

Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia. By Eren Tasar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xxii, 409 pp. Appendix. Notes. Glossary. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Tables. \$99.00, hard bound.

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Eren Tasar wants to upend our understanding of Islam in postwar Soviet Central Asia. Soviet policies toward Islam, he suggests in this book, were marked not by hostility and a will to eradicate it, but by “flexibility and accommodation” (3) and “freewheeling moderation” (10). It was the great moderate Iosif Stalin who, during the Second World War, “forever turned away from the anti-religious repression of earlier decades” (46). After that, Tasar finds “no evidence that Stalin or his immediate successors (Khrushchev excepted) cared about the anti-religious struggle” (84), and even Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign of 1959–64 failed to alter realities on the ground. Stalin’s policy shift “normalized” relations between the state and religion. “Pressure on religion all but disappeared” (142), Tasar asserts, and Islam became “a ubiquitous feature of social life, not an underground phenomenon” (312). The centerpiece of this arrangement was the Spiritual Administration for the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), founded in 1943 and charged with managing permitted religious activity. It was answerable to the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), a ministerial organization. CARC emerged as the moderate face of Soviet power. Its officials worked hard to ensure that local governments and party organizations respected the legal rights of religious communities and proved to be SADUM’s biggest defenders. They also looked away from the persistence of religious activity that took place beyond the officially-sanctioned spaces. Numerous mosques continued to operate without registration and shrine visitation remained a prominent feature of rural life. Meanwhile, SADUM created a centralized structure of religious authority that, over the course of the 1950s, brought most functioning mosques, including many unregistered ones, under its control. There was a recognized space for Islam in Soviet life, and Central Asians could be Soviet and Muslim at the same time.

The notion that Sovietness and Islam coexisted happily in the later Soviet period is not new. Others, including myself, have made this point, arguing that “Islam” itself was reshaped in many ways in Soviet conditions, with the observance of ritual taking second place to customs and traditions that came to valorized as the essence of “Muslimness” and firmly tied to new discourses of nationhood. Tasar does not cite this literature, for he wants to make a blunter argument. It was not just a confessional Muslim identity that survived, but also religious practice and the authority of religious elites. Central Asians remained pious, practicing Muslims through the thick and thin of the Soviet period. Under the guardianship of the *ulama* (classically trained scholars), SADUM became a key institution in Soviet life. It not only “stood at the center of major social change” (145) in Central Asia, but its leaders “functioned as senior Soviet statesmen on the international stage in all but name” (242), key figures in Soviet diplomacy with Muslim countries from the era of decolonization to the end of the Soviet regime.

These are tall claims that ultimately stretch the ability of the evidence to support them. Tasar presents the view from the windows of the offices of CARC. He has made thorough use of the mountains of paper CARC left behind, but of little else. His source base allows him to describe the workings of CARC and SADUM in thorough detail, but it also inflates the significance of the two bureaucracies. Tasar brings no other sources to bear on his analysis and makes no attempt to check the information gleaned from CARC sources against other documentation. The result is a deeply flawed picture of the religious and political situation of late-Soviet Central Asia that vastly exaggerates the significance of Islamic elites. Many of his assertions can easily be disputed. There was, for instance, nothing “normal” about the religious situation in late-Soviet Central Asia. The antireligious campaigns of 1927–41 were extremely destructive. Mosques and shrines were shut down and in many cases destroyed, religious education destroyed, religious publishing abolished. Tasar grossly underestimates the extent of this destruction, partly because his account of the early Soviet period is strewn with grave factual errors and based entirely on an uneven reading of the secondary literature. The destruction was never undone and SADUM existed in a vastly impoverished religious landscape. It controlled a small number of mosques (statistics are not plentiful in the book, but the mosques SADUM controlled seem to have numbered around 180 in 1981), ran two madrasas (with a total enrolment of 120 in the early 1980s), and it was allowed to send a small delegation to the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. It published a few religious texts over the decades, though most of them were for foreign consumption and seldom available in Central Asia. There may have been numerous unregistered mosques, but they existed on the sly, while the landscape was dotted mosques and shrines turned into warehouses, clubs, shops, or those that sat forlorn in a state of utter disrepair. Much of what Tasar describes existed under the radar or in the “gray spaces” of the Brezhnev era. It cannot be confused with official policy.

