

BOOK REVIEWS

Jeff Eden. (2021) *God Save the USSR: Soviet Muslims and the Second World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, \$99, 272pp, ISBN 9780190076276

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In *God Save the USSR: Soviet Muslims and the Second World War*, Jeff Eden provides an insightful account of two histories. The first is the story of how the Soviet government under Stalin sought to manage and monitor Muslimness during the anti-Nazi drive of the Second World War. The second is a chronicle of how Soviet Muslim leaders in this period took advantage of loosening state restrictions on religion to advance Muslim concerns and interests, leading to what resembled a religious revival of sorts. A key aspect of the book is its joint focus on the experiences of and the contributions made by both Muslim elites and ordinary Muslims. Through this, Eden is able to capture a snapshot of Muslim life and praxis in the Soviet Union in the early to middle of the twentieth century.

The book's Introduction presents a number of historiographical approaches to explaining the revival of Islamic praxis (and other religious praxis) in the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Eden presents five distinct approaches (2021: 23). The first is the "propaganda abroad hypothesis", which argues that it was all a ploy by the Soviet government to counter Nazi propaganda and curry Allied favour. The second is the "borderlands propaganda hypothesis", which postulates that it was a concession to believers in the borderlands intended to counteract Nazi propaganda there. The third approach is the "rallying call hypothesis", where the Soviet government used religion to rally its citizens (especially non-Russian and Muslim citizens) to the war effort. The fourth approach is the "revolution from below hypothesis", which argues that a grassroots spiritual upheaval forced the Soviet government to change its tune on religion. Finally, the fifth approach is the "continuity hypothesis", which postulates that the wartime religious revival was less radical than often presented and instead reflected previously existing undercurrents and developments. Throughout the entire book, Eden engages with each of these approaches and masterfully puts them into conversation with one another, simultaneously problematising them and demonstrating the points where they do indeed provide useful explanations.

Chapter 1 outlines the setting for the book's wider narrative. It briefly summarises the history of Soviet religious policy, beginning with the immediate

aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution and covering the repressive 1920s and 1930s, finally ending with the “New Deal” that Stalin struck with the Orthodox Church in order to allow them to operate openly again. Eden explores how Soviet Muslim institutions were squeezed politically and economically by the state in the period between the two World Wars, including through the imprisonment of Muslim elites, the seizure of Muslim property such as mosques, and the punitive taxation of Muslim religious organisations to the point of bankruptcy. As Eden notes, these pressures were the direct result of a “hard line” taken on religion by Stalin and others in the Soviet bureaucracy, who believed that these were the most effective methods to crush religion and bring about the triumph of atheism. However, Eden also highlights a second “soft line” on religion taken by some Soviet bureaucrats (such as P.A. Krasikov and G.G. Karpov), who also wished for the triumph of atheism but worried that overly strict policies against religion were driving believers underground out of the reach of the Soviet state. These bureaucrats argued that a controlled permitting of religion was necessary in order to be able to successfully monitor religious activities. When Nazi Germany invaded the USSR in June 1941, the official state approach to religion shifted to this “soft line”, and certain religious figures came into the circle of “registered” religion in the Soviet Union.

Chapter 2 takes a deeper look at two key players from the Soviet Muslim elite: Gabdrahman Rasulev in the Volga-Urals and Ishan Babakhanov in Central Asia. Both came from prestigious religious backgrounds and held important official religious positions during the Second World War: Rasulev headed the Central Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Russia (TsDUM), while Babakhanov had been appointed (at the age of 80) to lead the newly established Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM). As state-sanctioned religious leaders, both men were responsible for crafting and delivering patriotic appeals to their fellow Muslims in order to encourage them both to join the Red Army and to donate money and valuables to support the war effort. While both were successful in this endeavour, Eden notes that both took the opportunity to include other messages in their appeals; Rasulev’s speeches held a recognisable pan-Islamist flavour, while Babakhanov emphasised the particular nature of Central Asian Islamic praxis (including the importance of local saints and shrines). The chapter ends with a brief analysis of an anonymous patriotic appeal made to Isma’ili Muslims living in Central Asia; while it echoes many of the same themes expressed by Rasulev and Babakhanov, it also simultaneously tailors it for an Isma’ili audience.

Chapter 3 looks at how Soviet Muslim elites roused their Muslim audience to action through mediums beyond speeches. A significant aspect of this was the encouragement of donations to support the war effort, which culminated in the instrumentalisation of *zakat* as a source of revenue for the war (following the decriminalisation of *zakat* by the Soviet government). However, this giving was

