

State of the art

VLADIMIR BOBROVNIKOV

Research on pre-modern and modern Islam conducted in post-Soviet Russia, has been, and still is, very poorly known to scholars from abroad – both in the West and in the Muslim world. Despite the fall of the ‘iron curtain’ after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is still an informational barrier separating post-Soviet and non-Soviet researchers. Many questions arise concerning what has happened in Islamic studies after the cease of religious persecution during the ‘perestroika’ years: What was the impact of the so-called ‘Islamic revival’ on research on Islam? Which academic schools training specialists in Islamic studies have survived since the pre-Soviet and Soviet times? To what extent do post-Soviet scholars know and share modern Western approaches and concepts in Islamic studies?

Islamic studies have benefited from the fall of the Soviet rule, which saw the return of Islam to the public sphere. Islam was recognized by Yeltsin’s government as the second main religion in Russia. The state does not suppress research on Islam. Re-established mosque collections and even the secret archives of the CPSU and KGB were opened for scholars from Russia and abroad. On the other hand, the already negative view of Islam in the Russian public opinion further deteriorated from 1994–1999. Escalating violence prevents researchers from carrying out archival research and fieldwork in some regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Large collections of Muslim manuscripts in Chechnya and Abkhazia were burnt due to shelling during civil wars. Furthermore, the state funding of universities and academic institutes was considerably reduced.

The all-Union network of research institutes affiliated to the Academy of Sciences was dissolved as soon as the USSR broke down. But centres of Islamic studies established under the Soviet or pre-Soviet rule have survived in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kazan, Makhachkala and Ufa. They still concentrate on traditional scholarship of Islam including Arabic and Iranian philology, studies of the Qur’an, *hadith* and other Muslim texts. They, however, also include research on Sufism, history and social anthropology of Muslim societies and communities. Outside Russia, similar centres exist in Tashkent, other capitals of the former Soviet Central Asia and Baku as well. The best Islamicists still graduate from the Oriental Department of the St. Petersburg State University (OD SPSU). The most qualified anthropologists are trained at the Department of History of the Moscow State University (DH MSU) and the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (IEA). Recently, departments of sociology have been established in the MSU and the SPSU and at the universities of Kazan and Ufa. They train specialists in modern political and social developments of the post-Soviet Muslim regions. The main research centres are the St. Petersburg and Moscow branches of the IOS, the IOS of Uzbekistan in Tashkent and the Dagestani Research Centre (DRC) in Makhachkala. All of them house large collections of Muslim manuscripts and rare printed material in Arabic, Iranian and Turkic languages.

Post-Soviet Islamic studies are in the process of flux and change. Russian Islamicists attempt to rethink the scholarly legacy of the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods, without dogmatically rejecting their contributions in traditional disciplines. Their work on collecting and translating Arabic manuscripts, interrupted in the late Soviet period, is being re-established. Growing interest of the general public in the religion resulted in an explosion of publications related to Islam. The

Islamic Studies in Post-Soviet Russia: in Search of New Approaches

Kazan and Tashkent editions of the Arabic text of the Qur’an and its Russian translation prepared in the 1920s by the prominent Soviet scholar I.Yu. Krachkovsky (1883–1951) as well as another one published in 1878 by the Orthodox missionary G.S. Sablukov (1804–1880) were reproduced by the millions. They were best sellers and regularly appeared even in such periodicals as *Physical Culture and Sport*. In 1995 in St. Petersburg the first Russian translation of the Qur’an by General D.N. Boguslavsky, completed in 1871, was prepared for printing by Dr E.A. Rezvan (IOS). In the same year, Prof. M.G. Osmanov (DRC) published in Moscow a new Russian translation based on the Muslim tradition. From 1989–1991 the Qur’an was translated into Azeri (by I. Agaev) and Kazakh (by Zh.M. Istaev), and later into other Turkic and Caucasian languages. Dr Rezvan is currently preparing a database of Qur’anic manuscripts kept in St. Petersburg.

In the field of history there was a blossoming of Islamic studies at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. This mostly dealt with the earlier periods of Islam, for instance, Prof. O.G. Bolshakov’s (IOS) *History of the Khalifat* in 6 volumes (three of which were published in Moscow between 1989–1995). These works were informed by an enormous range of scholarship. His work is the best Russian study available on the early Muslim state in Arabia and the subsequent Arabic conquests. Russian Muslims bought up almost all available copies of the first volume with Muhammad’s biography, thus making it a rarity. Mention should also be made of the *History of Dagestan*, edited in Makhachkala in 1996, in which Prof. A.R. Shixsaidov (DRC) re-thought the Islamization that lasted in the North Caucasus from the 7th to the late 15th century.

