

# **The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State**

Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup



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# CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| List of Tables  |     |
| Foreword  |     |
| Acknowledgements  |     |
| Introduction  | 1   |
| 1. Russia and Islam   | 5   |
| 2. The Muslims and Russia   | 55  |
| 3. Soviet Muslims and the Muslim World Abroad                             | 88  |
| 4. Soviet Islam in Perspective – Muslims and Russians in the<br>Year 2000 | 124 |
| Appendices  | 153 |
| Select Bibliography   | 159 |
| Glossary  | 163 |
| Index   | 165 |

## TABLES

|      |  |     |
|------|--|-----|
| 1.1  | North Caucasian Population, 1959-79  | 33  |
| 1.2  | Percentage of North Caucasians Claiming their Language as their Mother Tongue, 1959-79 | 33  |
| 1.3  | Muslim-Russian Marriages in Daghestan, 1973  | 53  |
| 3.1  | Muslim Population of China, 1978   | 118 |
| 4.1  | Muslim and Russian Populations, 1926 and 1939  | 125 |
| 4.2  | USSR Populations and Growth Rates, 1959-79   | 126 |
| 4.3  | Population Growth Rates in Northern Caucasus, 1959-79                                  | 126 |
| 4.4  | Percentage of Central Asians within Central Asia, 1959-79                              | 127 |
| 4.5  | Percentage of Russians in some Muslim Territories, 1959-79                             | 127 |
| 4.6  | People Claiming their National Language as their Mother Tongue, 1959-79                | 128 |
| 4.7  | People Claiming the National Language as their Mother Tongue, 1959-79                  | 129 |
| 4.8  | Volga Tatars Claiming the National Language as their Mother Tongue, 1959-79            | 129 |
| 4.9  | Percentage Annual Increase of Total Population by Republic                             | 130 |
| 4.10 | Religious Belief by Age Group in the Karakalpak Republic, Early 1970s                  | 142 |

## FOREWORD

Ever since the conversion of the Khan Özbek of the Golden Horde to Islam in the early fourteenth century, marking as it does the beginning of regular and close contacts between Russians and Muslim Turks, the Muslim factor has dominated Russian history. The first period was that of Muslim pre-eminence during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the Golden Horde Khans ruled over their Russian vassals. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a certain equilibrium was achieved: the Russians captured Kazan in 1552 and in 1556 conquered Astrakhan, but in 1571 Crimean Tartars burned Moscow and in 1604 the Russians were badly defeated by the Daghestanis and the Ottomans on the banks of the river Terek. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the emergence of Russian supremacy. In the twentieth century, the attempt by the same Russians — turned Soviet — to consolidate their position and at the same time to solve, once and for all, the problem of the coexistence of two different civilisations in the same state seems set to fail. The mosaic of nationalities which makes up the USSR remains as hostile — perhaps even more so — to one another as it has ever been and the emergence of a 'Soviet' nation becomes more and more difficult to achieve. Only Soviet agitprop proclaims the advent of a mythical 'Homo sovieticus' (*Sovetskiy chelovek*), but few people in the USSR believe in this dream. A Soviet Russian remains a Russian, a Soviet Muslim simply a Muslim, not a 'Homo Islamicus', another mythical monster born out of the minds of some Western political scientists.

This book is an attempt to place the current problem of Soviet Islam in its historical perspective. We believe that the roots of this problem go back to the time of the Golden Horde, the conquest of Kazan, and also to the revolt of the Basmachis in 1920 and the 'Holy War' of Shamil. The history of Soviet Islam is long, glorious and tragic, dominated as it has been by seven centuries of conflict with Muscovy and later Russia and the USSR. This inheritance could never be annihilated by the Socialist Revolution. The past has not been forgotten, but on the contrary is still present, continuing to mould the *Weltanschauung* of the Soviet Muslims as well as that of the Soviet Russians, from the most sophisticated intelligentsia to the rural and urban masses.

We believe that a thousand years of history is crucially important to a proper understanding of the complex relationship between

## Foreword

Russians and Muslims and outweighs the Marxist-Leninist 'Nationalities Policy' which has been tried out for fifty years and which now shows unmistakable signs of failing.

## **CROOM HELM SERIES ON THE ARAB WORLD**

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In recent years the Islamic population of the Soviet Union has become a serious threat to the political cohesion of the USSR. In the wake of Islamic fundamentalist revival in Iran, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf, it is argued that the Muslims within the Soviet Empire may try to weaken the dominance of Moscow and Marxist Leninist ideology. Certainly the demographic trends amongst Soviet Muslims indicate that before long they will constitute the largest religious group within the USSR.

This book traces the historical and cultural development of the Soviet Muslim population. Going back to the Mongol Empire and the Russian conquest of Muslim lands under the Tsars, it demonstrates how the present Soviet Islamic culture has emerged. It also examines how Soviet Muslims interact with the Muslim world abroad and how Soviet Muftis have been used as ambassadors of the USSR in Muslim countries.

Most importantly, the book projects the likely pattern of development for the Soviet population up to the year 2000. It describes the political options available to the USSR and indicates how these are likely to influence the Soviet Muslim community in the coming years.

Jacket illustration drawn by David Henderson

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