



# Russian Islamophobia

**From Medieval Tsardom  
to the Post-Soviet Man**

Iskander Abbasi



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# Introduction

Both the medieval and modern Russian experience with the Muslim world has been systemically marked by Islamophobia.<sup>1</sup> Yet, few scholars have written about the *longue durée* expression of Russian Islamophobia (Bennigsen 1983, Tlostanova 2010). In this article, I chart a genealogy of Russian Islamophobia from medieval Tsardom to modern Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. Russia has been long marginalized in global analyses of Islamophobia, and is often not included in analyses of Western Islamophobia. Russia has long been considered a partner in Western civilization. As a predominantly white and Christian-led historical territory situated on the Eurasian continent, Russia has for centuries been viewed and viewed itself as a type of eastern Spain and the heir to Christian Orthodox Byzantium. Like the Mediterranean front of southern Europe bordering the Muslim world, Russia's borders with Asia are lineated across the expanse of Islamicate civilization in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The first systemic antagonisms between Russia and its Muslim neighbors began in the medieval period. This early form of Islamophobia under white Christian Russian empires later transformed and intensified during the Soviet and Post-Soviet periods. The later manifestations of Islamophobia came with new logics, especially those tied to systems of secular governmentality from within the modern nation-state model. This article highlights these time periods and argues that they signify a cohesive and consistent form of *longue durée* Russian Islamophobia

which shares much in common with other renditions of Islamophobia emanating from the West.

<sup>1</sup> By Islamophobia, we do not mean the literal etymology of "fear of Islam". Rather, Islamophobia signifies a system of anti-Muslimness and anti-Islamness. In the broadest sense of this technical definition, Islamophobia is a term for analyzing the way that Muslims and Islam have been ontologically Othered by religio-racial systems of discrimination, domination and governmentality; largely from the medieval and modern periods of world history, and largely though not exclusively by the West. Islamophobia deals with the biological, cultural, political, and other forms of ontological otherizing that place categories of humans into the zone of non-being. For further reference regarding these mainstream definitions of Islamophobia, see Sayyid and Vakil's *Thinking Through Islamophobia* (2010).



# Russian Islamophobia in Medieval Times

The story of Islam in what we now call Russia, in part began on the banks of the Volga River in 922 CE. Ibn Fadlan (d. 960) was a Muslim religious scholar of Arab (or possibly Greek) ancestry who was sent by the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir to the king of the Volga Bulgars, who were a largely nomadic Turkic peoples practicing Tengrism. The Volga Bulgars converted to Islam in mass in 922 and thereafter the region experienced rapid socio-economic and political growth connecting the Eurasian Steppe to rising Islamic polities in West Asia for the next two to three centuries, controlling much of the trade between Europe and Asia along the Volga River (Bukharaev 2000: 15, 53). Orthodox Christianity began to spread in the Slavic domain east of the Volga River after Princess Olga of Kiev (d. 925) and her grandson, Vladimir the Great (d. 1015), adopted Eastern Orthodox Christianity and began engaging in mass conversions of the Slavic and other local and regional peoples in the proto-Russian Kievan-Rus polity (92). This eventually led the Kievan-Rus – one of the main originators of Russian civilization – to integrate into the Byzantine empire and its political, economic and cultural life. Much of this early medieval history between rising Orthodox Christian and Islamic polities in the eastern Eurasian Steppe was relatively peaceful with no systemic antagonism developing between them (93). This proto-Russian interaction from the 8th-10th centuries with various Muslims peoples – such as the Khazar Khanate and Volga Bulgaria, and, to a lesser extent, Khwarazm, Soghdiana, Bukhara, Samarkand, Sassanid Iran

and the Arab Caliphate – was one of the central factors in the later formation of Russian ethnicity, as well as the political, legal and economic practices of the then predominantly 'pagan' proto-Russians (Yemelianova 2002: 194).

Like Western Christendom's Crusades (1100-1400 CE) and the modern/colonial period (late 1500s to present), the 10th and 16th centuries are of importance in the historical relationship between the Russian and Muslim worlds. The 10th century marked the moment that geopolitical and civilizational boundaries were established between Russian and Islamicate peoples that still carry weight and influence until today. In the early 10th century, the line between "civilization" and "barbarity" was reversed from today, with the Slavic ancestors of the modern Russian people being viewed by highly developed Muslim polities of the Central Asian regions (i.e. Middle and Lower Volga, North Caucasian mountains, Derbent, Syr Daria, etc.) as the uncivilized, wild and primitive natives (Bennigsen 1983: 5). This protohistory of Russian-Islamic state relations, from the 9th to the 12th centuries, was characterized by many complex exchanges between various sedentary and nomadic populations, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish (such as the Khazar kingdom) or other in the Eurasian borderlands that did not characterize a hardened paradigmatic "negative" relationship just yet (5-7). From the 13th to the 15th centuries things began to change. The Mongol invasion of 'Russian'<sup>2</sup> territories in the Middle Ages left deep

<sup>2</sup> 'Russia' did not become Russia proper until the turn of the 15th century under Ivan III (d. 1505). At the risk of appearing anachronistic, when I use the term Russia prior to this time period, I am speaking of proto-Russian predecessors such as the Kievan-Rus polity or Grand Duchy of Moscow and broader Rus' principalities in what is now north-eastern Europe and parts of the western Eurasian Steppe that acted as predecessor states to Tsardom in early modernity (Yemelianova 2002: 24).

scars on the collective consciousness of Russia (Law 2012: 4-5). For three centuries, Russia was not in primary command of the political economies brought along by the century-long rule of “Pax Mongolica”<sup>3</sup> of all the regions between “the Black Sea and the Pacific Ocean bordering the commercial highways linking Europe to China (Silk Road) and to India (Spices Road)” (Bennigsen 1983: 7-8). Southern Russia was thoroughly devastated and depopulated by the Mongol forces, while Northern Russia was bypassed in the economic exchanges between East and West (ibid.).

