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TITLE: How Strong Is It in the Soviet Union?

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The principal conclusions of this study are:

1) On balance, Islam in Soviet Central Asia is strong. There is even the suggestion of an Islamic revival.

2) While Islam is lax in the religious field, it is rather compulsory in the social and national, in those aspects that are perceived as essential for retaining the bonds of the community. This explains the importance of burial rites, circumcision, and the practices of fasting during the month of Ramadan and prayer, as well as the inhibition against intermarriage with non-Muslims. Circumcision and traditional burial, although basically classified as familial rites, are highly significant for the larger community.

3) There can be no doubt that the particularism of Soviet Muslim society persists to this day. Islam is a way of life, and Soviet Islam penetrates all fields of human activity.

As one broadly summarizes the ranking of various aspects of Islam as it is observed by Soviet Muslims today, the following picture emerges: the concrete retention of social customs ranks lowest, especially in regard to attitudes toward alcohol and pork; religious observance takes a middle place with fasting and praying engaged in selectively, but in a manner impressive to the outside observer; and familial rites with a communal significance rank at the top.

There is a notable difference between generations, and one could interpret this to imply a gradual decrease in the role of Islam. However, there is much to suggest that we are dealing less with actual generational differences than with differentiated stages of life. Young Muslims become much more observant of their religion and traditions as they grow older, the turning point being between the age of forty and fifty. This point approximately coincides with the date of retirement from work (very early for many Muslims), and people come back to Islam not because of a sudden discovery of faith, but as a social psychological step of joining the community of elders. In this context it is more important to observe all traditions.

The Soviet Union is one of the largest Muslim countries of the world. The disproportionate demographic increase of the Soviet Muslims as well as their increasing drive towards higher education and more responsible positions suggest that they are beginning to emerge as the most dynamic Soviet subnation.
Islam: How Strong Is It in the Soviet Union?

Discussions about the forces affecting the internal development of the USSR have frequently pinpointed the pertinence of its continued ethnic and religious diversity. Recently, increasing attention has been paid to the Islamic peoples of the Soviet Union, for a variety of reasons. Although it is still an unusual thought, one has begun to realize that the Soviet Union is one of the largest Muslim countries of the world; and the general potential and political saliency of Islam has been dramatically highlighted by recent events in Iran and Afghanistan which directly adjoin the Muslim regions of the USSR. The disproportionate demographic increase of the Soviet Muslims as well as their increasing drive towards higher education and more responsible positions suggest that they are beginning to emerge as the most dynamic Soviet subnation. Consequently, one has to inquire whether Islam in fact constitutes a major distinguishing trait of these people, and if so, how important is it?

While Soviet press reports and the observations of foreign visitors have provided some indication of the survival and strength of Islam in the USSR, an altogether unique opportunity presented itself
during interview research with recent emigrants of German extraction.* It was epitomized in the words of one frustrated young man, "people here always ask me about life in Russia, but I never lived in Russia. I lived in Kirgizia". In fact, nearly eighty percent of recent Soviet German emigrants have spent at least twenty years of their lives in Soviet Central Asia and Kazakhstan, usually in close contact with the native inhabitants. One can learn very much by talking to these people. In social and economic terms they are highly representative of the average Soviet citizen, their typical background being that of the construction worker, nurse, or truckdriver. Since their perspective is that of the common man, they view things from an everyday position and usually relate their observations in a forthright manner.

The experiences and observations of these people as revealed in oral interviews constitute the basic material for this study. More specifically, an analysis was made of all replies given to the question "Do the (Kazakhs, or Kirgiz, or other local nationality) still observe their religion and traditions?" In the case of the respondents who had lived in Muslim areas, the response was overwhelmingly affirmative. To quote a typical reply, "yes, very much so, 

* The project deals with various aspects of ethnicity in the USSR and consists of two hundred systematic oral interviews. It is administered by the University of Chicago and funded by a the National Council on Soviet and East European Research. The author is grateful to Professor Alexandre Bennigesen for his involvement in the project and especially the sharing of his profound understanding of the Muslim peoples of the USSR.
they are in their country and hold on very strongly to everything of their own" (#176, Kazakhstan)** Most respondents added various illustrative observations about praying or fasting, traditional burial, food taboos, etc. The recurrence of similar observations on the part of many respondents, from different regions and walks of life, are taken as the basic indicator of those aspects of Islam that are most relevant for contemporary Soviet Muslims. However, since the question asked was open ended, individual responses varied considerably, covering a broad range of traits perceived to characterize Islamic religion and traditions. This already is very indicative for understanding Islam in the Soviet Union, since specialists generally emphasize its broadness and variety of meaning. Islam is not only a religion, but more: it is an ensemble of religious beliefs, social customs, and familial and national traditions. In short, it is a way of life. In order to appreciate the essence of Islam it is important to recognize that there is no such thing as an Islamic church, there is no need for middlemen, a religious ritual or prayer can be performed by anybody who knows enough Arabic. Sunni-Islam, which predominates in Soviet Central Asia is even more a clergyless religion than that of the Baptists, and the ecclesiastical establishment with its four mufti has been created by Soviet authorities after World War II in order to control Islam better.2

Since Islam cannot be defined easily, and since nowadays various

**The number serves to identify each respondent in the research files.
Quotes indicate verbatim replies translated from German or Russian.
facets of it are observed to a different degree, the discussion is to be divided in four major sections:

I. Religious observance

II. Islamic familial rites

III. Social customs associated to Islam

IV. Overall strength of Islam as measured by the summary replies of observers and factors such as the geographic/historical context, generational differences, the relationship between Islam and the Communist party, et al.

