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### Alexey Starostin (ed.) Muslims in Russia's Far East: History and Contemporary Situation. (Book Review)

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## BOOK REVIEW

Alexey Starostin (ed.) *Мусульмане на Дальнем Востоке России: история и современность* (Muslims in Russia's Far East: History and Contemporary Situation). Kazan' : Typografia "Algoritm+", 2020, 656 pp, hardback. ISBN: 978-5-6042963-5-6.

Reviewed by Elena Glavatskaya, Ph. D., senior research fellow, Institute of History and Archaeology of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Ural Federal University in Ekaterinburg, Russia.

Russia is traditionally perceived as an Orthodox Church realm. However, Islam, its second biggest religious group adds much variation to its religious landscape. There is no agreement about the size of the Muslim population in the Russian Federation; different sources provide estimates between 14.5 and 30 million people or 10-15% of the country's population. In some areas of Russia, their share is significantly higher and keeps increasing, and in still others, such as the Volga basin, Caucasus, Southern Urals, and Siberia, where it proselytized prior to the Russian Orthodox Church mission, Islam is a majority religion. One potent and enduring religious development in the country is the emergence of Islam in the Russian Far East, the realm with numerous indigenous religions until the 18th century, including Buddhism and the Russian Orthodox Church. By the end of the 19th century, every big city in the area had its Muslim community and a mosque, and throughout the 20th century, Muslims, or the ethnically Muslim population in the area steadily increased. This fact was underestimated for too long and the new book *Мусульмане на Дальнем Востоке России: история и современность* (Muslims in Russia's Far East: History and Contemporary Situation) is one source filling the gap. To make this ambitious project a reality, a group of scholars headed by Alexey Starostin who has published extensively on Islam in Russia,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among other papers Alexey Starostin and Elena Glavatskaya "Мусульманская община Екатеринбурга во второй половине XIX–XX вв.: численность и институты" (The Muslim Community of Yekaterinburg between the Late 19th and Early 20th Century: Size and Institutions). *Izvestia Ural'skogo federal'nogo universiteta. Seriya 2. Gumaniternye nauki* № 4 (157) (2016). pp. 244–253. DOI: 10.15826/izv2.2016.18.4.078); Alexey Starostin and Alexander Yarkov "Мусульмане в Приамурье: эскиз к историческому портрету" (Muslims around Amur River basin: a historic portrait). *Religiovedenie* № 3 (2017). pp. 32–48. DOI: 10.22250/2072-8662.2017.3.32-48; Alexey Starostin and Alexander Yarkov (The Ummah of Krasnoyarsk Krai in the Past and Present) *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* № 422 (2017). pp. 197–205. DOI: 10.17223/15617793/422/28; Alexey Starostin and Rezeda Pavlinova "Мусульманское население Сахалина в материалах Первой всеобщей переписи населения Российской империи 1897 г." (Muslim population of Sakhalin in the Materials of the First Census of the Russian Empire in 1897). *Minbar. Islamic studies* № 1 (2020), pp. 38–62. DOI: 10.31162/2618-9569-2020-13-1-38-62.

undertook an impressive attempt to collect and analyze data on Muslim communities, their history, and contemporary situation in the easternmost part of Russia. The team also included Dmitry Rudenkin, a sociologist who processed the Soviet Census data, Rezida Pavlinova, who digitized the 1897 Census data, and Artur Garifullin – Plenipotentiary Representative of the Supreme Mufti (Muslim religious leader) of the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia in the Far Eastern Federal District, whose main task was to organize interviews with local Muslims.

In contemporary administrative terms the region under consideration is the DFO – *Dal'nevostochnyi Federal'nyi okrug* (the Far Eastern Federal District), one of Russia's strategically important regions, making up a quarter of the country's territory. Intensive migration to the DFO from predominantly Muslim countries—the former Soviet Union's Asian republics and the Caucasus since the beginning of the 21st century, brought various ethno-cultural and religious traditions, which differ from those of the 'native' Muslims, predominantly Bashkir and Tartars. As a result, the residents of DFO started to perceive Islam as the alien religion and/or religion of the immigrants. So, one of the aims of the new book is to reintroduce the history of Islam in the region, and to present the interreligious and interethnic cooperation in the context of heritage and practices. The authors conducted extensive research in 13 local archives, extracting rare documents with narratives and statistics, memoirs and photo materials. They also conducted extensive field research among the local Muslims, including religious and secular authorities, as well as scholars. As a result, they collected more than 150 interviews to fill in information gaps that exist in the state archives.

