

The Russian Roots of “Sovietological Islamology”

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In a recent review essay of Yaacov Ro'i's *Islam in the Soviet Union*, Devin DeWeese praises Ro'i's extensive archival work, but ultimately concludes that the book is significantly flawed in its conception, methodology, analysis, and interpretation.¹ DeWeese asserts that these flaws are a legacy of what he calls “Sovietological Islamology:” the tendency in Western scholarship to analyze Islam using conceptualizations, methodologies, and interpretations developed in a particularly “Soviet” context. Many of these flaws, according to DeWeese, are due to an over-reliance on Soviet sources and published Soviet scholarship for information on Islam in the Soviet Union.² Others are the result of Western Sovietologist, who often possessed no specialized training in religious studies, failing to address Islam in the Soviet Union outside the narrow context of the regime's ideology, politics, and anti-religious policies. DeWeese's primary criticisms of “Sovietological Islamology” can be summarized briefly as: (1) the failure to place Islam in the Soviet Union in the context of the wider Islamic world; (2) the tendency to ignore Islam's social context and instead rely too heavily on “belief” and theology as measures of Islamic religiosity; (3) the problematic concept of “parallel Islam”; (4) the tendency to artificially separate communal, national, and religious identities; and (5) the uncritical use of Soviet terminology and categories, many of which are more appropriate for a discussion of Russian Orthodoxy than Islam.

¹ Devin DeWeese, “Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's *Islam in the Soviet Union*,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13:3 (2002), 301.

² This flaw is apparent in Ro'i's otherwise impressively researched book, which utilizes a wealth of Soviet archival and Russian-language materials but draws on almost no material in Central Asian languages. Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

Despite its merits, many of these problems are indeed apparent in *Islam in the Soviet Union*, not to mention in earlier, less well-researched scholarship.³ However, to suggest that scholars are merely parroting tired Soviet conceptualizations of Islam would be mistaken. Historians addressing the Soviet period have long recognized potential problems with the use of official Soviet sources and the flaws inherent in Soviet conceptions of religion;⁴ consequently, the persistence of the conceptual problems addressed by DeWeese cannot be blamed wholly on uncritical utilization of Soviet sources and interpretations. Rather, as this essay will show, these flawed conceptions are the result of a much longer history of interaction between the Russian state and the Islamic world, in many cases going back to the religious policies of Catherine the Great. The roots of these problematic interpretations and conceptualizations of Islam can be found in a variety of writings, including those of Tsarist missionaries, Islamic reformers, Russian colonial officials, and early Soviet documents and scholarship. This legacy explains in part why such conceptions have been slow to change, as such change requires rethinking not only Soviet views of Islam, but in many ways an entire tradition of writing about Islam in the Russian and Soviet empires.

Following the conquest of Kazan in 1552, the Russian Empire encompassed a significant Muslim population, but it was under Catherine the Great that an institutional framework was established to govern Islam in the Russian Empire. Catherine's policy of toleration toward Islam was intended to demonstrate the enlightened nature of her rule, ending previous policies of religious persecution and forced conversion. The creation of the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly in

³ See Alexandre Bennigsen, *Islam in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 1967). Bennigsen takes many Soviet sources at face value and tries to "read into" others, seeking to show that Islam provides an impassable divide between Soviet Muslims and the rest of Soviet society.

⁴ See David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1975); Dmitry Pospelovsky, *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory and Practice, and the Believer*, 3 vols. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); William Husband, *Godless Communists* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); and Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

