

Islam in Dagestan Under Gorbachev

MARIE BROXUP

On 4 February 1989 TASS reported that following Friday prayers an unauthorised assembly in Tashkent by some 200 Muslim believers from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, had demanded the resignation of the chairman of the Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan, Mufti Shamsuddin Baba Khan. Three days later TASS confirmed the resignation of the mufti and the nomination of Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf as acting chairman of the Board pending formal elections.¹ On 14 March 1989 he was formally elected mufti. Some 2,000 Islamic students crowded the streets and the rooftops of Tashkent to greet their new leader, chanting slogans and waving banners proclaiming 'Islam is the only true way'. The new mufti was acclaimed by 400 imams and mullahs from all over the Soviet Union with a cry of *Allah-u Akbar* (God is great).² The solemnity of the occasion was further marked by the return of the seventh century Quran of Caliph Osman, one of the holiest of Muslim relics, by the Uzbek government. The prompt acquiescence of Moscow to the resignation of Shamsuddin Babakhanov, brought about by popular demand, and the orderly election of the new young mufti without, it would seem, administrative edict from above, are on the face of it a credit to *glasnost*' and testify to a new approach to Muslim affairs in the USSR. However, these events took place in Tashkent — an important regional capital frequently visited by foreigners from the Muslim world and the West, and in full view of the foreign media, considerations which no doubt contributed to a satisfactory handling of the crisis for the believers. The case of remote Dagestan, where similar developments took place three months later, is an altogether different story.

¹On the demonstrations see *Komsomolets Uzbekistana*, 10 February 1989, *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 15 February 1989 and *Moskovskoye novosti* 19 February 1989.

²See an account of the ceremony in the *Financial Times*, 17 March 1989, SWB SU/0410 i, (16 March 1989), and *Central Asia and Caucasus Chronicle* Vol. 8 No. 2, (May 1989).

Dismissal of the Mufti of the North Caucasus and Dagestan

First notice that events were on the move in Dagestan reached the West accidentally when a foreign visitor brought back a copy of *Dagestanskaya pravda*³ (9 July 1989), which carried an article entitled 'So What is Happening?' signed by K. Magomedov, a pen name for a man claiming to be the son of a mullah. The article began, predictably, by claiming that the newspaper had received many letters from readers complaining about believers who gather illegally in the main square of the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala, to perform collective prayers (*zikr*), thus disrupting traffic and creating an unhealthy atmosphere in the city. Further it revealed that towards the middle of May 1989 an unauthorised 'conference of believers' had gathered in the official mosque of Buinaksk and taken the decision to dismiss Mufti Mahmud Gekkiev. The members of the assembly then proceeded to Makhachkala on 15 May where together with some 2,000 believers they held a demonstration in Lenin Square opposite the government headquarters. The demonstrators — an 'incensed crowd' according to *Dagestanskaya pravda* — besieged and stormed the seat of the religious board, arrested the secretary, the accountant, and the mufti whom they intended to put on trial forthwith on charges of immorality and corruption. (According to independent sources the demonstrators accused Gekkiev and the staff of the religious board of being KGB agents.) Only the timely arrival of a detachment of the militia saved the mufti from this ordeal. The demonstrators also demanded that land be allocated to build a new cathedral mosque in the capital, that Arabic should be taught in schools as a foreign language, and that corruption among Soviet officials should be stopped.

According to independent witnesses the demonstration lasted all day. The demonstrators, who included representatives from the neighbouring republics and nationalities (Chechens, Ingush, Adyghes, Kabards and Ossetians), demanded talks with government representatives and officials of the Council for Religious Affairs. They were told by the local authorities that they had to wait for two or three days for the arrival of officials from Moscow, to which they replied that they wanted an immediate decision as they had already been waiting for sixty years. They were confident of their strength as they had the support of the mountain population — traditionally the political and religious heart of the country — and threatened the authorities with 'unpleasantness' unless Gekkiev was dismissed immediately. The believers were disciplined and well organised. They had brought

³ *Dagestanskaya pravda* is difficult to obtain outside Dagestan and only occasionally reaches the West.

newspapers to use as prayer rugs, and water and cakes which they distributed to the women and children present, although many of the Sufis among them were fasting as this was the first day of the holy month of Moharrem. They also had loud speakers. They sat on the ground, shoulder to shoulder, reciting religious poetry in the Arabic, Avar, Dagin and Kumyk languages. One of the recurrent slogans was 'War on the repression of the North Caucasian peoples'. The *zikh* referred to by *Dagestanskaya pravda* was performed at 1pm during which time the believers were surrounded by the crowd, including many women and children, who protected them from the intervention of the militia. It was after this, according to our informants, that the atmosphere deteriorated, when government officials accused the believers of behaving like 'hooligans'.

