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## The Soviet Discourse on the Origin and Class Character of Islam, 1923-1933

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### Abstract

The article examines the growing radicalization of the Marxist anti-Islamic discourse in the USSR as a case-study of “Soviet Orientalism”. To which of Marx’s five socio-economic formations should Muslim society be assigned? During the relatively pluralistic period of the New Economic Policy (1921-1927) Marxist scholars offered various answers. Many argued that Islam emerged from the trading community of Mecca and was trade-capitalist by nature (M. Reisner, E. Beliaev, L. Klimovich). Others held that Islam reflected the interests of the agriculturalists of Medina (M. Tomara), or of the Bedouin nomads (V. Ditiakin, S. Asfendiarov); and some even detected communist elements in Islam (Z. and D. Navshirvanov). All authors found support in the Qur’ān and works of Western Orientalists. By the late 1920s Marx’ and Engels’ scattered statements on Islam became central in the discourse, and in 1930 Liutsian Klimovich rejected the Qur’ān altogether by arguing that the book, as well as Muḥammad himself, were mere inventions of later times. By the end of the Cultural Revolution (1929-1931) it was finally “established” that Islam was “feudal” in character, and critical studies of Islam became impossible for decades. The “feudal” interpretation legitimized the Soviet attack on Islam and Muslim societies at that time; but also many of the Marxist writers on Islam perished in Stalin’s Terror. We suggest that the harsh polemics the authors directed against each other in the discourse contributed to their later repression. By lending itself to the interests of the totalitarian state, Soviet Marxist Islamology committed suicide—the ultimate form of “Orientalism”.

### Keywords

Soviet Orientalism, Islam, Qur’ān, Marxism, Orientalists, Repression, Cultural Revolution, Liutsian Klimovich

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After the October Revolution of 1917 the Bolsheviks did not yet have a clear strategy on how to deal with Islam. While the Orthodox Church was subjected to systematic repression from very early on, the new regime was reluctant to apply similar measures to Islam. In the Civil War against the White Armies (1918-1921) the Bolsheviks needed the support of the nationalist movements among the Tatar, Bashkir, Daghestani and other Muslim nationalities of the former Tsarist Empire. The Bolsheviks' revolution was portrayed as anti-colonial, and Lenin's promise of far-reaching cultural autonomy was more attractive to the Muslim intellectual elites of the Empire's colonial peripheries than the "White" alternatives which basically meant nothing but a return to Imperial autocracy and Russification policies.<sup>1</sup> Also, the secularization measures taken by the new government—the separation of state and church and of school and church, nationalization of church property—affected Muslims to a lesser degree than the Orthodox church. There was no powerful Islamic ecclesiastical hierarchy that would be perceived as a political threat to the new regime. Lacking significant endowments, Muslim schools and mosques in Russia were traditionally financed on grass roots level, by Muslim neighborhood communities operating in a decentralized manner and largely outside of the purview of the state. Under the economic relaxation of the New Economic Policy (1921-1927), this situation allowed Muslim communities to maintain a fair amount of Islamic service, teaching, and communal life. The Bolshevik policy towards Muslims was thus very much dictated by practical circumstances.

In addition, there was also a persistent uncertainty among the Bolsheviks how to understand Islam on a theoretical level. Marx, Engels and Lenin did not provide a clear theoretical framework for an historical evaluation of Islam, and it took the Soviets more than a decade to explore the "class character" of that religion. It is this

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<sup>1</sup>) For the development of the Soviet nationalities policy see Alexandre A. Bennigsen, S. Enders Whimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World* (Chicago; London, 1979), and Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca; London, 2001). For the development of the Soviet religious policy see Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party, 1917-1929* (Helsinki, 1994).

early Marxist discourse on the character of Islam and its origins that I will try to analyze in detail in this article.

The central question of this discourse was how Muslim society would fit into the general development of human history—a process which Marx imagined as a sequence of specific socio-economic formations. According to this model, the history of mankind follows a straight path from primitive classless society to antique slaveholding society and then to feudalism and bourgeois capitalism, which would ultimately be replaced by socialism. The driving force behind this development is the struggle between different social classes which pursue distinct economic interests. This model is clearly based on the European historical experience, and it was unclear how to adapt it to Asian societies. Which social forces are at work in Muslim societies, and where on the Marxist scale of historical development should Muslim society be located? Does Islam originally reflect the patriarchal or “semi-feudal” society of the Bedouin nomadic tribes of 7<sup>th</sup>-century Arabia? Or does Islam represent the interests of the merchants of the “trade hub” of Mecca, where the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632), himself a merchant, began to preach his new religion? Or did Islam emerge as a religion of the sedentary peasants of the oasis town of Medina where Muḥammad set up his first community? Or was Islam an expression of the feudal interests of the early Caliphate? Or, on the contrary, does Islam, with its emphasis on charity and equality before God, even have features that can be interpreted as close to socialism? The debate on how to evaluate Islam from a Marxist position necessitated a fresh view on Islamic history.

The ensuing discussions on the origins and history of Islam were not of purely academic interest. First, there was consensus among the debating scholars that socialism would by necessity eliminate Islam, and this rather sooner than later. We are talking here about *anti-Islamic* Islamic studies, with the degree of aggressiveness varying from author to author and from time to time. Second, Islamic studies were seen as a contribution to an ongoing political discussion on the place of Islam, and Muslims, in the new Soviet state. The ultimate purpose of these discussions was to understand whether ethnic Muslim societies in the emerging Soviet Union were ready

for a socialist transformation according to the Russian model, or whether, due to their “cultural backwardness”, different strategies were needed. The 1920s and early 1930s must therefore be regarded as a time of experimenting with Marx and Muḥammad.

It should be stressed that this Marxist discourse on Islam was not guided by professional specialists on Islam and Muslim tradition. Russia had an old-established philological school at the Asiatic Museum in St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad, but during the 1920s these scholars were becoming more and more marginalized. The Bolsheviks treated the old-school philologists and historians with discernible contempt, and regarded them as remnants of the “bourgeois” era. To be sure, the regime did not eliminate the Asiatic Museum (in fact the government upgraded it in 1930 by turning it into the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences, IVAN), and it did not purge the famous Academics of the elder generation, like the specialist on Islam Vasilii V. Bartol'd (1869-1930), the Indologist Sergei F. Ol'denburg (1863-1934), or the Arabist Ignatii Iu. Krachkovskii (1883-1953). However, the Bolsheviks took measures to create an atmosphere of severe intimidation, which drove the Orientalists into isolation.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars of the old school were arrested and interrogated once or repeatedly, as a recently published biographical dictionary of Soviet Orientalists shows.<sup>3</sup> Besides supervising all their activities, the new administration also cut the scholars' opportunities for travel and publication, and it enforced a sheer endless chain of restructurings in institutes and universities that made coherent work almost impossible. Most important in the long run was the infiltration of the academic institutions with party cells, mainly by forcing the old professors to take on doctoral students whose only qualification was loyalty to the Party.

In the 1920s, the Bolsheviks created new institutions and organizations intended to produce devoted Marxist scholars of Oriental

<sup>2</sup> On the tragic situation of the Leningrad Orientalists in those years see A.A. Dolinina's biography of Krachkovskii, *Nevolnik dolga* (St. Petersburg, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Ia.V. Vasil'kov and M.Iu. Sorokina (eds.), *Liudy i sud'by: Biobibliograficheskii slovar' vostokovedov-zhertv politicheskogo terrora v sovetskii period (1917-1991)* (St. Petersburg, 2003).

studies.<sup>4</sup> Foremost among them was the Moscow Institute for Oriental Studies (*Moskovskii institut vostokovedeniia*, MIV), a party school created in 1920 mainly for the requirements of the Soviet foreign service. Its counterpart for educating party workers and administrators from the Eastern regions and republics of Russia and the USSR, as well as for training communists from abroad, was the Communist University of the Toilers of the Orient (*Kommunisticheskii universitet trudiashchikhsia vostoka*, KUTV), a school founded in 1921. The new Marxist discourse on Islam was dominated by scholars from these political teaching and research institutions. Also involved in the new debates were specialists in the history of Marxism, activists in anti-religious propaganda organizations, as well as Communists of various Muslim backgrounds working in party institutions either in Moscow or in Muslim areas of the Soviet Union.

It was generally assumed that Muslim societies were based on the teachings of the Qur'ān, and Qur'ān interpretation figured prominently in this Marxist discourse on Islam. However, most of the new experts on Islamic matters were not trained in Oriental studies and had no command of Arabic or Persian, the classical languages of the Islamic tradition. As they were not in the position to engage in new source studies, they relied heavily on the works of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Western Orientalists, like August Müller, Ignac

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<sup>4</sup> For surveys of Soviet Oriental studies see Nikolai A. Smirnov, *Ocherki izucheniia Islama v SSSR* (Moscow, 1954); N.A. Kuznetsova and L.M. Kulagina, *Iz istorii sovetskogo vostokovedeniia* (Moscow, 1970); and, for the most part based on the aforementioned works, Wayne S. Vucinich, "The Structure of Soviet Orientology: Fifty Years of Change and Accomplishment", in: Wayne S. Vucinich (ed.), *Russia and Asia: Essays on the Influence of Russia on the Asian Peoples* (Stanford, 1972), 52-134. For the Bolsheviks' creation of "parallel" research and teaching institutions see Loren R. Graham, *The Soviet Academy of Sciences and the Communist Party, 1927-1932* (Princeton, 1967); John Barber, *Soviet Historians in Crisis, 1928-1932* (New York, 1981); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca; London, 1992), esp. 37-64. For a fresh view on the "bourgeois" (liberal) Orientalists of the St. Petersburg "old school"—esp. Oldenburg, Rozen and Marr—and their idea of the role of Oriental Studies in Russia, see Vera Tolz, *Russian Academicians and the Revolution: Combining Professionalism and Politics* (Houndsmills; New York, 1997), and especially her "European, National, and (Anti-) Imperial: The Formation of Academic Oriental Studies in Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Russia", in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9:1 (2008), 53-81.

Goldziher, Theodor Nöldeke, Henri Lammens, and Leone Caetani. The new Soviet experts assumed that the works of these German, Hungarian, Belgian, or Italian “bourgeois” Orientalists, as well as of some authoritative Russian Orientalists like V.V. Bartol’d, provided enough factual information for new conclusions. From their works, the Soviet scholars believed, it was possible to develop an appropriate Marxist stance on Islam simply by using the “correct” dialectical thinking. In general, this was the method proposed by the most prominent Soviet historian of the 1920s and early 1930s, Mikhail N. Pokrovskii (1868-1932).<sup>5</sup> In short, “bourgeois” Western Orientalism was just to be turned upside down to produce a new, “revolutionary” interpretation of Islam. The path to this interpretation, however, proved to be very curvy, and for many even deadly.

### **Communism in Islam (Z. and D. Navshirvanov, 1923)**

The experimental discourse on Islam produced curious results. In 1923 the journal *Novyi Vostok* published a short article entitled “The Communist Trends in the History of Muslim Civilization”, written by Z. and D. Navshirvanov.<sup>6</sup> Zinatullah Navshirvanov was a Volga Tatar communist who was also active in the formation of a communist party in Atatürk’s new Republic of Turkey. His co-author was probably his wife, who was active in socialist propaganda among women in Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

In their article, the Navshirvanovs stated that there were several forms of communism in Islamic history. The authors detected a “primitive communism” already in the activities of some of Muḥammad’s companions (*ṣaḥāba*), but they found that communism was

<sup>5</sup> Bernard W. Eissenstat, “M.N. Pokrovskii and Soviet Historiography: Some Recon-siderations”, in: *Slavic Review* 28, no. 4 (1969), 604-618, with a quotation from Pokrovskii on p. 612.

<sup>6</sup> Z. & D. Navshirvanov, “Kommunisticheskie techeniia v istorii musul’manskoi kul’tury”, in: *Novyi Vostok* No. 4 (1923), 274-279.

<sup>7</sup> Zinatullah Navshirvanov was sentenced to labor camp by the Turkish government in May 1921; see George S. Harris, *The Origins of Communism in Turkey* (Stanford, Calif., 1967), 92f. It can be assumed that he was back in Russia in 1923. For references to his wife see *ibid.*, 169.

even more prominent in the tradition of Islamic Sufism. Under the cover of Sufism, the Navshirvanovs claimed, communist ideas and movements emerged that had nothing to do with Islam and religion whatsoever. These movements were driven by Muslims—poor nomads as well as peasants and urban craftsmen—longing to overthrow the feudal order of their times, i.e., the Abbasid, Seljukid, and Ottoman dynasties in the Near East. As examples the Navshirvanovs mentioned the Shi'i Ismailites, the Anatolian Futūwa and Akhī organizations, and the Bektashi order of dervishes. The climax of this supposed anti-feudal Sufi communist movement was Shaykh Bedreddin of Simavna who was executed by the Ottomans in 1416 as a heretic; his disciples led peasant rebellions against Ottoman rule and set up what the Navshirvanovs called the “first revolutionary government of Anatolia”.<sup>8</sup>

The message of this article is clear: communist movements did not only emerge in Europe, but also in the East, where they have even been an inherent part of the Islamic tradition! In fact, the two Tatar authors detect communist movements in almost every rebellion of Muslim “poor and underprivileged masses”, and they do not draw a strict dividing line between nomadic, peasant, and merchant environments. Islam is thus presented as an ideology against feudalism (and there is no mention of Islam being used by Muslim kings against their subjects).

