as an opposition to the traditional sufi leaders, these processes took place with a large KGB involvement as well. Some of the ideologues of the Chechen "democratic revolution" were certainly former KGB. The initial congress of the "Islamic Revival" movement in the summer in 1990 took place outside of the republic, at the DOSAAF headquarters in Astrakhan (not to be confused with Gantamirov's Islamic Path organization). The Chechen delegation was headed by Akhmad Mataev and Adam Deniev (who would soon call himself a "prophet" and the "caliph of all Muslims of the World"). In reality, this "prophet" served as a colonel in the KGB, and his younger brother Gazi-Mohamed was a major in it. According to Musa Temishev (himself one of the new ideologues) the entire affair turned out to have been a grand spectacle organized by the repressive apparatus of the collapsing "evil empire."¹² The KGB and its successor organizations supported opponents of sufism as well as pro-Moscow leaders (the more obvious choice).

The questions I would like to see discussed are the involvement of the KGB and of the power institutions in Islamization (what do participants know about other regions and incidents) and in particular the central power's support for opponents of sufism and of the traditional religious leaders who saw the people through all the years of deportation and Soviet rule. It is not they who led the nation into a disastrous war, but the new movements and parties created in the 1990s. The chaos and Muslim-on-Muslim violence that ultimately resulted has allowed the political rulers to strengthen their "vertical of power" – not only in Chechnya.

⁹ Максаков И. "Я благодарен судьбе за этот урок" (интервью с представителем в Москве президента Чеченской Республики Ичкерия Вачагаевым) // Независимая газ. - 2000. - 19 февр.

¹⁰ Выдержки из справок о результатах работы и из отчетов об итогах организационной и агентурно-оперативной деятельности 4 отдела 5 управления КГБ СССР
ЦА КГБ ф.1, оп.5, пор. N 360, д. 360

¹¹ Ермаков И., Микульский Д. Ислам в России и Средней Азии. - М., 1993.- С. 23-24.

¹² Информация к размышлению...Отрывок из книги Мусы Темишева, Chechenews.com
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