The believers won the day although there was no formal announcement of Mufti Gekkiev's resignation as in the case of Babakhanov. Some of their demands were deemed 'reasonable' and they were allocated land to build the cathedral mosque in Makhachkala out of private funds. *Dagestanskaya pravda* reported that a council was formed by the leaders of the demonstration to oversee the future activity of the religious board. The assessment of these leaders by the newspaper owed little to *glasnost*'. They were accused of 'calling believers to actions aimed at breaking Soviet legislation'; it was hinted that they had no formal religious education and were unemployed — only one better than being called 'parasites' — although one of them, the 32-year-old Abbas Kebedov was a scientist.⁴ Kebedov, it was said, belonged to 'an extremely reactionary trend of Islam — Wahhabism' despite the fact that he himself had repeatedly denied it in public.⁵ The activity which contravenes Soviet legislation seems to amount simply, according to the newspaper, to travelling regularly around the republic to visit the mosques without the formal authority of the religious board, and holding unauthorised meetings.

Dagestanskaya pravda mentions further religious demonstrations, in particular in Kizil-Yurt on 22 June 1989 where believers gathered from Gubden, Paraul (Lenin district). Kadar (Buinaksk district) and Ulluaia (Levashi district). Some of these raions are renowned for a significant Sufi presence. The believers demanded to be given a piece of land to build a mosque — not any plot of land but precisely the place where the authorities had planned to build a 'palace of culture',

⁴The other instigators of the demonstration named by *Dagestanskaya pravda* were Z. Alibekov, D. Gebekov, D. Maksudov and Abbas Kebedov's brother Bagautdin Magomedov. Alibekov was also accused of using threats against government officials.

⁵It is most unlikely that Wahhabi trends should appear in Dagestan which has an extremely strong Sufi tradition. The accusation of 'Wahhabism' is sometimes used in Soviet anti-Islamic literature to discredit religious activists.

a 'palace of weddings' and other government buildings. *Dagestanskaya pravda* claims that the previous day the *gorispolkom* of Kizil-Yurt had held a meeting in the presence of 138 believers during which it was decided to allocate land in the old section of the town for a mosque. This was obviously deemed unsatisfactory as the believers replied by threatening to call a 'general demonstration and to occupy Makhachkala'. The *gorispolkom* was obliged to give in.⁶ The newspaper also mentioned another religious demonstration in Makhachkala on 1 July 1989.

On 28 January 1990 *Izvestiya* reported that a two-day congress of North Caucasian Muslims in Makhachkala ended with the election of Bagaudin Isaev, the Kumyk imam of the Makhachkala city mosque, to the post of mufti, which had been vacant for the past six months. According to unofficial sources the congress appeared to have been fairly stormy. However, the election of Mufti Isaev did not bring the situation back to normal. On 10 March 1990 a sbylline notice in *Izvestiya* reported yet another 'mass meeting' of believers on the main square of Makhachkala, demanding that Bagaudin Isaev be declared mufti not only of Dagestan but of the whole Muslim Religious Board of the North Caucasus. By way of explanation *Izvestiya* wrote:

For several months groups of believers have been struggling for a high position in the Muslim Religious Board of the North Caucasus. Requests from the authorities to hold the Muslim congress on a democratic basis with the participation of representatives of the believers from the [other] republics of the North Caucasus, were ignored. As a result the religious associations from Chechnia-Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia withdrew from the Muslim Religious Board of the North Caucasus, and approached the Council for Religious Affairs with a demand to establish their own religious boards and *qaziat*. The Muslim Religious Board of the North Caucasus had practically ceased to function and the January congress of Makhachkala could not be considered as a regional one.

According to official representatives of the Council of Ministers of the Dagestani ASSR, this meeting is yet another attempt to involve the authorities in the disputes between the Muslim associations of the region. At the same time the meeting proves that believers understand that *perestroika* is impossible without a strict observance of Soviet as well as Shariat law.⁷

⁶Our independent sources reported that demonstrations were also taking place in Makhachkala at that time.

⁷Ali Kazikhanov, 'Miting musul'man', *Izvestiya*, 10 March 1990.

In attempting to unravel what is happening we need to look at the religious developments of recent years in Dagestan.