I. Religious Observance

Traditionally, a believer has had to observe the five pillars of faith: fasting during the month of Ramadan, daily prayers, a pilgrimage to Mecca, the payment of alms, and the profession of faith. The standard has been relaxed, however, and now none of the five obligations is in fact obligatory. Islam as an official doctrine is very lax in the Soviet Union. As a Soviet commentator has remarked, "the objective of Islam's adaptation to Soviet life is to preserve the cult's influence on believers in a society where atheism is the predominant world view". In this context, the open observance of religious rites such as fasting and praying is even more notable.

1. Fasting.

According to the mufti of the USSR, fasting during the entire month of Ramadan—which is not observed very strictly in most of the Muslim world—may be replaced by a fast during the first ten days of Ramadan, or even three days. However, our respondents typically...
described it this way: "They also observe fasting, for one month they don't eat anything during the day, from the time of the fading of the morning star until the rise of the evening star, the entire day—not the young people, more the older ones, or the women". While fasting cannot be prohibited, it is regularly attacked by Soviet anti-religious propaganda, which accuses it of being anti-social. People who fast have difficulty working in factories or fields and this was noted by our respondents as well: "Sometimes they don't come to work during the fasting period, they grow too weak for working" (#127 from Kaskelen, Kazakhstan). And a woman from Dushanbe gave this impression of the fast, "it lasts one month, then they don't have any weddings or anything. When the fast is over they have a big holiday, then they eat very much, so much that they get sick because of having fasted before. The hospitals already know about this, they prepare, because many people are taken to hospitals—some even die from overeating too suddenly".

In general, fasting during the month of Ramadan was observed by relatively many of our respondents in various regions.

2. Prayers.

A devout Muslim should perform five daily prayers, one each in the morning, at noon, at five in the afternoon, and at sunset and midnight. It is also acceptable to say two daily prayers, or less. The prayers are silent, but should be performed kneeling on a carpet or a piece of cloth. A large number of respondents noted this demonstration of piety. Thus: "they are Muslims, they hold their
prayers when it is their hour, [they] throw everything down, even at work, kneel down, on the streets as well, they put down a cloth and pray". (#126 from Dushanbe). "Always at sundown, they spread a cloth on the field or on a sidewalk and pray"..."women too". (#139) "A Muslim sits down and prays...no matter whether there is a tractor coming, [he] doesn't move from his place". (#80)

Other respondents mentioned that people might stop their cars in order to pray, and several mentioned praying in train or bus stations. One man had experienced a seat neighbor on an airplane kneeling down in the aisle and starting to pray, "the stewardess came and said that he should go into the baggage section and do it there, and that's what he did--he wasn't in the least uneasy in front of everybody"."yes, that was an older man". When asked about other people's reactions, this respondent and others stated that such public praying was accepted as something normal. "Nobody minds them, there is no ridiculing, nobody takes issue with the Kazakhs doing it" (#91). Or, "no, it isn't ridiculed, you must know, it is like this with the Muslims, nobody ever laughs about an old person, the old ones are honored" (#142 from Issyk, Kazakhstan). There were individual cases of passersby reacting negatively: "[they pray] at sundown, in the mornings, and at meals"."mostly the older people, they go down to the river, wash their feet, and pray"."some laugh, even Kazakhs, Chechen, Uzbeks, but these they [the others] already do not count as their own people" (#179 from Vinsovkhoz, Kazakhstan). "Yes, they believe, they have their law and customs; for example at the specific time they knelt down and prayed, the Russians frequently kicked them
in the streets, but they did it nevertheless" (#198, Dzambul, Kazakhstan). Such negative reactions are clearly classified as wrong, perpetuated by people not to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, they appear to have some effect; one respondent mentioned that young people are ashamed to pray openly. However, he lived in a Russian dominated village in Kirgizia, otherwise the main thrust of statements was that "they are not ashamed to say their prayers openly". (#71)

There is also a religious tradition of collective prayers at a mosque on Fridays, but this was rarely commented upon. It appears that organized religious observance is less important—or visible—than individual praying or fasting. Nevertheless, mosques were mentioned occasionally, as well as unofficial mosques, "they come together on Fridays, some place, in private homes, very simple" (#15, Issyk, Kazakhstan). In sum, open praying is rather noticeable and highly impressive.


