

*Noveishaia Istoriia Islama v Rossii (A Modern History of Islam in Russia)*. By Roman Silant'ev. Moscow: Algorithm 2007, 576 pp. (ISBN 978-5926503224). doi: 10.22679/avs.2021.6.1.010

In *A Modern History of Islam in Russia*, Roman Silant'ev, a leading Russian specialist on Islam and previous Executive Secretary of the Interreligious Council of Russia (IIRC), clearly sees in Islam, especially in its radical form, a mortal danger to the Russian state's very existence. His views provide valuable insight into the views of a considerable segment of the Russian elite, who fear Islam as a source of potential instability. Silant'ev seeks to re-establish the imperial and late Soviet-era model of state control over Russia's Muslims, and the book emphasizes the danger posed by Russian Islam's autonomous funding and leadership, and new Russian converts, which he sees fueling the rise of extremist Islamism.

Silant'ev begins by describing Islam's deep roots in Russia, dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Islam became the official religion of the Golden Horde (p. 16) and one of the leading creeds of the Russian empire following the incorporation of the remains of the Golden Horde into the Russian empire. Later, Catherine II issued an edict that prohibited any discrimination or mistreatment of Muslims (p. 17) and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islam had been finally incorporated into the Russian bureaucratic system (p. 20). While Soviet authorities were initially unfriendly toward Islam following the Bolshevik Revolution, according to Silant'ev, eventually the Muslim clergy became incorporated into Soviet officialdom (p. 26). Centralization and bureaucratization, Silant'ev implied, were actually positive phenomena, for they integrated Islam into Russian culture and the state. Gorbachev's reforms and the later Soviet collapse led to the end of this healthy symbiosis between the state and the Islamic umma, and since February 1989 the Soviet Islamic community was in the process of disintegration (pp. 30, 470) and "for the last 10 years the Islamic community of Russia lost even the appearance of unity" (p. 6). Silant'ev praises the remaining forces of traditional Islam, such as the anti-LGBT Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin, (p. 187) and the Council of Muftis of Russia (*Sovet muftiev Rossii*), the leading body of Islamic culture in Russia created in 2004 (p. 149), but views them as exceptions to a Russian Islamic community ridden with ideological and political perversions, implicitly opposed to the Russian state.

Silant'ev opposes even moderate challenges to traditional Russian Islam, including from the Tatar politician and historian Rafail Khakimov, who sought to incorporate European values such as tolerance and democracy into Islam through the principles of "EuroIslam" (p. 156). Silant'ev describes limited support for Khakimov's views, which he sees as undermining the authority of the traditional Islamic clergy. It is the spread

of fundamentalist Islamism, though, which Silant'ev views as the most dangerous manifestation of the degeneration of Russian Islam.

Islamism has spread in Russia, according to Silant'ev, through the return of Russian Muslims studying abroad (p. 84), the use since the 1980s by Islamists of Russian as their *lingua franca* (p. 331) and replacement of older traditionally trained Russian imams with young Wahhabi (p. 472). Silant'ev also identifies autonomous access to funding as a major reason for Islamist success.

While Muslim organizations received generous donations from believers and Muslim clergy earned generous state salaries during the Soviet era (p. 393) the intense competition for funds following the Soviet collapse helped split the Muslim community (p. 392). From the mid-1990s, a considerable amount of up to a billion dollars in unregulated and undocumented funds flowing in from charitable organizations and private Muslim businessmen (p. 406) from Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt (pp. 398-399) got into the hands of the Islamists (p. 398) helping to spread Islamism in the Caucasus. Wahhabi efforts were aided by the foundation of an Arab-funded mini-state in the spring of 1998 (p. 428), while the Turkish extremist organization 'Nurdzhular' spread pan-Turkism and the non-traditional Islamic ideas of Said Nursi, the Kurdish Sunni Muslim theologian (p. 439).

The FSB's success in shutting down Arab charitable foundations (p. 400) failed to cripple the finances of extremist Islamists, who had become financially self-reliant by the 1990s (p. 188). Silant'ev notes that contrary to common wisdom, many well-off, educated Wahhabi were able to support their own jamaat (movements) (pp. 442-443). Criminal converts to Islam also helped raise funds (p. 283).