1788 was part of an attempt to integrate Russia's Muslims into the institutional structure of the empire and bring them under closer government supervision. The Assembly was modeled on the Holy Synod that governed the Russian Orthodox Church, and was led by a *mufti* (an authoritative Islamic scholar) appointed by the Tsarist government. Thus began a long-running trend in government policy of treating Islam in terms derived from the much more familiar Russian Orthodox Church, a trend that became especially apparent in later Soviet policy. Islam in the Russian Empire remained less hierarchical than the Orthodox Church: *imams* were still selected by Muslim religious communities (*mahallas*) rather than appointed, and the *ulama* never became a separate legal estate (*soslovie*) like the Orthodox clergy. Nevertheless, the government understood Muslim religious figures to be roughly the equivalent of the Orthodox clergy. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, for example, the Russian administration in Nizhnii Novgorod used the Russian word for an Orthodox priest (*sviashchennik*) to refer to an *alim* (one knowledgeable about Islam), and the ambiguous term *mulla* afterwards.⁵ Even the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly, though staffed by Muslim religious figures, often employed terminology derived from the Orthodox clergy to avoid confusion with other departments of the Tsarist bureaucracy.

The creation of the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly also introduced the requirement that the Assembly confirm the nominations of all *imams*, establishing another level of bureaucratic control. More importantly, however, to receive an *ukaz* (license) a potential *imam* had to travel to Ufa and pass an exam in Islamic sciences.⁶ This requirement by itself may not have represented a significant change in Islamic life in the Russian Empire. After all, *imams* were often chosen from the most knowledgeable, educated, and respected members of the *mahalla*. The introduction of a formal educational requirement, however, was one of the first reflections of

⁵ Allen J. Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia*, (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 100-101.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 102-105.

the tendency, later to become problematic in scholarship on the Soviet period, of seeing religious education and formal knowledge of religious doctrine as measures of one's religiosity. While the attitudes of Muslims in the Russian Empire did not change overnight, by the end of the nineteenth century most *imams* seem to have accepted the need for an *ukaz*.⁷ By making an individual's religious authority dependent on government approval and formal knowledge, the Tsarist government laid an institutional framework that not only would affect later Soviet institutions and conceptions, but also influence Muslims' own discourse about Islam, education, and the Russian government.

The conceptualization and institutional status of Islam in the Russian Empire was also heavily influenced by the writings of two professors at the Kazan Theological Academy: Nikolai Il'minskii and Evfimii Malov. Both were involved with training Orthodox missionaries but adopted very different views of the best means to bring *inorodtsy* (non-Russians) to the Orthodox faith. Given that the city of Kazan was both a center of Islamic life and of Orthodox Missionary activity in the Russian Empire, the "struggle" between Orthodoxy and Islam occupied a prominent position in the writings of each man. Despite their disagreements, both Il'minskii and Malov exerted great influence on the conceptualization of Islam in the Russian Empire and later in the Soviet Union.

Il'minskii's system of religious schools used native languages to provide instruction in the Orthodox faith to the empire's non-Russian subjects. These schools were particularly focused on ensuring that various "pagan" peoples in the Volga region adopted Orthodoxy rather than Islam. Interestingly, although Il'minskii taught for many years in the anti-Islam division of the Kazan Theological Academy, he had little confidence in the possibility of converting adult Muslims, in this case predominantly Tatars, through polemical debates or coercion. Islamic

⁷ Ibid., 105-106.

religious education in the *maktabs* (Islamic primary schools) and *madrasas* (Islamic secondary schools) made Islam an integral part of Tatar society; therefore, Il'minskii focused on reinforcing Orthodoxy among young Tatar converts, often called *kriashens*, through comprehensive native-language education.⁸

Il'minskii's system represented something of a departure from previous ways of thinking about national and religious identity in Tsarist Russia. Before the nineteenth-century, being "Russian" was essentially equated with being Orthodox and being a loyal subject of the Tsar. During the nineteenth-century, however, ideas of what constituted "Russianness" became increasingly disputed. While some continued to hold up the Orthodox religion as the primary attribute of "Russianness," others adopted the Russian language or a more general, non-religious "culture" as the true measure of Russian identity.⁹ This disputed understanding of "Russianness" was particularly salient in Kazan and the Volga region because of the presence of Muslim Tatars, Orthodox Russians, animist Maris and other native Volga peoples, and numerous converts (to both Orthodoxy and Islam) living in close proximity. As Paul Werth has argued, many Tsarist officials in the Volga region during the second half of the nineteenth-century became increasingly concerned about the "quality" of converts' knowledge of Orthodoxy, while others suspected that conversion was not enough to make *inorodtsy* genuinely "Russian" and advocated greater Russian-language education and *sliianie* ("fusion" of peoples).¹⁰ The connections between language, religion, and national identity were therefore somewhat fluid at this time, leading to different proposals regarding how to make *inorodtsy* into Russian subjects.