In contrast to fasting and praying, the other three pillars of faith were mentioned hardly at all. Thus there was no comment on the once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca, which in the Soviet Union is limited to thirty to sixty selected pilgrims per year, nor was there any mention of pilgrimages to local holy places. The observance of the fourth pillar of faith, the payment of legal alms, is forbidden by Soviet law and has in practice been partly replaced by voluntary contributions by believers to the mosque. However, none of our respondents commented on this practice, maybe because it isn't very
visible. The fifth pillar of faith eludes the observation of outsiders even more, since the testimony of faith, the shahada, is a non-verbal profession of belief in Allah by the believer in his heart. Interestingly enough one respondent did remark on this, "they say like this 'we younger people don't want to show our religion openly, in our hearts we are believers, but it is better not to show it'.

4. Other religious rites.

Religious festivals are a further element in the practice of Islam as a religion, although again, their observance is not obligatory, and they have become part of the national tradition. There are three religious festivals: the Uraz-Bairam which marks the end of fasting, the Birthday of the Prophet, and Kurban-Bairam the most important festival commemorating Abraham's sacrifice of his son. A considerable number of respondents mentioned the observance of festivals, frequently adding that people would not come to work on them: "On their holidays they never went to work, but we had to go [on our holidays], we were afraid". (938)

"The Kazakhs hold themselves according to their law, in terms of their religion. It's like this; they don't go to work when they have one of their holidays"... "Yes, something is said about this, but they [the higher-ups] can't do anything about it, the Kazakhs say, I am in my country. I can live according to my own ways" (9127).

"They celebrate their holidays, even if the Soviet Union has no holiday, they do it on their own, don't go to work"... "no, they have no difficulties because of that" (9122, from Dushanbe). Additionally,
some basically non-Islamic traditions have been sanctified by
Islam, such as the making of sacrifices at times of draught, or to
prevent earthquakes. These had been observed on occasion.

II. Familial rites.
While Soviet Islam is lax in regard to obligatory religious
observance, it penetrates all fields of human activity. The private
life of a believer—or non-believer—is regulated by various
ceremonies of a religious character. This is mostly true for three
life-cycle rituals: circumcision, wedding, and burial. Of these,
traditional burials are observed most frequently, by just about one
hundred percent of the people. This, as well as nearly total
adherence to circumcision and traditional weddings, has also been
noted by official Soviet Muslim religious leaders in interviews
with Western correspondents.6 By implication, even party members
and people in higher positions participate in these rituals, and
many respondents in our own interviews did, in fact, emphasize
this point. Most mentioned it with notable surprise and awe,
because such a coexistence between religious ceremonies and party
membership is much less conceivable for non-Muslims.

1. Burial rites.
The first observation to make about burial is the existence of
purely Muslim cemeteries where believers and non-believers are
buried in a traditional manner in a shroud and with prayers. There
are even indications of clanic cemeteries, and certainly national
ones, i.e. separate cemeteries for various Muslim peoples. To
quote: "Yes, they [Kazakhs] even have their own cemeteries, and
Turks have theirs. The black nations have their own cemeteries, and the white nations theirs." (34) "There are separate cemeteries for Kazakhs, Chechens, and Turks. Each extended family has its own mound. There is a Korean cemetery too. The Germans, Russians, Greeks, are together. - They bury in their own way even the sovkhoz director: first in a coffin, then they take him out, the women wail at home. The burial is towards the evening" (#99 from a village near Alma Ata). "Everybody wants to be in his homeland, that is true for all nations, for a Kazakh as well, he wants to be buried in his old village, his hometown, there, where he was born" (#125 from a village in the Pavlodar oblast of Kazakhstan, the implication is that of a clanic cemetery). Burial itself is performed in a traditional manner: "At funerals there are only men, [they] roll cloths around [the dead] and sit him in a niche".."even the young and the partymembers are buried that way" (#69, Leninabad). "Last year; in Alma Ata, the daughter of a school principal died, the funeral was first held according to Russian customs with a coffin, but afterwards, when all the schoolchildren had left, they quickly took the girl out of the coffin, rolled her into cloths and buried her--threw the coffin away--they stick very closely to their customs, and that was a partymember". (#179) Or, to cite one more description: "Funerals: roll into [cloths], only men [are present], and bury the same day while there is still daylight"."everybody observes this, even partymembers--first party official will give a speech, and afterwards their mullah". (#98)
One could go on with many similar quotations, varying slightly in detail but providing a clear picture of traditional burial being performed very widely. In those instances where a non-Muslim custom is observed—such as laying the dead in a coffin—it is discarded at the final point. This practice is typical of the Muslim approach: if necessary, they can be extremely flexible and accommodating without compromising the essence of their ways.