The Navshirvanovs did not even try to bolster their statements with historical sources. From their position, such historiographic work was still ahead, for Europe had not even begun to investigate the social conflicts in the Muslim World of past and present. Even Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had only few reliable sources at their disposal, and what is more, their sources dealt with the classical period of Islam only. For these reasons Marx' and Engels' statements on Islam did not provide a satisfactory interpretative basis for an analysis of Muslim history and society, and can be neglected. The present task, according to the Navshirvanovs, was to approach the history of the Orient not from Marx' and Engels' scattered references

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<sup>8)</sup> Navshirvanovy, “Kommunisticheskie techeniia”, 276–278 ff. Cf. Ahmet N. Cerrahoğlu, *Şeyh Bedreddin ve Türkiye'de sosyalizm hareketleri* (Istanbul, 1966).



to Islam, but, equipped with Marxist methods, to prove that the history of the Orient was subject to the same social laws as the West.<sup>9</sup> The function of this article, therefore, was to maintain that Muslim societies are capable of developing communist ideas, and that they are prepared to accept the revolutionary ideals of Soviet communism.

### The “Trade Capitalism Theory” (M. Reisner, 1926)

The first Soviet scholar to produce a detailed Marxist analysis of the Qurʾān from the perspective of social studies was the ethnic German historian of law and publicist Mikhail A. Reisner (Michael von Reusner, 1868-1928). A professor of law at Tomsk University, Reisner joined the Bolsheviks in 1905; after the October Revolution he served in the Commissariat of Justice, directing the section for new legal initiatives. He also belonged to the founders of the Communist Academy, which was intended as a Marxist counterpart to the “bourgeois” Academy of Sciences.<sup>10</sup> Reisner produced numerous books on various aspects of intellectual and contemporary Russian history, especially on law and on the social role and violent practices of the Orthodox church in Russia; after 1917 he published some openly atheistic works, like *Is Belief in God Necessary?*<sup>11</sup>

In the last years of his life Reisner turned to the study of Oriental “ideologies”, i.e., religions. His interpretation of Islam can be found in two articles on “The Qurʾān and Its Social Ideology”, published in 1926 in a Soviet literary journal.<sup>12</sup> In these studies Reisner main-

<sup>9</sup> Navshirvanov, “Kommunisticheskie techeniia”, 278f.

<sup>10</sup> I. Ilʼinskii, “Reisner, Mikhail Andreevich”, in: *Malaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia* (Moscow, 1932), vol. 7, 256.

<sup>11</sup> M. v. Reusner, *Gemeinwohl und Absolutismus* (Berlin-Charlottenburg, 1904); idem, *Die russischen Kämpfe um Recht und Freiheit* (Halle, 1905); M. Reisner, *Vilʼgelʼm II i zheleznaia imperiia* (Petrograd, 1914); M. Reisner, *Dukhovnaia politsiia v Rossii* (St. Petersburg; Moscow, 1909). See also his preface to A.S. Prugawin’s *Die Inquisition der russisch-orthodoxen Kirche: Die Klostergefängnisse* (Berlin-Charlottenburg, 1905); M. Reisner, *Nuzhna li vera v boga? O vere, tserkve i gosudarstve* (Moscow, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1925); and *Tserkov i gosudarstvo: Svoboda i tiranniia v delakh very* (Petrograd, 1917).

<sup>12</sup> M. Reisner, “Koran i ego sotsialʼnaia ideologiia”, part I, in: *Krasnaia novʼ*, 1926, vol. 8, 134-149; continuation as part II in: *Krasnaia novʼ*, 1926, vol. 9, 146-164. The articles

tained that Islam was the religion of the Arab merchants of Mecca. He distinguished between the big merchants, that is, the rich families of Mecca, and the less affluent and poor merchant families. Due to the disunion of the Arab tribes, trade caravans were constantly running the risk of being raided by nomads. These caravans were organized as joint ventures of rich and less affluent trade families of the Quraysh tribe, but the poorer merchants invested, and therefore risked, a higher percentage of their capital than the rich families. For this reason the idea of a union of the Arab tribes under one monotheistic religion was developed by the poorer families of the Quraysh, for only such a union would eliminate the raids. Their speaker became Muḥammad, who himself hailed from one of the less privileged Quraysh clans.<sup>13</sup>

Reisner tried to bolster these assumptions with quotations from the Qurʾān. In his view, the holy book of Islam portrays God as a rich, powerful and smart capitalist. Allāh is all-powerful, makes all decisions himself, and does not allow predetermination to restrict his actions. He leads on the right path whom he wills and leads astray whom he wills, his actions are not foreseeable and not to be influenced by man (or by ‘middlemen’, *prikazchiki*, a Russian word for mediators in trade). If petty merchants try to deceive him he will always be smarter, and will always take them in. Reisner thus emphasized God’s attributes of arbitrariness and omnipotence, not God’s Qurʾānic attribute of justice. For an Arab merchant, God does not have to be just: the Arab trader would prefer to have dealings with an omnipotent God rather than with weak gods who, as the Qurʾān maintains, can neither reward nor punish.<sup>14</sup> Yet God’s omnipotence does not preclude his mercy, just as a rich capitalist can afford a certain amount of charity for the poor without seriously charging his wallet. The Paradise promise in the Qurʾān—as Reisner called it, the “public relations” of “God’s company”—is clearly modeled after a rich man’s life in this world, with golden cups, silk

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were later included in his comparative book on “Eastern Ideologies”: M. Reisner, *Ideologii vostoka: Ocherki vostochnoi teokratii* (Moscow; Leningrad, 1927).

<sup>13)</sup> Reisner, “Koran”, part I, 135f.

<sup>14)</sup> Reisner, “Koran”, part I, 140ff.; for God as “the mighty heavenly capitalist” see *ibid.*, 144.

clothes, sweet dishes, wine, and virgins—the delights of Paradise as depicted in the Qur’ān do not go beyond what money can buy already in this world. In other words, Paradise turns the believer into a millionaire, and for this reason the trade with God pays off for the believer.<sup>15</sup> Reisner dubs Islam a “Paradise Stock Company” (*raiskaia aktsionerskaia kompaniia*) which everybody can join just by pronouncing the formula of faith. Islam is a “Divine Savings Bank” where everyone can make investments to obtain interests for heaven’s sake. By contrast, Hell appears as a prison for debtors (*adskaia dolgovaia tiurma*).<sup>16</sup>

In Medina, so Reisner, Muḥammad acted not so much as a prophet and preacher but as a skillful organizer. He was successful not because people were eager to join a new religion but because they longed for a law that would unite them.<sup>17</sup> The Qur’ān does not suggest a certain political system, and Muḥammad did not even announce his own successor. The Qur’ān, Reisner continues, only guarantees the right to property and creates a “World Trade Company of Believers” (*mirovaia torgovaia kompaniia veruiushchikh*) under God’s own leadership. Many elements in the Qur’ān reflect a merchant’s position: the prayers and rituals are not very complex and do not require “spiritual contortions”; the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) is linked to a trade fair; *zakāt* is restricted to a moderate level, and believers are exhorted not to squander their money; while usury is forbidden, Muslims are encouraged to make moderate profits; and, of course, the Qur’ān emphasizes the importance of oaths, correct measurements, and the faithful return of the deposit.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Reisner finds trade terminology scattered throughout the Qur’ān, as for instance in verses that speak of Islam as “the best trade”. Reisner also points out that Muḥammad refrained from performing any kind of miracles; rather, the way the Earth is described in the Qur’ān is “almost scientific” and sheer “utilitarian” in character: nature proves God’s omnipotence, and it was created in order to

<sup>15</sup> Reisner, “Koran”, part I, 145, 147ff.

<sup>16</sup> Reisner, “Koran”, part II, 149f.

<sup>17</sup> Reisner, “Koran”, part I, 136.

<sup>18</sup> Reisner, “Koran”, part II, 155-158.

be used and exploited by man in the best manner.<sup>19</sup> Reisner explains that mystical elements, which tended to supersede the clear class distinctions, were to enter Islam only much later, mainly stemming from the Persian tradition.<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, his general interpretation of Islam as emerging from a trade community in Mecca can also be found in many, if not most, works of European Orientalists of the time. Yet Reisner's study was based on just a few works of Orientalists; for the most part he quotes from works of Vasilii Bartol'd, August Müller, and Martin Hartmann. While Reisner's study was thus not very impressive as an independent piece of research, it was most compelling by its clear and coherent interpretation, and by its vivid comparisons and terminology.

As seen above, Reisner's portrait of God is not that of a merchant who insists on justice and fidelity, but that of a monopolist who recklessly takes advantage of his powerful position, and with whom one should try to be on good terms. This image of God reflects the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Marxist critique of monopoly capitalism; capitalism means exploitation, servitude, and strife for hegemony, even though it seems to suggest equal opportunities and free trade. Consequently, Reisner predicted that the social revolution of the "advancing Oriental proletariat" will thwart all aspirations of the contemporary Muslim industrialists and merchants.<sup>21</sup>

### **Friedrich Engels on Islam (V. Ditiakin, 1927)**

Reisner's interpretation turned out to be very influential among Soviet scholars of the late 1920s. However, as more and more works by Marx and Engels became accessible in Russian print, the question remained how the theory of Islam as a merchant religion could be reconciled with the writings of the founders of communism. This question was first specifically addressed by V. Ditiakin, an expert on the history of Marxism. Ditiakin worked in the historical cabinet

<sup>19</sup>) Reisner, "Koran", part I, 142ff.; II, 160.

<sup>20</sup>) Reisner, "Koran", part II, 161.

<sup>21</sup>) Reisner, "Koran", part II, 164.

of the Tatar Communist University as well as in the Cabinet for Research on Marxism (*kabinet izucheniia marksizma*) of the Eastern Pedagogical Institute, both located in Kazan, Tatarstan. His starting point was therefore not the Islamic tradition, nor Western Oriental studies or even Reisner, but the works of Marx and Engels. After a previous study on Marx' and Engels' views on the "Eastern Question" (written in the context of the Crimean War, 1853-56),<sup>22</sup> Ditiakin in 1927 published an article on "Marx and Engels on the Origins and Character of Islam".<sup>23</sup>

Ditiakin conceded that Marx and Engels had only limited sources at their disposal and never devoted a special study to Islam; nevertheless he believed they came to important insights on this topic. According to Ditiakin, Marx and Engels understood that pre-Islamic Arabia was characterized by two different environments, that of nomadic Bedouins and that of settled urban traders. As the correspondences of the two thinkers show, the Bedouins could hardly be characterized as bearers of high culture, whereas the population of the southwestern Arabian peninsula was a "civilized" Oriental high culture. Obviously, Engels had access to publications on petroglyphs from Yemen, which, in his mind, reflected "the ancient, national Arabic tradition of monotheism". However, in the centuries immediately before Muḥammad the old culture of Yemen was destroyed by incursions of the Ethiopians, and consequently also the Arabian trade route to the north via Mecca was in decay. This decline of trade in the period before Muḥammad was, as Engels wrote to Marx in 1853, "one of the chief factors in the Muhammadan revolution".<sup>24</sup> To quote Engels again, "it seems that Mohammad's religious revolution, like *every* religious movement, was *formally a reaction*, an alleged return to the old, the simple";<sup>25</sup> "the movement

<sup>22</sup>) V. Ditiakin, "Vostochnyi vopros v seredine XIX veka v osveshchenii Marks'a i Engel'sa", in: *Novyi Vostok*, vol. 13-14 (1926), 329-342.

<sup>23</sup>) V. Ditiakin, "Marks i Engel's o proiskhozhdenii i sushchnosti Islama", in: *Ateist*, no. 22 (1927), 80-92.

<sup>24</sup>) Ditiakin, "Marks i Engel's", 82, referring to Engels' letter to Marx of June 6, 1853; see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Correspondence 1846-1895: A Selection with Commentary and Notes* (New York: International Publishers, without date [1934?]), 67.

<sup>25</sup>) Ditiakin, "Marks i Engel's", 83 (Engels' letter to Marx, May 1853; cf. Marx and Engels, *Correspondence 1846-1895*, 64; emphasis in the original).

