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## **MUSLIM SOLDIERS IN THE SOVIET ARMED FORCES: IDENTITY TEST? (Historiographical Review)**

**Kubeyev R.D.**

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**Abstract.** The paper deals with some issues of the Soviet Muslims' participation in the Soviet Union's military conflicts (on the example of the Great Patriotic War and the war in Afghanistan). There was considered how the religious leaders and officials interacted, the history of the Religious Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) formation during the Great Patriotic War, as well as the usage of Muslim soldiers in the Afghan war.

**Keywords:** Soviet, War, Great, Patriotic, leaders, religious, conflicts, military, SADUM, Muslims, conflict., Afghan

## **КЕҢЕС АРМИЯСЫНДАҒЫ СОЛДАТ-МҰСЫЛМАНДАР: ҰҚСАСТЫҚҚА ТЕСТ? (тарихнамалық шолу)**

**Көбеев Р.Д.**

Ш.Ш. Уәлиханов ат. Тарих және этнология институтының ғылыми қызметкері

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада кеңес мұсылмандарының КСРО әскери қақтығыстарына қатысуының кейбір қырлары (Ұлы Отан соғысы мен Ауған соғысы мысалында) қарастырылады. Ұлы Отан соғысы жылдарындағы діни басшылар мен билік арасындағы қарым-қатынас, Орта Азия мен Қазақстан мұсылмандарының діни басқармасының (САДУМ) құрылу тарихына, сондай-ақ кеңестік мұсылман солдаттарды Ауғанстандағы соғыс қимылдарында пайдалану мәселелеріне назар аударылған.

**Түйін сөздер:** кеңес мұсылмандары, САДУМ, әскери қақтығыстар, діни басшылар, Ұлы Отан соғысы, Ауғанстандағы қақтығыстар.

## **СОЛДАТЫ-МУСУЛЬМАНЕ В СОВЕТСКОЙ АРМИИ: ТЕСТ НА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ? (историографический обзор)**

**Көбеев Р.Д.**

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассматриваются некоторые вопросы участия советских мусульман в военных конфликтах СССР (на примере Великой Отечественной войны и войны в Афганистане). Уделено внимание взаимодействию религиозных лидеров и властей, истории создания Духовного управления мусульман Средней Азии и Казахстана (САДУМ) во время Великой Отечественной войны, а также использованию советских солдат мусульман во время войны в Афганистане.

**Ключевые слова:** советские мусульмане, САДУМ, военные конфликты, религиозные лидеры, Великая Отечественная война, конфликт в Афганистане.



It is well-known, that in the nation-building process it is very important to have a unifying idea which represents interest of all the segments of population. The Marxist ideology which was the driving force of the October revolution and which became the state ideology in the USSR is atheistic in its essence, and it is very interesting to trace its relations with religion in the Soviet Union generally, and especially with Islam – the religion regulating absolutely all the aspects of human life and this way serving as a frame for the believers' consciousness, kind of filter for accepting or not accepting some new ideas.

At that Thomas S. Szayna in his book 'The Ethnic Factor of the Soviet Armed Forces: the Muslim Dimension' points out that 'prior to the Russian conquest, religion was not a distinguishing feature to the Muslims inhabited lands now part of the USSR'. He shares the opinions of other famous scholars that 'loyalties were primarily local and distinctions were based on towns or villages of origination, tribe, occupation, or Sufi membership. The Russian seizure of the Muslim lands transformed Islam to the major aspect of identity because it became a central cause of the large socio-cultural chasm between the Russian and the Muslims'. [1, p. 3]

Obviously, the rivalry of these two ideologies was unavoidable. After the establishment and strengthening of the Soviet regime, the authorities having a real power started their persecutions of Islam (by A. Benningsen it started in 1928 and continued up to the beginning of the World War II) [2, pp.115-133].

And what happened during the War? It is clear that the authorities needed everyone's help, without any exception. Talking about the Muslim population, firstly, they were considered as a human reserve, and in the second, contrary to the German propaganda using the ideological controversies between the

As noted Aidar Khabutdinov in his article 'On the 70th anniversary of the Religious Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM)',

after the series of victories in 1943 there appeared a chance to change the relations between the state and religion. By the proposal of the Imam Eshon Babakhan there was formed a preparatory committee for holding the Kurultai. Some prominent theologians from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and other regions of the USSR entered to this committee.

In August-September, 1943 the Committee members were visiting the regions of 5 Central Asian republics for explanation on the Committee formed and for choosing the delegates for Kurultai. The region's Muslims were wary of the explanations of the committee members, because many of them or their family members experienced the wrath of atheists and saw the destructive power of communist ideology in relation to the followers of Islam.