The Sufi Tariqat

Ever since the end of the 18th century and the first *jihad* led by the Naqshbandi Sheikh Mansur against the Russian advance in the North Caucasus, the religious and political life of Dagestan has been dominated by the Sufi *tariqat*, to the extent that in Russian historiography the *murid* movement is equated to resistance with Russian conquest.⁸ Until the late 1970s the consensus among Dagestani anti-religious experts was that Sufi *tariqat* survived only as unimportant 'splinter groups'.⁹ Since the advent of *glasnost*¹⁰ numerous articles have appeared in Dagestan testifying to the vitality of the Sufi brotherhoods, although the official assessment of the Sufis and of Islam in general remained unequivocally negative. In 1987, an article by Irshad Makatov of the Dagestani Branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences, gave a comprehensive description of the present day situation of muridism in Dagestan, which continues to attract a large section of believers.¹⁰ Makatov was the first anti-religious specialist to claim that Sufism in Dagestan was becoming politicised and could present a potential threat to Soviet administration. He introduced his article by stating that:

The system of muridism is based on the principle that its adepts must abandon their own will and become dumb, obedient, blind instruments in the hand of those who pretend to follow the rules of a sheikh. Over the last few years religious groups of murids have become more active and begun to meddle in public affairs which have nothing in common with the religious feelings of believers.

He stressed that

Murid groups are influenced by foreign propaganda... We must not forget that foreign intelligence centres are expecting murid

⁸ Sheikh Mansur Ushurma was a Chechen who united the Dagestanis and the Chechens in a struggle against Russian colonial encroachment. He was captured in 1791 in the fortress of Anapa. For an in-depth study of the Sufi *tariqat* in the North Caucasus, see: Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars, Sufism in the Soviet Union*, (C. Hurst & Co.: London, 1985), and Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quequejay, 'Muslim Religious Conservatism and Dissent in the USSR', *RCL*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 153-161.

⁹ See for instance: Kh. M. Khashaev, *Perezhitki shariata i vrednykh adatov*, (Makhachkala, 1963), p. 11.

¹⁰ Irshad Makatov, 'V ushcherb interesam obshchestva i lichnosti', *Sovetski Dagestan*, No. 6 (1987), pp. 37-44.

and other extremist religious organisations to create a political opposition in our country and to use it for their own anti-Soviet and anti-socialist aims.

Makatov mentions the following Sufi groups active in Dagestan:

1. the Qadiris, traditionally stronger in the Chechen-Ingush country. There are two branches: the followers of Kunta Haji (or the traditional Qadiri *tariqat*), and the followers of the Vis Haji *tariqat*. According to Makatov, Vis Haji 'was a model of a religious leader who had adapted religion to contemporary conditions'. The Vis Haji group was founded somewhere in Kazakhstan in the 1950s during the deportation of the Chechens by Vis Haji Zagiev. The Qadiris are active today in the districts of Khasa-Yurt, Kizil-Yurt, Kazbeg, Botlikh, Kizliar, and 'others'.

2. The Naqshbandis. There are three branches: the followers of Ali of Akusha, a Dargin sheikh arrested and probably executed in the 1930s. They are to be found in the Dargin country in the districts of Akusha and Levashi, and also in the industrial area of the coastline of Kaspiisk, Izberbash and Leninskii. The second group includes the followers of the Amay group founded in the 1920s by Sheikh Arsanukay Khidirlezov of the village of Gremenchuk, and a former follower of Uzun Haji.¹¹ Soviet sources generally described the Amay group as 'bandits'. Arsanukay Khidirlezov was one of the leaders of the anti-Soviet revolt of the Dagestanis which lasted from 1929 to 1936. He was killed in battle or arrested and executed. His brotherhood was reactivated in the 1950s.¹² Two former murids of Arsanukay Khidirlezov, Alautdin Temirbulatov and Beybulat Kaskuraev, were responsible for the re-emergence of the group. It was rediscovered by the Soviet authorities and the members were arrested, tried as 'murderers' and probably executed.¹³ The group was liquidated and reappeared again in the 1980s. Today the followers of the Amay group are located in the lowlands of northern and eastern Dagestan, the districts of Kizil-Yurt, Kaia-Kent, Buinaksk, and Makhachkala. The third group are the followers of Sheikh Hasan of Kakhib, an Avar sheikh. They are spread over the mountainous area of Avaristan — in the districts of Khunzakh, Tsumada, and Untsukul — and in the lowlands of northern Dagestan, in the districts of Kizil-Yurt and Sovetskii. Makatov does not list any Sufi groups in the south of Dagestan but according to other authors there are murids

¹¹ Usun Haji, a Chechen Naqshbandi sheikh fought and repulsed Denikin's White force during the offensive of the summer and autumn 1919. He proclaimed Chechnia and north western Dagestan to be a 'North Caucasian Emirate'. He died in May 1920.