2. Circumcision.

Circumcision usually takes place at age seven or eight because it supposedly is a free decision of the boy. Circumcision may be performed by anybody, a doctor or a mullah, or, as frequently is the case, a grandmother. There are some standard prayers in Arabic, which may be said by anybody. Circumcision is not obligatory for Muslims and although it has certain religious elements associated with it, it has assumed the character of a national custom. Thus, while it is possible to be a Muslim without being circumcised, it is difficult to be a Kirgiz, Kazakh, or Uzbek without circumcision. While Soviet propaganda denounces it as barbaric and unhygienic, the Muslims regard it as hygienic and significant as a national custom. It is a joyous occasion, and as a rule there is a three day celebration in which all members of the larger family participate. A circumcision celebration, toi, may be organized for several boys at once, and various forms of entertainment will be provided. There is much food. Not surprisingly, it is rather expensive:

"A Tadzik, a colleague at work, had three sons, he sold his car in order to be able to have a real celebration for them, that is very expensive, it is celebrated for three days and all the people from the village come"(Judy Tuchman). "Yes they have their national
holiday, the toi--circumcision--, they lead horses by their bridles, there are many people, many tables, national dishes.

We were invited as musicians".

Again, it is a custom observed by nearly one hundred percent of the population, "everybody does circumcision, even the young people--our neighbors who had higher education had all their three sons circumcised. Circumcision is something of a holiday, a doctor is even called to the home" (#59 from Frunze).

"And they have circumcision too, it is done by everybody, there are cases where a Russian girl marries a Kazakh and that they too have their children circumcised" (#179 from a village near Karabulak, Kazakhstan). "Circumcision is done by all--be they partymembers, or educated--no matter, in some cases they are even taken to hospitals. At a toi there usually are some 300 people" (#69, Leninabad). "They come together mostly for a circumcision, then they erect a huge tent, the same is done for a wedding or a funeral" (#141).

Although circumcision cannot be forbidden by Soviet law it is officially attacked and therefore some persons of a higher standing do not want their participation to be know. In such cases they might call it a birthday celebration or hold it where they are unobserved. Thus a respondent who worked for a very high Kazakh party official gave the following account: "the sons are circumcised..the party members do that as well, not in their church, but somewhere in the open country, the call the militia in order that they form a cordon all around and then they begin...it is a huge celebration, sheep are slaughtered, everybody eats a lot
and drinks[,] "is that allowed?" "they are the ones in charge, the
Kazakhs, that is their country and they live as they please."(#127).

3. Weddings

In regard to weddings it is striking that our respondents
rarely mentioned the religious ceremony performed in the presence
of a mullah. Since there is other evidence that it is frequently
performed\(^8\), one may assume that it has been reduced to a minimum--
it has always been very short--and therefore goes unnoticed.

More importantly, it appears that the national traditional side of
wedding ceremonies is emphasized much more than the religious one.
Thus quite a few respondents made general statements to the effect
that "they celebrate weddings in their own way"(#58) or related
customs observed at weddings such as women and men sitting
separately, the negligible use of alcohol, etc.: "At weddings
they erect tents on the street...there is no open drinking, but the
young people add something to their tea. For a circumcision one
gets two or three days off from work, but weddings are celebrated
for two weeks" (#69, Leninabad).

There were also rather frequent accounts of other social customs
related to marriage, such as the *kalym*, the stealing of brides,
and the like.

III. Social customs associated with Islam.

1. The *kalym* and stealing of brides.

The *kalym*, the payment of a bridal price, or its avoidance by
the means of abducting a girl, are unlawful and the two customs
most violently attacked in the Soviet press. Nevertheless, both
still occur on rare occasion. Thus a man who had lived in Dzetesai, Kazakhstan, related that in his area the kalym was very high, up to twenty or thirty thousand rubles, and others mentioned valuable gifts being made to the family of the bride. The stealing of brides, however, was mentioned more often than the kalym, maybe just because the latter is so expensive.

In a few cases, respondents knew of actual forcible abductions:

"There was this case, a modern girl I knew was abducted, was taken far away to the countryside--she didn't want to get married with the man. Her brothers went to take her away, but she didn't return; everybody would point with fingers at her, nobody would marry her. If a bride isn't a virgin, or if there are no children, she is later sent away" (#59 from Frunze).

Generally, however, the comments on the stealing of brides revealed that it was done with the consent of the bride, or her parents, or both. This is extremely curious, since an abduction that has been pre-arranged can hardly be called an abduction. Nevertheless, the respondents always used the terminology of "stealing", the implication being that the Muslims call it the same. The explanation appears to be that there exists a considerable wish to sustain the traditions associated with marriage and that in the case of a highly impracticable custom such as the kalym, a ritualistic equivalent is engaged in, i.e. the "stealing" of the bride. This is an indication how a concrete custom can change and be superceded by a symbolic practice.
2. **Attitudes towards exogamy with non-Muslims.**

Islam has traditionally been associated with a variety of exogamic and endogamic laws, but the one most relevant today concerns attitudes towards exogamy with non-Muslims. All comments on this matter overwhelmingly indicate a Muslim rejection of intermarriage. Some respondents emphasized that a mixed marriage is especially problematic for a Muslim woman, and others implied the same by unconsciously referring to mixed marriages in terms of non-Muslim women marrying Muslim men. Interestingly enough this practice conforms with Islamic religious law according to which a man may marry outside of his faith provided the woman belongs to one of the "people of the Book"—i.e. is either Christian or Jewish—while a girl is not supposed to marry outside her community at all. The following quote may refer to a rather extreme case, nevertheless it is indicative of basic attitudes: "[intermarriage happens] very rarely. A German wanted to marry a Kazakh woman, and the Kazakhs had a conference about that—just like a trial—and told him that he should disappear within 24 hours, otherwise he'll be killed. The families don't want such marriages. They won't tell you directly, but anyway." (#98 from a village near Alma Ata).