But generally the militant policy was changed with relative religious tolerance. Eshon Babakhan sensed this moment and in winter of 1943 he addressed to the Muslim communities of Central Asia and Kazakhstan with a call for unity, Along with a group of religious leaders through the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR Yuldash Akhunbabayev Eshon Babakhan started negotiations with the Soviet government on the establishment of the Religious Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

On July 12, 1943 the initiative group headed by Eshon Babakhanov officially appealed to the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Mikhail Kalinin. Soon, the initiative on the establishment of the Islamic religious center in Central Asia was approved in Moscow and for these needs the government returned the house of Eshon Babakhan in Hazrat Imam mahalla of Tashkent which was confiscated in 1928.

The author mentions that according to the legend, in July 1943 Eshon Babakhan was summoned to Moscow. In the Kremlin he met with I. V. Stalin, who suggested Eshon Babakhan to arrange Kurultai of Muslims and form a Religious Administration in Tashkent. Stalin emphasized that the priority of the Muslim community should be a real help in the fight against the German fascist invaders.

The first Kurultai (congress) of Muslim Ulemas was held on October 15-20, 1943 in Tashkent in

the house of EshonBabakhan. It was attended by 160 delegates from the republics of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The Kurultai decided to form the Religious Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM). Sheikh EshonBabakhanAbdulmashhidhan was unanimously elected its chairman. At the same time he was awarded the rank of the Mufti of five republics.

The authorities allowed to open over 200 mosques in the Central Asian republics (the most of these mosques started really working only by the end of the war. At the same time there was determined a staff and departments of the Administration (Department of fatwas, Department of Mosques etc.). Later there was founded Mir-i Arab madrasah (1946) and the Higher Islamic Institute (1971).

AidarKhabutdinovnotices that the Holy Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) were declared as a basis for Central Asian Religious Administration's (SADUM) guidance, which is a very interesting fact taking into account the character of the Soviet state and its traditional attitude to religion. In SADUM's statute there were

established the right and duties of the Board as a highest religious body of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, determined functions of the departments in the center and on the ground. Besides, in the Statute there were determined the following tasks:

- to manage religious affairs and ceremonies through the official religious organizations, located in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan;
- to preach the fundamentals of Islam among the believers;
- to solve some complex and conflicting issues relating to religious rites, explain the guidance on these matters to believers through Imam-Khatibs;
- to educate believers in the spirit of truthfulness, honesty, diligence and compliance with the law;
- to fight against harmful practices among the clergy and believers;
- to promulgate fatwas on the above issues;
- to publish religious literature;
- to establish relations with foreign Muslim organizations, to familiarize foreign Muslim brothers with the spiritual and social life of five republics' Muslims.

The Board of SAADUM was located in the house of EshonBabakhan. Besides, the Mufti handed over more than a thousand books and manuscripts from his collection to the library formed at SADUM.

The Mufti EshonBabakhan mobilized Muftiyat on targeted front assistance work. At the Muftiyat there was organized the collection of clothing for the soldiers and money for weapons, initiated the establishment of a permanent committee to provide material assistance and moral support to the families of soldiers.

The author concludes that the formation of a single Religious Muslim Administration of Central Asia became a part of the Soviet policy to ensure the unity of the Soviet people during the War, so the Soviet Ummah had a time of relative religious freedom and tolerance. [3]

In the context of this Soviet Policy's it is interesting to consider the project of the Address of Muslim

In the context of this Soviet Policy s it is interesting to consider the project of the Address of Muslim leaders to the Muslims of USSR from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan gathered at the Kurultai (under the leadership of Sheikh ul-Islam IshanBabakhanAbdumadzhidkhanov).

The project of document was declaring support to the Soviet authorities. At that providing substantiation for war with the German occupants the Muslim leaders used the Islamic terminology, concepts, and fragments of Qur'an and hadiths about protection of religion, freedom, love to Motherland. The fight of Muslims against occupants was called 'Gazavat' (fighting for Allah), the believers who died in this war were declared martyrs, and every Muslim who killed the enemy was called 'Gazi' (fighter for the faith).

Muslim leaders gave an example of Crimea, where ‘Germans and Romanians ruined this flourishing region, liquidated the national independence of the Crimean Muslims, subjected to unprecedented bullying their domestic customs and faith’.

There was mentioned Hitler’s intention to destroy such places connected with pious peoples as Shakhzind, Ferghana, Bukhara, Turkestan, Tashkent and others.

Besides they stressed that Germans are going to ‘destroy the national culture of the people of Turkestan and Kazakhstan, burn the treasures of science and knowledge accumulated and stored at the libraries of Bukhara, Urgench, Samarkand, Tashkent, Ashkhabad, Khujand, Alma-Ata, Frunze’.

It was pointed out that the Hitler’s soldiers are going to defile their wives and daughters, destroy their homes and normal life of their elders and children.