The Mongol “Golden Horde”<sup>4</sup> rulers in these Central Asian regions became Muslims while still maintaining the complex “religious tolerance” of Chingiz Khan (11). The rise of the so-called Mongol-Tatar yoke (Bukharaev 2000: 93) provincialized and limited Russian civilizational expansion, and has been described by modern Russian historians as a period that put Russia in a type of “dark ages.” Furthermore, modern Russian and Soviet Orientalist historians projected back to periods when they were in conflict with Muslim powers and began referring to them as “crusades”, even though these were not framed that way at the time (Bennigsen 1983: 11.). Modern Russian historians present the period of Muslim Tatar dominance in the region as an era of “absolute monarchy, serfdom, and arrogant messianism” as a direct result of the Muslim Golden Horde rulers (8). Whether this is true

to historical fact or not is another discussion; yet, interestingly, this narrative of civilizational decadence, militant crusades and dark ages is not part of the historical memories of other countries in the region who were conquered by the Mongols, such as China, Iran, Turkestan, Georgia or Armenia (ibid.). At the same time, this period imbibed in Russians a long-lasting inferiority complex towards their former Muslim masters which survives until this day and gives Russian-Muslim relations their unique character (Yemelianova 2002: 29). Bennigsen notes:

**These relations are not those of the classical ‘colonial’ type, where the European master, hated as he may be, was, at the same time, respected for his better organization, greater technical skill and superior military power. The native Muslims in the USSR, even when obliged to recognize and to yield to the supremacy of their Russian ‘Elder Brother,’ do not feel inferior in the cultural or political matter. Ayaz Iskhaki, a Tatar revolutionary historian, summed it up in question: ‘How did it happen that we became slaves of our former slaves?’ (1983: 8).**

The strange relationship of an “Elder Brother” (Russia) having an inferiority complex towards his “Lesser Brother” (Muslim) is deeply rooted in the historical hatred of Russians towards Muslims in general, and towards the Turco-Tatar Muslim in particular. It has survived for centuries and made a cultural/biological racial symbiosis between different former Soviet nationalities a hopeless dream (Bennigsen 1983: 9, Law 2012: 4-5). Additionally, there are interesting similarities between the modern Russian self-conceptualization of this time period as a type of “dark ages” in relation to Christendom and later Europe’s conceptualization of this time period as a “dark ages”. It seems darks ages only exist in the modern Western imagination when Muslims are in civilizational power.<sup>5</sup> Yet, this makes more sense when examined in the context of Russia being viewed - and viewing itself - as the “Third Rome”, “Second Jerusalem”, and heir to Christian Orthodox Byzantium, as well as a type of eastern Spain that protected Europe against Asiatic and specifically Muslim savages (Bukharaev 2000: 7, Thackeray 2012: 202, Rossman 2013: 199).

Along similar lines, the sixteenth century was the era when Russian conquest of Islamic lands (1552-1900) becomes a bedrock for long-term Russian relations with the Muslim. Indeed, Russia, like Europe, was engaged in colonial expansion from the 15th-20th century. This five-hundred-year period was

3 Lit. Latin for “Mongol Peace”, yet refers to the periods of the 13th and 14th centuries when Mongol civilization conquered and sustained sovereignty over vast swaths of Eurasia and the Silk Road, from Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia (Prawdin 1961).

4 The “Golden Horde” is the Russian designation for the “Ulus Juchi,” or the Western part of the Mongol Empire, which flourished from the mid-13th to the end of the 14th century and consisted of a mix of mainly Turkic and Mongol peoples. The area eventually Turkified and Islamized, notably under the rule of Uzbek Khan (d. 1341) who converted to Islam and made it the state religion (Golden Horde & Oz Beg).

5 In God’s Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science (2010), James Hannam argues that there is a need to deconstruct the idea of a medieval “Dark Ages” as the Middle Ages were not simply a period of stagnation and degeneration, but a period of complex growth and developments in science, technology and all aspects of human life in Western Christendom that actually laid the foundation for such events as the Reformation and Enlightenment. The idea of a Dark Ages is largely a late modern construction by Europeans made in order to justify their idea of the secular as a break from the past (Asad 1997). The idea of a Dark Ages is an act of secular “history-making” (Asad 1997: 2) which is teleological marked and guided by the logic and desires of Euromodern secular historiography. In light of Europe and Russia’s long-term anti-Muslim projects, it seems apparent that one of modernity/coloniality’s spatiotemporal functions is to form the very notion of history itself - like that of ontology - against that of the Muslim.

defined by Russia subjugating non-Russian populations, many of them Muslim, to their colonial dominance (Bukharaev 2000: 6-7). In 1552, Ivan the Terrible (d. 1584) and the Tsardom of Moscow conquered Kazan and began processes of state and empire-building that attempted to discipline or destroy Muslim presence in the regions they conquered. The loss of former Tatar Muslim-controlled Central Asian lands (Middle Volga, Lower Volga and Western Siberia) marked, shortly after the loss of Al-Andalus, the second greatest territorial set-back for medieval Islamic civilization and the advance of Western civilizational dominance across the Islamic world (Bennigsen 1983: 9-12). The rise of Russian Tsardom over the next four centuries up until the Soviet Union was constituted by various conservative and liberal notions of Islamophobia. The marriage of state and religion, Russian Orthodox Christianity and Tsardom, created a civilizational complex that viewed the Muslim as enemy, barbarian and problem to be eradicated or tamed. While certain rulers were harsher, such as Tsar Mikhail (1596 – 1623), and others more liberal and pluralistic, such as Catherine II (1729-1796), the fact remained that Muslims posed a “nationality problem”<sup>6</sup> for the Russian empire as they did not fit the dominating religio-racial logic the empire (Bennigsen 1983: 12-16, Bukharaev 2000: 7).

