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SOVIET ISLAM IN BUKHARA IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY IN THE WORKS OF ANGLO-AMERICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract: This electronic document explores the dualistic status of Bukhara and the Miri Arab Madrasah based on Anglo-American Sovietology from the 1950s to the 1980s. It demonstrates how the region combined the role of the Kremlin's foreign policy "showcase" and a center of religious autonomism. The paper analyzes the geography of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order's transit to the Caucasus and the Volga region, alongside the concept of the "gray zone" as exemplified by the activities of M. Hindustani. The necessity of verifying Western models using local archival materials is thoroughly substantiated.

Keywords: Soviet Islam; Bukhara; Miri Arab Madrasah; Anglo-American historiography; Sovietology; parallel Islam; Sufism; Naqshbandiyya; Muhammadjan Hindustani; state-confessional relations; Uzbek SSR

I. Introduction

The study of state-confessional relations in the Soviet Union remains one of the most debated fields in modern historical science. Of particular interest to researchers is the period of the 1950s–1980s—an era when the Soviet government shifted its tactics from the total destruction of religious institutions to pragmatic administrative control and the exploitation of believers for foreign policy objectives. Within this complex system, the Bukhara oasis and its main spiritual institution, the Miri Arab Madrasah, occupied a central and largely paradoxical position.

For foreign Anglo-American historiography during the Cold War, Bukhara became a unique focal point through which scholars attempted to comprehend the phenomenon of Islam's survival within an atheistic state. The relevance of this study stems from the need to critically re-examine foreign academic experiences regarding the religious life of Soviet Uzbekistan. This re-examination helps identify the strengths and weaknesses of Sovietological concepts while stripping the region's history of past ideological distortions. The primary objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the specific status of Bukhara and the Miri Arab Madrasah in the second half of the 20th century through the analytical lens of Anglo-American researchers.

II. Materials and Methods

The methodological foundation of this work relies on the principles of historicism, objectivity, and a systematic analysis of historiographical data. The primary research instrument applied is the comparative-historical method, which facilitates a structural comparison between the conceptual approaches of classical Western Sovietology (represented by the school of A. Bennigsen) and later revisionist studies from the turn of the 21st century (such as the works of A. Khalid, E. Tasar, and A. Frank). Additionally, the method of deconstructing Cold War-era ideological narratives is utilized to distinguish objective observations made by foreign authors from political conclusions that were conditioned by the geopolitics of that era and limited by the lack of direct access to regional Soviet archives.

III. Results and Discussion

An analysis of Anglo-American literature demonstrates that foreign researchers viewed Bukhara as a unique historical paradox: the city simultaneously served as a primary tool for state control over believers and remained a cradle for religious revival. While pre-war Western authors predominantly documented the destruction of traditional institutions, during the period under review (1950s–1980s), Bukhara began to be perceived as the main arena where two opposing trends collided: the harsh, pragmatic institutionalization of religion by the state and the underlying, grassroots preservation of Islamic identity [1].

Researchers E. Lazzerini and Ch. Lemercier-Quelquejay were among the first to point out that following a radical turning point in state-confessional relations during World War II, the Soviet authorities abandoned the idea of immediate Islamic eradication, shifting instead to a strategy of bureaucratic state co-optation [2]. In this updated hierarchy, a strategic role was assigned to Bukhara. As emphasized in the foundational works of A. Bennigsen and A. Khalid, the legalization of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) and the resumption of the Miri Arab Madrasah's operations in 1945–1948 possessed a pronounced foreign policy subtext [3]. Amidst the Cold War and the struggle for influence across the decolonizing Muslim world of the Near and Middle East, Bukhara was transformed into a mandatory representative "showcase" for the Kremlin. The city became a key node on international itineraries where foreign delegations were routinely brought to witness "Soviet freedom of conscience."

Nevertheless, this "showcase" status faced rigorous academic criticism. Sovietologists viewed the monopoly position of the Miri Arab Madrasah as an instrument of artificial isolation and reduction of Islam. From the perspective of Western observers, concentrating the entire reproduction system of religious personnel for a vast region within a single, state-controlled institution represented an attempt by Soviet security agencies and party organs to localize, confine, and gradually dismantle the intellectual potential of Islam. As E. Tasar points out while examining the internal mechanics of the Council for religious cult affairs, this step allowed the KGB to exercise total surveillance over applicant selection, curricula, and graduate placement [2]. A. Khalid notes the forced conformism of official Bukhara ulema who, operating within the framework of SADUM, were compelled to issue fatwas aimed at modernizing and adapting Islamic dogmas to Soviet reality—including fatwas against pilgrimages to shrines (mazars) and "excessive" ritual spending [1]. In early Anglo-American historiography, this gave grounds to view official Bukhara spirituality (particularly the Babakhanov dynasty) exclusively as instruments of state policy.