⁸ Robert Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 56-57.

⁹ On these varying notions of "Russianness," see Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Russian Identities: A Historical Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Paul Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

Although based on the long-held concept that conversion to Orthodoxy was required to become “Russian,” in effect Il’minskii’s ideas began to separate national and religious identities. By advocating native language schools and translations of religious texts, Il’minskii seemed to suggest, without specifically using these terms, that one could preserve a separate “national” identity (embodied in native languages, dress, and customs) while adopting a different religious identity. Il’minskii’s ideas became very influential in the late Tsarist period after they were adopted in 1870 as the model for *inorodtsy* education throughout the Russian empire.¹¹ This conception of “national” and religious identities as separable would reemerge, with often problematic results, in Soviet policies toward religion in general and Islam in particular. Robert Geraci even goes so far as to suggest that Lenin’s nationalities policy, which encouraged the promotion of “socialist” national identities and the use of native cadres (*korenizatsiia*), may have had its roots in Il’minskii’s system, noting that Lenin’s father I.N. Ulianov was a school official closely associated with Il’minskii.¹²

Father Evfimii Malov also taught in the anti-Islam division of the Kazan Theological Academy but held very different views from Il’minskii. Malov concentrated on polemics and rational discussion as the best way to steer apostates away from Islam and win new converts. His polemics were based on a thorough knowledge of the Quran and other Islamic writings, combined with logical arguments that tried to show that Islam was intrinsically inconsistent. Malov’s logical system was based on fixed principles of religion and the idea that spiritual texts provided the “objective” meaning of a religion.¹³ He argued that many ostensibly Islamic practices were in fact arbitrary traditions and customs that did not appear in the Quran or other basic Islamic texts. Malov made the same distinction between doctrine and practice in his

¹¹ Ibid., 65.

¹² Ibid., 77.

¹³ Ibid., 100-103.

defense of Orthodoxy, arguing that the poor behavioral example set by some priests and Orthodox peasants did not change the inherent superiority of Christian theology. In Malov's writings, therefore, one can see the continuation of a larger shift from a focus on communal practice, ritual, and custom as the measure of religious identity to a more textual and theological focus. For Malov, many Muslim rituals were not "true Islam," a conception that later influenced Soviet interpretations of Islamic practices.

Both Il'minskii's and Malov's ideas had a large impact on the conceptualization of Islam in the late Russian empire and the early Soviet Union, which inherited many conceptions and personnel from the Tsarist state. The conquest of Western Turkestan in the second half of the nineteenth-century brought a large number of new Muslim subjects into the empire and raised the question of how to govern a predominately Muslim population. Despite the decision of Governor-General von Kauffman to disallow missionary activity and the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly in Turkestan, the Russian conceptions of Islam discussed above had a definite impact on how the Russian empire approached Islam in Central Asia. The failure of Malov's "rational" arguments among the Tatars, as well as the failure of many previous missionary efforts, had given Muslim Tatars a reputation as religious "fanatics." This label was all too easily extended to the "traditional" and "exotic" Muslims of Central Asia, and strong efforts were made to isolate the two Muslim populations from each other.¹⁴

At the same time, Il'minskii's ideas about separate religious and national identities, as well as Malov's emphasis on theology and text as the essence of religion, encouraged missionary efforts among the Kazakhs. Russian missionaries described in hopeful terms the Kazakhs' "ignorance of Islamic prayers and rituals" and positive "natural traits" that made them prospects

¹⁴ Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 51.

for conversion.¹⁵ Yet these missionaries also warned of Muslim fanatics eager to strengthen the Kazakhs' "superficial" conversion to Islam. This conceptual opposition between a positive "natural character" and the "fanatic" and negative influence of Islam among Central Asians would reappear in Soviet writings, recast in terms of promoting national identities at the expense of religion.