While the Russian Empire may not have been as quantitatively successful as the Spanish in Al-Andalus in completely liquidating or expelling Muslims from the territories they conquered, Muslims were similarly viewed with racism and as hostile, alien and foreign bodies that needed to be disciplined and destroyed. Through such imperial policies as destroying Muslims’ political economies; forced conversions and proselytization to Russian Orthodox Christianity; the shutting down of mosques; forced resettlement of Russian Christians in former Muslim lands; the confiscation of waqf (communal trust) properties; mass expulsions and ethnic cleansing; epistemicide through book-burning (Tlostanova 2022: 10) and the replacement of Islamic knowledge structures with Tsarist education systems, Muslims were systemically killed, converted and forced to Russianize or face the consequences (Bennigsen 1983: 12-16, Yemelianova 2002: 37). Simultaneous to these wide-spread anti-Muslim policies were exceptional moments of cooperation between Russians and Muslims. From the late 18th century era of Catherine the Great, a more liberal ‘Islamophilic’ approach to the Muslim Question in Russia allowed for relative political, cultural and economic partnership, albeit under the terms of ‘managing’ Islam (Crews 2009: 2, Tuna 2015: 57-

58).<sup>7</sup> The flourishing of a type of “Tatar Renaissance” expressed through the Muslim modernist reformist Jadid Movement<sup>8</sup> was a result of this time period (Bennigsen 1983: 19, 25). Without a doubt, the Russian imperial engagement with the Muslim was complex. There were many Muslim figures, states and movements who both cooperated and resisted it. Yet, when viewed through a long-term systemic point of view, it becomes clear that Muslims were an undying problem for Russians – whether through Islamophobia or Islamophilia – and especially when Muslims expressed any desire for political autonomy.

The rise of the Russian Empire and later USSR must also be interrogated in relation to modernity/coloniality. Tlostanova, unlike Bennigsen, provides a genealogy of Russian

Islamophobia that examines how Russia’s relationship with the Muslim was both an internal pre-existing historical relationship, as well as one externally influenced by modern Eurocentrism.<sup>9</sup> Tlostanova argues that the initial type of ‘religious’ Islamophobia had developed early on due to Russian opposition to the nomads of the Eurasian Steppe in the Middle Ages and later the Mongols who colonized Russia (1237-1480). Russian identifications with being the heir to Byzantium and Orthodox Christian Empire lead to a religious basis for Islamophobia similar to Western Christendom’s early forms of Islamophobia (Abbasi 2020). For this early Islamophobia, Muslims were pogany (from Latin pagani) and busurman (a Slavic distortion of Musulman, and slur for Muslims) (Tlostanova 2010: 172). In relation to Europe though, Tlostanova argues

7 Crews writes, “Rather than try to impose religious uniformity on its varied subjects, the empress [Catherine] and her successors devised a policy of toleration to make faiths such as Islam the basic building blocks of the empire. They sought to transform religious authority in each community into an instrument of imperial rule. For millions of tsarist subjects, the state did more than tolerate other confessions; it presented itself as a defender of certain forms of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and other faiths.” French political leader Napoleon Bonaparte (d. 1821) also claimed himself a ‘friend’ to Muslims in his attempt to colonize Egypt and construct a form of political governance that tamed Islam and Muslims rather than aim to immediately erase them (Bazian 2014). Islamophilic approaches to governance appear friendly on the surface, and may have short-term practical advantages, but at a deeper glance are systemically entrenched in forms of governmentality that deny political ontological autonomy to the ‘friend’ in question. Scholars of Islam in Russia such as Crews who highlight the ‘positive’ dimension of Russian governance in relation to Islam and Muslims often fail to recognize the deeper negative layer of the surface-level philic relationship. Yemelianova notes how Catherine the great shifted state policy from eradication of Islam to management, yet still continued expansionism to conquer Islamic lands in the Crimea and North Caucasus during her reign (2002: 197). African-American President Barack Obama also seemed to ‘manage’ Islam in a friendlier way during his presidency by better incorporating Muslims into his public administration or celebrating Ramadan iftars at the White House while increasing Islamophobic domestic public policy and wars abroad across the Muslim world (Bazian 2014).

8 The Jadid Movement, or Jadidism, was an Islamic modernist reform movement in Central Asia, mainly among Uzbeks and Tajiks, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that attempted to reconcile classical Islamic teachings with those of the modern social sciences and Western thought. They self-labeled themselves as modern reformist jadis, or “new” in Arabic and Farsi, in comparison to the traditional qadims, or “old”, who, according to Jadid logic, blindly followed tradition and stagnated Islamic knowledge production as a result (Hitchins 2008).

9 One might find similarities in Chinese Islamophobia. Yi argues that “Chinese culturalism” has been a classical force that views non-Chinese as more or less civilized based on their adherence to Chinese Han values, such as the Confucian religio-social system or learning the Chinese language (2010: 186-187). Both Yi and Polk note that although these insider-outsider civilizational logics had existed in relation to Muslims since China’s first contact with Islam, it is through the Manchurian Qing regime of the Last Empire (1644-1911) where the view of the Muslim Other becomes more centralized (2010: 190 & Polk 2018: 418-434). The Muslim as “rebel” becomes more solidified during this period, leading to a normative discursive process in which Chinese writing about Muslims over the past 300 years has shared the theme of “violence” and has been articulated by “Chinese Confucian, nationalist and communist alike” (Yi 2010: 190). A number of different thinkers have published in recent years highlighting Islamophobia under Chinese Communism since the mid-20th century. The centralization of modern/colonial state sponsored Marxist-Leninist-Maoist propaganda and policy during Chinese Communist rule, in addition to recent Chinese renditions of War on Terror Islamophobia and anti-Islamism share more in common with Soviet and post-Soviet Russian Islamophobia (Yi 2000, Byler 2017 & 2021, Byler & Franceschini & Loubere 2022). For Yi, it is both age-old Chinese culturalism as well as importation of Eurocentric ideas of the secular and War on Terror that collide to define Chinese Islamophobia.

6 The “nationality problem” of Russia old and new is fundamentally a problem of political ontology and the coloniality of being. The racialized Jews, Muslims and other “indigenous groups” under Tsardom, the Soviet Empire and Post-Soviet Regime have posed a nationality problem to Russia’s political ontology because they are considered nations outside the body politic of Russia, whether religious or secular (Korey 1973 & 1995, Rossman 2013, Tlostanova 2010).

that Russia was viewed as a quasi-Asiatic and semi-racialized empire. Europe looked upon Russia with the same inferiority that Western Europe has looked upon 'dirty white' southern European countries like Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy; these countries have also been 'tainted' by experiences of intermingling with or overt rule by African or Asian Islamic powers.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the difference that comes to the fore between Europe and Russia is intra-imperial difference, and not the religio-racial colonial difference that the rest of the non-West has faced (2010: 171).

Russia thus tried to play "catch-up" to the rise of European modernity. Starting from the end of the 17th century onwards, Russia began a process of active self-colonization through the lens of Eurocentric modernity. This process mixed

Russia's pre-existing Islamophobic and racist discourses tied to its own Orthodox "Christendom" model with that of modern Europe's rising secular model (2010: 172). This relationship between Europe and its eastern Spain even lasted through the Cold War, as the meaning of the Western Bloc's 'democracies' was described in contrast to the 'Asiatic' despotism of the Eastern Bloc's "totalitarian communism" (Sayyid 2014: 74).<sup>11</sup> The eventual convergence of adopting both religious and secular forms of religio-racial colonial difference led to Russia's increasingly hostile relationship to Muslims guided by an indigenized Russian coloniality (Tlostanova 2010).<sup>12</sup>

10 There have been many debates within Russia concerning the issue of its identity as European or Asian, Western or Eastern (Yemelianova 2002: xii-xiii). Russia, like southern Europe, has always been a borderland and frontier region between vastly different religio-racial peoples, and especially between ethnically European or white Christians and Muslims of various Eurasian and Afro-Asian ethnicities. Russia, like southern Europe, was very much influenced by these Eastern and Muslim civilizations throughout its history, but its white and Christian identity has always remained at the fore. In this regard, the debate concerning Russia and southern Europe's complex religio-racial identity in relation to the more ethnically 'pure' Western Europe is an intra-imperial debate between Western powers that is not marked by the sharper racist and colonial difference between the West and the Rest (Tlostanova: 2010: 171).

11 In remarking on the absence of religion in secular approaches to understanding the Cold War, Ahmad argues that the name and idea of the Cold War was often in reference to the binary of the West vs. Islam. The name "Cold War" (guerra fría) itself was first used by Spanish writer Don Juan Manuel (d. 1348), a prince and nephew of Ferdinand II, to describe the relationship between Islam and Western Christendom as "neither war nor peace" (2017: 9). Already in 1953 Bernard Lewis likened the Cold War with Islam, later identifying the Soviets as participating in a "communist jihad". This rhetoric followed earlier claims of such thinkers as British philosopher Bertrand Russell (d. 1970) who likened the Bolsheviks to being "successors of Mahomet" (ibid.).

12 There is noted existence of long-term Russian anti-Semitism as well. Both Rossman (2013: 196-197) and Beller (2015: 28) note that anti-Judaism existed in medieval Russia. Christianity had been brought to Russia by way of Byzantine missionaries in the 9th century, and old Christian - albeit Orthodox rather than Catholic - Jewish polemics persisted as a result (Rossman 2013: 197). Yet, the Jewish Question was more systematically or overtly raised in the 18th century when vast tracks of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth - where Jews had lived for centuries, constituting the bulk of Askenazi Jewry - were annexed to the Tsardom (Beller 2015: 28). Persecution, oppression and racial discrimination proceeded the annexation through such policies as the Pale of Settlement (1791 - 1917) (ibid.) Jews were viewed as outside the body politic of Russian imperial national identity, alongside the likes of Muslims and Tatars at times, and could only become "truly Russian" by converting to Russian Orthodox Christianity (31). A number of works (Korey 1973 & 1995, Rossman 2013) have also noted that although traditional religion-based anti-Semitism was officially banned following the Bolshevik Revolution (1917), new secular forms of anti-Semitism emerged after and throughout the history of the Soviet Empire, especially under the reign of Stalin (d. 1953), and even into the post-Soviet era (Rossman 2013). While it is not within the scope of this work to provide a more detailed genealogy of anti-Semitism in Russia, there are interested similarities and differences to note between Russian Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. In terms of similarity, both started as religious forms of racism and then transformed into secular racisms in the Soviet era, and were fueled by centuries of Russian civilizational religio-racial ontological difference. One difference is that Muslims were much larger in size than the Jewish populations who suffered under long-term Russian racism. While much scholarship has been written on anti-Semitism in Russia, there is a lack when it comes to Russian Islamophobia. This is similar to what had long been the situation on studies of medieval and modern Iberia where studies of anti-Semitism were abundant while studies of Islamophobia had been scarce. This points to the coloniality of knowledge, and specifically the hegemony of the Judeo-Christian privilege, in which Jews entrance into Westernness from the mid 20th century forward allowed for the normalization of their narratives of former subjugation in such areas as Spain, Russia or Europe. Under the auspices of modern/colonial knowledge structures, Western Christian/Secular guilt towards Jews has allowed for them to be welcomed into the family of nations, while others continue to remain external to the canon of the "human".



# Soviet and Post-Soviet Islamophobia and Coloniality

The birth of the Soviet Union did not mark the end of Russia's Islamophobic relationship to the Muslim. As the Kazan Tatar historian Bukharaev argues, the link between the Tsarist empire and that of the Soviets in relation to Islam was inseparable (2000: 13). The Orientalist Soviet state created the idea of Homo Sovieticus, or the ideal Soviet Man.<sup>13</sup> Who was able to travel towards the ontology of this Soviet Man? It became clear from the early to late stages of the Soviet period that the Muslim should be excluded, or, at least, made 'palatable' towards the standards of the Soviet state (Tasar 2017: 117-119).<sup>14</sup> During a short period leading up to and after the Bolshevik Revolution (1918-1923), there was the formation of a number of Muslim political entities in various parts of Russia that attempted to band together in order to create

more autonomous space for 'Muslim nationalities' – whether through integration or separation from what was to become the USSR (Hunter 2015: 20-22). A number of these were Muslim National Communist parties who had supported the Bolsheviks and joined the Communist Party. Prior to and after the Revolution, these Muslim National Communists desired to see themselves as part of the Soviet Republic; yet, they also wanted cultural and political autonomy for Muslims and the ability to indigenize communism on their own Pan-Islamist terms (Bennigsen 1983: 37-38 & Bennigsen 1980).

As much as the Muslim National Communists were tied to the unification of the Muslims masses enslaved to capitalist exploitation, they also viewed their fate as tied up

with that of the Western European and Russian proletariat in opposition to global capitalism and colonialism (Bukharaev 2000: 13-14). The Pan-Islamist Soviet Muslim communists wanted to be the vanguard that took communism to the Muslim masses of Asia and Africa. For a short period, Moscow became the Mecca of Muslim revolutionaries from across Africa and Asia who believed that the October Revolution was an important step in the liberation of the Muslim World from the colonialist West. The Muslim revolutionaries – Indian Caliphate Nationalists, Iranian Democrats, Arab Radicals, Indonesian freedom fighters and more – all convened in the city during this time period to discuss supporting the World Revolution (Bennigsen 1983: 93-98). The Soviets, nevertheless, viewed these Muslims with suspicion and disdain for still regarding themselves as part of the Muslim world and ummah, unwilling or unable to fully Sovietize and drop their religio-cultural and political Pan-Islamist baggage. The Muslim National Communists had extended the olive branch to the Bolsheviks by proposing a plan to work together by unifying Soviet Muslims under one nation, or under one Millet<sup>15</sup>. They were opposed to being divided into different "deMuslimized" nationalities and wanted to create an autonomous Muslim communist state while still supporting the Soviet Republic (ibid.). The Muslim Communists' aspirations were continuously shot down, leading Sultan Galiev (d. 1940), one of the prominent Muslim Communists leaders of the time to say:

**The East with its population of one and half billion enslaved by the West European bourgeoisie was forgotten by the Bolshevik leaders. The development of the international class struggle continued by-passing the East [...] Because of ignorance concerning the East and of the fear which it inspired, the idea of the participation of Eastern revolutionaries in the world revolution was systemically rejected ('The Social Revolution and the East', Zhizn' Natsional'nostey, 39 (47) 1919)" (cited in Bennigsen 1983: 97).**

13 For many Marxists, the communist Soviet Man was their counter to capitalist Western Man. In effect, this was a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism. The Soviet Man was the ideal ontology and teleological end to the Hegelian Spirit which flooded Marxist historical materialist understandings of history, class divisions and the cosmos. Indeed, there is a long history of Russian and Soviet Orientalism in relation to this concept, starting at least from the 19th century. Earlier pre-Soviet Russian Orientalists were philologically trained in Oriental languages – such as Arabic, Persian or Turkish – while still engaged in a form of colonial Orientalist studies. They engaged the broader canon of Western Orientalism while also coming up with their own contributions from inside Russia (Kemper 2009: 5). Soviet Orientalism post-Bolshevik Revolution, however, took a more drastic turn. In the roughly two decades following the Bolshevik Revolution (1920s-1930s), Soviet Orientalists were even more ideologically driven to determine the ultimate 'class nature' of Islam, and they did so without the rigor of their Russian or wider Western Orientalist ancestors (35-36). Soviet Orientalists were largely not trained in any primary source materials in Islamic languages, and instead relied on secondary literary from Western Orientalist sources and the ideological canon of Marxist-Leninism to attempt to understand the ontological and class character of Islam and Muslims (46). Soviet Orientalists were obsessed with defining Islam as either feudalist, mercantilist, capitalist, socialist, nomadic, pastoralist or any other derivative of political economy that served the early Soviet state's project (Kemper 2009). After the reign of Stalin, Oriental Studies lost much of its energy and became dormant or subsumed loosely under other disciplines such as anthropology or history (48). As result, Kemper argues that the USSR did not take note of the rise of political Islam post-WWII, and lacked all the basic necessary cognitive or policy-making frameworks for adequately understanding events such as the Iranian revolution in 1979 or resistance of the Mujahidin in Afghanistan in the 1980s (ibid.). The nature of Soviet Orientalism was not to listen to experts – let alone have experts in Oriental Studies proper – but for the supposed experts to listen to the demands of the imperialist state (ibid.).

14 Muslims were themselves aware of the Islamophobic and colonial nature of the Russian and Soviet empire, and critiqued it from various geo-political locations from within the Muslim world from the beginning to the end of the Soviet Period. One important early critic in this regard was the Muslim National Communist Sultan Galiev (d. 1940), who is mentioned in greater detail in this article. Another is the Jadid movement, mentioned earlier, who critiqued both the Russian and USSR empires through various epistemic and aesthetic projects (Tlostanova 2022: 7). The Iranian Islamist Leftist Ali Shariati critiqued Soviet and Marxist Eurocentrism and was very critical of the colonial nature of USSR-sponsored Marxist-Leninism in terms of its incompatibility for fully grasping and addressing the social question specifically in the Muslim world, and more widely in the Third World (Shariati 1979: 39, Miri 2020: 214). Sayyid Qutb was also very critical of both the Western and Eastern blocs in the Cold War saying, "All these opinions overlook one vital element in the question, which must be added to all other elements – the Crusader spirit that runs in the blood of all Westerners and lies deep in their minds, to which is added imperialism's fear of the Islamic spirit and the effort to destroy the strength of Islam, whereby Westerners are linked by a single feeling and a single interest in destroying it. This unites communist Russia and capitalist America" (Qutb 1996: 287). While Qutb's essentialist language regarding "Western blood" is not unproblematic, his political critique of the 'crusading spirit' of both communist Russia and capitalist America is interesting in that he links both of these blocs to a wider Western colonial mission to oppress the Muslim mind and world.

15 In Arabic and Turkish, millet literally means religion, religious community or nation. The Ottoman millet system was a form of personal law that allowed for various confessional communities – that is, mainly Muslims, Jews and different Christian denominations – living under the Ottoman Caliphate to rule themselves under their own laws (i.e., Muslim Shari'ah, Christian Canon Law, and Jewish Halakha). The millet system was non-systematic up until the 19th century with the introduction of the Tanzimat Reforms (1839-1876), which attempted to ensure that religious minorities were legally protected and operated under a relative sense of self-autonomy within the larger Ottoman Caliphate political structure (Masters 2001: 61-62). The Muslim National Communists appropriated this term to signify and name the self-autonomous nation under which they would live within the larger Soviet political system (Bennigsen 1983: 93-98).

Sultan Galiev and other Muslim National Communism leaders had warned others coming from the Third World that Soviet Communism was not intrinsically different from Russian Tsarism and that eventually it would become a tool of Russian imperialism and colonialism (Mabruk 2006: 146, Hunter 2015: 128). In relation to the broader Muslim world, Soviet policy in supporting Communist parties was complex and had liberatory potential, yet ultimately ended up self-serving, caring less about local concerns than it did about its imperial designs. They did not understand the complexity of local traditions, needs and desires, and were not willing to comprise their vision of the secular/atheist white Russo-centric Soviet Man. Non-ethnic Russians, and especially Muslims, were systemically excluded from positions of power in the Communist Party and central government throughout the duration of the Soviet period (Hunter 2015: 128). The lack of success and ultimate decline of communist support in Muslim societies during and after this period was largely due to Soviet arrogance, ignorance and Eurocentrism in their approach to spreading the so-called World Revolution (Law 2012: 21). From the beginning of the Soviet project, it was clear the Muslim

could not become the Soviet Man on his terms. After this initial period, the Soviet Man only became more aggressive, and the plight of those who disagreed worsened.<sup>16</sup>

The era after the initial post-Bolshevik decade became widely known as the period of the "Iron Curtain" (1928-1968 CE). Stalin's purges, brutal Sovietisation/Russofication and the breakdown of local societies and "micro-nationalities" became the norm. In relation to the Muslim, this led to cutting Soviet Muslims off from the rest of the Muslim world and a number of state policies that would lead to epistemic and ontological death for many Islamic systems, institutions and communities. In learning from their Tsarist ancestors' "religious Islamophobia", the Soviet state implemented a number of "secular Islamophobic"<sup>17</sup> policies including: banning annual pilgrimage to Sunni and Shia sites (Mecca for both and Qom for the Shi'ah); the wide-scale shutting down of mosques and distribution of anti-religious and anti-Islamic propaganda; the reclamation of Muslim waqf properties; the extensive successful and unsuccessful genocide attempts targeting specific Muslim populations (as well as other non-Muslim

"threats"); banning Arabic in certain regions and the attempted linguistic colonization of Muslim ethnicities; and the promotion of Soviet tolerance towards Islam through creating and co-opting Soviet Muslim religious leaders and sending them abroad to the Muslim world on propaganda trips (Bennigsen 1983: 25-54, 100-103 & Law 2012: 21 & Tasar 2017: 262). Tlostanova confirms that the Soviet empire's Islamophobia penetrated all hierarchies in society:

Islam, even in its everyday and symbolic forms, remained one of the major anxieties of the Soviet empire which systemically eliminated all of its signs as a part of, a wider campaign of erasing indigenous cosmologies, religions, languages, histories, and replacing them all with the self-degrading slave mentality which is very hard to get rid of today. A good example was the forceful 'Cyrillisation' of all Turkish language, which deprived them of the continuity of their traditions and of the possibility of a dialogue with others of similar religious or linguistic heritage. Other examples include the elimination of mosques in predominantly Muslim localities of the empire and profanation of the sacred elements of Islamic architecture in Soviet public buildings (Tlostanova 2010: 178-179).<sup>18</sup>

Further, Tlostanova argues that the architectural Other for Soviet self-engineering was found in the Oriental Muslim woman. The Soviet's Oriental Muslim woman was supposed to be modernized by the "Great Russians" with the grand idea of making her (and everyone in the Soviet empire) fit the future standard of the Soviet citizen which was to be "a racially mixed atheist, brought up on the ideas of Russian cultural superiority and manifesting theatrical multicultural traits in cuisine, singing, dancing, fiction, theatre, national costume, etc." (2010: 179). Soviet citizens of nominal Muslim heritage – including the Oriental inorodtsy, or "born others", who - like the Moriscos of early modern Spain - were racially marked even though they had converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity from Islam in previous generations – remained trapped in colonial ontological difference. For these "enemy-nations" of the Soviet empire, Soviet treatment towards the Muslim rested on the notion that religio-racial "ontology predetermined politics" (2010: 178-180). In this regard, Soviet Man must be seen as but a Red extension<sup>19</sup> of Western Man and the coloniality of being at large.

In terms of the late Soviet period, the Soviet approach to the Afghan War and rise of the Mujahidin resistance

16 Matthew Renault writes that Sultan Galiev provided a decolonial critique of the colonial Soviet approach to communism and the Colonial International in his article "The Idea of Muslim Communism: About Mirsaid Sultan Galiev (1892-1940)" (2014). From early after the Bolshevik Revolution, Sultan Galiev was excluded from the Soviet Communist International-organized People's Congress of the East in Baku (1920), which brought together revolutionaries from the East and West to support national liberation movements in the East and labor struggles in the West (Renault 2014). The Congress did not follow through with approving the goal of Muslim National Communist Autonomy. Galiev was expelled from the Communist Party in 1923, and imprisoned due to his relations with Muslim rebel nationalist leaders and Soviet fear of the spread of "Sultangalievism". Sultan Galiev was not allowed to rejoin party, and starts writing between 1923-27 about revolution from the East, critiquing Eurocentric and Soviet chauvinist visions of World Revolution (ibid.). One of Galiev's arguments was that the Ummah should still unite towards a World Revolution except for the bourgeois and feudal classes. He called for communists from the East to have privilege and priority over communists in West, and was against the idea of a "Colonial International." Galiev was later sentenced to death and imprisoned several times after 1928, until he was executed in 1940 (ibid.). For more information on Renault's work on Sultan Galiev and Lenin's views on the Muslim Question in Russia, see Wissam Xelka's article "Sultan Galiev, the First 'Islamist'?" (2022).

17 Secular is used in the sense that the logic of Soviet secular racism built on the palimpsest of Russian religious racism in ways new and old, even if they were still targeting the same Muslim enemy. For more on how religion is racialized category in post-Enlightenment conceptualizations of the human, see Theodore Vial's *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (2020), as well as the author's "Islam, Muslims and the Coloniality of Being: Reframing the Debate on Race and Religion in Modernity" (Abbasi 2020).

18 The Russian Cyrillic alphabet of today was based on Greek letters modified by the Byzantine missionaries and brothers St. Cyril (d. 869) and Methodius (d. 885) who created the Slavic Glagolitic script. Such histories are used to support the idea of Moscow as a "Third Rome" and "Second Jerusalem", Russia as an Eastern Spain, and Russian civilization as a continuation of Eastern Christendom (Thackeray 2012: 202). Soviet forced cyrillization of its Muslim colonial subjects must be viewed in light of this Christian/Secular-centered historical dynamic, as linguistic colonization is part of coloniality's larger project of epistemicide (Grosfoguel 2013).

19 Ian Law, in his *Red Racisms: Racism in Communist and Post-Communist Contexts* (2012), argues that there was "no paradox" between racism and communism, and that racism was a part of communist logic in Maoist China, Soviet Russia and Castro's Cuba (143-144). With regards to Soviet Russia, Law notes that, "The socialist nation was built on the basis of territorialisation of ethnicity, state-invented differences and mutually exclusive ethnic loyalties, and 'on the principle of blood' (Tishkov 1997, p. 250) [sic]. This was the regime's high period of ethnophilia with the wiping out of selected languages, cultures, identities in order to clear the way for the new nationalities. This process of ethnophilia involved the deployment of ethnographic knowledge, and the cultural technologies of rule which in this case involved eliminating differences and distinctions rather than creating them as in European colonization, through the use of the census, the map and the museum" (144-145). Law's insights into this phenomenon aid in further theorizing what might be called 'racial communism', alongside that of the more popular 'racial capitalism' (Robinson 1983).

in Afghanistan in the 1980s was equally marked by an Islamophobic antagonism. Secular Left geopolitical analyses of the Cold War are predominantly apologetic towards Soviet colonialism and engage in a unipolar reading of the Cold War that sees the USA as the only active 'bad guy' (Bozo 2008: 3-4). They do not take seriously the historical and sociological agency and complexity of local and regional actors that were caught between the two blocs. The USSR had acted as an imperial power by installing its puppet government in Afghanistan through the Communist Saur Revolution (1978) over that of the not unproblematic one-party administration of Afghan president Daoud Khan who was part of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which was critical of both the Western and Eastern blocs in the Cold War.<sup>20</sup> When resistance movements such as the loosely-organized Mujahidin or various Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Afghan groups arose to confront the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), they were viewed by the Soviet regime as enemies and 'bad Muslims' for not conforming to the dictates of the Soviet imperial project. The federation of various Mujahidin and non-Mujahidin groups

received much financial and military support from the Western bloc in the 1980s, whether due to realpolitik or ideological alignment, and were thus able to better resist the onslaught of Soviet domination (Kakar 1995: 79-95). Without engaging in an ultimate value judgement of the Mujahidin or post-Cold War offshoots such as the Taliban, it is clear that both the Soviet and American involvement in Afghanistan was organized by a racist form of governmentality. Americans viewed the Mujahidin as 'good Muslims' in the 1980s, and their offshoots in the post-Cold War era as 'bad Muslims'. This good Muslim-bad Muslim binary (Mamdani 2004), whether coming from the Western or Eastern blocs of the Cold War and post-Cold War geopolitical formations, has at its center a denial of Muslim political and cultural agency in forging an autonomous present and future.

In the post-Soviet period, Russia has involved itself in multiple external wars in the Muslim world – from Chechnya in the 1990's to Syria in the 2010's – that are largely imperialist in nature.<sup>21</sup> The wars in Chechnya in the 90's in particular led to a revival of Islamophobic policies and

20 For a more comprehensive history of the effect of modern/colonial Soviet imperial involvement in post/colonial Afghan state in the 20th century and particularly the late phase of the Cold War, please see Mohammed Kakar's *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (1995) and Amin Saikal's *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (2012).

21 This is a common feature in global Islamophobic Leftist discourse when it comes to movements in the Muslim world that are inflicted and/or led by Islamist currents. The Left treated Afghanistan in the 1980s the same way it has treated Syria in the 2010's. In her article, "The 'Anti-Imperialism' of Idiots" (2018), British-Syrian anti-Assad regime activist and thinker Leila al-Shami takes the global Left to task for being apologists of the fascist authoritarian Assad regime, which has wreaked havoc on Islamist and anti-authoritarian secular Leftist circles within Syria for decades. Like Afghanistan in the 1980s, the global Left has not had the epistemic humility to listen to Syrian activists who have been involved in anti-Assad regime movements for decades before and concurrent to the Syrian uprising (2011). Instead, the Left uses uncritical Islamophobic War on Terror frameworks and Rightist terms such as "Islamofascism" to make repeated generalizations about the Syrian opposition being a monolith of American and Gulf-money backed Islamist extremists (@BenjaminNorton 2017). Counter to this Leftist Islamophobic discourse, which has in effect made Syria a New Afghanistan, Syrian anti-Assadists – such as al-Shami and Robbin Yassin-Kassab in their work *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (2016) – have detailed the social struggles and contradictions anti-regime activists face between the Assadist state (and its Iranian and Russian state funders), transnational Sunni takfiri movements such as ISIS, and the many factions within the rebel Free Syrian Army opposition camp. Counter to the analytical rigor displayed by the likes of al-Shami or Yassin-Kassab, for these Leftist Islamophobes, critical actors in the Islamicate world cannot be analyzed with sociological and historical complexity sans reliance on an anti-Muslim/Islamist reservoir of language.

language used by the Russian state and mainstream media. Chechen fighters were routinely portrayed by politicians and the media as "bandits, international terrorists and Islamic extremists" (Yemelianova 2002: 192). The Russian public thus increasingly associated Islam with military aggression, political extremism, savage public executions, terrorism and intolerance towards the other. The Russian state security apparatus (FSB – formerly the KGB) and mass media invented language of an anti-Islamic and anti-Caucasian nature, such as *Litsa Kavkazskoi Natsional'nosti* (people of Caucasian nationality) and *Musul'manskaia mafia* (Muslim mafia). The Russian police and interior forces began to treat all Muslims – and particularly Caucasians – with suspicion and to routinely subject them to humiliating identity checks (192-193). There was also a revival of Orthodox Christianity as central to the new post-Soviet Russian national identity and greater promotion of a civilizational clash between Russia and Islam; most notably through President Yeltsin's promotion of Orthodox Christianity as the state religion and one of the pillars of the new Russian idea (193).

In the post-Soviet era, Russian Islamophobia has slightly transformed but remained just as racist. While the desire to convert Others into the Sovietized communist faith is gone, the desire to discipline and dominate through the social engineering of a Post-Soviet Man/citizen is prevalent. The Muslim woman of the post-Soviet era is an internal threat (akin to Europe's gypsy, Jew, and Morisco of old) that must be tamed at all costs. For example, Tlostanova notes that in 2003 the openly Islamophobic Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs launched operation Fatima which prescribed

searching all hijab-wearing women as possible terrorists. While there are many others discriminated against by the Russian state based on religion and/or ethnicity – such as Armenians or Indigenous peoples in the Russian provincial Far North, Siberia or Far East – Tlostanova argues that anti-Muslim racism remains the strongest as an organizing principle (2010: 180-181). From labeling Muslims the derogatory *busurmanin* in the heyday of the Tsarist empire, to that of the Tartar and other ethnic/nationalist names in the 19 – 20th century, to now a racist calling of Muslims "Black" in the 21st century, the Muslim Other endlessly agitates the Russian Self (2010: 177). Russian imperial Islamophobia is still alive as well. After the Russian invasion and annexation of the Crimea region in Ukraine in 2014, Crimean Muslim Tatars have been disproportionately discriminated against by Russian authorities. Hundreds of Crimean Tatars have been rounded up, disappeared, surveilled and sentenced to prison on terrorism charges – some of the victims for simply possessing a Qur'an in their home, while others being part of Islamic political parties that were legal under Ukrainian administration yet are now banned and criminalized under the Russian state (Anadolu Agency 2021, *Pikulicka-Wilczewska* 2022). This contemporary Russian imperial policy regarding the Crimean Tatars follows the precedent of the Soviet empire during WWII when they engaged in massive 'population transfers' – or, in other words, ethnic cleansing – of Crimean Tatars to Central Asia. As a result, the peninsula became majority ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, and all Turkic place names in the region were replaced with Russian names (Anadolu Agency 2021).



## Conclusion

From medieval Tsardom to the post-Soviet citizen, the religious and secular forms of Russian Islamophobia have viewed the Muslim as a perennial menace, enemy or 'friend' to be tamed. The early antagonisms between medieval Tsardom and the Islamic world laid a foundation for religious forms of Islamophobia. The modern Tsarist and then Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian state eventually secularized and engaged in creating religio-racial forms of colonial ontological difference. While Russia is viewed as a lesser-Westerner alongside the rest of the 'dirty white' countries of southern Europe (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain), it is nevertheless viewed and views itself as part of the Western family and its civilization mission. In relation to Islamophobia, the political economy of Russia – whether pre-industrialist, modern capitalist or communist – has functioned to challenge, subdue and dominate the life and land of Muslims within and outside its borders. Like the Black, Roma, Indigenous or other racialized non-beings who are outside the Western religio-racial family, the 'Green Menace' of Islam indeed hovers below Western Man whether in Europe or Russia. This article does not suggest that something like European or Russian Islam has not or cannot ever exist due to complete incompatibility between completely sealed-off civilizations. Rather, it presents a historical social analysis which highlights consistent hegemonic Islamophobic and philic signifiers as ultimately racist forms of governmentality when looking at the longue durée relationship between Islam and Russia. Ultimately, this article demonstrates a clear link between the medieval and modern forms of Russian Islamophobia, and the ways in which they transformed through the push and pull of religious

and secular forms of Islamophobia and racist governmentality.



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