[of Muḥammad] has seemed to me to have the character of a Bedouin reaction against the settled but degenerate fellahin of the towns, who at that time had also become very decadent in their religion, mingling a corrupt nature-cult with corrupt Judaism and Christianity." The decline referred to by Engels was thus economic and religious.

According to Ditiakin, Engels' statements led to the apparent contradiction that the uncivilized Bedouins, who were defeated and driven out of their country by foreign invaders, created an "ideological system" that would ultimately rescue Arabia and soon rule over a huge part of the world.<sup>26</sup> In Ditiakin's mind, this apparent contradiction can only be solved by the following line of reasoning: The cradle of Islam was characterized by a coexistence of the nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouins and the formerly highly developed trade economy of the "urban fellahs", which was however in decline, but still "potentially" stronger than the Bedouin culture. A series of "revolutionary blows" was necessary to dissolve the contradictions between the two, and to free the trade formation from its restrictions. These blows came in the form of foreign invasions, as Engels had suggested in 1853: "The expulsion of the Abyssinians took place about forty years before Mohammed and was obviously the first act of the awakening Arabian national consciousness, which was also spurred by Persian invasions from the North, pushing forward almost to Mecca".<sup>27</sup>

As the dominant type of culture in Muḥammad's time was Bedouin, the Islamic revolution had to be Bedouin "in form", and thus "reactionary" compared to the more "progressive" culture of urban traders. For Ditiakin, Islam had a Bedouin character, and Bedouin lifestyle had a huge impact on the new religion. Due to the course of the Islamic expansion, however, the emergent religion of Islam was soon adapted to the foundations of urban economy. Accordingly, Islam eliminated the relics of the clan-based society and became the ideology of an urban society. The old nomadic and

<sup>26</sup> Ditiakin, "Marks i Engel's", 83.

<sup>27</sup> Ditiakin, "Marks i Engel's", 83 (Engels to Marx, June 6, 1853).

Bedouin cultural heritage of Islam, however, turned out to be strong enough to prevent Islam from becoming dominant in Europe.<sup>28</sup>

The works of some Western Orientalists provided Ditiakin with ample support for Engels' conviction of the Bedouins' importance for the spread of Islam. A similar argument had been brought forward by the Italian Leone Caetani (1869-1935) who, in several solid works, expounded the theory that Islam was just the last of a whole series of Semitic emigration movements from the Arabian peninsula.<sup>29</sup> Caetani's ideas were accessible to Ditiakin by a Russian summary published by K.P. Dobroliubskii in *Novyi Vostok* in 1923/24.<sup>30</sup> While Dobroliubskii was deeply impressed by Caetani's results, Ditiakin found fault in many aspects of his theory. According to him, Caetani and Dobroliubskii erred when they assumed that the Bedouins were generally indifferent to religion, that they even did not know much about Islam when they fought in its name, and that only later, after the successful Bedouin expansion, Islam developed into a religion. This interpretation, so Ditiakin, was as mistaken as the contrary assumption that Islam expanded merely due to religious fanaticism. Also, Ditiakin openly derided Caetani's attempt to portray Islam as just another segment in a chain of nomadic emigrations that supposedly began some eight or ten thousand years B.C., developments which were basically caused by long-term climatic changes in the Arabian peninsula. This, so Ditiakin, is a form of "super-materialism" which denies the force of political and religious factors, and which ignores Engels' insight that at certain stages of their development, "almost every historical movement takes on a religious colour".<sup>31</sup>

Ditiakin came to the conclusion that Muḥammad's fight against the Quraysh of Mecca was "a revolution of the dying Bedouin culture against developing trade capital"—seemingly the exact contrary to Reisner's trade capitalism theory. Ditiakin, however, put it differently.

<sup>28</sup>) Ditiakin, "Marks i Engel's", 85f.

<sup>29</sup>) Ditiakin refers explicitly to Caetani's *Annali dell' Islam* (1905), *Cronografia islamica* (1912ff.) and *Studi di storia orientale* (1911-1914).

<sup>30</sup>) K.P. Dobroliubskii, "Vozniknovenie islama v novom osveshchenii", in: *Novyi Vostok*, no. 4 (1923), 328-348; and *Novyi Vostok*, no. 6 (1924), 360-375.

<sup>31</sup>) Ditiakin, "Marks i Engel's", 88ff.; cf. 86 for the Engels quote.



According to him, Marx and Engels established that Islam emerged out of an environment characterized by *two* main socio-economical formations—one of nomadic Bedouins and one of an urban population of the trade centers.<sup>32</sup> This dialectical twist seems to build a bridge between Reisner's thesis of Islam as a religion of the Meccan traders and Engels' idea of Islam as a "Bedouin reaction". Consequently, Ditiakin finished his article with a discussion of Reisner's book, whose general line of reasoning he found acceptable.<sup>33</sup> In result, Reisner was brought into a certain harmony with Marx and Engels.

### The "Bedouin Theory" (S. Asfendiarov, 1928)

Another interpretation of the role of the Bedouins was brought forward by the Kazakh communist and historian Sandzhar D. Asfendiarov (1889–1938).<sup>34</sup> Asfendiarov stemmed from a fairly Russified Kazakh family, with his father being a former Kazakh Sultan in Russian military service. After graduating from the Military Medical Academy in St. Petersburg, Sandzhar Asfendiarov worked as a doctor in the Imperial Russian army during World War I before he became involved in Muslim politics in Tashkent. Some sources claim he was involved in the Kazakh Alash Orda national movement.<sup>35</sup> In 1919 he joined the Bolshevik party and soon rose to several important positions in party and government: in October 1919 he was appointed People's Commissar for Public Health of the Turkestan Republic, and in the following year he became Turkestan's People's Commissar for Agriculture and a member of the Central Committee of the Turkestan Communist Party. In 1921 and 1922 he was Turkestan's representative in Stalin's Commissariat for Nationalities

<sup>32</sup> Ditiakin, "Marks i Engel's", 82.

<sup>33</sup> Ditiakin, "Marks i Engel's", 91f.

<sup>34</sup> For his biography see R.V. Suleimenov, "Vidnyi deiatel' sotsialisticheskogo stroitel'stva v Srednei Azii i Kazakhstane, uchenyi-vostokoved", in: *Sandzhar Dzhaifarovich Asfendiarov* (Alma-Ata, 1990), 3–26; M. Makhmudov, "Partiino-gosudarstvennaia deiatel'nost' S.D. Asfendiarova v Turkestane", in: *ibid.*, 44–60.

<sup>35</sup> F.D. Ashnin, V.N. Alpatov, D.M. Nasilov, *Repressirovannaia tiurkologiia* (Moscow, 2002), 20.



in Moscow. He then returned to Turkestan (i.e., Tashkent) to work again in various high party offices and as minister. As an expert in land and public health issues, he was frequently deployed all over Central Asia and thus actively involved in the Sovietization of the region, as well as in the national delimitation, the drawing of national boundaries of the Central Asian Soviet republics and autonomous regions.

When he was sent again to Moscow in 1925 to serve as deputy secretary to the Russian Central Executive Committee, he also began teaching history at Moscow University, where he soon obtained the title of professor. From 1927 to 1928 he directed the Moscow Institute for Oriental Studies (MIV), the above-mentioned party institute. He then moved to Almaty where he directed the newly established Kazakh State University as well as a medical institute (which today bears his name). In the Kazakh Republic, he also served as People's Commissar for Public Health and as Deputy People's Commissar for Enlightenment, besides various academic offices. In 1935 and 1936 he published several monographs as well as volumes of documents on the history of Kazakhstan.<sup>36</sup> Asfendiarov was arrested in August 1937 under the accusation of foreign espionage, obviously in connection to the equally fabricated case against the well-known Turcologist Aleksandr N. Samoilovich, the then director of the Institute for Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences (IVAN) in Leningrad. Both Samoilovich and Asfendiarov were executed in February 1938. Asfendiarov was posthumously rehabilitated in 1958, and today he is celebrated as one of the first Marxist historians of Kazakhstan.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See for instance his *Istoriia Kazakhstana (s drevneishikh vremen)*, vol. 1 (Alma-Ata, 1935); *Ocherki istorii kazakhov*, Kzyl-Orda 1935 (in the Kazakh language); *Natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe vosstanie 1916 g. v Kazakhstane* (Alma-Ata; Moscow, 1936); as well as the documentary volumes *Proshloe Kazakhstana v istochnikakh i materialakh*, Alma-Ata, 1935 (vol. 1), 1936 (vol. 2), edited by Asfendiarov together with P.A. Kunte, a German Communist who emigrated to the USSR. It should be mentioned that in these works Asfendiarov attacked several allegedly nationalist and supposedly "Pan-Islamist" or "Pan-Turkist" Soviet Muslim scholars who, at that time, were already being persecuted, and many of whom were executed soon after.

<sup>37</sup> Ashnin, Alpatov, Nasilov, *Repressirovannaia tiurkologiia*, 235ff.; *Liudy i sud'by*, 42f.

In 1928, probably during his brief directorate of the Moscow Oriental Institute, Asfendiarov published his first booklet on the “Reasons for the Emergence of Islam”.<sup>38</sup> Asfendiarov regarded Islam as the product not of the merchants of Mecca, as Reisner did, but of the Arab nomads. To him, the Islamic expansion was a huge emigration wave of about one million nomads from the Hijaz and Najd regions of Arabia to the outside world.<sup>39</sup> In order to understand the origins of Islam one has to study the nomadic economy of seventh-century Central Arabia. Obviously inspired by Caetani (accessible to him through Dobroliubov’s Russian excerpts), Asfendiarov maintained that Islam emerged as the last huge expansion of Semite tribes from Arabia. However, Asfendiarov insisted that this expansion resulted from changes in the nomadic economy, not from climate change.<sup>40</sup> According to him, the Arabs were beyond the formation of “primitive patriarchal nomadism”; rather, they possessed a “developed”, modified cattle breeding economy. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Arabia suffered from a scarcity in land for cattle breeding. The Byzantine and Persian empires in the North, and the Persian and Ethiopian interventions in Yemen, resulted in an isolation of Central Arabia, as well as in a heightened competition for the available pastures.<sup>41</sup> Due to this scarcity and competition, Arab tribes now occupied the oases and towns of the Hijaz, like Mecca and Medina, which had hitherto been inhabited mainly by Jews and other settled populations. The Arabic tribes that conquered these settlements took over the agricultural and merchant activities that had been in place.<sup>42</sup> Some Bedouin tribes, like the Quraysh, therefore turned into trading tribes. Due to the increased mutual raiding and warfare among cattle-breeders, more and more Arab nomads lost their livestock, settled around these settlements as pauperized and dependant clans, and took on agricultural work to make a

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<sup>38</sup>) S.D. Asfendiarov, *Materialy k izucheniiu istorii vostoka. Chast' pervaya: Prichiny vznikaeniia islama* (Samarkand, 1928).

<sup>39</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 43.

<sup>40</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 47–50.

<sup>41</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 15, 27.

<sup>42</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 22ff.

living.<sup>43</sup> For all of these reasons, the tribal economy of 7<sup>th</sup>-century Arabia constituted more than just a primitive patriarchal society, for the majority of transhumant cattle-breeders was supplemented by Arab traders and Arab agriculturalists (or “semi-agriculturalists”, as Asfendiarov had it,<sup>44</sup> for they still had connections to the nomadic way of life). Taken together, these three social groups still made up one single economic formation, one that was characterized by a certain amount of economic specialization with all ensuing social contradictions, especially a marked distinction between rich and poor. What they all had in common was their tribal organization, which did not evolve into a community- or neighborhood-based social organization. The tribal organization, according to Asfendiarov, was not simply a “residue” (*perezhitok*) of the past that was doomed to vanish, but rather a very functional element necessary for survival in all three economic environments.<sup>45</sup> He concluded that the Orient was characterized not by a historical sequence of primitive-patriarchal, feudal, and capitalist society, as in the West, but by one tribal formation that combined elements from all three formations. According to Asfendiarov, this tribal formation was retained at least until the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>46</sup>

Islam, in Asfendiarov’s mind, was nothing but the event that triggered off the social expansion of the Arab tribes, uniting the tribes to break the isolation of Arabia. He referred to Caetani’s opinion that the Arabs were rather indifferent to their religions, and that Islam was just an “unconscious impulse”, an “almost secondary reason” for the movement of the tribes. Islam should therefore be understood as an economic movement of the tribes.<sup>47</sup> The Qur’ān did not provide a religious system.<sup>48</sup> Rather, Islam became a religion only after the expansion, mainly under Abbasid rule (after 750 C.E.) when Islamic law and theology were formulated, and when an

<sup>43</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 17, 53.

<sup>44</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 12.

<sup>45</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 29f.

<sup>46</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 5ff., 51.

<sup>47</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 28, 48.

<sup>48</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 58.

Islamic “clergy” came into being.<sup>49</sup> In the early days, Islam was nothing but an outlet for social and economic pressures.

