

FOR PROPHET AND TSAR  
Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia

by Robert D. Crews

Harvard University Press

ISLAM IN RUSSIA  
The Politics of Identity and Security

By Shireen T. Hunter

M.E. Sharpe

Reviewed by Orlando Figes

Muslim leaders today like to boast that Islam arrived in Russia before Christianity. Muslims brought their religion to Russia from the Arabian peninsula in the first centuries of Islam, long before the arrival of Christianity on the Eurasian steppe. By the end of the first millenium, when the pagan prince of Kievan Rus' converted to Byzantine Christianity, there were substantial Muslim communities in the Caucasus, the Volga region, the Central Asian steppe, the Urals and Siberia. The Mongol hordes adopted Islam during their long occupation of Russia from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, and many of their Tatar tribesmen stayed behind in Russia when the Golden Horde was pushed back to Mongolia. As the Russian empire extended south and east, by conquest, trade and the collaboration of indigenous élites, the contingent of its Muslim population steadily increased. The Muslims of the Crimea and the steppelands north of the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea were incorporated into the empire by Catherine the Great in the eighteenth century; the Caucasus themselves were conquered in the early nineteenth century, although the Russians never really quelled the Muslim hill-tribes of Daghestan and Chechnya; and from the 1860s the Russian army pushed the empire's frontier deep into the Kazakh steppe and Central Asia, subjugating rich and ancient centers of Islamic piety and scholarship in

Tashkent, Kokand, Bukhara and Samarkand. By the end of the nineteenth century there were more Muslims governed by the tsar than by the Ottoman sultan.

The encounter between Russia and the Muslim world has been perceived by most observers as a simple tale of imperial conquest and confrontation epitomized by Russia's long and often brutal war with the Muslim rebels in Chechnya and Daghestan (a conflict that goes back to the nineteenth century, when the Daghestani warlord Imam Shamil led the Muslim hill-tribes of the northern Caucasus in a fierce campaign against the Russian army from 1825 to 1859). In this scenario of resistance and suppression Russia's southern border represents a crucial front in the 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and Christianity; the recent war in Chechnya is a return to the 'natural state of conflict' between these religious traditions after the collapse of the artificial peace imposed by the Soviet regime. But as Robert Crews reminds us in his scholarly and timely book *For Prophet and Tsar*, the conflict in the northern Caucasus was in fact unusual in a history of peaceful co-existence and collaboration between Russia and the Muslim world before 1917. The tsar's armies conquered Muslim territories and suppressed resistance but his officials also managed to win the allegiance of his Muslim subjects by making Islam and its attendant hierarchies (clerics, legal scholars and mosque communities) a central institution of imperial rule. As a result of tsarist policies, Crews maintains, 'Muslim men and women came to imagine the imperial state as a potential instrument of God's will' (20), and engaged with it to renegotiate their own relationship with Islam as loyal subjects of the tsar.

The linkages between the imperial state and religious institutions have been overlooked by previous historians of the Russian empire (and other empires too) who have focused almost exclusively on secular affairs and on the rise of nationalism as the key to understanding the unravelling of imperial rule. Yet, as Crews maintains, the tsar grounded his authority, not in his support of ethnic or national categories, but in his defence of faiths (tsarist law obliged every subject to belong to a confessional group), and through its commitment to religious toleration the tsarist state was able to 'govern with less violence, and with a greater degree of consensus, than historians have previously imagined' (8). There was no large-scale deportation or mass conversion of the Muslims by the tsar's imperial officials, who were generally tolerant towards Islam, largely as a matter of imperial policy, to curry favour with Muslim populations in newly-conquered territories and the near-abroad, but also from

respect for its monotheism, which in their perception put it on a par with Christianity: polytheistic pagans, like the Komi people of the Russian north, were forcibly converted to Christianity (a contrast Crews might have explored). As Crews shows, Tsarist Russia enjoyed relative stability in its Muslim territories compared to its main imperial rivals – the British and the French in Africa and Asia and the Habsburgs in the Balkans - which were less systematic and less skilful in their co-option of native religious élites. The resistance of the Muslim tribes in Daghestan and Chechnya was the one big exception to this rule, though even there a large proportion of the Muslim population was opposed to the rebel bands, which were partly recruited from foreign Sufi brotherhoods. But otherwise there were no major uprisings (only a few localized revolts) against tsarist rule in the half-century between the Russian conquest of Tashkent in 1865 and the First World War. Western states struggling to gain the allegiance of their Muslim citizens may learn a lot from the example of the Russian empire in the nineteenth century.