Other characterizations are equally misguided. Contrary to Tasar’s claims, SADUM’s leaders were not major public figures. They did not have access to republic-level government or party offices and had to channel all their correspondence through their handlers at CARC, itself a low-level bureaucracy. They were trotted out to meet visiting delegations from Muslim countries and were shuttled off to attend international conferences on peace or religion. Far from being “senior statesmen” (242), they were a minor part of Soviet diplomacy with the Muslim world, where Central Asian writers and artists were far more important. Tasar often finds himself arguing against his own evidence. He himself describes how CARC officials routinely intervened in SADUM affairs and drafted speeches and fatwas issued under its leaders’ names, or the disdain that local governments (staffed by Muslims) had for it. Tasar presents Ziyovuddin Boboxonov, the longtime head of SADUM, as the key figure who consolidated SADUM’s authority in public life. Yet, he also describes him as someone who wanted “to survive at any cost” (220) and who “nakedly catered to CARC’s approval” (221). This hardly adds up to a picture of a confident, authoritative institution that Tasar insists SADUM was. Tasar also presents plenty of evidence of mosques pushing back against SADUM’s attempts to control them and their finances, and of practicing Muslims

refusing to accept its authority, and of how SADUM's centralized authority was sharply dented by Khrushchev's antireligious campaign. Yet, he persists with his maximalist argument about the centrality of SADUM to Central Asian life. I also have to profess deep skepticism of Tasar's claim that CARC bureaucrats of the late Stalinist period were motivated by a desire "to consolidate a rule-of-law society" (95) and a "sense of responsibility for the communities they served" (100).

Tasar paints a picture of an unbroken continuity in the place of Islam in modern Central Asia. In this, he is part of a cohort of scholars today who insist on the essential Islamicness of Central Asia. The region, they assert, is innately Islamic and can only be understood through Islam, defined as a reified tradition of authority embodied in the ulama. The upheavals of the Soviet period did nothing to dent the authority of Islam and Islamic elites in the region, while other groups that emerged in the modern period, whether Muslim modernists, nationalists, or communists, remained uninfluential and insignificant. This view is not new, but if its previous iterations had seen the reified Islam in a heroic mode, battling adversity. Tasar effaces all adversity from his account, leaving us with a view of Islam never having been trampled at all. This is a serious mischaracterization of the cultural and religious dynamics in Central Asian society. It is achieved by ignoring everyone except the officials of SADUM and CARC. The only Muslims worthy of Tasar's attention are those connected to mosques and shrines. Non-observant Muslims, Muslims in the Communist Party or in local government, or the urban intelligentsia, many of whom were deeply hostile to SADUM, are completely banished from the narrative, leaving the ulama of SADUM as all-important. Tasar also willfully ignores all expressions of national discourse in his sources, for Central Asians for him can only be Muslim, and pious and observant ones at that. There is no place in his account for challenges to Islamic authority, its displacement under political assault, or its fraught relationship to discourses of ethnic nationhood. To his credit, Tasar describes (but does not explain) SADUM's shift from a Sufi-centered traditionalism to rigorist scripturalism, but beyond that, "Islam" remains unproblematized in the book. Tasar's argument is profoundly essentialist and, as such, fundamentally flawed. It does little to advance our understanding of the complexities of Central Asia's modern history or of the place of Islam in it.

ADEEB KHALID
Carleton College

Raised under Stalin: Young Communists and the Defense of Socialism.

By Seth Bernstein. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. xi, 254 pp.
Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Tables.
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Although historians have long been interested in the subject of Soviet youth, relatively few academic studies have ever focused squarely on the communist