¹² On Arsanukay Khidirlezov, see A. V. Aksent'ev, *Islam na Kavkaze*, (Stavropol', 1973), p. 100.

¹³ See Irshad Makatov, *Religioznye gruppy Amaia i Kunta Khadzhi*, (Makhachkala, 1982), p. 24.

groups in the following districts: Gumbetov, Baba-Yurt, Charoda, Akhty, Derbent, and Tabasaran in the extreme southern part of the republic.¹⁴ Furthermore the Naqshbandiya is present in all the mountainous districts of Avaristan.

A most interesting fact highlighted by Makatov's description is that Sufi groups are spreading in the lowlands of northern Dagestan and in the cities and industrial centres, in other words in territories where the Dagestanis are living in close contact with Russian colonies. Thus muridism has ceased to represent only rural, traditional Islam, and by moving to the cities has become more politicised. This supports what Makatov had remarked some years earlier in his book *Ateisty v nastuplenii* (Moscow, 1978) when he quoted a Dagestani mountaineer resettled in the lowland country in the district of Khasav-Yurt:

When we lived in the mountains, I never organised a religious meeting [*zikh*]. But here in the lowlands I have seen that all other nationalities have their own customs. On Sundays, and especially at Easter, Christian believers go to church. Having seen that, many Muslim immigrant families, including mine, began to observe our own Islamic festivals and rites.

Makatov also reveals that the character and activity of the Sufi groups are changing — the Naqshbandiya being once again the forefront.

Another author, G. Gadzhiev, confirms Makatov's assessment when he describes the modern believer in these terms:

The believer of today is not the same as he once was. He has become literate, he receives masses of information from newspapers and magazines, from television and radio. Some believers study not only religious, but also atheistic literature, and then force propagandists into a blind alley with questions which they themselves can answer better than any lecturer.¹⁵

The Holy Places

An article by Kurbanov in *Sovetski Dagestan* which attacks holy places as centres of obscurantism and fanaticism, gives interesting information on some new and previously unknown places of pilgrimage.¹⁶ It reveals an almost deliberate political choice in the selection of the new holy places — most commemorate the resistance of Dagestan against Russian and communist conquest. Singled out are

¹⁴ See M. S. Umankhanov, *Vospityvat' ubezhdennykh internatsionalistov*, (Makhachkala, 1982), p. 24.

¹⁵ G. Gadzhiev, 'Komu na ruku nasha lozh', *Sovetski Dagestan*, No. 2 (1988), pp. 16-18.

¹⁶ M. Kurbanov, 'Svyataya prostata', *Sovetski Dagestan*, No. 4 (1987).

Shamil's camp in the district of Untsukul; the tomb of a Turkish soldier killed during the Civil War in the village of Tsuda-Khan (Levashi district) and the mazar of the *aul* of Utamysh (Kaia-Kent district) where twenty Turkish 'invaders' are buried; the mazars of various 'fanatical counter-revolutionaries' who are honoured as saints, in particular: the newly built mazar in Khasav-Yurt of 'Saint Wahab Haji' executed for 'anti-social activity', and the mazar in the *aul* of Shtul (district of Karakh) of 'Hafi Ramazan who was executed in the 1930s for opposing the socialist transformation of the country'. Also significant is the fact that the tomb of Sheikh Mohāmmad of Balakhany whose mazar was destroyed by the authorities in 1964, remains a favourite place of pilgrimage. The Naqshbandi Sheikh Mohammed of Balakhany was the military commander of the last great uprising of Dagestan in 1920-21 led by Imam Najmuddin Gotsinski, which remains a 'blank spot' in Soviet historiography. The Sheikh directed the battle of Arakan during which a Red Army rifle regiment and an artillery division were surrounded and destroyed to the last man.