## 2

Crews begins his study during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-96), when cameralist ideas of religious toleration were applied by the empress to her new Muslim subjects in the Crimea and the Caspian littoral as a means of reinforcing state authority, which the cameralists maintained could be achieved by the regulation of tolerated confessions. Essentially, Catherine saw religious toleration as an instrument of imperial control and expansion: it would ease relations between Muslims and Russian settlers and officials in the restless frontier zones of the empire and win over Muslim intermediaries in neighbouring states. But studies of the ‘Turkish creed’ by European scholars had also convinced her that Islam was not very different from Christianity in its basic beliefs and commandments, in its church-like institutions, religious laws and hierarchies, which the tsarist state could use to add divine authority to the more conventional sanctions of imperial rule.

Catherine established a centralized ecclesiastical hierarchy to subordinate the empire’s Muslims to the bureaucracy in St Petersburg. In 1788 she appointed a Muhammadan Ecclesiastical Assembly in Ufa (later moved to Orenburg) to administer the religious life of her Muslim subjects under the direction of the state.

The Assembly was meant to play the role of an official church in a Muslim culture where no such institution had been known before. Led by the Sunni cleric and legal scholar Mukhamedzhan Khusianov, it licensed Muslim clergy, gave interpretations of Islamic doctrine and Shari'a law, received appeals from the laity against decisions by their mosques, and supervised the growing network of Muslim schools.

Until Khusianov's death, in 1824, the Assembly was dogged by allegations of venality, and, as Crews reveals, its influence on the mosque communities remained rather weak. But in the reign of Nicholas I (1825-55) its powers were enlarged and reinforced by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which looked to it as an instrument of imperial administration. The Assembly issued fatwas urging Muslims to support the tsar. It made all mullahs swear an oath of allegiance to the imperial family and conduct prayers for them from the pulpits of their mosques. It translated imperial laws into Islamic doctrine: military service, hygienic practices, industry and higher education were all interpreted as religious duties, defined by citations from the Qu'ran and made compulsory by fatwas issued by the Assembly. In a landmark case of 1834, which highlighted its primary allegiance to imperial authority, the Assembly issued a fatwa to instruct compliance with a controversial law directing Muslims to wait three days before burying their dead, and record such deaths with the police, even though the new law was in flagrant contravention of the Islamic tradition of burial on the same day. There had been cases of people being buried over-hastily, before they were dead, to avoid the wrath of God.

In the Assembly the Russian empire found an agency to moderate Islamic influence and bring it into line with its own demands of state and moral norms. Licensed mufti and mullahs counteracted extremists and jihadists, who called on Muslims to take up arms against the Russian empire or flee from it as a 'House of War' or a 'House of Unbelief.' They helped the state to root out Muslim schismatics, Sufi mystics and extremists, who threatened to unsettle the mosque communities and stir rebellion against the imperial authorities.

As Crews shows, the state handled the Muslim clergy with considerable skill. It supported the building of mosques and the opening of madrasas, some of which became important centers of Islamic learning in the Muslim world. It gradually improved the position of Muslim clerics to put them on a par with the Othodoxy

clergy. But it also gave a voice to the lay communities and encouraged anti-clericalism to keep Islam weak and divided.

In perhaps the best chapter of the book, a richly detailed investigation of the state's attempts to bring Shari'a law on the family closer to the norms of secular and Orthodox canon law, Crews shows how the tsar's officials intervened in family disputes and supported the appeals of Muslim women in particular to reconfigure the customary ('traditional') interpretation of Islamic justice in line with their own conception of domestic and imperial order. Objecting to the Muslim practices of polygamy, bride abduction, and forced marriages, imperial officials sought out the cooperation of Muslim scholars, grounded in the moderate Hanafi legal school, to validate their rulings in these family disputes in support of Muslim women's rights to divorce, property, and physical safety by making reference to Islamic textual authorities.