One of the advantages of the book is its rich statistical data, which includes tables and diagrams based on the All Russian 1897 Census and the following Soviet and post-Soviet censuses. All this data is to be found on a CD, attached to every volume. The research project aimed not only to study the history and contemporary situation of Muslims in Russia's Eastern frontier, but also to support interreligious dialogue and overcome islamophobia and migrant-phobia, as stated in the preface (5). Following an overarching principle of historical continuity, the book includes three large chapters, each covering a separate period of history—Imperial, Soviet, and Post-Soviet. Within the chapters the material is generally arranged according to geography and administrative borders, except for the second chapter. The Soviet period of religious history is generally poorly provided with archival documents due to the State's atheistic policy, hence the authors had to

present the material without spatial distinctions. One can be surprised that the authors included data on the Irkutsk gubernia (province) in the book, even though it is always considered as part of the Eastern Siberia, rather than Far East. However, while following the dramatic history of Russia's easternmost frontier's Muslim population, it became clear that Irkutsk was the main gate to the area, closely connected to neighboring Yakutia, Buryatia, and the Eastern Baikal region. The only two mosques that survived in Irkutsk oblast' (province) during Soviet time had become the closest religious centers for the Muslims on this vast territory.

The first chapter examines the Russian Far East *Ummah*'s early history. Some scholars assume that the first Muslims who penetrated the area to the east of Yenisei River, the natural barrier to Russian colonization of Eastern Eurasia in the 17th century, were either the Tartars—servicemen in Cossack regiments, or traders, coming from Bukhara. However, the documents register a permanent Muslim population in the Russian Far East not earlier than in the 19th century (7). The authors distinguish several methods of its formation. The most common method was the migration of criminals (seldom political offenders) sentenced to exile, often supplemented by hard labor. The Russian government considered exile not only as a punishment for criminals and protection for the society, but also as a colonization method, keeping the convicts near the places they had served their terms for additional years. That was sometimes enough for them to root and settle in the area. The authors have managed to provide archival documents with personal stories from the exiled Muslims, as well as some statistics on the number of exiled Muslims. The second largest group of Muslims that came to the Russian Far East were peasants in search for free land. One of the first waves started with the 1861 abolition of serfdom that caused lack of land available for cultivation in Central Russia, pushing landless peasants, Russians, Ukrainians, and Tatars, among many others to seek free lands for settlement. It usually took from two to three years for the families who dared to start their quest with all their belonging and cattle to reach the 'promised land.' This stream of colonists turned into a full-flowing river with the Trans-Siberian railway construction completed in 1904. The authors managed to extract interesting memoirs with descriptions of ordeals the migrants faced and the common fears about whether they had put themselves and their family members at mortal risks in vain (20). The third biggest group of Muslim colonists that arrived to the Eastern frontier were the workers (former peasants) who found employment in mines and gold panning enterprises in the Irkutsk and Yakutsk provinces. The fourth group was represented by artisans, merchants, businessmen, among others the famous

Shafigullov brothers, known for their financial support of Muslims in Irkutsk and the Baikal area. Finally, many Muslims did their military service in the area, being conscripted to Siberian regiments. All these groups did their best to organize their religious life, so by the early 20th century there existed a network of Muslim institutions in the Russian Far East, including mosques or houses for prayer, Sunni or Shi'ah, depending on where from the migrants came. They invited *mullahs* and sometimes provided Muslim primary schools for children. The authors constructed an interesting map depicting the geography of the mosque network in the area. The Muslim communities were also organized along social/professional principles in order to serve the needs of military men, industrial workers, railway workers, prisoners, and exiles. As a result, the authors concluded that by the early 20th century there had been developed Muslim infrastructure in the area, that included more than 30 mosques, Muslim charity organizations, respected religious leaders, as well as schools equipped with teachers. They managed to keep close connections with communities in the mainland. A distinguishing characteristic of the eastern frontier *Ummah* were the high number of military and convicted men. This also affected the sex ratio of the Muslim population already dominated by men, as is shown in numerous tables and graphs presented on the CD. In the rest of the chapter, the authors focus their attention on peculiar developments in the Muslim religious landscape in each administrative unit, illustrating the text with numerous pictures and documents extracted from local archives. The chapter opens new insights into how, during the First World War, Muslim prisoners influenced the religious situation in the area on the eve of the 1917 Revolution. This includes detective story like tales about the miraculous escape of the Turkish general Ishaan-Pasha Ridvan from Russian captivity in Chita, first to Harbin, then Begin and Shanghai and finally (via Japan, USA, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Germany) to Istanbul. There are also interesting details that allow reconstruction of rival Muslim prisoners' everyday life. They could attend the local mosques for prayer and had their life events registered in the *Metricheskie knigi* (life events registers, filled in by the *mullahs*). There are even a few records of marriages between the Turkish prisoners and local Tatar girls, however there were more death records, for many died from pneumonia, tuberculosis, and other diseases (45).