Accordingly, Asfendiarov strongly criticized Reisner’s view that Islam embodied the interests of the Meccan traders,<sup>50</sup> and he found support in Engels’ aforementioned statement that Islam emerged as a Bedouin reaction to the urban peasants (and traders, one might add).<sup>51</sup> In Asfendiarov’s mind, Reisner committed the crucial mistake to study the Qur’ān without reference to the economic formation in which it developed, and which was still dominated by tribal pastoralists. According to Asfendiarov, scholars like M. Reisner and the Orientalist V. Gurko-Kriazhin<sup>52</sup> largely overestimated the merchant capitalism of Mecca, which led to many inconsistencies in their interpretations. As examples he pointed out that Orientalists did not know the amount of the goods traded, or even what the goods were composed of, or whether they belonged to Meccans or to traders from elsewhere.<sup>53</sup> Of course he found support in Marx and Engels, who wrote that the South Arabian trade of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries was in decline, and that this was an important precondition for the “Muḥammadan revolution”.<sup>54</sup> In result, Asfendiarov accused Reisner and others of “Pseudo-Marxism”.<sup>55</sup>

To be sure, Asfendiarov did not deny the importance of Mecca as a trading center. However, in his mind the Quraysh had monopolized not the transit trade, but rather the internal market of the Bedouins of the Najd and Hijaz. Muḥammad was a leader of the disadvantaged in Mecca: his first followers were from among the urban poor who had been cast out by their tribes and become dependant on the traders, and who suffered from the monopoly of the rich Quraysh clans. This monopoly manifested itself in the

<sup>49</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 55.

<sup>50</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 20, 24, 39-43, 59.

<sup>51</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 52.

<sup>52</sup>) Asfendiarov does not mention any article or book by Vladimir Gurko-Kriazhin (1887-1931); most probably he is referring to Gurko-Kriazhin’s unpublished course materials or lectures. Gurko-Kriazhin taught at the MIV between 1921 and 1930, that is, also under Asfendiarov’s short directorship.

<sup>53</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 24, 31, 41.

<sup>54</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 19, 21. See above for Ditiakin’s use of this argument.

<sup>55</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 50.

ruthless exploitation of the poor by the ruling “clan aristocracy” of the Quraysh: grain would be lent only in return for exorbitant interests—hence the Qur’ānic ban of usury and its emphasis on charity and assistance to the poor and orphans.<sup>56</sup>

After his emigration from Mecca, Muḥammad found a more favorable environment in Medina, an oasis town inhabited by “semi-agriculturalists” but with strong ties to the nomadic environment. The struggle between the Aws and the Khazraj tribes, which Muḥammad was to arbitrate, reflected the competition for scarce agricultural land in the oasis town. After uniting the Medinan tribes and clans under his political rule, Muḥammad set out to win the support of the surrounding Bedouin tribes in order to defeat Mecca. Accordingly, Asfendiarov emphasized those numerous passages in the Qur’ān that reflect customary tribal structures.<sup>57</sup>

Asfendiarov’s understanding of early Islam was intrinsically linked to his interpretation of the history of his own Kazakh people, and throughout the text he made explicit and implicit references to Central Asia and Kazakhstan.<sup>58</sup> His purpose was to show that on the Marxist ladder of development, the nomadic peoples of Asia—the Arab Bedouins of the 7<sup>th</sup> as well as the Kazakh hordes of later centuries—did not belong to the “primitive” or classless patriarchal economic formation. Rather, they both represented a higher stadium of tribal society, which is marked by the transition to feudal (or “semi-feudal”) characteristics. Feudalism, obviously, refers here to the emergence of powerful Muslim caliphs in Arabia as well as to the khans and ruling families among the later Kazakh hordes. Asfendiarov thus depicted the history of the Asian tribal societies as a class struggle of an impoverished lower class against the exploitation by an upper class. Asfendiarov’s study of early Islam thus served as a foil for his explanation of Kazakh history and society. Also, his claim that the Bedouins were not motivated by Islam as a religion seems to imply that the Kazakh nomads were Muslims

<sup>56</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 29-32.

<sup>57</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 35f., 39.

<sup>58</sup>) Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 57, 66.

“in name alone”—a position which had already been popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which has not lost its popularity since.<sup>59</sup>

By introducing the nomadic cattle-breeding economic formation as a combination of patriarchal/feudal, peasant, and trade components, Asfendiarov clearly attacked the Eurocentric Marxist categories for understanding history. Also, Asfendiarov challenged the perception—as widespread among Marxists as in the West in general—that Oriental peoples were “backward”. In Asfendiarov’s mind, the nomadic cultures were ready for national liberation and revolutionary movements, which, in his words, would finally lead to an anti-colonial revolution (*kolonial’naia revoliutsiia*).<sup>60</sup> Asfendiarov did not develop this idea further, but one may assume that this anti-colonial revolution in the Muslim periphery would not necessarily take the same course, or depend on the same preconditions, as the proletariat-based socialist revolution in central Russia.

Asfendiarov’s “Bedouin theory” was not very different from V. Ditiakin’s concepts of a combination of the two economic environments. Nevertheless, or maybe precisely for this reason, Ditiakin swiftly reacted to Asfendiarov’s booklet with an elaborate critique. In his article entitled “The ‘Bedouin’ Theory of the Origins of Islam and Its New Defender” (1928), Ditiakin found fault in Asfendiarov’s view that the Bedouins were indifferent to religion, and that Islam was in fact not a religion but a social movement in the first place, and that all religious aspects of the Qur’ān were just taken from Judeo-Christian traditions. This, so Ditiakin, has no basis, for it can not be denied that religious issues figure prominently in the Qur’ān. Furthermore, this thesis of Asfendiarov also contradicted Engels’ statements about Muḥammad’s “religious revolution”.<sup>61</sup> Ditiakin’s

<sup>59</sup> For instance, Asfendiarov clearly shared his distance to Islam as well as his sympathy for “traditional” Kazakh lifestyle with the well-known Kazakh intellectual in Russian service, Chokan Valikhanov (1835–1865). For a critique of the widespread dismissal, and neglect, of Kazakh Islam among Soviet and Western scholars see Allen J. Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia: The Islamic World of Novouzensk District and the Kazakh Inner Horde, 1780–1910* (Leiden, 2001), introduction.

<sup>60</sup> Asfendiarov, *Materialy*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> V. Ditiakin, “‘Beduinskaia’ teoriia i ego novyi zashchitnik”, in: *Ateist* 1928, no. 35 (December), 45–62, here: 51f.

main point, however, was Asfendiarov's claim that Islam was driven by the nomadic cattle-breeders in conjunction with impoverished outcasts of the nomadic clans that formed a kind of urban proletariat, directed against urban merchant capitalism. This view, so Ditiakin, is as wrong as Reisner's, who tried to prove that Islam expressed nothing but the interests of the merchants. Why would Muḥammad wage a war against the arid trade city of Mecca if the real driving force behind his movement was nothing but the quest for more pasture land? And if Islam was the movement of impoverished nomads, why would their activity not be directed against the rich nomadic clans?<sup>62</sup> For Ditiakin, one can not ignore the role of the merchants in the emergence of Islam, even if, or rather because, Muḥammad fought against them; and he reminded the reader that Muḥammad ultimately came to an agreement with the Meccan merchant clans (at Hudaybiyya in 628) which eventually gave him the opportunity to take over Mecca.<sup>63</sup>

### **Beliaev's Modification of the "Trade Capitalism Theory" (1930)**

The debate on the class background of early Islam still continued in a surprisingly diverse and vivid form. In 1930, the atheist scientific journal *Ateist* published several articles that discussed the origin of Islam from different positions. The "Bedouin theory" was represented by a contribution of Asfendiarov himself, who merely repeated the line of argumentation exposed in his book of 1928, and who did not even mention Ditiakin's heavy criticisms.<sup>64</sup> The "trade capitalism theory" was defended by Evgenii Beliaev (1895-1964). Beliaev was the only professional trained in Oriental languages among all participants in the early Soviet discourse on Islam discussed here. After graduating from the University of St. Petersburg's Faculty of Oriental Languages (1916), Beliaev was among the first students of the newly created Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies (MIV) from which he

<sup>62</sup> Ditiakin, "Beduinskaia' teoriia", 49f.

<sup>63</sup> Ditiakin, "Beduinskaia' teoriia", 54.

<sup>64</sup> S. Asfendiarov, "Islam i kochevoe khoziaistvo", in: *Ateist* no. 58 (November 1930), 3-17.



graduated in 1922. With some interruptions during the Second World War he then taught at the MIV, witnessing Asfendiarov's short tenure as director, and finishing his PhD in 1942. From 1951 until his demise in 1964 he taught at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences (IVAN), which had been moved to Moscow in 1950.<sup>65</sup> Only very late in his life, in 1960, he obtained the title of professor.

In his contribution to the 1930 special issue of *Ateist* on the origins of Islam, Beliaev argued that Islam emerged from the merchant environment of Mecca.<sup>66</sup> The pagan religion served the purpose of trade, and the authority of the gods in the Ka'ba grew with the wealth of the merchants. Islam emerged in the late 6<sup>th</sup> (sic!) century as a movement of the less wealthy, "intermediary and lower Meccan bourgeoisie" against this "'aristocracy' of avaricious traders and pitiless usurers."<sup>67</sup> Similar to Reisner, Beliaev saw Islam as the product of a struggle between various layers of the Meccan trade capitalist society. Islam attracted some followers among the poor and enslaved, but it was basically a movement of the "middle traders" of the "suburbs" against the rich in downtown Mecca. In contrast to Reisner, however, Beliaev did not see anything progressive, liberating, or even revolutionary in this initial Islam: for instance, Islam did not stand up against slavery. Beliaev compared the image of God in the Qur'ān to that of a despot and slave owner.<sup>68</sup>

A similar struggle was taking place in Medina, where some clans became dependant upon others, and especially upon the Jewish clans, whose wealth was based on "usury capital" (*rostovshchicheskii kapital*). The gradual dissolution of the ancient tribal and clan structures in Muslim Medina must not be ascribed to the religion of Islam but rather to the development of Meccan trade capital, and in general

<sup>65</sup> Sofia D. Miliband, *Biobibliograficheskii slovar' sovetskikh vostokovedov*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 1 (Moscow 1995), 152; G. Landa, "Talant uchenogo i uchitelia. Vospominaniia o E.A. Beliaev (1895-1964)", *Slovo ob uchiteliakh. Moskovskie vostokovedy 30-60-kh godov* (Moscow, 1988), 312-325.

<sup>66</sup> Evg. Beliaev, "Rol' mekkanskogo torgovogo kapitala v istorii proiskhozhdeniia islama", in: *Ateist* no. 58 (November 1930), 48-60.

<sup>67</sup> Beliaev, "Rol' mekkanskogo torgovogo kapitala", 54.

<sup>68</sup> Beliaev, "Rol' mekkanskogo torgovogo kapitala", 51, 55, 57.



to the transition to private property in slaves, cattle, and other possessions. "With an eagerness and love for detail that is characteristic for the petty bourgeoisie, the boring, depressing and dull Suras of the Medinan period lay down the regulations for property and inheritance as well as buying and selling". In Medina Muḥammad changed the prayer direction (*qibla*) from Jerusalem to Mecca; "praying to the Muslim God, they bow down before the only god that they respect, namely capital." When the "medium wealthy" traders finally took over Mecca, they reached their goal: together with the rich "Quraysh of the Center" they found themselves at the helm of the "trade capitalist organization of the Hijaz" which eventually united the tribes of Arabia. The nomads, by contrast, did not play an active role in Beliaev's scenario; after Muḥammad's death they easily committed apostasy and had to be forced back to Islam by the first caliph, Abū Bakr (632-634). United by the Meccan bourgeoisie, the tribes then emigrated into other regions—not in order to spread Islam, and not even to find new pasture land for their cattle, but to secure the trading routes of the Meccan bourgeoisie.<sup>69</sup>

Beliaev's article is remarkable for lending Reisner's thesis the authority of an expert in Oriental languages and Islamic studies. At the same time, he turned Reisner's "progressive" evaluation of Islam's role in history into a negative one, emphasizing that Islam was not the struggle of the have-nots against the haves, but a movement of the moderate wealthy against the very rich. At the same time, the personality of Muḥammad almost vanished from the scene; he is nothing but an instrument of a social group, and part of a development that started even before his lifetime. Remarkably, Beliaev made no reference to Reisner whom he basically supported, nor to Asfendiarov whom he opposed; and he did not even mention Marx and Engels, whose statements about "Muḥammad's revolution" he clearly defied.

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<sup>69</sup> Beliaev, "Rol' mekkanskogo trgovogo kapitala", 58ff.