Increasingly, the imperial state turned to its own experts in Islamic law, as the new European science of oriental studies took off in Russian universities (a subject on which Crews might have said more). As the emphasis shifted from the legal opinions of Muslim clerics and intermediaries to the interpretation of Islamic texts, the state found it easier to restructure Muslim jurisprudence in line with its legal system by imposing binding precedents. Mirza Alexander Kazem-Bek, a Muslim convert to Christianity and a legal scholar at Kazan University, perhaps the most important Russian centre of Oriental studies in the nineteenth century, played a crucial role in interpreting Islamic law for the imperial bureaucracy. Following his transfer to St Petersburg University in 1849, he worked behind the scenes at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, reviewing cases sent to the capital on appeal, and clarified Islamic legal texts, which were full of inconsistencies, on various matters of civil law. By the 1860s, Kazem-Bek had become the indisputable authority on Islamic law, and his opinion, as Crews suggests, was usually decisive in upholding the decisions of 'state-backed Islamic authority' (184).

Engagement with Islam was crucially important to the Russian control of Central Asia in the last decades of the imperial regime. The nomads of the Kazakh steppe were basically pagan with a thin veneer of Islamic culture. Their migratory lifestyle kept them from constructing their own mosques and schools. From the time of Catherine the Great the Russians had supported the development of Islam among

the Kazakh pastoralists in the belief that it would encourage them to adopt a more 'civilized' way of life. By building mosques and schools, it was assumed, the Kazakh tribes would become more settled, turning from nomadic pastoralism to farming and trades, which could be taxed by the state. By the 1860s, however, Russian officials had begun to doubt the wisdom of relying on Islam as the only means of imperial leverage. The Kazakh ruling class, which collaborated in the Russian conquest of the region in return for a privileged position in the imperial administration, was not particularly religious, but it was proud of its Kazakh heritage. Wary of the role religion played in the anti-Russian movement in the northern Caucasus, where Shamil's forces had only just been defeated, the Russians turned to customary law (*adat*) and the tribal elders who administered it to perform the functions that elsewhere they assigned to the shari'a and the clerics in the mosques (a switch that was also made in the northern Caucasus).

In some ways perhaps, as Crews suggests, this new emphasis on rule by tribal custom was an attempt to equalize the Kazakh nomads with the Russian peasantry, which was also ruled by customary law following the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861. But it was also consistent with the imperial strategy of other colonial powers, such as the British in the Punjab or the French in North Africa, whose growing worries about Islam as a force of Western 'progress' and 'civilization' also led them to look instead towards the secular custom of the tribe as an alternative to Islamic law.

Like the British and the French, the Russians found that custom was no match for religion as a means of imperial control, not even among the Kazakhs. Without reliable Muslim clerics or effective regulation of religious life, Crews argues, the Kazakh steppe became a breeding ground for itinerant mullahs, who always had the potential to stir unrest among the Muslim poor.

Further south, in Central Asia, where Russian troops arrived in 1865, there were stronger Islamic institutions, well-developed networks of mosques, madrasas and clerical hierarchies, which made it easier for the imperial administration to take root, according to Crews. There were few other levers of imperial control in this distant outpost of the Russian empire, where outside the urban centers tsarist officials were very thinly spread. In 1910, Crews tells us, the Ferghana region (in present-day Uzbekistan) had a population of almost 2 million inhabitants, administered by only 58 Russian officials, two of whom were translators. Crews shows how in cities like

Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara the Russians interceded in religious disputes which had long divided these communities, disputes which intersected with struggles for the leadership of mosques, madrasas, endowments, and shrines, to reconfigure religious hierarchies and local political élites so that they depended on the new imperial administration and its patronage. He concludes that 'the deep interpenetration of Islamic controversies and tsarist administration account for the relative strength and durability of the imperial order in Central Asia' (260). There were occasional disturbances, cholera protests, and one rebellion, the Andizhan uprising of 1898, when the Kirghiz clashed with Russian settlers, but as Crews points out, the leader of the uprising, Dukchi Ishan,

sought not only to rid the area of Russians but also to forge a society that submitted fully to the Shari'a, sweeping aside what he saw as the corrupted religion of the established Sufis and scholars...For the most part, Muslims became more engaged in their everyday lives in fighting one another than in struggling against the regime. Local administrators stood ready to referee these contests (260).