However, behind this loyal facade lay a powerful layer of unofficial religious life, which A. Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush termed "parallel Islam." Through this analytical perspective, Bukhara appeared not as a submissive Soviet province, but as a potent, latently resistant citadel of traditionalism. At the root of this phenomenon was the indisputable sacred authority of the city as Bukhara-i Sharif (Noble Bukhara)—the historical center of Islamic orthodoxy in Central Asia. Western authors believed that this centuries-old status generated a robust immunity against Soviet atheistic homogenization, enabling the local population to maintain loyalty to religious practices in circumvention of official directives [3].

Anglo-American researchers paid special attention to Sufi networks (tariqas), primarily the Naqshbandiyya order, whose spiritual geography is inextricably linked to the Bukhara oasis. In A. Bennigsen's work, Sufi brotherhoods were analyzed as highly clandestine organizations embedded

in the local societal structure, which managed to reclaim the functions of preserving basic Islamic rituals from destroyed mosques. According to Sovietological concepts of the 1970s–1980s, it was this "underground" Islam, fueled by the memory of Bukhara saints (the mazars of the Seven Peers), that proved far more resilient than the official SADUM. Consequently, Western observers evaluated pilgrimages to Bukhara shrines as visible evidence of the failure of official atheistic propaganda [3].

New archival segments introduced into academic discourse by revisionist studies at the beginning of the 21st century allow for a detailed reconstruction of the mechanisms of grassroots religious resistance during periods of intensified state atheistic campaigns. Specifically, E. Tasar, drawing on declassified records of the Council for religious cult affairs, describes the implementation of the Khrushchev anti-religious campaign of the late 1950s and early 1960s in the Bukhara oasis, where local shrines became a primary target for administrative crackdowns [2].

The foreign researcher highlights two dominant trends characterizing this period:

Administrative Closure and Forced Secularization of Sacred Spaces: As part of the campaign, the state officially halted registration and reassigned dozens of revered shrines in the Bukhara region for economic needs or to the balance sheets of the Regional Department of Culture. Cult sites belonging to Sufi sheikhs of the Naqshbandiyya tariqa and other mystical orders were deliberately confiscated from communities to functionally transform them into regional warehouses, historical lecture halls, or local museums of atheism. The objective of these measures was the absolute desacralization of space and the liquidation of the material foundations of "parallel Islam" [2].

Institutionalization of "Nighttime" and Latent Pilgrimage Forms: Analyzing reports from regional council representatives sent to Tashkent and Moscow, E. Tasar highlights the conceptual failure of these repressive measures. The administrative closure of shrines (including the central suburban complex of Bahauddin Naqshband) did not halt worship practices; it merely altered their format. Believers adapted to the pressure by shifting to "nighttime ziyarats" (pilgrimages) or visiting sacred sites under the guise of legal family outings, picnics, and leisure activities. Furthermore, regulatory documents reveal a high level of solidarity within local traditional society: inspectors noted with concern that Soviet collective farm chairs and grassroots Komsomol activists secretly allocated funds to support unofficial guardians (shaykhs) of closed shrines, thereby ensuring the preservation and defense of the oasis's sacred infrastructure [2].

Moreover, the transmission of Bukhara's symbolic capital beyond the Central Asian region was considered a key factor in the survival of Islamic communities within the RSFSR. Analyzing ethno-confessional processes in Tataria and Bashkiria, Allen Frank put forward the thesis of a deep-seated "Bukhara tradition" that functioned as a psychological and socio-cultural shield against Soviet assimilation [4]. For centuries, Tatar and Bashkir communities constructed their identity around narrative genealogies that traced the emergence of Islam in the Volga region back to the activities of Bukhara missionaries. The recognition of Bukhara (rather than official Ufa, the seat of DUMES) as the true standard of faith fostered internal autonomy from Soviet institutions among Volga believers. Regardless of whether graduates of Bukhara madrasahs held legal imam posts or operated underground, their legitimacy rested upon Sufi lineage (silsila) tracing back to great Bukhara sheikhs such as Niyaz-Quli al-Turkmani. This element cemented grassroots cells—the mahallas—turning them into self-sufficient structures inaccessible to KGB control.