Il'minskii and Malov's ideas were also brought to Central Asia by Nikolai P. Ostroumov, Il'minskii's successor at the Kazan Theological Academy and, after 1877, the inspector for schools in Turkestan. Ostroumov published several polemics against Islam.¹⁶ Drawing on his anti-Islamic training under Il'minskii and Malov, he argued that the notion of progress was fundamentally incompatible with the writings of the Quran, and hence Islam.¹⁷ Islam, in Ostroumov's view, was a medieval and retrograde religion that was responsible for the "backwardness" of Central Asia compared with the Russian empire. He therefore argued for the introduction of Russian-language and modern scientific instruction into traditional Islamic schools to combat "fanaticism" and promote progress (and eventually the destruction of Islam). This focus on modern, scientific education as a means to undermine the influence of religion in society would continue, with some modification, in Soviet religious policy.

Such was the general framework of ideas and institutions that defined Russian discourse regarding Islam. Russian discourse also influenced the ideas of the Jadids, Islamic modernizers who argued for the compatibility of Islam and modern education and knowledge. While it would be mistaken, as Adeb Khalid cautions, to see Jadidism simply as a reaction to Russian imperialism, Russia's imperial institutions, including those governing Islam, helped shape the

¹⁵ Robert P. Geraci, "Going Abroad or Going to Russia?" in Robert P. Geraci and Michael Khodarkovsky, eds., *Of Religion and Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 289-290.

¹⁶ Geraci, *Window on the East*, 90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 275-276.

public arena in which Jadid debates took place.¹⁸ Ostroumov's newspaper, *Turkistān wilāyatining gazeti*, served as a tool for Russia's policy of "cautious enlightenment" and in some ways as a model for Jadid use of newspapers and print to disseminate their own ideas. Jadid debates regarding the future of Islam in the Russian empire engaged with many of the same ideas present in previous Russian conceptions of Islam, and given that Jadid discourse persisted into the Soviet period, it seems clear that one must also address the Jadids as a further potential source for Soviet ideas about Islam.

The Jadids did not constitute a unified movement and did not articulate a concrete, unchanging philosophy. Nevertheless, many of the basic ideas shared by most Jadids, including a belief in the compatibility of Islam and modernity and the need for educational reform, can be traced back to the Crimean Tatar reformer Ismail Bey Gasprinskii (Gaspraly). Gasprinskii's education and travels made him thoroughly familiar with modern European and Russian thought, and it is therefore unsurprising that many of his ideas seem to echo Russian views of the empire's Muslims as "backward," while offering his own version of a solution. What is remarkable, however, is the degree to which later scholarly conceptions about Islam (particularly in Central Asia) seem to have roots in Gasprinskii's writings.

In *Russkoe Musul'manstvo*, Gasprinskii lamented that whereas once Russian Tatars were engaged with the wider Islamic world, they had now become isolated, even to the point that they took no interest in the Russians who governed them.¹⁹ Scholars ever since have likewise emphasized the isolation of Islam in the Russian Empire and Central Asia, which has led to a tendency to study Islam in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Central Asia purely in the Russian or Soviet context. While Gasprinskii rejected the idea of Islam as being incompatible with

¹⁸ Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 114-127.

¹⁹ Ismail Bei Gasprinskii, *Russkoe Musul'manstvo* (Oxford: Society for Central Asian Studies, 1985), 30-31.

progress and modernity, he described contemporary Muslim society and religion in terms familiar to Russian critics, stating that ignorance, misunderstanding, and irrationality had kept Muslims from participating in modern (Russian) society.²⁰ While also critical of Russia's "civilizing mission," Gasprinskii supported the introduction of modern scientific education into the traditional Islamic school, which he saw as a way to promote cultural modernization and the elimination of the "foolish superstitions" (*durnye predrassudki*) that characterized much of Muslim life.²¹ Gasprinskii's understanding of Islamic life in the Russian empire was certainly more complex than many contemporary Russian views, but he still characterized Islam as essentially obscurantist, isolated from modern developments and the wider world, and polluted by outside elements and therefore in need of purification.