### The “Peasant Theory” (M. Tomara, 1930)

A completely new interpretation of the rise of Islam was brought forward by the economist Mikhail L. Tomara. Born in 1868, Tomara had pursued a great deal of his career in Tsarist times, and thus belonged to the so-called “bourgeois experts” which the Soviets felt they had to rely upon in their early years of power. Tomara had first worked in the Imperial postal and telegraph service and then in the Ministry of Finances. In 1893-94 the ministry sent him on a mission to Persia, after which Tomara published his *Economic Situation of Persia* (*Ekonomicheskoe polozhenie Persii*, Sankt-Peterburg 1895), a book widely regarded as the first Russian study of Persian economy. He then went to Georgia and worked as mayor (*gorodskaiia glava*) of the city of Sukhumi (1904-1905), then as a jurist in the Tiflis court as well as in some private banks. In 1921 and 1922, after Georgia had fallen under Bolshevik control, he held a teaching position in Abkhazia, presumably as a form of internal exile; then, however, he became professor at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) in Moscow, and got involved in the Comintern as well. He was shortly arrested for a first time in 1929, but resumed work after his release. His second arrest, from which he was never to return, occurred before or around 1936, when he was already in his late sixties.<sup>70</sup>

Tomara’s article in the *Ateist* special issue of 1930, entitled “The Origin of Islam and Its Class Basis”,<sup>71</sup> points at the role of peasants and agriculture in seventh-century Arabia. Tomara listed up a vast number of witnesses, taken partly from al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), but mostly from European travellers like Niebuhr, Burton and Palgrave, and especially from Aloys Sprenger’s *Das Leben und Werk des Mohammed* (1861-1865), showing that Arabia’s agricultural and horticultural population vastly exceeded its Bedouin population, not to speak of the merchants. In Tomara’s mind, agriculture was mainly taken up by impoverished Bedouins; under the general climate change in Arabia, Bedouins whose pastures dried up would either emigrate

<sup>70</sup> *Liudy i sud’by*, 376.

<sup>71</sup> M. Tomara, “Proiskhozhdenie islama i ego klassovoe osnovanie”, in: *Ateist*, no. 58 (November 1930), 19-47.

or, when the emigration was blocked as was the case before Islam, dig wells and settle down to pursue agriculture with the help of artificial irrigation. The continuous transformation of pasture land into fields led to an intensified struggle between the Bedouins and the peasant population. Tomara assumed that the agriculturalists consisted mainly of clients (Arab. *mawālī*, sing. *mawla*) of powerful clans, manumitted slaves and other dislocated people. Poor agriculturalists would become dependent on usurers and often lose their house, land, and cattle, thus being forced to work as hired pastors (Russ. *batraki*) for rich neighbors. Tomara thus distinguished three "classes": nomads, well-to-do peasants, and impoverished peasants who lived a semi-transhumant or even transhumant life (obviously, while herding the Bedouins' cattle).<sup>72</sup> Incidentally, he provided no source for his assumption that impoverished peasants sold their labor as pastors; his concept of *batraki* may have reflected conditions he knew from Persia or even Soviet Central Asia.

Tomara further maintained that trade was only slightly developed in 7<sup>th</sup>-century Arabia, and therefore Islam cannot be credited to it: "Islam was born in the trade city of Mecca, but only as an expression of the dissatisfaction of the poor strata of the city; and it turned out to be unsuccessful there. Trade capital, as a fierce opponent of Islam, defeated Islam and drove it out of Mecca".<sup>73</sup> Subsequently, Islam found a solid class basis in Medina, an exclusively agricultural town. The Qur'ān's endorsement of charity, so Tomara, the use of alms to support the poor, to manumit slaves, and to relieve debtors from their financial burdens, shows clearly that Islam emerged as the religion of the urban poor. The poor emigrants (*muhājirūn*) from Mecca joined the urban poor of Medina and broke the power of the rich Medinan landowners who had opposed Muḥammad at several occasions. As indicated in Qur'ān 59:7, Muḥammad allotted agricultural lands in and around Medina to his poor supporters as well as to people who flocked to him from other agricultural communities in Arabia. The increasing need to reward peasant supporters led to the expulsion, and later annihilation, of the Jewish clans of

<sup>72</sup> Tomara, "Proiskhozhdenie islama", 19-25.

<sup>73</sup> Tomara, "Proiskhozhdenie islama", 47; cf. 28.

Medina, for they held the best arable land in and around the oasis. By contrast, Muḥammad did not invest much energy into the fight against the Quraysh, for there was no peasant land to gain from dry Mecca; the few famous battles like Badr (in 624) were mere skirmishes, and the later battle at Uhud and the Meccan siege of Medina show that Muḥammad was clearly on the defensive against his hometown. Tomara found support for his “peasant theory” in the Qur’ān; its ban of interest, in his mind, expressed the interests of agriculturalists who suffered from exploitation by usurers. Also, he suggested that the Qur’ānic inheritance laws reflect the ongoing splitting-up of agricultural land in Medina.<sup>74</sup>

The nomads, by contrast, did not play an active role in Tomara’s scenario; they were unreliable as warriors,<sup>75</sup> and they accepted Islam only superficially. Also, “if Islam was the religion of the nomadic cattle-breeders, then Paradise would have been depicted [in the Qur’ān] as infinite steppes of high grass, similar to the way how American Indians imagined their reward in the Hereafter as hunting grounds in prairies with plenty of bison and other wild animals.”<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, in the War of Apostasy (*ridḍa*) after Muḥammad’s death the Bedouin tribes tried to reclaim the pasture lands they had lost to the poor Medinans and to agriculture.<sup>77</sup> But this rebellion was crushed by Abū Bakr, and the nomads found themselves forced to emigrate. As both the Sassanid and the Byzantine empire were now in political and economical disarray, the Bedouins found an easy outlet by emigration to Persia, Syria, and Egypt.<sup>78</sup> In result, and somewhat surprisingly, the Islamic expansion under the first caliphs was mainly undertaken by nomads driven out of their territories by Islam itself. Thus, in its beginnings Islam was the ideology of the peasants, and only later, under the Abbasids after 750, did Islam become “the ideology of trade capital in the form of Mu’tazilism,

<sup>74</sup> Tomara, “Proiskhozhdenie islama”, 29ff., 33.

<sup>75</sup> Tomara, “Proiskhozhdenie islama”, 24f.

<sup>76</sup> Tomara, “Proiskhozhdenie islama”, 32.

<sup>77</sup> Tomara, “Proiskhozhdenie islama”, 37.

<sup>78</sup> Tomara, “Proiskhozhdenie islama”, 39-45.

and the ideology of the feudal classes of Persia in the form of Shi'ism.”<sup>79</sup>

Tomara's interpretation thus does not ignore the role of nomadic Bedouins and urban traders, and even assigns them meaningful roles in the emergence and spread of Islam. Their functions, however, were mainly defined in the negative. Due to the fact that Tomara pointed out the crucial role of the poor agriculturalists in and around the towns, his concept would be regarded by his opponents as a mere “peasant theory”.

### Islam for the Godless (L. Klimovich, 1927)

Another participant in the Soviet discourse on Islam was Liutsian I. Klimovich (1907-1989). Klimovich wrote on, and against, Islam for more than sixty years, from Stalin through Khrushchev and Brezhnev to Gorbachev; by skillfully adapting his views to the changing line of the Party, he was able to become the most influential Soviet Marxist author on Islam. Today, he is above all remembered for his unscrupulous and mean defamations of other Orientalists.

When Klimovich published his first articles in 1927, he was just twenty years old and still a student of linguistics at Leningrad State University.<sup>80</sup> Already at that point he was affiliated to Soviet anti-religious organizations, and was publishing short contributions to various atheist journals, on topics such as the “blackmailing practices” of the Orthodox Church, but also against what he perceived as an overall upsurge in Islamic educational activities in the Tatar Republic.<sup>81</sup>

In his first major scholarly article, entitled “On the Origin of Islam” (published 1927 in *Ateist*), Klimovich made references to a considerable number of Western Orientalists (like Dozy, Nöldeke, Muir, Weil, von Kremer, Lammens, and Sprenger) and largely followed

<sup>79</sup>) Tomara, “Proiskhozhdenie islama”, 47.

<sup>80</sup>) For references to his career (here and below) see Miliband, *Biobibliograficheskii slovar' sovetskikh vostokovedov*, vol. 1, 558.

<sup>81</sup>) See for example Klimovich, “Religioznoe dvizhenie v Tatarskoi respublike”, in: *Antireligioznik* 4 (1927), 55-61; idem, “Iz istorii shantazhnoi praktiki khristianskoi tserkvi”, in: *Ateist*, no. 25, February 1928, 61ff.

Mikhail Reisner's theory that Islam emerged from Meccan trade capitalism. The opposition of the poor merchant families was directed against the rich clans and their pagan cult at the Ka'ba. This opposition manifested itself first in the movement of the Arab Hanif monotheists which was later to develop into Islam. Klimovich maintained that this movement was originally atheist, progressive and revolutionary in character; when Muḥammad became its figurehead the movement took on religious traits, yet without losing its progressive character right away.<sup>82</sup> After the *hijra* to Medina Muḥammad turned into a dexterous politician for whom Islam was nothing but a means to gain power. Similarly, the Arab tribes that joined the movement were only interested in booty, not in religion. After a series of battles the reactionary merchants of Mecca decided to embrace the new religion, because they understood that Islam would provide them with a new instrument for ruling over the Arab tribes. It is at the hands of these rich merchant families, according to Klimovich, that Islam finally turned from a revolutionary movement into an instrument for oppression and spiritual enslavement of the Muslim masses.<sup>83</sup> It seems that with his insistence on the "progressive" character of early Islam Klimovich intended to develop a new and specific strategy for anti-Islamic propaganda, one that would pull the carpet from underneath the believers' feet.

After graduating in 1929 Klimovich returned to his hometown Kazan, where he was a member of the local branch of the League of the Militant Godless (*Soiuz Voinstvuiushchikh Bezbozhnikov*, SVB).<sup>84</sup> That same year he published his first two books. In *Sotsialisticheskoe stroitel'stvo na vostoke i religiia* ("The Socialist Construction in the East and Religion", 1929), Klimovich maintained that the Muslim periphery of the Soviet Union was witnessing an ongoing revival of Islam. Under the conditions of the New Economic Policy, reformist mullahs tried to convince the Muslim masses that Islam was perfectly

<sup>82</sup> L. Klimovich, "K voprosu o proiskhozhdenii islama", in: *Ateist*, No. 18, April 1927, 52-63, here: 55ff.

<sup>83</sup> Klimovich, "K voprosu o proiskhozhdenii islama", 61ff.

<sup>84</sup> On the SVB see the study of Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca; London, 1998), which, however, does not take into consideration atheist propaganda work among the Muslim populations of the Soviet Union.

compatible with socialism. Klimovich warned that this was a deception, for socialism was based on Marxism, materialism, and the dialectical method, and diametrically opposed to religion and its idealism. Atheist propagandists, however, were often helpless in their discussions with the believers. What Klimovich considered necessary, therefore, was basic information on Islam for the anti-religious activist. This was the purpose of his second book of 1929, *Soderzhanie korana* ("The Contents of the Qur'ān").<sup>85</sup> This book was basically a compilation of quotations from the Qur'ān. Klimovich explained the book's structure, the Qur'ānic image of God, as well as its narratives on the creation of the world, Judgment Day, Paradise, and Hell. Above all, he emphasized internal contradictions in the Qur'ānic message and the scientific inaccuracy and simplicity of the scripture.

Klimovich's Qur'ān book still followed Mikhail Reisner's view that Islam emerged from Meccan merchant capitalism.<sup>86</sup> The Qur'ān, according to Klimovich, was an "Arabic law book" which demanded discipline in the interest of the merchant corporation, whose codex it represents. Besides trade, a second "way" demanded in the holy book of Islam is endurance and obedience to God, the Prophet and his family, as well as to the "people in power", which, in Klimovich's mind, clearly reflected the reactionary turn of Islam. The third "way" of Islam is *jihād*, the call to fight and kill the unbelievers. As martyrs would directly go to heaven, Klimovich regarded *jihād* as "a lottery in which one cannot lose".<sup>87</sup>

### Cultural Revolution: Killing Muḥammad (L. Klimovich, 1930)

By 1928 Stalin had succeeded in removing his great competitors from the left wing of the Bolshevik Party, above all Kamenev,

<sup>85</sup> Liutsian Klimovich, *Soderzhanie korana. S predisloviem i pod redaktsiei prof. V. Ditiakina* (Moscow: Ateist, 1929); cf. the preface written by the editor Ditiakin, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Klimovich, *Soderzhanie korana*, 3 (Ditiakin), 51 (Klimovich). In his preface to Klimovich's book, Ditiakin remarked that this view was at least disputed. Ditiakin also openly criticized Klimovich for certain shortcomings, and maintained that Klimovich's book was only a "first attempt" (5).

<sup>87</sup> Klimovich, *Soderzhanie korana*, 57, 58, 60.