In the case of mixed marriages occurring nevertheless, the non-Muslim wives usually had to adjust to the new community: "With men it happens, but with women very rarely. The family accepts [her] with difficulties, have her prepare the native dishes, speak their language. But Chechens don't marry Russian women at all, go with them, but don't marry" (#99 from a village near Alma Ata). "It doesn't fit, everybody should stay with their own...If a German
woman takes a Kazakh the children would all be Kazakh, that
nation is so strong, then it would still be better to take a
Russian". (#170) "If a Russian woman marries a Tadzhik, then she
has to dress in their native dress, she is drawn into their
traditions, Tadzhik families don't like foreigners".

Thus it appears that intermarriage frequently leads to the
integration of the non-Muslim spouse into the Muslim community,
with one big exception: in those cases where the parents never
accept a mixed marriage the young couple usually move away and
tends to Russify, "we had neighbors where the woman was Kazakh
and the husband a Russian, but when they married they moved away
to Russia...her mother didn't want to know anything about her
son-in-law, so they lived someplace else...the children spoke
Russian" (#141).

Several respondents stated that mixed marriages generally don't
last, frequently because of family opposition.

One should add that this rejection of intermarriage isn't onesided,
an overwhelming majority of the Germans interviewed themselves
thought nothing of mixed marriages, and while marriage with Russians
and other Europeans was accepted by some, this was not true for
Muslims. As the statements indicate, the difference in religion
and traditions plays a role, and there is also an element of ethnic
and racial prejudice: "[it] happens very rarely...if a German
married a Kazakh, one would call him a fool" (#147). "That isn't
worth anything, you must realize that they are brought up differently" (#13).

And a young woman from a kolkhoz in Kirgizia said: "We don't even
look at these, rather no husband at all than a Kirgiz...a former
boyfriend of mine, a German, married a Kirgiz girl, now he knows how that is, nowadays he drowns himself in alcohol—it's terrible. These basic attitudes are confirmed by other data on ethnic intermarriage. Thus only one of our respondents had a relative who had married a Muslim, whereas nearly fifty percent had experienced some close family member marrying a Russian. Similarly, the statistics available on intermarriage show very low rates for Muslims, especially the Kirgiz and Kazakhs.

3. Relations within the family and community.

Traditional family structure, especially the inequality between generations and sexes further inhibits intermarriage and the "merging" with other Soviet nations. The generally subordinate position of Muslim women was noted by some respondents, and others remarked on their not being allowed to work outside of the home, or on the emphasis on having many children. The high birthrate among the Soviet Muslim population is well-known and in this context it is interesting to note the suggestion that it may be related to religious strictures against abortion. Overall, however, the status of women was mentioned much less frequently than the special position of older people. Obedience towards parents, and a pronounced respect for one's elders were mentioned as a distinguishing trait of young Muslims: "All nations can take them as an example, they listen to every word their elders say. The students in Tashkent dress according to the fashion, but when they return home they change their dress before they enter the house. The Kazakhs are far ahead of the Russians or Germans, the Germans too stand much lower than the Kazakhs [in this regard]."
"They respect old people very much, Russian [old people] too, but their own ones more"..."if one doesn't observe one's traditions one insults one's nation". However, reverence towards older people is not only significant in itself, it also has major repercussions on the Islamic community and the survival of traditions. Due to the traditional respect for older people, especially those in one's own family, a young Muslim will be less likely to marry a non-Muslim, or break specific customs. Frequently a young person's observance of religious practices is also related to this special respect as is evident from statements such as "the young people usually don't pray [openly], but they do so in the company of their elders". Or: "They observe it [fasting]—do not eat or drink anything during daytime, the youth did the same, they had such reverence for the old ones, that they did it together with them"(W/also #106,#109,#125). The patriarchal structure of the family and community is a major factor to be considered in any analysis of the Soviet Muslim way of life. It strengthens their general communitarian tendencies, and affects many spheres, including the economic one. Thus several respondents noted that a Kazakh or Kirgiz holding a higher position would help to secure good jobs for family members, or members of a tribal formation. In one case a Kazakh had explained to his German colleague, that he was a member of the Hodja tribe, which is considered holy, and that his people therefore could only accept white-collar positions.

4. Relationship to pork and alcohol.

The customary taboos against pork and alcohol appear to be weakening; relatively few respondents mentioned this topic at all. In the case
of pork, several people mentioned that young people would eat it when they had no alternative, such as during military service or at the place of work, and some had noticed young Muslims eating pork secretly. In the latter case, respect for elders again played a role, as is true for this account: "There are cases in shops, if Kazakh girls work there, and an older Kazakh woman enters, they at once go to meet her and bow deeply...they revere their old ones very much, and if such a girl happened to be selling pork before, when an older Kazakh woman is in the store, the girl will not touch the pork, that is against their law" (140 from Kaskelen, Kazakhstan).