Gasprinskii's ideas influenced Jadid thought throughout the Russian empire, but Jadidism among the Tatars and in Central Asia was also rooted in local conditions.²² For Jadids in Central Asia, whose educational reforms were in general less successful than among the Volga Tatars, a primary concern was the struggle for "cultural capital" with the traditional *ulama* elite. The Jadids portrayed traditional elites as ignorant (even of "true" Islam), lacking necessary modern knowledge, and posing obstacles to progress.²³ The Jadid portrayal of the traditional *ulama* in many ways paralleled Russian conceptions regarding Islam and the Islamic "clergy," with the primary distinction that the Jadids, particularly in the years after 1917, began to see the traditional *ulama* elite also as obstacles to national liberation. Given that many Central Asian Jadids eventually joined the Bolshevik Party, it is not surprising that several of their ideas about Islam and the "clergy" reappeared in Soviet policies and interpretations of Central Asian society.

²⁰ Ibid., 47-48.

²¹ Ibid., 73.

²² Khalid, 9-10.

²³ Ibid., 259-260.

The Jadids were not the only Islamic modernists who eventually joined the Bolshevik Party and influenced its conceptualization of Islam in the Soviet Union. Russian-educated Muslim intellectuals coexisted in the early twentieth-century with the often more traditionally educated Jadids, and promoted their own ideas about Islam and modernity within the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. Mir Said Sultan-Galiev, for example, became involved with socialism while a student in Kazan. He later became the highest-ranking Muslim in the Bolshevik Party before being condemned as a “bourgeois nationalist” in 1923. As a committed socialist, Sultan-Galiev outlined a general plan for the elimination of Islam in the Soviet Union that combined some elements of earlier Russian conceptions, Jadid discourse, and Marxist-Leninist principles.

Sultan-Galiev, like most Russian observers, characterized Muslim culture as generally backward, a problem perpetuated by Islamic “fanaticism.”²⁴ Like Il’minskii, Sultan-Galiev recognized that Islam fulfilled a large social as well as spiritual function, and therefore cautioned against direct attacks on the faith. Sultan-Galiev also believed that Muslims’ religious identity could be separated from their (often newly established) national identity, a principle that influenced nationality and religious policies throughout the Soviet period. He recommended ethnographic studies to examine the culture of each “Muslim” nationality and tailor anti-Islamic propaganda to this culture.²⁵ Regarding the Kirgiz (Kazakhs), for example, Sultan-Galiev wrote that their culture was still relatively “clean” (*chisty*) of harmful Islamic influences and therefore more receptive to anti-Islamic propaganda than the more fanatical sedentary Central Asians. The parallels between Sultan-Galiev’s writings here and those of earlier Russian missionaries are striking.

²⁴ M.S. Sultan-Galiev, *Stat’i* (Oxford: Society for Central Asian Studies, 1984), 45-46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-55. Quotation marks in the original.

Sultan-Galiev also offered a warning to the fledgling Soviet government that the process of undermining Islamic identities in the Soviet Union would be difficult, and that a direct “anti-Islamic struggle” would be perceived by Central Asians as simply a continuation of Russian imperialism and missionary activity. A direct attack would therefore only strengthen their commitment to Muslim traditions.²⁶ This warning, along with Sultan-Galiev’s insistence that anti-religious methods developed for use against Orthodoxy would be counterproductive against Islam, apparently went unheeded, as the Soviet government launched a direct assault on Islam in the late 1920s. After Sultan-Galiev was condemned for his nationalist views, his opinions regarding the difficulty of separating religious and national identities were also ignored, with Soviet ethnographers and policymakers continuing to insist that rapid cultural transformation, including the elimination of Islam, was not only possible but also necessary for the development of modern, enlightened nations in Central Asia.²⁷