not without its uses: Eden demonstrates that Soviet Muslims exploited the high amounts of donations coming from their communities as a justification to successfully petition the Soviet government to reopen shuttered mosques in order to provide locations to continue this fundraising. The act of raising money for the war was also held in tandem with religious festivals, the former providing the latter with a “legal” cover. There was even a short-lived restarting of the hajj (which had not included Soviet Muslims since the mid-1930s) that saw a small number of Soviet pilgrims travel to Saudi Arabia and other regional countries as Soviet Muslim ambassadors.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus from Muslim elites to look squarely at the lives of ordinary Soviet Muslims. It highlights the multiple ways in which many Muslims and Christians both on the front-lines and on the home front came to think of the Divine as a result of the surrounding pain, loss, and death. As Eden demonstrates through numerous contemporary testimonies, hardly anyone was immune from praying, not even NKVD men. Eden also describes how Soviet soldiers going to the front frequently wore religious amulets or had prayers stitched into their clothes, while some soldiers formed small prayer groups with like-minded comrades. He also tells of how, in soldiers’ letters back home to family and loved ones, religious formulae often existed side-by-side with patriotic expressions, seemingly without fear of Soviet censors (or perhaps simply aware that these censors were now less concerned about monitoring religious expression). Religious motifs also appeared as frequent features of Soviet Muslim wartime poetry, which commonly discussed feelings of sorrow and loss as a result of the war.

Chapter 5 examines the implementation of Soviet religious policy through the organ of CARC (Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults), which had been established in 1944. Eden points out the ambiguity of much Soviet policy regarding religious freedom, especially regarding the degree of restrictions to place on religious activity. This inevitably led to confusion among Soviet bureaucrats working in Soviet provinces, and also allowed many Soviet Muslims to engage in their religious praxis without significant restrictions. Eden illustrates how this played out by chronicling a series of correspondences between N. Guliaeva (a CARC operative in Pavlodar, Kazakhstan) and her superior N. Sabitov from CARC’s main Kazakh office. Soviet monitoring of Muslim praxis assumed that religious activity would primarily operate out of a mosque; however, in her correspondence, Guliaeva notes that the nomadic Kazakhs preferred praying in open spaces, thereby complicating official Soviet attempts to monitor them. Guliaeva also frequently laments the lack of support that she was receiving from local authorities, who would often themselves take part in religious activities. Eden uses this episode to problematise a recurring differentiation in Soviet bureaucracy and in subsequent historiography of Soviet religion between “official” and

“unofficial” Soviet Islam, arguing that both spheres interacted with each other so consistently that it makes little sense to treat them as separate.

In addition to his engaging writing style and his rich use of notes, a key strength of Eden’s book is his incorporation of translated primary sources from multiple languages, including Russian, Tatar, Bashkir, Kumyk, Kazakh, Uzbek, and Persian. These sources include such wide-ranging examples as personal letters, poems, speeches, government documents, and declassified clandestine correspondence. These are included as excerpts throughout the book, allowing us to hear the thoughts and feelings of the original authors in essentially their own words (mediated, of course, through translation). A number of letters, patriotic speeches, and telegrams to Stalin from religious leaders are also included in full in the book’s appendix; among the most curious of these is a patriotic appeal by Babakhanov to Muslims in East Turkestan (which was independent at the time) encouraging them to fight the Germans.

As masterful as the book is, it is not without some flaws. Perhaps the most obvious can be found in the book’s coverage of Muslims in the Soviet Caucasus. While the book mentions Transcaucasian Muslim religious organisations and includes testimonies from Transcaucasian Muslims, there is a marked silence regarding Soviet wartime deportations of Muslims from the Caucasus (notably the Chechens and the Ingush) to Siberia. To his credit, Eden addresses this silence in the book’s introduction (2021: 5), lamenting that he was unable to find enough sources to examine the religious aspects of these deportations. However, he does state his intention to return to this topic in the future, so potentially more material will come to light relatively soon. Another under-explored area in the book is the Soviet deportation of the Crimean Tatars, which garners little more than a passing mention (Eden 2021: 52). Eden does not provide an explanation within the book for this editorial choice, but it is likely for similar reasons as the previous topic.

All in all, the book is a valuable contribution to the history of Muslims and Islam in the USSR and shines a light on a comparatively lesser-known area of Muslimistan. It will undoubtedly be of great use to anyone interested in the history and politics of Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. In my view, another important contribution of the book is in how it functions as a case study with the potential to inform our thinking about the multiple dimensions of secular instrumentalisation of Islam and Muslimness, including its politics and possible limits. While the Soviet bureaucratic apparatus was ultimately unable to root out faith from the hearts and minds of most Soviet Muslims, it was able to successfully mobilise them to the war effort and to motivate them to give their lives and their children to fight in an Army that had previously been used to oppress them. One dimension (out of many) of how this was achieved may lie in the discourses promoted by state-sanctioned Muslim elites such as Rasulev and Babakhanov.

As Eden notes (2021: 66, 79, 90), both leaders frequently pushed the line that patriotism was a duty for Muslims, regularly repeating the saying that “love for country/homeland is a part of faith” (usually cited as a prophetic hadith or occasionally as a Qur’anic verse). Without getting into a discussion about the authenticity of this quote (although a quick look online reveals the intense debate around it), it nonetheless provides a notable example of nationalist rhetoric filtered through theology. Interestingly, in writing this review, I came across a number of webpages directed at Indian Muslims which used the exact same quote to also argue for Muslims to be patriotic. It certainly provides some food for further thought and elucidates how some discourses seem to die hard.

References

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