In regards to alcohol, the main thrust of the statements was that it is already widely used even among Muslims, but they nevertheless drink less than Russians and other non-Muslims. Several respondents made a point of mentioning that there would be little or no alcoholic beverages at family celebrations such as weddings.

IV. Summary Analysis.

In order to obtain a better sense of the strength among the Muslims in Soviet Central Asia, one has to go beyond relating the typical observations of cohabitants. It is important to inquire about background factors influencing the perceptions of respondents, to remark on regional and generational differences in the intensity of Islam, and to examine the general measures used for evaluating its scope and meaning. In sum, one has to attempt a synthesis of conclusions.

1. Ranking of traditions.

In comparing the replies to our interview question one notes a ranking of the various traditions and observances, some clearly
being more crucial than others. The most frequently mentioned and
most widely observed tradition clearly is that of the burial rites,
circumcision taking a close second place. In some intriguing
cases respondents negated the general question about the local
population observing their religion and traditions, but shortly
afterwards said, "but they do observe circumcision and their own
way of burial" (#163). There is furthermore a strong consensus
that the inhibition against intermarriage with non-Muslims is very
strong, especially for women.

If one asks about the significance of the near universal observance
of these three aspects of Islam, non-intermarriage is most easily
understandable since the consequences are very concrete. It sets
crude barriers to ethnic integration in the familial and
community sphere, and in this regard particularism and the "staying
apart" clearly are valued very highly. More generally, non-
intermarriage underlines the importance attached to family and
community ties in Muslim society.

The emphasis on family and community is also evident from the
importance attached to circumcision and traditional burial; al-
though basically classified as familial rites, both are highly
significant for the larger community. Circumcision especially
appears to have become a symbol of belonging to the national commu-
ity. And that ritual per se is important for inculcating the
norms and values of a society has recently been underlined by
Soviet authorities who for the past fifteen years have made a
concerted effort to introduce universal "new" traditions throughout
the USSR. Their success, especially in regard to the acceptance
of new rituals associated with the life-cycle, has been especially low in the Islamic areas. In the eloquent words of a Soviet ritual specialist, "the struggle between the old and the new does take place not only on the barricades, not only in the economic and political field, but also in the resting places of the dead."

While non-intermarriage sets the Muslim community apart in practice, circumcision and burial rites do so symbolically. As one considers the observance of some of the other traditions, it is striking that, there too, the symbolic aspect is most emphasized such as in the case of the kalym which is frequently replaced by a symbolically equivalent ritual such as the "stealing" of the bride with her or or her parents' consent. In the case of the taboo against pork one can also observe that a concrete compromise is possible in cases such as that of the shopgirls in Alma Ata who sell pork, and probably eat it too, but who refrain from doing so in the presence of their elders. Again, the main point is to retain a symbolic gesture, even if a concrete social situation requires adjustment.

As one broadly summarizes the ranking of various aspects of Islam as it is observed by Soviet Muslims today, the following picture emerges: the concrete retention of social customs ranks lowest, especially in regard to attitudes towards alcohol and pork; religious observance takes a middle place with fasting and praying engaged in selectively, but in a manner impressive to the outside observer; and familial rites with a communal significance rank at the top.
2. The younger generation and Islam.

The second question to be asked in a general analysis of the strength of Islam in the USSR concerns its influence among the younger people. Not all respondents commented on this, but many did (sixty-five of a total of one hundred and nine). Of these, 40% said that Islam was observed by the younger generation as well, half of them qualifying it in some way such as "when they are together with their elders", or "mostly in rural areas". Another 40% negated the question in a conditional way by saying that young people did not observe Islam "as much", or "mostly when they get older". The remaining 20% replied with an outright "no".

Thus, there is a notable difference between generations, and one could interpret this to imply a gradual decrease in the role of Islam. However, in this part of their evaluation respondents did not distinguish between the various aspects of Islam and it appears that they were referring primarily to religious practices and social customs. Several intriguing comments furthermore suggest that we are dealing less with actual generational differences than with differentiated stages of life. Young Muslims become much more observant of their religion and traditions as they grow older, the turning point being between the age of forty and fifty. Typical comments: "Yes, they observe their customs; the youth less, but when they get older, they observe them too" (#147); "the young people do not observe the religion, they do as they please until age fifty, but at age fifty they have their religion
again and their customs" (#192); "the young ones also learn to pray, but they are ashamed... however, after age forty they start to pray... there is a special law, until age forty there is no sin, but after forty one has to prepare oneself for death" (#91). And one respondent even stated that a Kazakh who married a Russian or German woman would divorce her when reaching forty and marry a Kazakh (#91).

