

IS THE SOVIET UNION ISLAM'S BEST FRIEND?
NOT EXACTLY

S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev

August 1980

The Rand Paper Series

Papers are issued by The Rand Corporation as a service to its professional staff. Their purpose is to facilitate the exchange of ideas among those who share the author's research interests; Papers are not reports prepared in fulfillment of Rand's contracts or grants. Views expressed in a Paper are the author's own, and are not necessarily shared by Rand or its research sponsors.

The Rand Corporation
Santa Monica, California 90406

IS THE SOVIET UNION ISLAM'S BEST FRIEND?
NOT EXACTLY*

Faced with an almost universal condemnation of their invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet Union has countered with a massive propaganda campaign designed primarily to minimize the negative reaction in the Islamic world to naked Soviet aggression. In the process Soviet leaders and propagandists have tried to portray Moscow as Islam's only true friend and have gone as far as claiming that their intervention was necessary to guarantee the Afghans' right to an Islamic state. The moment therefore would seem right for a critical assessment of Soviet attitudes toward Islam on the basis of their historical record and present policies vis-à-vis the sizable Soviet Muslim population.

Soviet Muslims--of whom there are at present close to 50 million concentrated mostly in the Central Asian region--have a long and distinguished Islamic tradition. Long before the Russians were converted to Christianity, Islam flourished in Central Asia. As early as the ninth century, Central Asian cities such as Bukhara and later Samarkand had become the leading centers of Islamic culture and scholarship. Throughout the succeeding centuries the Central Asian Muslims kept their reputation of being among the Islamic cultural and scientific elite, even if they were not always successful in preserving their political sovereignty.

The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the power vacuum that resulted on the former Russian empire's periphery gave an opportunity to many of the Muslim nationalities to press for their national independence goals and led to the emergence of a number of autonomous Muslim states. Lenin's Bolsheviks however, despite paying lip service to the right of national self-determination, were determined to quash any challenge to Soviet hegemony and promptly embarked on a course of armed subjugation of the Muslim people.

Having reannexed the Muslim territories to the Soviet Union by the mid-1920s, Moscow systematically liquidated the entire Muslim cultural

*This was originally published under the title "Islam's Best Friend? Not Exactly," in the *Christian Science Monitor*, April 24, 1980, p. 23.

and religious elite. Tens of thousands of Muslim clerics were summarily executed or sent to labor camps for their alleged disloyalty. Between 1928 and 1933 alone over 10,000 mosques, 14,000 Muslim elementary schools, and 500 medressahs (theological schools) were closed down. As the first move toward Russification, the Soviets outlawed the Arabic script and ordered the use of the Russian alphabet.

In the late 1920s Stalin's collectivization campaign and a special de-nomadization campaign directed specifically against the Central Asians were pursued with particular brutality, often assuming genocidal proportions. To give just one example, the Kazakh population decreased from four million in 1926 to just over three million 10 years later, according to official Soviet statistics.

On a number of occasions the Soviet Muslims responded to the repressive policies of the Soviet regime by armed rebellion. The best known of these was the large-scale guerilla resistance movement in Central Asia known as the "basmachi" movement. Beginning in the early 1920s the basmachi engaged in hit-and-run raids, battled the Red Army for years, and were not completely suppressed until the late 1930s.

The alienation of the Muslim subjects of the Soviet Union was dramatically demonstrated during World War II when Muslim soldiers in the Soviet army defected en masse to the Germans. Many of them, perhaps as many as 250,000, volunteered to serve against the Soviets and fought until the end of the war in national Muslim units incorporated in the so-called East Legions.

The oppression of the Muslim peoples continued unabated during and after World War II. Several Muslim nationalities were uprooted from their ancestral homes and forcibly deported to remote areas for suspected disloyalty. Many did not survive the brutal ordeal. One out of every two Crimean Tatars, for example, perished during the deportation.

The campaign against Islam has not only persisted in the postwar period but has even been intensified. As a result there are at present less than 500 working mosques (compared to 26,000 in prerevolutionary Russia), only two medressahs (with fewer than 100 students), and less than 1,000 mullahs in the entire Soviet Union. Official Muslim activities are strictly controlled by the government, and Muslim leaders

chosen by the regime for their obedience are more active propagandizing the virtues of the Soviet system to coreligionists outside Soviet borders than tending to the spiritual needs of Soviet Muslims.

Apart from the religious realm Soviet Muslims are subject to constant Russification pressures and are often treated as second-class citizens in their own regions. The scientific and industrial establishments in the Muslim republics are heavily dominated by Russians while the party organizations are directly controlled by Moscow, through the appointment of a Russian watchdog as a second secretary.

Military garrisons in the Muslim areas are always manned by Slavic soldiers, yet local conscripts are sent to serve in far-off places. Nowhere is the unequal treatment of the Muslims more evident than in the Soviet army. The majority of Muslim youths are drafted in the construction troops which have little military relevance and are in fact a form of forced labor. Even those few who are called into the regular army are usually relegated to menial chores and do not receive adequate military training. The officer career is for all practical purposes closed to the Muslims and attempts to practice Islam in the military are severely punished.

There are nonetheless increasing signs that the regime's attempts to suppress the national and religious consciousness of its Muslim citizens have not been completely successful. If anything, it appears that an Islamic revival is taking place in the Soviet Union at present in the form of proliferating secret Muslim brotherhoods. This "underground" Islam, according to some experts, has already attracted more adherents than the officially condoned institution. Large-scale anti-Soviet rioting in recent years in Tashkent, Dushanbe, Chimkent, and other Central Asian cities also testifies that Soviet Muslims continue to resent Soviet oppression.

Thus, while the persistent efforts of the Soviet leadership to eradicate the influence of Islam within its borders are far from conclusive, it behooves Muslims everywhere to take a good look at the record of the self-proclaimed "best friend of Islam."

RAND/P-6529

IS THE SOVIET UNION ISLAM'S BEST FRIEND?
NOT EXACTLY

S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev