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*Moscow's
Muslim
★ Challenge*

SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA



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Preface

Soviet Central Asia has come out of the backyards of history and now clamors for our attention. Bordering on both China and the Muslim Middle East, it appears on every map of the oil-producing countries of the Persian gulf as a huge northern mass suspended over its southern neighbors, a palpable geopolitical weight. Even more noteworthy is the fact that the area is inhabited by Muslim peoples, linked by race, religion, and tradition less to the Soviet northwest than to an Islamic south. And the numbers of Soviet Muslims are swelling, altering the internal ethnic balance in the USSR: by the year 2000 every second child born in the country is expected to be of Muslim origin. Practically unassimilable and indifferent to most Soviet values, the growing masses of Soviet Muslims (especially those of Central Asia) present a potential challenge to the Russian-dominated social order established in the USSR.

Obviously Muslims are not alone in their opposition to that order. Ukrainians, Georgians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Jews, and Volga Germans are, in fact, more vocal than the Muslims. But Ukrainians, even when nationalistic, are still culturally, linguistically, and ethnically close to the Russians and, whenever out of their own republic, regarded as akin to the latter. The small Baltic nations, deprived of independence by the 1939 Soviet-Nazi agreement, are simply not numerous enough to challenge Russian domination. Jews and Germans, though they have lived in Russia for several centuries, are torn between assimilation and emigration; they are increasingly attracted by the latter. Proud Georgians, difficult to deal with, still regard historically Christian Russia as a "lesser evil" in comparison to their Muslim neighbors to the south.

In order to subdue nationalist ferment within its borders,

Moscow has attempted to mold the peoples of the USSR into a "new Soviet people" grouped around a Russian ethnic core, adopting the Soviet variant of Russian culture as its common base and the Russian language as its *lingua franca*. The general reaction to this program among the non-Russian nationalities has been quite unreceptive, with the Soviet Muslims among the most negative. Moscow's efforts have succeeded in creating some distance between Soviet Muslims and their foreign coreligionists, but an even greater gap remains between the Russians and their Muslim compatriots.

Well aware of the need for special political and administrative tools to control its dependencies, Moscow has devised methods that were neither colonial in the traditional sense nor free of colonial features: non-Russian lands inherited from the tsars were given an equal patina of autonomy but different degrees of actual say in their own affairs, depending on their reliability at the moment and the stability of their historic association with Russia. Their progress and modernization were promoted, but central economic control over the area was preserved; opportunities for personal advancement were enhanced, but key positions, whenever politically sensitive, were kept in Russian hands; national cultures were encouraged, but their content was purged to suit the larger Soviet purpose. This became known as the Soviet nationality policy.

Applied more thoroughly to Soviet Central Asia than elsewhere, under Stalin it fostered the creation of Muslim national republics dotted with developing economies and trained elites but deprived of final decision-making power in their own affairs. Education, industrialization, and modernization, consistently promoted and aided by Moscow almost since the beginning of Soviet rule, beneficial as they were, did not sway Muslim allegiances in Russia's favor. It is doubtful that the cooptation of Muslim elites into the ruling party apparatus, a process accelerated since Stalin's death, has produced better results.

The absence of political allegiance is not automatically translatable into political unreliability without the objective circumstances that promote dissent. The current level of disaffection would not turn the Soviet Central Asia of the 1980s into an insurgent Afghanistan or Islamic revivalist Iran. But in the two decades remaining in this century, propelled by an unprecedented demographic boom, the political, economic, and cultural weight of Soviet Islam will inexorably grow. By the year 2000 the sheer numerical strength and the continuing unassimil-

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ability of the Soviet Muslim masses will present the Soviet state with its greatest internal challenge: the survival of the empire inherited from the tsars.

This book presents the cumulative results of continuous study of Russian policies in Soviet Central Asia and of the principal developments either affected by or affecting such policies. My first book on the subject, *Russia in Central Asia*, was based on an analysis of Stalin's methods of control as applied to this area. Here I have adapted those parts of *Russia in Central Asia* which are still relevant, especially in the first three historical chapters and in the introductory passages of some other chapters. The present book is divided into four parts: historical (the first three chapters), economic and demographic (Chapters 4 and 5), cultural (Chapters 6 and 7), political and ideological (the last three chapters).

The reader will find a selected bibliography on pages 173-76.

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