The turning point approximately coincides with the date of retirement from work (very early for many Muslims), and people come back to Islam not because of a sudden discovery of faith, but as a social psychological step of joining the community of elders. In this context it is more important to observe all traditions. It is also easier, since younger people who work have more practical difficulties in fasting or saying their prayers, and they are much more exposed to the temptations of eating pork or drinking alcohol.

3. Regional differences.

The geographic distribution of ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union and Soviet emigration policy 12 have unfortunately precluded our sample of respondents being representative in geographic terms. Among the respondents who have lived in Muslim areas, seventy come from Kazakhstan, twenty seven from Kirgizia, ten from Tadzhikistan, and one each from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In rough terms, this weighting is inversely related to the strength of Islam, since the last mentioned republics have traditionally been the most religious, and Kazakhstan the least. 13 This makes our respondents' general perception of a strong Islam the more remarkable.
Taken together, respondents' replies to our question about local traditions and religion being observed may be subdivided into three types: "yes" (66%), "yes, very much" (22%), and "no" (12%).

As one examines individual statements by regional distribution, expectations based on historical knowledge are confirmed: Islam is perceived to be less observed in Kazakhstan than in Tadzikistan and Kirgizia, and least of all in northern Kazakhstan. However, as regards the latter, it is interesting that even though it emerges as the least Islamized area, a majority of respondents who had lived there still felt that Islam was observed there as well, with one respondent from Kustanai even rating it as "very strong".

As one compares statements by urban/rural residence one notes that certain cities in central and northern Kazakhstan that have been built by Russians and are dominated by them --cities such as Karaganda, Balkash, and Aktyubinsk--are perceived as least Islamic. Otherwise, there is no noticeable difference in the "rating" of Islam as related to urban or rural contexts. History again may serve as an explanation. In Islam the cities have traditionally formed the religious strongholds, while rural Muslims, and especially nomads, have been very lax. This explains while even today, Islam can retain a major influence even in large cities such as Dushanbe.

4. Respondent characteristics.

While differentiated perceptions of the strength of Islam are partly related to variation in geographic and historical contexts, variation in respondent characteristics also plays a role. However, since the number of respondents was limited to one hundred and nine, and since
the interview question was open-ended, the existence of non-existence correlations can be argued only tentatively.

Perceptions do not appear to have been influenced by either sex (51 males and 58 females) or urban/rural distribution (64 respondents lived in urban areas, 45 in rural ones). There is also little indication that the ethnic composition of the immediate environment plays a role, although it is interesting to note the numbers themselves: only eighteen respondents came from places where the republic nationality formed a majority, while the largest number—fifty-three—came from an "internationalist" environment where no one nationality predominates; five lived in communities with a Russian majority, and twenty-three in predominantly German kolkhozes or neighborhoods. Thus, respondents' experiences with the observance of Islam originate mostly in environments where the indigenous nationality constitutes a numerical minority—a remarkable finding in light of theories about acculturation processes.14

Knowledge of the local language correlates positively with the perception of a strong Islam, but only in those cases (six) where respondents knew the language well. Merely slight linguistic familiarity (ten cases) has no noticeable effect on perceptions. A similar finding suggests itself in regard to friendship patterns: in those cases where respondents had close Muslim friends Islam was more frequently rated as "very strong", while loose friendship relationships had no special effect.15

Religiousity16 appears to have some relationship to respondents' perceptions, but mostly in the case of people who do not practice
religion at all. This group is somewhat overrepresented among respondents who evaluate the role of Islam as weak, and it is underrepresented among those who perceive it as very strong.

The one factor showing the most apparent relationship to specific perceptions is age. Although this is not true for people who are older than forty-three (thirty-eight individuals in the sample), respondents aged between eighteen and thirty (forty-one) are strongly overrepresented among those who feel that Islam is weak, while those aged thirty to forty-three (twenty-nine respondents) are strongly overrepresented among those who evaluate it as "very strong". If one assumes that people refer primarily to Soviet Muslims of their own age, one could explain this phenomenon by the previously mentioned fact that the Muslims undergo a rather basic change in their observance of Islam at age forty. However, there might be other explanations as well.

5. The elusiveness of Islam.

In any appraisement of a foreign culture and religion, the appraiser's own cultural and religious background plays a role. For people with a Western tradition, Islam in the Soviet Union poses a special problem because it is so difficult to define, and also because it is so very flexible. This latter characteristic can be best illustrated by its relationship to the communist party. Islam in Soviet Central Asia is highly accommodative of the "powers that be", as was noted with a certain surprise by our German respondents. Coming as they do from a Christian tradition—mostly Lutheran, Baptist, and Mennonite—they perceive a strong tension between religious belief and communism, and as a result,
few join the Komsomol or the party. Muslim attitudes differ, as is evident in comments such as this: "They are members of the communist party as well, but they believe nevertheless. In the case of the youth, there is both, the party and faith" (#102 from Tadzikistan). Or, "a Kirgiz can be a communist, but in his home he will do everything as it should be" (#87); "even a member of government observes it [religion]—not officially, but they do; when they meet, they greet each other according to the Muslim custom" (#79 from Alma Ata).