An even more radical interpretation appears in the works of A. Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush concerning the North Caucasus (the Chechen-Ingush and Dagestan ASSRs), which was classified as a zone of "militant Sufism." The "Naqshbandiyya transit" served as a critical

component here. A. Bennigsen emphasized that the Naqshbandiyya order, originating in medieval Bukhara, formed the ideological basis of Shamil's Imamate and, during the Soviet era, transformed into an extensive, deeply underground anti-Soviet network operating its own shadow courts, mutual aid funds, and illegal schools [3].

The compiled findings allow for a reassessment of the interaction between Soviet authorities and believers, moving away from oversimplified templates. In later Anglo-American historiography (T. Rakowska-Harmstone, A. Khalid), there was a gradual departure from the rigid polarization of official and underground Islam. Rakowska-Harmstone proposed the concept of a "gray zone"—a space of forced and complex symbiosis between legal structures and parallel networks. Sovietologists rightfully identified the Miri Arab Madrasah itself as the ultimate embodiment of this "gray zone" [1].

Despite total surveillance, Miri Arab objectively remained the only space in the USSR where classical Islamic scholasticism, textual culture, and the "learned tradition" physically survived. SADUM, in essence, attempted to execute a unique project—creating a sort of "church for Islam," using legal institutions to protect the core dogmas of the faith. At the same time, Western historians identified a profound functional paradox: upon completing their studies and returning to their home regions, graduates of the official Bukhara madrasah frequently slipped away from state control and became leaders of unofficial, underground religious communities, utilizing their legally acquired knowledge to legitimize autonomous hujras (secret schools) [1].

The figure of Muhammadjan Hindustani (known locally as Domullo Hindustani), a major Hanafi theologian and underground mentor of the 20th century, stands out as a classic and vivid example of this dualism, analyzed in detail by A. Khalid and E. Tasar. His biography and intellectual legacy serve Western revisionists as primary proof that the Soviet "learned tradition" was neither completely wiped out nor blindly subordinated to the party apparatus; instead, it developed sophisticated mechanisms for latent reproduction within the "gray zone" [1].

Foreign researchers highlight several key aspects of M. Hindustani's activities that shaped the religious landscape of Central Asia in the second half of the 20th century:

Domullo Hindustani was a bearer of classical pre-revolutionary Islamic education rooted in the intellectual cultures of Kokand and Bukhara. However, as A. Khalid emphasizes, his defining feature was his extensive study in Kashmir (India) during the interwar period. This not only enriched his theological repertoire with classical Arabic and Persian literature but also endowed him with a charismatic "foreign" scholar status upon his return to the USSR [1]. Surviving the crucible of Stalinist repressions and labor camps, Hindustani accumulated immense symbolic capital, making him an undisputed authority for both official circles and underground environments.

The administrative model established in the post-war period enabled Hindustani to achieve legalization. On one hand, he was officially registered as an employee of SADUM and worked as an imam in Dushanbe, serving as part of the loyal state facade observed by Western scholars. On the other hand, alongside his official duties, he launched an unprecedented network of clandestine domestic teaching. Within a system of autonomous, highly secretive study circles (hujras), Hindustani translated and commented on fundamental classical texts, single-handedly reproducing the traditional scholastic culture of Mavarannahr under state-enforced atheism [2].

In A. Khalid's research, the tragic paradox of Hindustani's school during the 1970s and 1980s is thoroughly examined. Bound to a strict traditionalist Hanafi worldview, Domullo Hindustani sought to preserve the Bukhara theological model. However, through his hujras passed dozens of young intellectuals who, isolated from the global Islamic world, began to independently interpret texts and radicalize. This resulted in a deep internal schism: Hindustani fiercely criticized his young

disciples (such as Rahmatullo-qori and Abduvali-qori), accusing them of literalism (Wahhabism) and fracturing the region's centuries-old legal-theological (madhhab) consensus [1]. Thus, Western authors note that the "gray zone" of the Bukhara learned tradition birthed an internal ideological differentiation that predetermined the fragmentation of the Islamic movement in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on the eve of the Soviet collapse.

This case clearly illustrates the main conclusion of modern historiography: Bukhara and the personnel supervised by SADUM managed to exploit the narrow, highly restricted space of "showcase Islam" granted by party organs to transmit the foundational meanings of Muslim civilization, turning official institutions into a protective shield for the preservation of an autonomous religious identity [2].

A fresh impetus to the discussion on the nature of Soviet Islamic education and the reproduction mechanisms of conservative religious elites was provided by V. V. Naumkin's fundamental study Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle (2005). The author shifts the analytical focus from the macro-political surveillance of Soviet departments to the internal intellectual life of regional Muslim communities, meticulously reconstructing the activities of traditional underground schools (hujras) [12].