Zinoviev (excluded in 1927, executed in 1936) and Trotskii (excluded in 1927, exiled in 1928, assassinated in 1940). He then switched himself to extreme leftist positions. This meant the end of “pluralist” New Economic Policy with its support of private enterprise, and the start of enforced industrialization and collectivization. This turn also meant the beginning of the general attack on Islam. In 1928 and the following years, thousands of mosques in all parts of the Soviet East were destroyed or turned into shops, storehouses, clubs, or polling stations; and tens of thousands of Muslims were exiled, sent to prison and labor camps, or executed.<sup>88</sup> The persecution targeted above all the religious, cultural, and former political elites of the Muslim peoples, but also huge parts of the Muslim Soviet secular intelligentsia. At the same time the Arabic alphabet was forcibly replaced by a Latin script, which meant that the Muslim peoples of the Soviet Union were cut off from what was left of their written heritage.

The period of 1928 to 1931 in the Soviet Union is also regarded as the time of the “Cultural Revolution”. According to Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution” started as a campaign initiated “from above”, meant to discredit the “Right Opposition” within the Party. However, it soon developed many facets “from below” that were not always under control of the leadership, and turned into an “iconoclastic youth movement” directed against bureaucratic authority. “It was a process whereby militant Communist groups in the professions established local dictatorships and attempted to revolutionize their disciplines”.<sup>89</sup> In the field of history, these years are characterized by increased factional struggles, in particular by an increasing critique of the then still dominant school of Mikhail N. Pokrovskii. Founding member and chairman of the Communist Academy and head of its newly established Institute of History, Pokrovskii stood for a determinist and “internationalist” Marxist view that emphasized the importance of economic factors and class conflict in history instead of exceptional individuals, national frame-

<sup>88</sup>) See Jörg Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall. Stalinismus im Kaukasus* (Munich, 2003), ch. 7, for the example of Azerbaijan.

<sup>89</sup>) Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution as Class War”, in: Sheila Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931* (Bloomington, 1978; reprint 1984), 11.



works, and cultural phenomena.<sup>90</sup> Critics of Pokrovskii from within the profession found the protection of Emelian Iaroslavskii (1878-1943).<sup>91</sup> The latter was not only Secretary of the powerful Central Control Commission of the Party and member of the editorial boards of the important newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* as well as of *Bol'shevik*, but also chairman of the League of the Militant Godless (SVB).

In the field of Marxist Islamic studies we observe a gradual radicalization during this period, in which Klimovich played an important role. In November 1930 Klimovich came up with what he probably believed to be a fatal blow to Islam and at the same time a revolution within Islamic studies. That month he gave a lecture in the Communist Academy (probably in Kazan), asking the provocative question, "Did Muḥammad Exist?"<sup>92</sup> This lecture amounted to a wholesale refutation of Islamic historiography on the early Muslim community. According to Klimovich, no contemporary sources on Muḥammad's life have come down to us; the earliest known reports and biographies of the prophet, like that of Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām, were written by Muslim authors of the mid-8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. By that time, however, the Muslim scholars themselves had no reliable information on Muḥammad's life at their disposal; all they had was the Qur'ān, and therefore their biographies and the *ḥadīth* material is nothing but a late illustration and commentary on the Qur'ān.<sup>93</sup> In fact, by that time the language of the Qur'ān itself was so incomprehensible even to Arabs that the new additional sources were necessary to make sense of it at all.<sup>94</sup> In result, the

<sup>90</sup> Cf. George M. Enteen, "Marxist Historians during the Cultural Revolution: A Case Study of Professional In-Fighting", in: Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Cultural Revolution*, 155; Harvey Asher, "The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of M.N. Pokrovsky", in: *Russian Review* 31:1 (Jan. 1972), esp. 49-54.

<sup>91</sup> Enteen, "Marxist Historians", 160ff.

<sup>92</sup> Liutsian Klimovich, "Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed? Diskussii v Kommunisticheskoi akademii v antireligioznoi sektiia instituta filosofii 12/XI 1930g. po dokladu L.I. Klimovicha", in: *Voinstvuiushchii ateizm*, No. 2-3, (1931), 189-218.

<sup>93</sup> Klimovich, "Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?", 197. Klimovich does not refer to Western authors who questioned the authenticity of *ḥadīth*.

<sup>94</sup> Klimovich, "Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?", 200 (with reference to a statement by Vasilii Bartol'd).

time gap between Muḥammad's alleged lifetime and the first written sources was so huge that we cannot suppose that any of the information given in these sources is authentic. According to Klimovich, also references to Muḥammad in Christian sources were anything but convincing.<sup>95</sup> Klimovich concluded that nothing is known for sure about the historical Muḥammad, and that it is even likely that he never existed. Quite consequently, Klimovich assumed that the Qur'ān was not Muḥammad's work but the product of a whole group of authors.<sup>96</sup> Muḥammad was created by later historians as a myth, designed to explain the emergence of the Islamic community out of the Hanif movement. The prophet was an invention to cover up early Islam's character as a social protest movement.<sup>97</sup>

This is a remarkable and original contribution to the Soviet debate on the origins of Islam. In fact, with his denial of Muḥammad's individual person and his attempt to explain Islam as a collective, social movement, Klimovich found himself in line with Pokrovskii's (whom he however did not refer to) denial of the role of individuals in history, and thus stood implicitly against Iaroslavskii, the head of the Militant Godless propaganda organization. It should be emphasized that Klimovich still regarded early Islam as a progressive movement, claiming that it turned into an instrument of oppression only at a later point of time.

Klimovich's lecture was not only a frontal attack against Muslim tradition but also against the Soviet community of scholars, who, according to the author, had committed the huge mistake of blindly following eighth- and ninth-century Muslim "falsifiers". His assault on the profession perfectly reflects the general iconoclastic spirit of the "Cultural Revolution" period.

Klimovich's paper in the Communist Academy was directly followed by a discussion in the auditorium, which was later published as an addendum to his lecture. During this debate at least nine scholars and party functionaries of atheist propaganda expressed their mixed feelings about Klimovich's paper. The above-mentioned

<sup>95</sup> Klimovich, "Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?", 200f.

<sup>96</sup> Klimovich, "Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?", 198.

<sup>97</sup> Klimovich, "Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?", 208.

Orientalist Evgenii Beliaev rejected the paper wholesale and on scholarly grounds, remarking that Klimovich “wanted to bury Muḥammad but buried many sources instead”.<sup>98</sup> In a similar vein, the author of the “peasant theory”, Mikhail Tomara—also present during the presentation—criticized Klimovich for neglecting Syrian Christian sources that mentioned or failed to mention Muḥammad.<sup>99</sup> More confusion was spread among the atheist propagandists in the room, many of them being of Muslim cultural background; apparently some of them wondered whether the non-existence of Muḥammad was good or bad news for their anti-religious work. It was obvious that Klimovich’s paper was influenced by an older debate on the historicity of Jesus, and one discussant immediately suggested that Klimovich’s “discovery” could be as useful for propaganda purposes as the denial of Jesus and Moses.<sup>100</sup> Somebody else objected that the Soviet anti-religious activists in fact needed Muḥammad as a real person (“He was a cruel and bloody man”).<sup>101</sup> Only the well-known Tatar writer, historian, linguist, and Marxist politician Galimdzhan Ibragimov (1887-1938) openly doubted the usefulness of Muḥammad’s non-existence for practical propaganda; such a claim would only arouse hostile feelings among the Muslim population.<sup>102</sup>

### **The “Feudalization” of Early Islam and the End of the Discourse (1931-1932)**

As can be seen from these various contributions, as late as 1930 the Marxist debate on Islam was still quite diverse and undecided. The

<sup>98</sup>) Klimovich, “Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?”, 212. Beliaev added sarcastically that “as a scientific worker, Comrade Klimovich grows before our eyes not from day to day, but from hour to hour”. Klimovich was 23 years old when he held his provocative lecture in the Communist Academy.

<sup>99</sup>) Klimovich, “Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?”, 209.

<sup>100</sup>) Klimovich, “Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?”, 210 (the person is referred to as “Shokhor” in the published transcript of the debate).

<sup>101</sup>) Klimovich, “Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?”, 210 (“Chegtai” in the transcript).

<sup>102</sup>) Klimovich, “Sushchestvoval li Mokhammed?”, 211. Ibragimov was arrested in 1937, and he died in a prison hospital in Kazan the following year. Cf. *Liudy i sud’by*, 177.

“trade capitalism theory”, the “Bedouin theory”, the “peasant theory”, and even Klimovich’s radical rejection of Islamic historiography were all subject of discussion. To be sure, the style of these debates was very polemic, but it seems that the authors still felt comparatively free to express their views, and to suggest new interpretations. However, this was to change radically in the following years.

It is worth noting that a similarly “open” situation had existed in another contemporary Soviet discourse, namely that of the so-called “Asiatic Mode of Production” (AMP). This discussion was sparked by some remarks of Marx and Engels that Asia pertained to a separate economic formation.<sup>103</sup> For the Soviets, these deliberations were highly problematic as they challenged the classical Marxist concept of five universal socio-economic stages, the so-called *piatichlenka* (consisting of primitive society, “classical”/slave-holding society, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism). Lenin mentioned the AMP once or twice, but does not seem to have elevated it to the rank of a special economic formation. In order to discuss the apparent contradictions, the Leningrad Association of Marxist Orientalists staged a debate between Marxist scholars in 1931. The whole event appears mainly as a colorful but rather stretched exercise in Marx-Engels exegesis; just as in the discourse on Islam, a major point of contention was how to make sense of individual quotes, and how to evaluate the level of Orientalist knowledge that Marx and Engels had at their disposal. The AMP discussion of 1931 was also a typical example of what I would call “Soviet Orientalism”. It lumped together reflections on many “Oriental” countries of all periods (from Ancient Egypt to twentieth-century China) and

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<sup>103</sup>) For the Soviet debates on AMP see Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, 1957), 402-407; and especially Stephen P. Dunn, *The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production* (London; Boston; Melbourne; Henley, 1982), 3-37 (including a critique of Wittfogel). AMP was generally associated with the following elements: a) in Asia, the ruler was an “Oriental despot”; b) the state was the biggest landowner, and there was no private property in land; c) under the prevailing geographical and climatic conditions in most parts of Asia, the economy was largely based on self-sufficient and isolated villages; d) agriculture was depending on huge irrigation systems, which could only be set up and maintained by a powerful state and its bureaucracy; e) this bureaucracy (or “priests”) constituted the ruling elite of the state, instead of a feudal gentry.

discussed what had to be regarded as specific about the “East” (in fact, one protagonist warned of “exoticism” in dealing with the “Orient”, but tellingly, he was an adherent of AMP).<sup>104</sup> The published proceedings of the discussion started and ended with contributions by the leading opponent of the “Asiatic Mode of Production”, M. Godes. The latter linked the supporters of AMP to Trotskyism, and he finished his closing statement by drawing attention to the circumstance that Stalin, when talking about China, spoke of feudalism, and not of AMP.<sup>105</sup> It is thus obvious that the debate was meant to end with a rejection of AMP, and with the assertion of the standard five-stage model.<sup>106</sup> The dogma of the *piatichlenka* meant that “Oriental” countries did not pertain to a specific Asiatic formation but pertained mostly to the universal “feudal” stage. While the link between Islam and feudalism was only sporadically pointed out in the AMP discussion of 1931,<sup>107</sup> I would like to argue that the discourse on the class character of early Islam went into exactly the same direction, towards a “feudalization” of Islam.

To be sure, already in previous years Soviet anti-religious activists in the Muslim peripheries attacked Muslim landowners alongside mullahs, claiming that Islam supported feudal exploitation.<sup>108</sup> In the early 1930s, however, Islam itself started to be regarded as a

<sup>104</sup> M. Kokin, “V zashchitu teorii aziatskogo sposoba proizvodstva”, in: *Diskussii ob aziatskom sposobe proizvodstva*, 53.

<sup>105</sup> M. Godes, “Itogi diskussii ob aziatskom sposobe proizvodstva”, in: *Diskussii ob aziatskom sposobe proizvodstva. Po dokladu M. Godesa*, Obshchestvo marksistov-vostokovedov pri leningradskom otdelenii kommunisticheskoi akademii—Leningradskii vostochnyi institut im. A. Erukidze (Moskva; Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoe izdatel’stva, 1931), 5; Godes, “Zakliuchitel’noe slovo”, in: *ibid.*, 180. In 1938, the *piatichlenka* would find its dogmatic formulation in Stalin’s infamous *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Short Course* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1939), 118.

<sup>106</sup> Dunn, *The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production*, 77-120.

<sup>107</sup> Only one of the fifteen published contributions (pp. 126-137) mentions the role of Islam. N. Kalemin, obviously an Orientalist by profession, suggested that the Zoroastrian society in pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia was characterized by the AMP, but that this AMP was destroyed by the advent of Islam, which replaced it with feudalism.