Silant'ev describes how appeasement by the Russian state failed to stem the spreading influence of self-funded Islamic extremists, online and through the regions of Chechnya and the Volga from the late 1990s to the 2000s. Chechen rebel leader Dzhokhar Dudayev's attempt to use Islam for political purposes (p. 40) proclaiming war with Russia a jihad, helped stimulate the regional development of Wahhabism (p. 431). Still, Islamists opposed Dudaev's regime, and after fighting representatives of traditional Islam in 1992 spread their influence following Dudaev's demise in the First Chechen War. In the criminal chaos that engulfed Chechnya in 1998 (p. 114) the Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov barely fended off a brazen attack from the Islamist Arbi Baraev detachment, which regarded the Chechen government as insufficiently Islamic. By 2005 the Islamists dominated Kabardino-Balkaria (p. 161) and organized an attack on Nal'chik. Islamists engaged in active propaganda in the Volga region in 1992-1993, (p. 435), created cells in Mordovia in 1997 (p. 240), began to penetrate Russia from Central

Asia (p. 188), and in 1999 organized terrorist attacks in Volgodonsk, Moscow (p. 103) and Tatarstan (p. 104). Islamists used Koran.ru and Vakkhabizm.ru (p. 209) as internet vehicles to propagate their views and persuade increasing numbers of Russian Muslims that force and threats of force were the most effective means to deal with the Russian authorities (p. 486). Silant'ev held a Russian policy of appeasement as responsible for the failure to stem the Islamist threat, and that Wahhabi expansion would inevitably lead to conflict with Orthodox Christians (p. 482).

Silant'ev identifies ideological leadership, in particular, that of the late Geidar Dzhemal, as a key factor behind the danger posed by Russian Islamists. In contrast to Talgat Tadzhuddin and Ravil Gainutdin, Silant'ev alleges that Dzhemal “perverted Islam,” faking mental illness in the 1970s to avoid legal problems (pp. 287-288) and joining a group which studied mystics, esoterics, and took illegal drugs in the late Soviet era (p. 295). While virulently anti-Christian and anti-Jewish from early on, Silant'ev describes how Dzhemal abandoned a politician's role as the chief ideologist of the Islamic Party of Renaissance (*Islamskaia Partiiia Vozrozhdenia*) (p. 47), and founder of the Islamic Committee of Russia (*Islamskii komitet Rossii*) in 1995 (p. 238) to praise Islamic terrorism in Russia (p. 295). Dzhemal justified “taking hostages in Budennovsk,” supported Basaev and ibn al-Khattab's attacks in Dagestan in 1999 (p. 311), spread Islamist propaganda online through Islam.ru (p. 164), and condemned the attempts of authorities to reign in Islamism by requiring approval of the sale of Russian language Qurans in Dagestan in 2004 (p. 146) and killing former Chechen fighter Aslan Maskhadov in 2005, whom Dzhemal called the “real shahid” (martyr) (p. 259). Dzhemal disrupted Russian foreign relations, criticizing Mufti Ravil'Gainutdin's meeting with the Israeli ambassador and Mufti Nafigulla Ashirov (p. 258), and praising suicidal terrorist attacks on Israel (p. 124) at an international conference in 2002. Dzhemal also played an important role as the spiritual leader (p. 154) of the “Banu Zulkarnain” (Dhul-Qarnayn)/Nation of Alexander of Macedonia (*Naṣṣiia Aleksandra Makedonskogo*) (p. 347) group of converts seeking to transform Russia into a Muslim country. Cooperating with the Iranian Embassy-run Cultural Center in Moscow, Dzhemal also helped form the group NORM which was “to represent the interests of all converts” (p. 458), formally electing Abu-Talib Stephenko as its leader in 2004 (p. 258).

Silant'ev views Islamic converts as a significant national security threat. Despite their limited numbers, the ideological fervor, higher education, and Russian appearance of converts have allowed them to take leadership posts and effectively carry out acts of terrorism. Silant'ev traces the practice back to the forcible conversion of Russian prisoners to Islam in the Afghan War (p. 342). Conversion later spread to the heartland with the establishment of diverse ethnic communities of Russian Muslims in Petrozavodsk in 1999 (p. 338), Kareliia in 2001 (pp. 130, 350), St. Petersburg, and a “Wahhabi enclave” in Mordavia (p. 350).

Many converts were highly educated (p. 342) and took on leadership positions. Silant'ev directs particularly animosity towards the Muslim Russian leader Viacheslav-Ali Polosin a former Orthodox priest and current ideologist for the Council of Muftis of Russia (*Sovet Muftiev Rossii*) (p. 348). Silant'ev claims that Polosin lacks principle and seeks to publish books offensive to Christians, written in the style of Soviet propaganda (p. 159). Other prominent converts mentioned by Silant-ev include Valeriia-Imam Porokhova, a translator of the Quran (p. 343), and Sergei-Dzhannat Markus, who established an Islamic radio show, "Voice of Islam" (p. 207) and worked as the Press Secretary of the Council of Mufti (*Sovet muftiev Rossii*) (p. 348).

