



**ISLAM ON THE TERRITORY OF THE FORMER SOVIET EMPIRE:  
A Review of STÉPHANE A. DUDOIGNON,  
CHRISTIAN NOACK (eds.), ALLAH'S KOLKHOZES:  
MIGRATION, DE-STALINISATION, PRIVATISATION  
AND THE NEW MUSLIM CONGREGATIONS  
IN THE SOVIET REALM (1950s — 2002s).**

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maps, photographs, indices, bibliographies**

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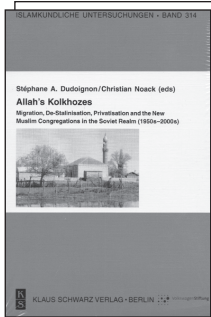
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**Abstract:** This review covers important research, based on rich archival and field work, on the history of the Muslim communities of the former Soviet Union. The main message of the authors is a connection between the economic development of rural communities and the processes of re-Islamisation. The reviewer draws attention to possibilities for further study in the field.

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### Islam on the Territory of the Former Soviet Empire

In the middle of the 1990s, when it became possible for scholars from the former Soviet Union to collaborate with their Western colleagues, there appeared a particular genre of description of the history of Islam in Northern Eurasia: collections of articles which geographically embraced what S. M. Prokhorov calls 'Islam on the territory of the former Russian Empire' [Prozorov 2006]. This genre begins with the assumption that the historical dynamics of the development of Muslim communities in this area had much in common, being determined by a shared colonial experience within the Russian Empire, and then the Soviet Union. However, this sort of determinism is to a large extent only the product of state frontiers and an academic tradition that dictates that the complex mosaic of cultural experience should be divided into administrative units and mental constructs: the Caucasus (most often Dagestan and Azerbaijan), Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and sometimes Kazakhstan) and the Volga Littoral (usually associated with a small Tatarstan). It is obvious that this sort of division, which one meets all the time in contemporary research, only follows the Soviet notion of frontiers, which does not necessarily coincide

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with the way the people actually involved, the makers of history, saw the world.

*Allah's Kolkhozes* is a book about the renaissance, transformation and politicisation of Islam in the Soviet Union, written in the style of post-Soviet collections of articles divided up into territorial cases, and is the result of an international project funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung. The book's chapters have been written by well-known specialists on the history of the Muslim borderlands of the Russian empire on the basis of field- and archival work in collective farms, and in their introductory article the book's editors, Stéphane Dudoignon and Christian Noack, set out the basic hypotheses of the project and offer a synthesis of the discoveries which are described in greater detail in the individual chapters.

The kernel of the project consists of several important premisses.

Firstly, Islam not only continued to exist in Soviet society, it interacted vigorously with the political and socio-economic demographic factors of the Soviet system. Particular attention is paid to the very productive observation that Muslims were not only 'victims' of Soviet modernisation but also beneficiaries of its positive results. I consider this position a productive one because it allows us to reject the usual black and white narrative of the Muslim experience in the Soviet Union, in which there is no place for a wide range of practices of dialogue, concession and avoidance of the Soviet system. A certain exoticisation of the Soviet case, reflected in the book's title, seems quite appropriate in order to overcome the antagonistic perception of the history of religion in an atheist state.

Secondly, the authors of the projects see the 'renaissance' of Islam in the Soviet Union in the contacts between incipient local protest groups and the non-conformist ideologies seeping through from the Middle East and India and Pakistan, beginning in the 1960s. If this is so, it means that the fundamentalist and radical movements that became known after the fall of the Soviet Union also had roots in the local communities, so that the argument about 'imported' radicalism, as opposed to 'traditional Islam', is devoid of any firm foundation.

Thirdly, migrations, usually inspired by the Soviet authorities, are very important for the history of 'Allah's *kolkhozes*' — mass resettlements, at the village community level, usually from the mountains to the plains. The resettlement of mountain people in the plains in Dagestan, for example, changed the picture of religious life in the region radically: Soviet policy unintentionally favoured the spread of the Mahmudiyya Sufi brotherhood, as Sh. Sh. Shikhaliev has shown.

Fourthly and finally, it was the village communities (*jamā'at*) that were the centres in which Muslim political activity, which first made

itself known at the very end of the Soviet period and relied on economic specialisation, was born.

This double focus means that most of the chapters in the book consist of two parts (not always clearly connected to each other): features of economic development in the *kolkhozes*, and local Islamic history seen through the prism of biographies and the development of institutions. The *jamā'at* is the keyword for this research, since that is the social unit, with a religious nuance, that united people who had been forcibly resettled in various contexts, or who went to the same mosque, or who were members of a *kolkhoz* as a community.

The particular cases analysed in the book are examples of micro-historical research. The authors of the chapters establish why this or that *qışlaq* / *kolkhoz* was indicative or important. But, as V. O. Bobrovnikov quite rightly remarks in his article, these cases cannot in practice serve as indicative examples for whole regions, even though the chapters are arranged on the territorial principle. Detailed descriptions over many pages of life in the *kolkhoz* make it possible to make a judgment of the extent to which the authors' central premisses are confirmed by actual examples, although one sometimes has the impression that many of the details could have been shortened to make the basic arguments of the articles clearer. This proliferation of detail, not always accompanied by profound analysis, may easily be criticised, particularly where the texts and ideas created by the Soviet Muslims themselves have simply been ignored.

Added to this, the opinion advanced by many contributions to the book that thanks to various institutions pre-revolutionary Islamic tradition persisted and was able to flourish in the post-Soviet period, remains highly questionable. Such a simplification of social relations, of course, contradicts the position of the project's authors, which stresses transformations, and not continuity with some ideal past. The same can be said of the practical isolation of the selected examples from each other: apart from the focus of research, there is hardly anything that unites them.

The body of sources used for the research is indeed impressive. It consists of numerous interviews, archival documents in different languages, manuscripts from private archives, photographs, statistical data, local newspapers, etc. Such a rich selection will certainly underpin future research on the history of Islam in the macro-region. Nevertheless, except for the work by Stéphane Dudoignon and B. M. Babadzhanov, there is not, unfortunately, any serious discussion anywhere in the book of the methods of criticism of sources or the place of the researcher in the research field and his or her influence on the results obtained. This, moreover, is important, because most of the authors of the book themselves have a direct personal relationship with the late Soviet period and to a great extent

view the history of the *kolkhoz* as a piece of the recent past which is familiar to them.

*Allah's Kolkhozes* is essentially an encyclopaedia of Soviet Muslim experience at the village community level. This book is a very important step on the road towards understanding the dynamics of intellectual and social evolution inside Islamic communities that were being transformed for the whole of the twentieth century under the influence of a multitude of factors, which the authors of the book carefully take into account. One would like to hope that in the Russian-speaking environment this fundamental research will be read and considered (including in a critical light), since it is regional research (practically local studies) or research written in the style of national history that dominates in native approaches to the history of Muslims in Russia. This innovatory attention to the socio-economic aspects of the Islamic 'renaissance' may be particularly useful for continuing and developing in subsequent research, and not only on the Soviet period. An enthusiasm for ideas and administrative institutions often distracts us from the specific realities amongst which people lived.

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