<sup>108</sup> To give an example, anti-religious propaganda in Azerbaijan denounced Islam as “the ideology of militant trade capitalism” and “a pillar of feudalism” as early as 1928 (Babrowski, *Der Feind ist überall*, 559).

feudal product. At the same time, the tone of the debates became even more aggressive. One of the earliest contributions to this development was a review essay written by one Kh. Naumov in 1932,<sup>109</sup> which appeared in *Revoliutsionnyi Vostok*. This journal, which was published since 1927 at the Stalin Communist University of the Toilers of the Orient (KUTV), became the mouthpiece of a radical Marxist faction in Oriental studies. Naumov's review essay attacked Evgenii Beliaev, who had recently published a textbook with Russian translations of Western European Orientalists.<sup>110</sup> Beliaev's chrestomathy contained several texts by Henri Lammens and one by Julius Wellhausen on the pre-Islamic society of Arabia and especially on the economic and social situation in Medina. In general, these Western authors supplied arguments for his modified "trade capitalism theory" of early Islam. In addition, Beliaev also included excerpts from works by Sprenger, Grimme, Goldziher, Bartol'd and Caetani, thus displaying the wide spectrum of interpretations of the origin of Islam, including discussions of the agricultural character of Medina and the nomadic economy of the Bedouins. Obviously, Beliaev's goal was to offer the Soviet public, as well as Marxist scholars, some direct access to the work of European authors whose names and ideas had already been floating around for a long time anyway.

Naumov attacked Beliaev harshly not only for "popularizing" the achievements of bourgeois Orientalists but also for presenting the three economic environments distinctly, and for adding them up "mechanically". Instead of being separated, he insisted, "the three systems were distinct parts of a unified economy of Arabia in those days, with the trade regions having a dominant role on the basis of their feudal relations".<sup>111</sup> This very vague and contradictory statement seems to imply that the merchant economy was dominant, but that it was linked to feudal lords in that society. Naumov nowhere explained this relationship between trade and feudalism, nor did he provide any sources; obviously the connection to feudalism

<sup>109</sup> Kh. Naumov, "Protiv popularizatsii burzhuaznogo islamovedeniia (K voprosu o proiskhozhdenii islama)", in: *Revoliutsionnyi Vostok*, No. 3-4 (15-16), 1932, 325-339.

<sup>110</sup> Evg. Beliaev (ed.), *Proiskhozhdenie islama: Khrestomatiiia*, part I (Moscow; Leningrad, 1931).

<sup>111</sup> Naumov, "Protiv popularizatsii burzhuaznogo islamovedeniia", 327f.

was motivated not by scholarly but by political reasons. Islam had itself to be feudal, not through later developments, as had been argued by most of the previously discussed authors, but from its very origin. Feudalism had to be the very foundation of Islam.

Naumov quoted Engels to the effect that “all religion (...) is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily live”.<sup>112</sup> This quote alone sufficed him to maintain that “the Qur’ān is the distorted fantastic expression of the reality of those times”. Consequently, it is wrong to regard the Qur’ān as a source for early Islam. Naumov went on to explain that it is also unacceptable to make a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, as Beliaev had done when he mentioned that the Muslims of Medina were attacking the caravans of pagan Mecca. Making a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, so Naumov, means to take over the position of “missionaries” who sort out the non-believers (as we will see, the accusation that Orientalists become missionaries, that scholarship serves religion, was becoming a convenient and widespread instrument of defamation in the 1930s). Naumov also attacked many other Marxist Orientalists, including Liutsian Klimovich for his view that Islam was a “social revolution” of the “progressive elements of Arabic trade capital”.<sup>113</sup>

Naumov’s leveling of Muslims and non-Muslims, his disregard for religion as a special factor, can probably best be characterized as an ultra-leftist position. In general, however, his rejection of the importance of religion and personalities and his deterministic emphasis on materialism can still be linked to the school of M.N. Pokrovskii. Pokrovskii never elaborated a clear Marxist time-table of socio-economic formations; to take an example, in his analysis of sixteenth-century Russia he identified a mixture of trade-bourgeois and feudal interests as the proponents for the conquest of Kazan.<sup>114</sup> Naumov’s

<sup>112</sup> Frederick Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)*, (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 344.

<sup>113</sup> Naumov, “Protiv populiariizatsii burzhuaznogo islamovedeniia”, 331.

<sup>114</sup> See M.N. Pokrovsky, *History of Russia from the Earliest Times to the Rise of Commercial Capitalism*, transl. and ed. by J.D. Clarskon and M.R.M. Griffiths (New York [1931] 1966), 132. This English translation, authorized by Pokrovskii himself, was based on his *Russkaia istoriia* of 1910-12.



foggy view of a unified economical system of Arabia with parts of three different systems seems to reflect Pokrovskii's influence.

Naumov's critique was therefore not very revolutionary in its theoretical foundation. For Islamic studies, however, Naumov's critique had fatal implications. What he said is basically that Islamic sources do not need to be studied any more in order to understand the historical emergence of the Islamic state. Rather, it is enough to know the Marxist laws of history. "The centralization of the monetary capital in some Arabian cities, above all in Mecca, the struggle against the 'colonizers' [i.e., the Ethiopians and the Persians], the dissolution of natural (economic) relations, and the process of class warfare in general pushed the Arabs with iron inevitability towards the creation of an Arabic state."<sup>115</sup>

In principle, Naumov's interpretation of the Arabian economy was not very far away from that of Beliaev, whom he attacked so severely. The difference was that Beliaev knew Arabic and studied the available sources, including Islamic as well as Western ones, while Naumov did his best to make any study of Arabic primary or European secondary sources impossible. Naumov even stated that Beliaev "makes himself a mullah" when he regarded the Qur'ān as an important historical source that reflects the historical situation of the early Muslim community. In fact, Naumov's *Rundumschlag* against all Soviet authors on Islam amounts to a call to abolish all historical scholarship on Islamic history.<sup>116</sup>

At times, Naumov's text reads like a bill of indictment against Muḥammad and his companions, who are accused of forbidden underground activities:

Abū Bakr, medium merchant, literate, 38 years, Quraysh; Uthman Affan, big merchant, literate, 34 years, Quraysh; Abdarraḥman Auf, big merchant, 30 years, Quraysh; Abbas Abu Talib, medium merchant, 43 years, Quraysh

<sup>115</sup> Naumov, "Protiv populiariizatsii burzhuaznogo islamovedeniia", 329.

<sup>116</sup> Naumov goes on to attack V. Ditiakin and other scholars, including L. Klimovich, who contributed to a volume of articles on Islam (V. Ditiakin [ed.], *Islam. Sbornik statei*, Moscow: Bezbozhnik, 1931). The third target of his review is the Tatar author Nigmat Khakim (Khakimov), who published a book in the Tatar language on the origins of Islam in 1926. In this work, which I could not get access to even in Tatarstan, Khakimov



(...) [Naumov continues this list with five other names, including Muḥammad]. As you see, these facts make it clear that Ḥanifism expressed the ideology of the merchant bourgeoisie, above all of the upper bourgeoisie. (...) In other words, this secret organization [!] of the Qurayshite merchant bourgeoisie had a specific program of action, aiming at the unification of the Arabic tribes, above all by the big and medium bourgeoisie, and the creation of a state of Islam.<sup>117</sup>

This form of presentation reminds us of Stalin's perceptions of "counter-revolutionary" activities, which often contained similarly inflated and grotesque accusations (the "creation of a bourgeois state of Islam" mirroring the often used charge of "aiming at restoring capitalism in Russia" in Stalinist show trials). Naumov explicitly reminds the reader that the discussion of the origins of Islam was "linked to the class struggle of our days, to the socialist construction" in Muslim societies.<sup>118</sup> Obviously, the debate was no longer guided by rational argumentation and differentiation; instead, the attack on other scholars and authors became an end in itself. In this respect, Naumov's review is another characteristic contribution to the radical spirit of "Cultural Revolution".

### Marx-Engels Revisited (Klimovich, 1933)

The change in the general political atmosphere of the country and in Islamic studies in particular prompted many authors to readjust their positions. This produced a weak but unified Soviet theory on Islam that would henceforth be regarded as dogma.

Liutsian Klimovich played a crucial role in this process. It seems that he managed to switch sides at the appropriate moment: In 1932/1933 he gave up his positions at institutes in Kazan<sup>119</sup> and

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apparently made use of psychology to explain Muḥammad's revelations as hallucinations.

<sup>117</sup> Naumov, "Protiv popularizatsii burzhuznogo islamovedeniia", 334.

<sup>118</sup> Naumov, "Protiv popularizatsii burzhuznogo islamovedeniia", 335 (in the context of Naumov's discussion of Ditiakin's volume).

<sup>119</sup> From 1931 to 1933 Klimovich taught at the Tatar Institute of Economics (*Tatarskii nauchno-issledovatel'skii ekonomicheskii institut*) and at the Eastern Pedagogical Institute (*Vostochnyi pedagogicheskii institut*), both located in Kazan.

joined the faculty of the Stalin University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) in Moscow. In 1933, aged around twenty-six, Klimovich received the title of professor—a clear example of the huge opportunities for upward mobility in this period.

Klimovich understood he had to withdraw from his view that Islam had initially been a progressive social protest movement. The starting point could no longer be the Qurʾān, the Arabic tradition, or the critique of “bourgeois” Orientalism; instead, one had to start with the works of Marx and Engels. In a lecture held at the KUTV in May 1933 (and published later in *Revoliutsionnyi Vostok* as “Marx and Engels on Islam and the Problem of Its Origin in Soviet Islamic Studies”),<sup>120</sup> Klimovich basically listed up all quotes by Engels on Islam which Ditiakin had already published in 1927, without, however, giving any credit to Ditiakin. As we have seen, Engels remarked that religion was a “fantastic” reflection on life, that Islam was the “reaction of the Bedouins” as well as the “first act of the awakening Arabian national consciousness”, a “return to the old”. Taking these quotes together, Klimovich concluded that Islam had to be classified as reactionary. But how could this be supported by facts? Klimovich now contended that Islam resulted from a process of “feudalization” and centralization of the Arabic tribes, which was reflected in the centralization of the religious cults in the Kaʿba. Put in these terms, Islam emerged as the “ideology of feudal lords (Russ. *feodalov*)”, representing exploitation and inequality.<sup>121</sup>

Empowered by Engels, Klimovich now attacked all scholars who once held different views. He maintained that it was completely wrong to look for similarities between Islam and communism, as the German scholars August Müller (*Der Islam im Morgen- und Abendland*, 1885, Russian edition 1895) and Hubert Grimme (*Mohammed*, 1892-95) had done, who held that Muḥammad’s message was essentially socialist or communist in nature. More specifically, Klimovich attacked Z. and D. Navshirvanov for their 1923 article

<sup>120</sup> Liutsian Klimovich, “Marks i Engel’s ob islame i problema ego proiskhozhdeniia v sovetskom islamovedenii”, in: *Revoliutsionnyi vostok. Organ nauchno-issledovatel’skoi assotsiatsii po izucheniiu natsional’nykh i kolonial’nykh problem*, No. 3-4 (19-20) Moscow 1933, 59-92.

<sup>121</sup> Klimovich, “Marks i Engel’s ob islame”, 62f.

in which they, as seen above, detected communist elements in Sufism. Such views, according to Klimovich, were mere “lies”. In this context he also denounced Vasilii Bartol’d for a remark made in 1922 that Muḥammad had defended the interests of the poor.<sup>122</sup>

Another of his targets was Mikhail Tomara who expounded the idea that Islam was the religion of the peasants of Medina. As we have seen, Tomara regarded Islam as initially a progressive and democratic movement.<sup>123</sup> Klimovich charged Tomara with being influenced by the “social-fascist theory” of Karl Kautsky, who regarded Jesus as a rebel against injustice.<sup>124</sup> According to Klimovich, such a positive interpretation of Islam was currently being exploited by *kulaks* (here referring to supposedly “rich” Muslim peasants) in Tatarstan, who used *ḥadīth* material to counteract the Soviet collectivization effort. By establishing this connection Klimovich blamed Tomara for doing “missionary work” for Islam.<sup>125</sup>

As shown above, Tomara explained the Qur’ānic ban on usury as a reflection of the interests of the poor peasants in the town of Medina and their struggle against rich merchant and landowning clans of that city. This interpretation was clearly not appropriate any more. Instead, Klimovich came up with the position that the ban of usury expressed the struggle of feudal landlords (*feodaly-zemlevladel’tsy*) and cattle-breeders against merchants and money-lenders.<sup>126</sup> This view has no basis in any Arabic source whatsoever (in fact, we do not know who might be described as a “feudal landowner” in mid-seventh century Arabia) and Klimovich did not even try to find any support for his claim in Arabic or European literature. However, this view was perfectly clear to anybody familiar with economic relations in Russia: the audience would be reminded of the fate of the Russian landowning gentry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of whom

<sup>122</sup> Klimovich, “Marks i Engel’s ob islame”, 64 (Grimme), 66 (Bartol’d, Navshirvanovs), 69 (Müller). Also attacked is P.K. Zhuze, “Iz istorii kommunisticheskogo dvizheniia v islame”, in: *Nauchnoe obozrenie* no. 1 (1923), 26-34 (not available to me).