Also, because Islam is more compromising, and because it is indigenous to the region, it is tolerated more than the Christian religion: "They participate much in the worldly affairs, aren't suppressed so much" (#142), and "there are many Kirgiz in the government and they have much power over moral questions; when they are together with their fathers they too observe their customs, observe what their fathers say" (#166).

For a person raised within a Christian tradition, someone is or isn't a believer according to certain outward criteria. For Muslims, the measure is much broader, and as a Soviet commentator noted with vexation "the standard has been relaxed to include any representative of a traditionally Islamic people, whether or not he observes the religious precepts". Islam is not a Western type religion where individual belief is decisive, but more a general life style. It is decisive to be part of a community, and therefore even partymen and "atheists" participate in rituals such as circumcision and burial symbolizing it.
6. Conclusions.

On balance, the observations related by German cohabitants of Soviet Muslims indicate that Islam in Soviet Central Asia is strong. This is especially remarkable if one considers that most respondents lived in areas that have never been regarded as the most Islamic ones, and which nowadays are rather mixed in ethnic terms. There is even the suggestion of an Islamic revival. In the words of one respondent from Kazakhstan: "It [observance of Islam] is increasing, ten years ago it wasn't as religious as it is now. Formerly, ten years ago, they spoke more Russian to their children, now more Kazakh" (#200).

If one compares the evaluation of the role of local tradition and religion in Central Asia to the one provided by respondents who had lived in other areas of the Soviet Union, results again underline the special role of Islam. In the case of non-Muslim areas, the respective religions and traditions are perceived as being observed much less. This is especially true for the RSFSR, but also for Moldavia, Estonia, and Latvia, where religious observance appears especially weak. It is also indicative that generally much less was said about specific traditions in these areas; as far as they survive, their observance is certainly less visible.

As was noted before, compromise is always possible in Islam, especially in regard to the open expression of religiosity. In light of the acceptability of laxity, the degree of openly demonstrated piety is impressive. However, while Islam is lax in the religious field, it is rather compulsory in the social and national, in those aspects that are perceived as essential for retaining the bonds of the community. This explains the importance
of burial rites, circumcision, and inhibition against intermarriage with non-Muslims.

The general significance of our findings may be related to a statement made by Alexandre Bennigsen twelve years ago: "The future relations between Russians and Muslims depend to a great extent on the success of this attempt to destroy the particularism of Muslim society and make it an integral part of the Soviet world". There can be no doubt that the particularism of Soviet Muslim society persists to this day.

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Footnotes:


2 The Soviet authorities treat the Mufti of Tashkent as a head of church and he alone is allowed to elect mullahs who are officially entitled to perform religious rites. There are between three and five hundred official mosques in the USSR, but this clearly is insufficient for Islam to survive as a religion. Therefore there has been a reversion to clergyless practices of the original Islam, to the establishment of underground mosques, clandestine schools for learning Arabic, etc. See, for example, Alexandre Bennigsen, "Muslim Conservative Opposition to the Soviet Regime: The Sufi Brotherhoods in the North Caucasus", in ibid., pp.334-348.


5 Ibid., p.179

6 According to A. Abdoullah, the Soviet Union's second-ranking Muslim, "it is extremely rare for someone to get buried or get married here without a Muslim ceremony". Interview by Robin Knight, U.S. News and World Report, May 14, 1979, p.36.
Circumcision is "practiced very widely" according to A. Nurullay from the "Council for Religious Affairs at the Council of Ministers of the USSR". Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, May 4, 1979

7 Personal communication from Professor Alexandre Bennigsen.

8 See footnote six.


11 G. Gerodnik, O parkakh dobrakh vospominani (Tallin, 1970), p.6, as cited in ibid., p.258.

12 Soviet Germans, who before World War II primarily lived at the Volga, in the Ukraine, and in the Caucasus, nowadays are scattered all over the Soviet Union. The largest group, close to a million, lives in Kazakhstan. For a more detailed geographic listing and a discussion of other background factors see Rasma Karklins, "Interviews mit deutschen Spataussiedlern aus der Sowjetunion", Berichte des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, No. 42, 1978.

13 Within Kazakhstan one should distinguish between the traditionally sedentary areas in the South which have always been more religious and the former nomadic areas of central and northern Kazakhstan.
which in the past have been only superficially Islamized. In
Kirgizia a similar subdivision pertains, although this time the
North is much less religious than the South. All of the
respondents from Kirgizia lived in the North, whereas a majority
of those who lived in Kazakhstan lived in the South.

14 Karl Deutsch, for one, has argued that acculturation processes
are crucially related to the numerical balance of ethnic groups.
Karl Deutsch, Nationalism and Social Communication (Cambridge,

15 Evaluations are based on replies to the question "what
nationality were your personal friends". If a respondent mentioned
friends of a local nationality only as an afterthought, these
friendships were categorized as "loose".

16 Religiosity was measured by church attendance. Our sample
includes thirty-nine persons who never attended church, twenty-
two who did so occasionally, and forty-eight who participated
in services at least once a week.