Soviet Islam policy was therefore not solely the result of Marxist-Leninist misconceptions about religion and nationality; it also reflected an inherited institutional framework, the debate over the “problem of Islam” in the Russian empire, and Jadid modernist discourse. The institutional framework of Islam in the Soviet Union, centered on the Muslim Spiritual Boards, closely resembled that of the Russian Empire, and indeed perpetuated the same tendency to treat Islam in terms derived from the Orthodox Church. The Spiritual Boards, for example, emphasized the mosque as the only appropriate center of Islamic religious life in the Soviet Union, despite the fact that a mosque did not play the same spiritual and social function as an Orthodox church.²⁸ The classification of Islamic “clergy” in the Soviet Union also used the

²⁶ Ibid, 41-43.

²⁷ See, for example, Douglas Northrop, “Nationalizing Backwardness,” in Ronald Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press 2001), 191-222.

²⁸ Mark Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 71.

same general framework as the earlier Spiritual Assembly.²⁹ The emphasis among earlier reformers (both Russian and Jadid) on textual knowledge as the measure of religiosity was also represented in the work of the Muslim Spiritual Boards, which stressed the need for better theological education and knowledge among the Muslim “clergy.”³⁰ In addition, Soviet anti-religious organizations highlighted the average Central Asian’s “ignorance” of “proper” (i.e. textual) Islamic prayers, rituals, and theology as a sign that Islam was disappearing in Central Asia. It is therefore unsurprising that Ro’i’s extensive reliance on Soviet archival documents leads him to perpetuate several of these misconceptions.³¹

The registration of mosques under the direction of the Spiritual Boards has also led to a somewhat problematic scholarly distinction between “official” and “unofficial” or “parallel” Islam. In many ways this is an indirect result of earlier Russian and Jadid conceptions of contemporary Islam. Many earlier ideas fit comfortably within Marxism-Leninism’s ideological rejection of all religion as “reactionary” as well as its practical tendency to at least temporarily compromise with progressive religious elements, such as the Jadids. Earlier Russian and Jadid views that criticized Central Asian Islam as backward, obscurantist, scholastic, or medieval fit well with the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of Central Asia as a “feudal-patriarchal” society. As it did with the Renovationist or “Red Priest” movement in the Russian Orthodox Church, the Soviet government in the 1920s tried to divide Muslim society by absorbing its more “progressive” elements into government institutions.³² Later, by declaring themselves the heirs of the Jadid reformers, the Muslim Spiritual Boards implicitly made unregistered religious

²⁹ Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 120.

³⁰ Saroyan, 50; Ro’i, 241.

³¹ See, for example, Ro’i, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 243-245, in which Ro’i discusses the low educational level of Islamic clergy and their “ignorance of Islam,” and DeWeese’s critique of this section in “Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology,” 311.

³² Keller, 72, 108.

societies out to be traditionalist, reactionary, and anti-Soviet; in short, the opposite of Jadid values. This distinction between a subservient, progressive “official” Islam and a traditionalist, anti-Soviet “parallel” Islam is, as DeWeese points out, quite problematic, yet continues to be perpetuated in scholarship.³³

Finally, earlier ideas about the possibility (and even necessity) of separating national and religious identities were given prominence in Soviet policies in Central Asia. The Soviet government relied on a combination of previous Russian ethnographic studies and its own nationality “experts” to delimit and promote new national identities, ostensibly separate from Islam, among the Central Asian population.³⁴ Much like earlier Russian missionaries, Soviet experts searched for evidence of “national” traditions supposedly not influenced by Islam, particularly among the nomadic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen. By emphasizing “folk culture” and other “national” traditions, the Soviet government sought to promote the emergence of separate nationalities from among the Soviet Union’s Muslim population.³⁵ In some ways this project harkened back to Il’minskii’s efforts to promote Orthodoxy among the *inorodtsy* by emphasizing national language and customs at the expense of a shared Islamic religious culture. Yet as several authors have pointed out, this project faced immense challenges: beyond the extreme difficulty (some might say impossibility) of clearly delineating Islamic and “national” elements of Central Asian culture, the very symbols, rituals, and traditions often used to define nationality also possessed a strong religious meaning.³⁶ This tendency to impose distinctions

³³ DeWeese, 313-317. For several glaring examples, see Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1985), 17-18, 40-45.. Bennigsen essentially characterizes all Sufi orders as anti-Soviet fanatics, and seems to suggest that Muslims in the Soviet Union were faced with the binary choice of becoming part of an “official” mosque or joining a secret, anti-Soviet Sufi order.