Chapter 2 focuses on the dramatic period that covers the history of Muslim population in the Russian Far East from the 1917 Revolution, with its hopes and illusions about religious freedom, through the painful disillusionment due to the state's atheistic policy and destruction of almost all Muslim institutions. The 1917 Revolution and the following Civil War forced many Muslims to

immigrate to China and Japan hoping for revenge, but as it turned out all was in vain. The authors briefly present this history along with the construction of the buffer-like *Dal'nevostochnaya* Republic with reference to the comprehensive studies conducted earlier (196). However, it was difficult for them to resist the temptation to present some details about what the Muslim emigrants had to face when finding themselves in occupied Manchuria, where the Japanese occupation authorities required Goddess Amaterasu images to be placed in every mosque and imposed corporal punishment for any *mullah* who dared to argue against it (263). As to the situation on Soviet territory, the history of mosques' destruction and persecutions is described in as much detail as the rare documents allowed. Information in this context is also based on the information recorded during the interviews conducted among the Muslim residents during their lifetime or interviews with their descendants. That included description of some mosques' destinies, including the only two legally operating between the 1940s and 1980s in Irkutsk. Closed for several years and deprived of minarets, one of the mosques served as a compartment house, a garment factory shop, and a school for drivers. The chapter presents unique material on the ethnic groups, sent to the Far East after WWII to populate the area and cultivate the land. Many came as part of arranged recruitment—a variant of labor conscription (so-called *органбон*) or tempted by the propaganda activists' promises of the rich lands and financial support, free housing, cattle, and seeds. The field research that the authors conducted among the Muslims proved that there were indeed cases, when families were provided with everything that was promised on their arrival. However, the majority had to struggle on their own, face hardships, and some even had to return, losing family members and their illusions.

By the late 20th century, the number of ethnic Muslims in the area had increased 20 times, even though their share among other religions did not exceed 3%. In addition, ethnic composition among Muslims had changed due to the decline of the Tatar and Bashkir population and increase of the Azerbaijanis, Tadzhiks, Kazakhs, and Uzbeks who usually arrived after graduating from university<sup>2</sup> or obligatory military service (339) in search of well-paid jobs or better life conditions in the cities. Since most of them were males, this situation resulted in more mixed marriages. The intensive inner migration, along with urbanization during late Soviet time, catalyzed assimilation processes and further secularization.

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<sup>2</sup> University education was free during the Soviet time but required a few years of obligatory work after graduation in the place (usually remote place) they were assigned to by the plan.

The final and third chapter addresses the contemporary situation from 1990 until 2020, when most of the field work was conducted. Predictably, it is focused on religious revitalization and the process of new ethno-religious identity search; recovering the historic memory of the “lost generations”; reconstruction and construction of the new Muslim landscape in the area. It also provides the details of everyday struggle of solving vital problems such as lack of religious leaders, who could transmit the native, historic, Tatar and Bashkir (which means traditional for Russia) versions of Islam rather than the one imported from the explosive Middle East. The Russian *Ummah* had been modernized in many ways during the late Imperial history and early Soviet times by Jadidism.<sup>3</sup> This chapter is divided into several parts, each covering the situation in one of the regions’ administrative units pointing to the peculiar features of Muslim life and introducing the local Muslim secular or religious leaders. It also presents achievements in reconstructing or constructing the Muslim landscape with all the necessary elements, including mosques, charity organizations, schools, etc. The authors also focus on ethno-religious dialogue and achievements in this sphere, providing the local religious leaders’ statements on the situation.

The book does not have any traditional conclusion, but rather ends with an interview with Ahmad-Hazrat Garifullin, the Chair of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Far East (*Духовное управление мусульман Дальнего Востока*). He evaluates the achievements and problems that the contemporary Muslim community faces. According to him, the local *Ummah* is experiencing a religious renaissance similar to that of the early 20th century: with communal life developing, new religious institutions emerging, etc. And he hopes that this time the process will not be interrupted by some political cataclysm. Not like a hundred years ago ... (651).

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<sup>3</sup> Jadidism was “the new” method of teaching of Islam that emerged in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th century, advocating modernization and social and cultural reformation.