

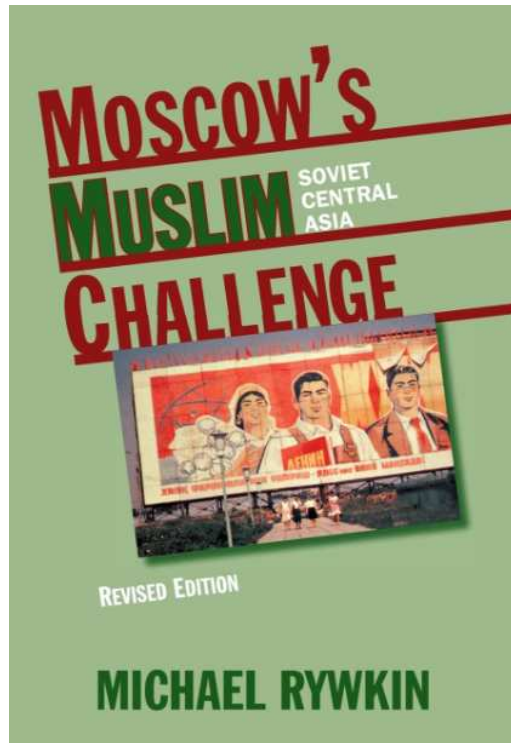
MOSCOW'S MUSLIM CHALLENGE: SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

MICHAEL RYWKIN

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Michael Rywkin's *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia* (1982, 1990) is a set text for studies of Soviet-era Central Asia and the history of the Turkic and Persian/Iranian peoples of Asia and Eurasia. The five so-called 'Stans' under investigation are Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. The book focuses on the work of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's social transformation of majority-Muslim Central Asia and the critical role of Soviet nationalities policies. Questions addressed in the book centre on the compliance of the Central Asians with Moscow, their socialisation and acceptance of the socialist society, and whether the Communist Party would fail economically, socially and culturally in the region. Indeed, was Central Asia the ideologically weak underbelly of the communist regime?

As a Cold War text, it reflects the mainstream United States and Western European ideological thought of the time. This makes it an interesting read as it highlights some of the perceptions that Western academics had on the viability of the Communist Party's social intervention programme, the Soviet people-building project, and the degree of social and cultural integration of the Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Tajiks and Kazakhs. Indeed, it contains arguments on the purpose and function of Moscow's control of the region and its people.

However, the reader should be cautious of some of Rywkin's arguments because during the Soviet era, (i) Western academics had minimal access to conduct fieldwork in Central Asia or anywhere in the Soviet Union, (ii) some of these Western authors used Soviet newspaper articles and documents, infused with communist propaganda, to construct their criticism of Soviet society, and (iii) the Cold War culture often encouraged the Western authors, unless they were sympathetic to Marxism-Leninism, to make predictions based on insufficient primary evidence.

Rywkin was a Soviet émigré who had been a refugee (from Poland) in Soviet-era Samarkand (Uzbekistan) during the Second World War (1939 to 1945). He started his academic career at Samarkand University and retired as a professor in the United States. *Moscow's Muslim Challenge* contains eleven chapters (and includes maps, data, and information).

Chapter One examines Central Asia under the yoke of Russian colonialism; Chapter Two explores the impact of the Russian Revolution of 1917-1921 in the region; Chapter Three describes the local resistance to the communist occupation

after the fall of Imperial Russia; Chapter Four reviews the economy of Central Asia at the dawn of communist rule; Chapter Five reviews the regional population and the available workers as the Communist Party commenced its development plan and how things changed over seventy years; Chapter Six considers the national-religious symbiosis of the Central Asian culture and identity; Chapter Seven discusses the types of Central Asian cultures; Chapter Eight highlights the sociopolitical background, different social classes and how people functioned in the socialist state; Chapter Nine contemplates the Soviet form of government and how it operated in the region; Chapter Ten explains nationality politics in Central Asia; this is important because the Soviet Union was a multinational and multicultural society, with approximately 100 official ethnic groups; Chapter Eleven reviews how Gorbachev's perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) impacted the Central Asians and how change during the mid-to-late 1980s played out regionally and how the Central Asians responded, or not, to events in Eastern Europe and Slav-majority Russia.

Overall, Rywkin book is worth the time spent reading. The reader gets an indication in the first pages of Rywkin's view of the viability of social integration of Muslim Central Asians into Soviet society early in the text '*Moscow's efforts may have succeeded in putting some distance between Soviet Muslims and their foreign coreligionists, but an even greater gulf remains between the Russians and their Muslim compatriots*' (p. viii). However, the reader needs to consider that the Kremlin expected the Soviet Union to last more than seventy years and saw its Central Asian project as a work in progress; with time, the integration of the Central Asians and all other Soviet-categorised national groups was expected to happen.

This sets a theme in this work on Moscow's attempts to build the Soviet citizenry in Central Asia, and the study emphasises notable weaknesses. We must ask ourselves whether the author's analysis is plausible or wishful thinking. For instance, the entire economic and social transformation of the Central Asian region was under threat if the (secularised) Muslim population failed to adopt Soviet consciousness and become compliant and hardworking citizens. Some Western-based observers openly questioned whether Central Asians might ever become loyal Soviet citizens. '*He [the Central Asian] has acquired enough Soviet traits and Russian habits to make him distinctive. But in his opposition to the Russian Homo sovieticus he truly remains Carrere d'Encausse's Homo islamicus*', claims Rywkin (p. 106).

With the hindsight of the post-991 period, we can judge such academic observations and critique Rywkin's text as a document of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union collapsed between 1989 and 1990, it was because of economic, political and legitimacy factors. After seventy years of communist rule, the Central Asians were isolated from the outside world and had little knowledge of alternative political models. Central Asians generally accepted the Soviet state and government, and large numbers of Russians and Ukrainians settled in the warmer climate of urban Central Asia. The Turkic and Slavic communities mixed at work, in education, in the army, and at sports events; however, despite the regime's efforts otherwise, they lived separately, and intermarriage was uncommon.

Still, Rywkin's quote above about (religious and cultural) identity is significant as today's right-wingers criticise Muslim communities and specific Muslim individuals residing in the Global North for supposedly selectively 'resisting' elements of Western state-civic integration. This is a moot point, and there is no substantial evidence to prove it to be the case. Citizens of Muslim heritage in communist and capitalist countries have worked as teachers, doctors, engineers, caterers, and bus drivers. Regardless of historical regime or ideology, this argument about Muslim integration rears its head repeatedly.