³⁴ On the influence of Russian and Soviet ethnographers in the construction of nationality in Central Asia, see Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

³⁵ See Frank, 8-9, for a brief discussion of this phenomenon among the Volga Tatars.

³⁶ Shoshana Keller, “Conversion to the New Faith,” in Geraci and Khodarkovsky, eds. *Of Religion and Empire*, 326, and Northrup, 211-214.

between the “national” and the “Islamic” elements of Central Asian culture continues to cause the same confusion in current scholarship.

As with many problems with scholarship on Islam in the Soviet Union, the unproductive distinctions made between “religious” and “non-religious” (i.e. national) traditions and the overemphasis on “belief” and theological knowledge as the measure of religiosity can be traced to the Russian Orthodox Church, though not necessarily in a direct way. The concept of “*dvoeverie*,” the idea that Orthodoxy as practiced in Russia preserved many earlier, pagan elements, has been quite influential in both Western and Soviet scholarship on Russian Orthodoxy, but has more recently been challenged as a flawed conceptualization of the realities of religious belief.³⁷ The major problem with the “*dvoeverie*” concept is that it oversimplifies the complexity of religious belief and practice and promotes a misleading assumption that those elements which do not conform to established Orthodox doctrine and theology are “pagan” remnants. Given the long predominance of this concept in scholarship on the Orthodox religion, it is not surprising that its influence can also be seen in many studies of Islam as well. Thus, Malov’s student Mikhail Mashanov argued that Islam retained the essence of earlier Arab animist beliefs, and was therefore inferior to Orthodoxy, while Soviet scholars continually argued that many Central Asian traditions, particularly among the nomads, were in fact of pre-Islamic origin, and therefore acceptably “national.”³⁸

In sum, while many of the conceptual problems outlined by DeWeese do stem immediately from “Sovietological Islamology,” they have roots going back earlier to a wide variety of writings about Islam in the Russian and Soviet contexts. Given the extent of this source literature, it is not entirely surprising that these concepts have continued to appear in

³⁷ See Eve Levin, “*Dvoeverie* and Popular Religion,” in Stephen Batalden, ed., *Seeking God* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 29-52.

³⁸ Geraci, *Window on the East*, 91.

scholarship on Islam after other problematic Soviet-era interpretations have been jettisoned. How can scholarship on Islam in the Soviet Union be improved? DeWeese offers several pertinent suggestions, including the utilization of a wider source base (i.e. not just Russian language and Soviet sources), the rethinking of such problematic concepts as “parallel Islam” and “belief” as the ultimate measure of religiosity, and the examining of Islam in the Soviet Union in a wider Islamic context. Scholars of the Soviet period also need to reexamine overused dichotomies like state/society or modern/traditional, and attempt to define more precisely where these terms can be applied appropriately and where they tend to make misleading distinctions. Finally, I would suggest that many of the limitations in scholarship highlighted by DeWeese stem from the disciplinary isolation of Russian and Soviet Union specialists. That is, the long tendency to treat Russia and the Soviet Union as special cases within European history have led to an excessive reliance on Russian and Soviet sources, with the predictable result that the problematic conceptions discussed in this paper have only recently begun to be significantly challenged. Rather, scholars of Russia and the Soviet Union need to expand their discipline to include concepts and methodologies from other disciplines (including, as DeWeese suggests, religious studies) and place Russian and Soviet history not simply on the fringe of European history, but more properly within a Eurasian and even global context.