‘...Following the precepts of our fathers the people of Turkestan along with other people of the Soviet Union have taken a great fight with the fascists for their dear homeland, for freedom and prosperity, for the faith and law, for the honor and glory’.

Besides in this document a special attention was paid to the ‘race theory’ supported by Hitler, the ideas of ‘purity and supremacy of German race’, and to his perception of Oriental nations ‘as monkeys’.

On behalf of all the devout Muslims of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan the representatives of the Muslim clergy called on their brothers to fight against Hitler’s army.

The letter was also addressed to home front workers: the clergymen used hadiths saying that helping to arm the warriors marching to the front is equivalent to participation in battle.

At the end the document there was an address to imams, the spiritual leaders of the Muslims where they were called to pray for the victory and urge the Muslims to fight bravely. [4, pp. 318-326]

In the comment it was mentioned that this project of the letter was recommended by the State Security People’s Commissar V. Merkulov for consideration of Secretary of VKP (b) comrade Shcherbakov. It was proposed to publish this text in Turkic, Arabic, Uzbek and other languages of the ‘Muslim’ ethnic groups of the USSR and to distribute it among the Soviet Muslims and even abroad.

Another proposal was to publish the project of this letter in central newspapers. Since there was no answer, in December Merkulov sent another letter to Shcherbakov (Top Secret, 08.12.1943. #3124/M TsKVKP (b) to Comrade Shcherbakov, recommending to publish the Muslim leaders’ letter (published edition 15 000) in Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, Kirgiz and Kazakh languages and to distribute it among the Soviet Muslims with help of the Religious Administration.

Anyway, the decision on this issue was never made. The reasons were not mentioned, so we can only guess whether it happened this way due to unwillingness to use such instruments as religion in the atheistic state’s policy, or because of fears of religiosity growth. This issue needs to be studied particularly.

Besides, the Muslim leaders prepared the project of the similar Address to the Muslims of Crimea (the letter dated the period between October 15 and October 26, 1943).

Again, they appealed Muslims mentioning some advantages given by the Soviet authorities (national autonomy, development of the Crimean Tatar language, and some possibility to observe ‘national... and religious habits’.

In this text it was stressed that after coming to Crimea the Germans firstly played on religious and national feelings of the region’s population. And now everyone (even those who trust Germans) can see that they bring only devastation, blood and tears. Germans impoverish local population, expropriating even home stuff, making people die of hunger. Besides, they make Tatar Muslims raise pigs for German army.

At the end the letter’s authors urged the Crimean population to render all the resistance to Germans, and assured that the Red Army is coming to Crimea. So the Crimeans should protect their wealth from destroying and burning by Germans and Romanians. [4, pp. 326-329]

A prominent French researcher A. Benningsen marks out these following stages of the state policy towards Islam in the USSR:

1.1918 – 1928: this period could be characterized with a liberal position of new power towards Islam;

2.1928 – the beginning of the World War II is a period of persecution;

3.1941 – 1960: –temporary lightening period;

4.Beginning of 1960 – 1964 –the beginning of the new pressure period;

5.1965 – 1970: decreasing of pressure on Islam.

6.70-ies – the period of harsh policies and tensions. [2, pp. 115-133].

Another example of how the Soviet authorities were dealing with the Muslim identity is the case of the Afghan conflict.

At the beginning of 80-ies the number of the Soviet Muslims according to some scholars' opinion was close to 50 million [5, p.1]

It seems very interesting to familiarize with some scholars' opinion on how the authorities relied(or showed a lack of confidence) the Muslim soldiers taking into account their commitment to traditions and own identity.

Of course there were some obvious successes in the authorities' policy on instilling the Soviet Muslims new identity.

Some results of this policy could be observed during the Afghan conflict, when on the one hand, it was decided to use the representatives of Soviet nationalities also inhabiting Afghanistan, and on the other hand, there was a concern about the loyalty of these soldiers in this particular conflict with their 'coreligionists and blood brothers'.

While there are some opinions saying that the Soviet Central Asians showed themselves as bad soldiers due to their belonging to the same religion and nationality, Jiayi Zhou, the researcher from the University of California, Berkeley, is trying to present a 'more balanced position':

'While the use of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen in Soviet forces is often said to have been a failure, the material in this article points at a more balanced conclusion. While there are accounts of Central Asian and Soviet Muslim soldiers sympathizing with the Afghan cause and even defecting to the mujahedin, other evidence indicates that many Soviet Central Asian soldiers, if not the majority, served the Soviet Union's cause without viewing it from a separate nationalist or ethnic lens. This perhaps speaks to the strength of the 'Soviet identity' and the successes of Soviet nationality policy'. [6, p. 303]

'While the Muslim Battalion members may have been ethnically closer to Afghans, and more culturally and linguistically more attuned than their Slavic counterparts—based on the information obtained, it seems that these spetsnaz soldiers kept firm sight of their identity as Soviet soldiers' [6, p. 315].