The study of ‘Russian’ Islam

In the last years, Russian scholars have begun to turn their attention to ‘Russian’ Islam, as it emerged from close ties and the intense relationship between Russia and the Muslim peoples of the Volga River region, Siberia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Islamic studies become more interdisciplinary in their approaches. In addition to written sources, Islamicists examine current institutes and practices of post-Soviet Muslims. Within this context, the world of modern holy men and Sufi sheikhs has been studied by Dr B.M. Babadzhanov and Dr A.K. Muminov from Tashkent (IOS). On the basis of his archival research and fieldwork, Dr Babadzhanov prepared a series of writings on the developments of the Naqshbandiya and other Sufi orders in Central Asia in the 18th–20th centuries. Some of these works have been published in German and French scholarly periodicals (*Islamkundliche Untersuchungen*, 1996, 1998, Bd. 1, 2; *Cahiers d’Asie Centrale*, 1998, 5–6). An excellent insight into the world of the *medrese* and Muslim libraries in medieval and contemporary Dagestan was presented by Prof. Shixsaidov in

his publications (*Islamkundliche Untersuchungen*, 1996, 1998, Bd. 200, 216), resulting from comparative research of more than 200 private collections of Arabic manuscripts revealed in highland Dagestan by a joint expedition of the DRC and the Oriental Department of the Dagestani State University (OD DSU) from 1996–1999.

In the 1990s, many social and political scientists, in whose research Islam is not central, turned to the study of modern Muslim societies and communities in the post-Soviet regions. Their work, however, is not always accurate from the methodological point of view. Many of them share corrupted positivist and orientalist concepts and research methods which need to be criticized. Post-Soviet Islam is often interpreted as a ‘revival’ of unchanged ‘local traditions’, able to resist any Soviet innovation. The most eminent advocates of this concept include: Prof. Alexander Bennigsen (deceased), specialist in Soviet studies; his daughter Dr M. Bennigsen-Broxup; and Prof. S.P. Polyakov (DH MSU), the author of *Traditionalism in the Modern Central Asian Society*, published in Russian in 1989 and soon published in English in the USA. Some authors ignore primary sources including numerous field and archival data, while basing themselves on incorrect official materials. Both of these faults can be found even in accurate writings of contemporary political scientists such as *Islam in the History of Russia*, by Prof. R.G. Landa (IOS, 1995) and the *Muslim World of the CIS Countries* by Dr A.V. Malashenko (the Moscow branch of Carnegie Endowment, 1996).

Much more fruitful seem to be the approaches of Russian historians and anthropologists exploring the fate of Muslim societies and communities under Russian and Soviet reforms. For instance, Dr S.N. Abashin (IEA) studies forms of popular Islam in Soviet and modern Central Asia by proposing to look not so much at Muslim traditions surviving under the state, but at those constituted through state reforms. Dr A.A. Yarlykapov from the school of the late Prof. V.N. Basilov (IEA) argued in his doctoral dissertation on ‘Islam among the Steppe Nogays in the 20th century’, defended in June 1999, that the Soviet reforms caused the formation of opposed ethno-religious groups including so-called ‘Wahhabis’. Works on ‘Russian Islam’ presented by the above-mentioned scholars were integrated with the Islamicists’ studies in the lexicon *Islam on the Territory of the Former Russian Empire*, initiated by Prof. Prozorov from St. Petersburg in 1998. This is a fascinating project that is to bring together different specialists in Islamic studies in an attempt to understand Islamic civilization in Russia and its relationship to the Muslim world. The lexicon follows research principles of the encyclopaedic lexicon, *Islam*, published in Moscow in 1991. It will include three or more issues, two of which have just been published and the following fascicle will be compiled in 2000.

It is difficult to know how Islamic studies will develop in post-Soviet Russia in the future. But it is clear that a new era has begun, which is characterized by the expansion of the existing work and the development of new interdisciplinary programmes. New research bodies such as the Centre for Arabic studies (CAS), headed by Prof. V.V. Naumkin, and the Centre for Civilizational and Regional Studies (CCRS), under the direction of Dr I.V. Sledzevski, were founded within the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. While the CCRS concentrates on political studies in modern post-Soviet areas, the CAS has three main purposes: publication and translation of Arabic manuscripts, research on pre-modern Islam and Sufism, and studies in urgent political issues in the other post-Soviet Muslim areas. The CAS cooperates in its research missions with colleagues in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Its recent works, such as a case study by Dr D. Makarov on the introduction of Sharia court in a Dagestani Wahhabi community (see: *ISIM Newsletter*, 1/1998), contribute significantly to a deeper understanding of the various forms of post-Soviet Islam. ◆

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Islam on the territory of the former Russian empire, lexicon. The 1st issue edited in Russian by Prof. S.M. Prozorov. Moscow, Vostochnaya Literatura, 1998.

Dr Vladimir Bobrovnikov is a senior research fellow at the Institute for Oriental Studies, Moscow, and a teacher of Arabic and anthropology at the Russian State University of Humanities in Moscow. E-mail: depcis@orientalia.ac.ru