*For Prophet and Tsar* is an original and revelatory book. Clearly written and well-researched, it sheds new light on the complex interactions between the imperial state and its Muslim subjects in a way that will illuminate contemporary debates about how to secure the allegiances of Muslim populations in modern Western states. Crews' analysis of the imperial politics of religion presents a cogent and persuasive explanation of the Russian empire's relative stability in its Muslim territories during the long nineteenth century. It is refreshing to see the question posed this way, not with a view to discovering the social forces that undermined the empire in the longer run, but with a view to understanding the sources of the empire's durability. For what strikes one about the Russian empire is not that it collapsed, as all empires do, but rather that it managed to survive so long (and resurrect itself in the Soviet era) in such a vast and backward land-mass as Eurasia, where the Russians were themselves no more than a large minority. The first national census of 1897 showed that Russians made up only 44 per cent of the empire's population, and that they were one of the

slowest-growing ethnic groups. The Muslim population, with its high birth-rate, was the fastest-growing ethnic group in the empire.

Crews is less convincing on these broader social forces, which destabilized the Russian empire in its final years. There is little in the book, for example, about the economic exploitation of the Muslim regions for raw materials, nor about the massive immigration of Russian agricultural settlers, who took over pastoral lands, though both did a lot to fuel resentment of imperial rule among the Muslim poor, who found in radical Islam an organizing force and ideology of defiance and resistance against their colonial masters. There is no more than a cursory discussion – almost as an afterthought in the book's final pages - of the Muslim civil rights movement that joined the Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 to bring down the structures of imperial rule.

### 3

In its handling of Islam the Soviet empire was clumsily oppressive compared to its tsarist predecessor. Opposed to all religions, the Communists set out from the 1920s to eradicate the Muslim judicial and educational institutions promoted by the tsar's officials in the nineteenth century; to rid the Muslim clergy of their pious endowments (the *waqf*); and to undermine Islam through propaganda and the persecution of mosque communities. Before 1917, there were 26,000 functioning mosques with 45,000 mullahs in the Russian empire; but by 1963 there just 400 mosques and 2,000 Muslim clergy left within the Soviet Union, according to statistics presented by Shireen Hunter in *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security*, a lucid study of the challenges confronting Russia at home and abroad in the Muslim world today.

Apart from closing mosques, the Soviet regime also pursued a policy of ethnic fragmentation by deporting Muslim populations (such as the transfer of the Chechens and Meskhetian Turks to Central Asia during the Second World War) and by including large minorities in Muslim republics and autonomous regions, such as the Tajik majorities of Bukhara and Samarkand who were included in Uzbekistan, or the Uzbeks who were left in Tajikistan and Kirgizstan.

In these conditions, where Muslim Soviet republics were too divided ethnically to develop national identities, Islam became an alternative identity for Muslims alienated by the Soviet system, and in time an organizing system and



ideology of resistance to Soviet rule. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in 1979, was a turning-point in this respect, not just because the Afghan rebels became a symbol of Islamic strength and defiance for Muslims in the Soviet Union, but perhaps more crucially because the mujahedin and their Pakistani and Saudi supporters established direct links with Soviet Muslims in Central Asia and elsewhere. As Hunter points out, many Soviet Muslims were exposed to the ideology and guerilla tactics of the mujahedin and other jihadists in the religious schools and military camps set up by the Muhammad Zia ul-Haq government of Pakistan on the Afghan-Pakistani frontier.