Silant'ev provides estimates of only two to three hundred Russian converts, most a product of marriage to Muslims (p. 341) far below Gainutdin's claims of tens of thousands (p. 341) but the radical ideological beliefs of many converts predispose them towards terrorism and preclude peaceful coexistence with the Russian state and society. Silant'ev divides Russian Wahhabi into two groups: the "ideologues" and the "*ispolniteli*," i.e., actors. The ideologues are usually well-educated and take middle management positions in the Wahhabi organization. The *ispolniteli*'s Slavic appearance disguises them from law enforcement, allowing them to play important roles in terrorist attacks (p. 351). The criminal backgrounds of some converts like Sergei Basov (Pashchenko), the leader of the Vladimir criminal community, also facilitate terrorist attacks. Other converts like Shamil' Matveev, the chief editor of *Koran.ru*, produced propaganda to support Chechen fighters (p. 351).

Russian converts engaged in terrorism include the Wahhabi cells created by Abuzar-Oleg Marushkin in Mordovia which fought against Russian troops during the Second Chechen War (p. 437), an attempted 1999 terrorist attack by Nikolai Eprintsev and Viktor Miroshkin (p. 351), the kidnapper Maksim Gaponov (p. 352), suicide attacks in 2000 by Aleksandr Alekseev and Sergei Dmitriev, and an attack on gas lines in Tatarstan by Oleg Babushkin in 1999 (p. 352). Russian authorities also arrested terrorist groups of 200 "Russian Muslims" (p. 353) and 80 Islamists in 2003 that included Russians and Chuvash (p. 352).

Silant'ev claims that even convert leaders appearing to be non-violent may be hiding terrorist motives, pointing to the arrests of Vladivostok Islamic Cultural Center leader Ermak Tegaev for possessing "explosive materials" (p. 259), and the 2000 arrest of Piatigorsk Mosque imam (Abdulla) Anton Stepanenko (p. 165). Ostensibly peaceful Muslim leaders, like the leading mufti Ravil Gainutdin, a leading mufti, or groups such as Hizbut Tahrir interact with dangerous "Russian Muslims" such as Dmitry Petrichenko who was arrested in 2006 (p. 190).

Silant'ev also highlights the career of alleged convert Abdul-Vakhed Niazov, who despite not siding with the Islamists, eroded public trust in traditional Islamic authorities by cynically promoting his personal interests. Launching a political career as a "young Muslim activist" in 1991, Niazov, whom Silant'ev alleges had previously been known as Vadim Valerianovich Medvedev (p. 149) founded the political and religious movement Refakh and the Union of Russian Muslims (*Soiuz musul'man Rossii*) (p. 78), and later the officially registered political party, the Eurasian Party-Union of Russian Patriots (*Evraziiskaia Partiiia-Soiuz Patriotov Rossii*) in 2002 (p. 253), which in 2004 joined an electorate bloc, the "Great Russia-Eurasian Union" (*Velikaia Rossiia-Evraziiskii Soiuz*) (pp. 136, 255). Silant'ev views Niazov as an unprincipled *Geschäftsmacher* whose sole focus on a political career damaged the reputation of Russia's Islamic umma, encouraging the spread of extremism.

Silant'ev views as counterproductive any effort to bolster traditional Russian Islam through reform, such as through the "Russian Islam" project launched by philosophers Petr Shchadrovitskii and Sergei Gradirovskii with Igor Ponkin in 2000 (p. 447), which identified Islamic traditions deeply embedded in the country's historical narrative and distinguished Russian Islam from internationalist jihadists in order to prevent neophytes from embracing extremist Islamism. Silant'ev argues that the reformers' attempts will only undermine traditional Islam and encourage conversion to Islamism.

One can easily see the major framework of Silant'ev's narrative. The ideal time for Russian Islam was in the imperial and late Soviet eras when Russian Muslims were fully under the control of the state. Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's changes destroyed this healthy "symbiosis" and produced violent Islamists and converts who largely side with Islamists. They are funded either by foreigners or criminals and inspired by fanatics or cynics. He views all of this as possibly leading to an Armageddon-type war between Islamists and not just traditional, law-abiding Muslims, but the Russian state itself.

Only solitary repression and a variety of restrictions can prevent the collapse of public order and the state itself. If one looks closer at Silant'ev's narrative, one can see an eerie similarity to the views of the current Russian authorities and, of course, tsarist authorities' narratives about revolutionaries, their leaders, and their actions. Islamists clearly substitute for revolutionaries and "extremists" in Silant'ev's narrative, which represents the concerns of a considerable segment of the present-day Russian elite, vis-a-vis the stability of Russian society.

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