From the researcher's perspective, the phenomenon of Domullo Muhammadjan Hindustani's school stands as a core element in preserving the classical theological heritage of Mavarannahr amid state atheism. Naumkin emphasizes that despite rigid administrative boundaries and total surveillance of the official Miri Arab Madrasah by secret services, it was the Bukhara scholastic model and the Hanafi madhhab that formed the core of the religious identity transmitted by Hindustani to his followers [12]. The author argues that underground instruction of classical Arabic texts within latent circles served as an institutional shield protecting traditional society from mental assimilation.

Of particular significance for understanding the dualism of the Soviet system is the tragic split documented by Naumkin within the "gray zone" of the Bukhara scholarly tradition during the late Soviet period. Analyzing theological disputes of the 1970s–1980s, the researcher notes that Hindustani's drive to preserve the historical dogmatic foundations of Bukhara clashed sharply with the ambitions of his young students, who began to radicalize and adopt literalism under Soviet isolation, predetermining the internal ideological layout of Uzbekistan's Islamic landscape just prior to the union's collapse [12]. Thus, verifying Sovietological models against the work of V. Naumkin allows for the conclusion that legal structures (SADUM, Miri Arab) and underground hujras existed in a state of complex intellectual symbiosis, wherein official status was frequently exploited by traditional clergy to legitimize autonomous networks.

Reviewing the conclusions of classical Sovietologists like W. Kolarz or J. Thrower, it must be acknowledged that the resilience of Islam in Uzbekistan was secured precisely by this intricate blend of official institutionalization and shadow networks [5, 6]. The principal value of Anglo-American research from the 1950s–1980s lies in its accurate identification of Islam's primary survival algorithm—its capacity to anchor itself within the historical-cultural bedrock of the Bukhara region [6]. Simultaneously, the main limitation and "blind spot" of Cold War-era Western historiography was its political bias and the complete lack of direct access to local Soviet archives, which frequently led to an over-dramatization of certain processes (such as exaggerating the politically destructive nature of the "Sufi threat") [1].

In contemporary Anglo-American political and historical science, a representative sample of which is the RAND Corporation's collective study Religion, Conflict, and Stability in the Former Soviet Union (2018), a profound reassessment of the Soviet legacy in state-confessional relations is

underway [11]. The authors introduce a radically new analytical framework that deconstructs old Cold War stereotypes, offering a fresh evaluation of Soviet control mechanisms in pivotal religious centers like Bukhara.

Analyzing Soviet religious policy in the Central Asian region, RAND Corporation experts emphasize that strict institutionalization and the establishment of legal administrative frameworks (such as SADUM and the state-monitored Miri Arab Madrasah) failed to achieve complete secularization or wipe away religious identity [11]. On the contrary, their analysis clearly tracks the thesis that the Soviet model of pragmatic oversight left long-lasting institutional scars that continue to shape ethno-confessional dynamics and stability in the region during the post-Soviet era [11]. In this context, Bukhara is viewed as a critical junction where official Soviet strategies intersected with grassroots religious mobilization.

The focus of the RAND Corporation researchers centers on evaluating the efficiency of the Soviet repressive and administrative apparatus. The authors observe that the Soviet state intended to turn Bukhara into a tightly regulated space where the reproduction of religious cadres was restricted by minimal quotas, and the clergy's activities were bound by mandates of official loyalty [11]. However, from the perspective of modern American analysts, this policy yielded the opposite effect, fostering the growth of latent networks autonomous from the state. The space designed by authorities for oversight effectively turned into a specific niche where local traditional society engineered complex adaptation mechanisms. The symbolic capital of "Noble Bukhara" as a center of Islamic scholarship functioned as a potent socio-cultural integrator, ensuring the preservation of traditional values despite state atheistic propaganda [11].

A major element of discussion within the RAND Corporation methodology is the rejection of oversimplified Cold War frameworks that treated all manifestations of unofficial Islam in the USSR as direct political or extremist threats [11]. The authors argue that the survival of Islamic institutions and Sufi ties in the Bukhara oasis bore the character of cultural resistance and identity defense rather than a political challenge to the regime [11]. State pressure and the forced closure of sacred spaces (mazars) merely pushed religious practice into a latent, domestic sphere, reinforcing solidarity within the mahalla and traditional communities.

Thus, engaging with contemporary analytical models from the RAND Corporation indicates that Soviet religious policy toward Bukhara demonstrates a conceptual failure in its attempt to achieve total state ownership over faith. The legal facade and parallel grassroots structures coexisted in a state of complex, forced symbiosis, which pre-determined the high vitality of Islam in Uzbekistan and laid the groundwork for the subsequent religious revitalization at the end of the 20th century [11].