<sup>123</sup> Klimovich refers specifically to Tomara’s article “Islam i kommunizm”, published by Ditiakin in his volume of articles entitled *Islam* (Moscow, 1931), 189-218.

<sup>124</sup> Obviously referring to Karl Kautsky, *Der Ursprung des Christentums*, 1908.

<sup>125</sup> Klimovich, “Marks i Engel’s ob islame”, 71-75.

<sup>126</sup> Klimovich, “Marks i Engel’s ob islame”, 75.

fell into debt and became dependant on urban moneylenders. For assessing the effect of Klimovich's defamation of Mikhail Tomara it should be kept in mind that Tomara's personal situation had already been precarious after his first arrest in 1929; accordingly, Klimovich's ruthless attack on Tomara in 1933 may well have contributed to the latter's second arrest around 1936, from which he was not to return.

Klimovich attacked the "trade capitalism theory" of Reisner with similar harshness; to be sure, Reisner had died some years before, but as seen above, his theory had been taken up and modified by Evgenii Beliaev and others.<sup>127</sup> Here Klimovich had to face the problem that he himself had wholeheartedly embraced this theory in all of his earlier writings. In fact, Klimovich now mentioned his own name, and his article of 1927, among those many authors who, as he wrote, erroneously upheld the "trade capitalism theory".<sup>128</sup> By utilizing the Soviet tradition of "critique and self-critique" he cleared himself and charged others. It should be noted that Beliaev, like Klimovich himself, managed to switch sides in time, and thus escaped repression; by the time of Klimovich's writing this was, however, far from being guaranteed.

In addition, Klimovich also denounced authors who assigned the primary function in the emergence of Islam to Bedouins. The problem here, however, was that these authors had Engels' statements on their side, and so Klimovich chose to attack them on other accounts. According to Klimovich, Ditiakin expressed the opinion that "Islam stands without doubt lower than Christianity"; this, in Klimovich eyes, showed how much Ditiakin was still influenced by the heritage of "missionary apologetics", in this case for Christianity.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, the above-mentioned Kazakh Marxist Asfendiarov was attacked by Klimovich for following the "rotten" theory of Leone Caetani. Klimovich also criticized Asfendiarov for stripping Islam of any religious contents, for erasing any differences between Islam

<sup>127</sup> Klimovich, "Marks i Engel's ob islame", 77. Klimovich also attacked Nikolai Smirnov's (1886-1983) *Musul'manskoe sektantstvo* (Moscow, 1930).

<sup>128</sup> Klimovich, "Marks i Engel's ob islame", 76.

<sup>129</sup> Klimovich, "Marks i Engel's ob islame", 74.

and the old tribal religions.<sup>130</sup> Again, Klimovich contributed to the increasing public charges against a scholar who was already in a very vulnerable position and who would later, in 1938, be executed.<sup>131</sup> And to make the list complete, Klimovich also found blame in the writings of the supercritical Kh. Naumov, on whose fate I have no information.<sup>132</sup>

Why was Klimovich able to carry out this blow against almost anybody hitherto involved in the Marxist discourse on Islam, including himself, without endangering his own position? Here it should be remembered that two years earlier, in his lecture “Did Muḥammad Exist?”, Klimovich had already publicly denounced all research on Muḥammad’s time. True, this provocative lecture had earned him mockery and critique in 1931; but now, under the changed conditions of 1933, his rigorous rejection of Islamic historiography turned out to be the safest position of all. By deciding to ignore the historical Muḥammad, Klimovich transferred the emergence of Islam from the period of 610-632, which was obviously so confusing, towards the time of the Caliphate, that is, to a period of Islamic kingship that could more easily be considered “feudal”. For supporting the new official dogma, Klimovich’s “skeptical” position turned out to be best suited.

In the following years it became impossible to describe Islam in any meaningful manner. The surviving participants in the Soviet discourse on Islam had to subscribe to the dogma that linked Islam to feudalism. At the same time it was carefully avoided to ascribe any content to the term “feudal”, or to explain its relationship with the “trade capitalists”. To take an example, Evgenii Beliaev (who reportedly distanced himself from the “trade capitalism theory”

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<sup>130</sup>) Klimovich, “Marks i Engel’s ob islame”, 68, 70, 78. Obviously Klimovich did not share Naumov’s position that religious differences should be neglected.

<sup>131</sup>) In a similar fashion Klimovich attacked the Tatar “national communist” Sultan Galiev (Klimovich, “Marks i Engel’s ob islame”, 66), who maintained the necessity of a Muslim anti-colonial revolution distinct from the Russian proletarian revolution. Sultan Galiev was dismissed from his offices in 1923, temporarily arrested in 1928, and shot in 1940.

<sup>132</sup>) Klimovich, “Marks i Engel’s ob islame”, 68f. Naumov is attacked for his remark that Islam was basically a renewal of the Abrahamic religious tradition.

already in 1932)<sup>133</sup> opened his booklet on “The Class Character of Islam” of 1934 with the following words:

Islam—like any other religion—has been serving, from its very beginning to the present day, the interests of the exploiting classes, by blessing their rule over the suppressed and exploited masses. (...) When Islam emerged—in Arabia in the 6th and 7th centuries—it was the ideology of the Arabian feudal lords (Russ. *feodalov*) and merchants, who, with the help of this religion, enslaved (*zakabaliali*) the toiling masses of nomadic Bedouins and settled agriculturalists, and founded their exploiting state over their heads.<sup>134</sup>

There is no explanation whatsoever in Beliaev’s booklet who these “feudals” were. However, Beliaev now found reflections of this feudalism also in the Qur’ān, where God’s image is supposedly that of an “almighty *feodal* and merchant, and all believers are declared to be ‘slaves’ who have to submit to the will of that fantastic despot in heaven.” Also the traditions (*aḥādīth*) of the Prophet were created for the single purpose of defending “the class interests of the feudals and the merchant bourgeoisie”.<sup>135</sup> Translated into Soviet reality of the early 1930s, behind these two terms stand the basic victim groups of Stalinist persecution in Muslim areas, the mullahs, the beks, and the trading peasants.

### Conclusion: The Failure of Soviet Orientalism

During the vivid debates of the 1920s Soviet authors developed contradicting interpretations of how Islam emerged and whose class interests it represented: the merchants’, the Bedouins’, or the peasants, or a combination of several of them. Their interpretations were not necessarily new, for many were inspired by the works of Western or non-Bolshevik Russian Orientalists (and in fact some of the central problems raised in the Soviet discourse, like the character of Arabian trade, the origin of the Qur’ān, or the time gap between Muḥammad

<sup>133</sup>) See the reference in Klimovich, “Marks i Engel’s ob islame”, p. 78f.

<sup>134</sup>) Evgenii Beliaev, *Klassovaia sushchnost’ islama. Ob’iasnitel’nyi tekst diapozitivnogo fil’m’a pod obshchei redaktsii Ts SVB* (Moscow: Soiuztekhnfilm, 1934), 1.

<sup>135</sup>) Evgenii Beliaev, *Klassovaia sushchnost’ islama*, 2f.

and his biographers, are still being discussed in our days, though with no reference to the Soviet debates).<sup>136</sup> Also, most participants in the Soviet discourse of Islam lacked important language skills and were not professional Orientalists; the Marxist discourse on Islam developed in open opposition to what was perceived to be the “bourgeois”, philologist Oriental school of Leningrad and the Academy of Sciences. It was a parallel discourse in parallel, Marxist institutions. In spite of its critique of classical Oriental studies, however, the Marxist discourse was itself pure “Orientalism” (in the sense of Edward Said):<sup>137</sup> the Soviet authors held the essentialist view that it was possible to grasp the “character” of early Islam, and that this knowledge would provide them with an understanding of contemporary Muslim peoples. Also, they unquestionably put their knowledge at the disposal of the state, which used it for ruling and thoroughly transforming these contemporary Muslim societies. As we have seen, most Soviet scholars were personally involved in this huge transmutation program, be it as educators and advisers, as anti-religious propagandists, in the Comintern and secret services, or even in republican governments.

As a result, it becomes evident that the Soviet Orientalist discourse of the 1920s and early 1930s was full of limitations, constraints and pressures. At the same time it is hard not to see the devotion of these authors in experimenting with the Qurʾān as well as with Marx and Engels. Tellingly, interpretations of the Qurʾān and Islamic tradition dominated the first years of the discourse, when Marx and Engels were still not fully explored. By contrast, Engels’ scattered fragments on Islam became central in later years, making any historical research on Islam irrelevant and ultimately impossible.

And yet, the comparatively open discourse on Islam even survived the general political turn in 1928/1929, and continued into the “Cultural Revolution” period, which was, for Marxist authors, still

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<sup>136</sup> See Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge; New York, 1977); Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton 1987); John E. Wansbrough, *Qurʾanic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford, 1977); and Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin, 2000).

<sup>137</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978).



essentially pluralist though characterized by increasing radicalization. This openness of discourse ended around 1932: from this year on everybody had to subscribe to the “feudal” (or “feudal-merchant”) character of Islam. The reasons for the introduction of this dogma are still not entirely clear; it is suggested here that this turn reflected the Stalinist all-out onslaught against *kulaks* and representatives of Islam and traditional Muslim society. The discourse on the class character of Islam paralleled the debate on the “Asiatic Mode of Production”, which also resulted in the dogma that huge parts of the Oriental world pertained to the feudal stage of development. The integration of Muslim socio-economic history into the fold of the Eurocentrist *piatichlenka* legitimized the violent transformation of Muslim society according to the Bolshevik model.

What our examples plainly show is the connection between certain standpoints in the discourse and the tragic fates of individual scholars. By 1938, many Marxist authors of the late 1920s and early 1930s were removed, imprisoned, or killed. While various reasons might have led to a person’s repression and death, it is hard to deny that scholars participating in a public discourse on Islam were at a special risk. It can even be argued that the scholars became victims of their own discourse; and by studying the ugly and defamatory writings of scholars like Klimovich one might even argue that Marxist Orientology committed suicide. To be sure, not everybody was repressed; some scholars may have escaped by lucky circumstances, while others, like Klimovich and Beliaev, managed to change their views in time and to continue their careers in the moving shadow of the Party line.<sup>138</sup> However, their reputation was severely compromised.

This “suicide” of Soviet Oriental studies had serious long-term consequences for the USSR. After the Second World War, the universities and research institutions were staffed by a generation of deeply intimidated scholars who had learned their lesson under Stalin. Soviet Oriental scholarship of the 1950s to the early 1980s

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<sup>138</sup>) For Klimovich’s skilful manoeuvring through the rest of the Soviet period until the late 1980s, see M. Kemper, “Ljucian Klimovič, der ideologische Bluthund der sowjetischen Islamkunde und Zentralasienliteratur”, forthcoming in: *Asiatische Studien—Études Asiatiques*, vol. LXIII-2 (2009).

was extremely uninspired; the Leningrad scholars took refuge in philological studies and avoided topics of any social and political relevance, while the heavily politicized scientists in Moscow were eager to keep strictly to the party line. The dogma had it that Islam was a “remnant” of the feudal past, and bound to disappear under the Soviet modernization effort. Consequently, it was considered worthless, and even dangerous, to engage in a study of Islam. For decades Islamic studies were absent in the Soviet Union, or barely existing under the cover of other disciplines (like history and anthropology). While many Soviet scholars continued to produce valuable historical work, publications on the topic of Islam were limited to dull and stereotyped anti-religious pamphlets, with a varying degree of aggressiveness depending on the current political climate.

As a result, the USSR completely ignored the emergence of political Islam in the post-World War II period. Events like the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the Islamic resistance to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan took the Soviet Union by surprise. If “Orientalism” means that scholars work for the benefit of colonial and imperial state interests, then Marxist “Orientalism” was a clear failure. Soviet Oriental studies did not supply the knowledge necessary for policy making, for the administration did not listen to the experts but the experts listened to what the state wanted to hear.<sup>139</sup> It is therefore no wonder that the Marxist discourse on Islam of the 1920s and 1930s is hardly remembered today. Still, the debate is remarkable insofar as it shows how scholarship placed itself at the disposal of the totalitarian state, in order to be supported, manipulated, and ultimately executed.

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<sup>139</sup> Cf. Nathaniel Knight’s observation that already the Imperial Russian administration did not care for the Orientalists’ advice: “Grigor’ev in Orenburg: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?”, in: *Slavic Review* 59 (1), 2000, 74-100.