Christian Bleuer in his study 'Muslim Soldiers in Non-Muslim Militaries at War in Muslim Lands: The Soviet, American and Indian Experience' adduces the opinion of Erica Marat:

'Most Central Asian veterans, however, say that they drew a clear line between their Soviet identity, calling themselves internationalists, and the local Afghan population, despite often similar physical appearances and languages' and that Central Asian veterans 'in particular remained loyal to the Soviet ideology' regarding the Soviet–Afghan War'. [7, p.5]

Besides, he cites some other scholars, arguing that:

'In general, neither Muslim nor non-Muslim soldiers in the Red Army held much affinity for the Afghans. Galeotti, the author of an in-depth study on the Soviet military, commented that 'One can [...] safely discount tales of Central Asians galvanized, as a whole, into resistance by the thought of fighting their coreligionists,...'. He later states that 'To an extent, even to Soviet Central Asians, but especially Slav soldiers, the Afghan remained alien, unknowable and suspicious. As a result, neither those supporting nor repudiating the war had much fellow feeling for the rebels' [7, p. 5]

However, about this issue Jiayi Zhou writes about the very interesting ‘case of Darzob district’, which serves as a good example of good relations between the Soviet Muslim Battalions and locals. He adduces the memoirs of the Commander Kerimbaev who describes that ‘through patient work, reconstruction of the village infrastructure, and the show of good will to the locals, residents of the town who had fled to the mountains (numbering 10,000), started to return’. Besides, the local rebel leader Mavlavi Pahlavan and about 120-150 soldiers switched the side of the government.

When leaving the Muslim Battalion had very good relations ‘– So much so that when 177 ooSpN was ordered out of the area, Darzob village elders petitioned President Kamal for part of the group to stay behind in the village, on the villages’ own allowance’. [6, p. 312].

Besides, at interviewing one the Muslim Battalion soldier it was fixed that he was not driven by a national or ethnic identity, but by a Soviet, international, humanitarian-motivated mission to help Afghans [6, p. 325].

It is necessary to mention that initially the idea of using the Soviet representatives of the nationalities inhabiting Afghanistan does not belong to the Soviet authorities.

Jiayi Zhou cites the Moscow Russian Television Network in Russian, ‘Special File’ program, 14 July 1992:

‘The DRA President Nur Muhammad Taraki phoned Soviet Premier Kosygin in his first major appeal for intervention: I ask you to extend assistance. I suggest you place Afghan markings on your tanks and aircraft and no one will know the difference. Your troops could advance from the direction of Kushka and Kabul. In our view, no one would catch on. They’d think they were government troops . . .

Why can’t the Soviet Union send Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen in civilian clothing? No one would recognize them. We want you to send them. They could drive the tanks because we have all those nationalities in Afghanistan. Put them in Afghan costume and give them Afghan badges and no one will recognize them. It’s very easy work, in our view’ (here author cites the Moscow Russian Television Network in Russian, ‘Special File’ program, 14 July 1992, as translated in FBIS-SOV-92-138 (17 July 1992), pp. 30–31, in Feifer, Gregory, *The Great Gamble* Harper, New York, pp. 31–32) [6, p. 305].

Christian Bleuer in his work mentions that ‘...Not only did Central Asians serve in combat units, but they were also prominent in psychological operations units as their language skills were an asset. The most prominent example of Muslims in combat roles are the two Muslim Battalions, the first of which (officially the 154th Special Operations Detachment) was composed of Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen, and was tasked to perform covert operations disguised as locals’.

Firstly their task was to protect the President Taraki, but later it was directly involved in the attack on President Amin’s palace in the first days of the war.

And the second battalion, despite claims that Central Asian and Muslim soldiers had been withdrawn, served in the very dangerous Panjshir Valley through 1982. [7, p.4]

The history of using the Muslim soldiers in the Soviet Union is ambiguous. On the one hand in some historical moments their participation and active assistance was necessary. On the other hand the authorities were afraid of raise of Islamic and nationalistic sentiments. In 70-es and 80-ies, as we know, the situation became more complicated, as the number of Muslims comparing to Slavonic population increased, and the authorities had to do something with it.

However, in spite of the Soviet Muslim soldiers proven themselves well, first of all identifying themselves as Soviet soldiers, the officials preferred to limit their presence on the higher military positions. Generally, such a delicate issue as involvement of soldiers whose specific identity considerably determines their perception of reality, regulates the everyday life and keeps them within certain frames is very interesting topic and it requires a detailed research.

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