A separate point of interest within modern analytical approaches is the assessment of the long-term, transboundary consequences of Soviet religious policy for the Central Asian region. Researchers point out that the Soviet period left behind a profound institutional legacy that pre-determined the specifics of modern state-confessional relations in the independent republics [11]. Specifically, the Soviet model of rigid, pragmatic oversight, tested through SADUM and the Miri Arab Madrasah, was practically inherited by post-Soviet political elites. Modern Central Asian muftiates largely mirror Soviet bureaucratic mechanisms for managing the religious sphere, maintaining an adherence to the principles of tightly controlled, state-sanctioned Islam and secular authoritarianism [11].

Furthermore, decades of atheistic and secularizing policies by the Soviet state led to a fundamental shift in the nature of religious devotion among the local population. The displacement of Islam from public and political spaces resulted not in its erasure, but in its deep transformation

into an element of cultural and national heritage [11]. Analytical models highlight that in the late Soviet period, Islam in the Bukhara oasis and Uzbekistan as a whole began to be perceived by mass consciousness not so much as a rigid code of theological dogmas and daily ritual routines, but as a vital marker of ethnic and cultural identity (encapsulated by the formula "to be a Muslim means to be an Uzbek") [11].

Consequently, Soviet Bukhara emerged in foreign research thought as the nexus of a complex historical paradox. On one hand, it stood as a highly restricted state "showcase" serving the goals of Soviet cultural diplomacy [11], while on the other, it remained a powerful, latently functioning foundation for preserving the autonomous essence of Islam, which transformed under atheistic pressure into a defensive socio-cultural shield for traditional society [11].

IV. Conclusion

A comprehensive historiographical analysis of Anglo-American research on Soviet religious policy toward the Bukhara oasis in the second half of the 20th century allows for the formulation of the following concluding summaries:

First, within the focus of Anglo-American academic thought and media during the Cold War era, Bukhara and the Miri Arab Madrasah possessed a uniquely dualistic status. On one hand, the city was viewed by Sovietologists as a key instrument of Soviet "Islamic diplomacy" and a strictly limited foreign policy "showcase" for the Kremlin, designed to project an illusion of freedom of conscience to the Muslim world. On the other hand, foreign authors accurately identified the region as the epicenter of "parallel Islam," which generated a robust grassroots traditionalist resistance against the atheistic pressure of party organs.

Second, narrowing the analytical scope of Western specialists down to local "Bukhara specifics" made it possible to explicate the transboundary and interregional character of this historical phenomenon. Foreign monographs vividly demonstrate that the undisputed sacred authority of "Noble Bukhara" acted as a massive integrator of Muslim identity across the vast spaces of the USSR. Through the mechanisms of the "Naqshbandiyya transit" and the authority of Miri Arab Madrasah graduates, the symbolic capital of Bukhara determined the vitality of religious structures in the Volga region, the Urals, and the North Caucasus, building a mental shield against Soviet assimilation.

Third, verifying Sovietological concepts against modern revisionist research (V. V. Naumkin) and contemporary political science models (the RAND Corporation analytical center) has allowed for a detailed reconstruction of the "gray zone" phenomenon. It has been established that the Soviet administrative system failed to realize the complete secularization of Central Asian society. The legal institutions (SADUM) set up by the regime for total oversight were effectively co-opted by the traditional elite and major theologians, such as Domullo Muhammadjan Hindustani, for the latent reproduction of classical Islamic scholasticism, textual culture, and the "learned tradition" within domestic schools (hujras). Concurrently, the uncovered internal ideological schism among conservative Bukhara students in the 1970s–1980s pre-programmed religious differentiation in the region on the eve of the Soviet collapse.

Fourth, modern foreign approaches prove that Soviet ethno-confessional policy left behind deep "institutional scars." The model of pragmatic state control over loyal clergy developed in Bukhara was almost completely inherited by the post-Soviet political elites of the independent Central Asian republics. At the same time, the exile of religion from the public square led to a long-term transformation of Islam, which in late Soviet mass consciousness became framed less as a strict theological dogma and more as an inseparable ethno-cultural marker of national identity.

A promising direction for future research lies in the systematic verification of Western theoretical models by introducing declassified documents from the regional archives of Uzbekistan into academic circulation (specifically, funds from the State Archive of Bukhara Region, namely Fund 1206 — Reports of the Plenipotentiaries of the Council for Religious Affairs). This will enable the construction of an objective narrative of state-confessional relations in the republic, entirely free from the geopolitical biases of the Cold War era.

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