The Islamic revival that followed the collapse of the Soviet regime bore the imprint of these foreign extremists. In the northern Caucasus, in particular, alongside the Sufi brotherhoods of mainstream Islam, there was a rapid growth of religious and jihadist movements calling for the introduction of the Shari'a as the law of the land. The most influential of these movements has been inspired by the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab (Wahabbism), whose activists have been involved in many of the terrorist atrocities committed in the name of Chechen independence against Russian and Chechen citizens (*The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror* by Paul Murphy is a gruesome catalogue of their criminal activities, their bombings, hostage-takings, kidnapping and assassinations of thousands of innocent civilians since 1991, which is to be welcomed as a reminder that the Russian forces are not the only ones who have been guilty of atrocities in this brutal war).<sup>i</sup>

The Shahidists are perhaps the most extreme of the recent groups of jihadists to emerge in the northern Caucasus. Embracing martyrdom as a means of struggle against Russia, its members were involved in the Dubrovka theater siege in Moscow in October 2002, when at least 164 men, women, children and terrorists were killed. The Shahidists have also been involved in dozens of suicide bombings in Chechnya and North Ossetia, killings hundreds of people. Accounting for the growing influence of these extremists groups, Hunter points to the chronic problems of unemployment in the northern Caucasus and to the institutional weakness of mainstream Islam after sixty years of persecution by the Soviet regime, which left Russia vulnerable to the mass influx of foreign missionaries and Islamic teachers from countries where extremism had taken root. As Hunter demonstrates, there were close links between the Taliban in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda and the Chechen extremists, a claim long made by

the Russian government but never properly accepted by the West, where there was widespread sympathy for the Chechen fighters, until September 11.

The international war against Islamic terror has strengthened Russia's hand in its own struggle to secure its southern Muslim territories, where it has been vulnerable to the influence of Islamic extremists from Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. There are signs that the Chechen situation is beginning to be stabilized. The rebel movement has begun to splinter and move into the adjacent territories of Ingushetia and Daghestan since the deaths of Aslan Maskhadov, the main rebel leader, in March 2005, and the warlord Shamil Basaev, who was responsible for many of the worst atrocities by the Chechen terrorists, including the hostage-taking at a school in the southern Russian town of Beslan in September 2004. Increasingly, the Chechen rebels are not Chechens ethnically at all but Islamic extremists from abroad.

The Chechen population regards them as foreign invaders using their land as a battleground. It is exhausted by the war and will accept any peace that allows them to rebuild their shattered communities. The parliamentary elections of November 2005, however imperfect they may have been, have given the new pro-Russian government an opportunity to isolate the extremists and win popular support by reconstructing the country. But part of that endeavour must involve the construction of a genuinely democratic electoral system and the international monitoring of human rights, which have been abused by the often brutal methods of the Russian-backed authorities. The Kremlin should not fear democracy: according to polls conducted by the Sociological Center of the Chechen State University in the last three years, only one in five of the Chechen population supports Chechen independence from Russia.

Whatever happens in the Chechen conflict, Russia will increasingly become a Muslim country: the rapidly declining Russian birth-rate, which is now at about only 1.5 births per 100 women for ethnic Russians, compared with nearly 5 per 100 women for Muslim ethnic groups, will see to that. The Russian government will need to find a better means of winning the allegiance of its Muslim citizens than waging war on them. It needs to build a genuinely secular state with equal freedom of religion for all faiths. This will mean decoupling the state from Russian Orthodoxy, which was given a privileged position by the 1997 law 'On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations,' which recognized 'the special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia and to the development of Russia's spirituality and culture' (Hunter 117),

in spite of the Constitution of 1993, which defined the Russian Federation as a secular state without an official religion. Orthodox leaders have vocally supported the Russian military campaign in Chechnya, and at times have inflamed it by referring to it as a religious war between Orthodoxy and Islam.<sup>ii</sup> There is no place for such rhetoric if Russia is to forge a new relationship with its Muslim population. Islam must be fully accepted as an important part of Russia's cultural identity, and like its tsarist predecessor, the state must look for better ways to moderate and integrate its Muslim citizens.

---

<sup>i</sup> Paul Murphy, *The Wolves of Terror: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror* (Potomac Books, Washington, D.C., 2006).

<sup>ii</sup> On the relations between Orthodoxy and Islam since 1991 see Juliet Johnson, Marietta Stepaniants and Benjamin Forest (eds.), *Religion and Identity in Modern Russia: The Revival of Orthodoxy and Islam* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005).