The Official View Before 1988

Perestroika in policy towards parallel Islam in Dagestan was slow to come. The November 1987 plenum of the Dagestan *obkom* of the CPSU emphasised the need to strengthen atheist work in the republic in accordance with *glasnost*' and *perestroika*. The plenum noted that the clergy was attempting to interfere in the social life of labour collectives, and expressed alarm at the fact that the ideological *aktiv* of the republic was insufficiently trained to carry out atheistic work.¹⁷

In February 1988, the secretary of the Daghestan ASSR *obkom*, P. Kurbanova Churlanova, gave an interview to *Nauka i religiya*¹⁸ on the new interest of the younger generation of Dagestani intellectuals in Islamic religion and culture. Churlanova considered the religious situation in Dagestan 'disturbing' and recognised a 'revival of Islamic influence'. This was in part due to an increased interest in the national culture, in the national liberation movements of the North Caucasian Mountaineers, and in the political developments in Middle Eastern countries. She commented that such an interest was not dangerous in itself, but 'what was dangerous was to mistake the role and place of Islam in past history and in the contemporary world, to attribute excessive merit to this religion which Islam does not deserve'.

¹⁷Gadzhiev, *op. cit.*

¹⁸P. Kurbanova Churlanova, 'Vpered bol'shaya rabota', *Nauka i religiya* No. 2 (1988), pp. 8-10.

Churlanova confirmed that there is an all prevailing interest in Islam in all layers of the society. To quote her:

Today, the level of religiosity is revealed by the attachment of the population to religious rites: we find members of the *komsomol*, communists and leading workers of party and soviet organisations who accept religious marriages and who bury their parents according to Islamic rituals. They explain their 'split ideology' by saying that their ancestors have observed these customs, and they cannot abandon them. Thus, the national and the religious are so tightly interwoven that it is difficult to separate them.

She believed, and rightly so as developments in the USSR's national republics are proving every day, that the observance of national customs are an obstacle to Soviet internationalism. In the particular case of Dagestan it means that 'religious zealots' oblige parents to educate their children according to Shariat law, forbidding them to join the pioneers and the *komsomol*; that young men are encouraged to escape military service; that mixed marriages are disapproved; that non-believers are forced to hide their views for fear of being persecuted by society; that in rural areas the word of a mullah or of a leader of a murid group has greater authority than the word of a party leader; and more specifically, that people are taking possession of collective farm lands with the encouragement of the unofficial religious authorities.

Until the beginning of 1988 the influence of Islam was viewed as 'nefarious'. Sufi leaders, past and present, were treated indiscriminately either as 'bandits', 'useless old fools', 'drunkards and debauchees', or 'traitors'. Makatov, for instance, invited the authorities to wage an uncompromising struggle against the Sufis and 'when educational measures are insufficient, to apply administrative measures and even criminal punishment'.¹⁹

The New Debate in the Press

In 1988 *Sovetski Dagestan*, the official journal of the obkom of the Dagestan ASSR, launched itself on the path of *glasnost*' featuring a series of interesting and refreshingly frank articles on important issues concerning the history of the North Caucasus, from the rehabilitation of Najmuddin Effendive Samurskii, the first leader of the Dagestani Communist Party executed in 1937 or 1938, to a reassessment of Shamil, and the role of Islam in Dagestan today. The debate on Islam

¹⁹Makatov, 'V ushcherb interesam obshchestva i lichnosti', *op. cit.*

was opened by M. Muslimov, a well-known local atheist propagandist.²⁰

In total contradiction to previous official writing, Muslimov explains the growing attraction of Islam by the contrast presented between the good moral stand of the believers and the corruption of party cadres. He is one of the first specialists to query the value of atheist science itself, rather than the shortcomings of propaganda and of the individual *agitpropchiks*. Furthermore, he questions the accuracy of the statements made by the Moscow media, in particular the revolutionary article by Igor Belyaev 'Islam i politika' (*Literaturnaya gazeta*, 13 and 20 May 1987) which for the first time revealed the existence of an Islamic infrastructure and claimed that there were 1,800 'parallel' mosques in the USSR. Referring to this number and to Kharchev's estimation that there were 751 active Muslim associations²¹, Muslimov writes that 'anyone familiar with the situation in the areas where Islam is implanted knows off-hand that the number of non-registered associations is larger and that their activity is at least as great as that of the registered ones'. In an outburst which shows a long restrained frustration, Muslimov asks:

Why have the so-called 'parallel' mosques appeared? Why can some believers satisfy their religious needs openly, officially, while others are obliged to do it secretly underground? How does this fit in with social justice and the observance of Soviet laws? And what is a person dealing with atheist work supposed to reply to these questions? We do not have any answers.

Another article by P. Magomedova in the same issue of *Sovetski Dagestan*²² takes up the same theme. The author ridicules the new Soviet rituals by showing that one of their unavoidable elements consists of obliging people 'to hang around' for hours on end. While this goes on 'religion is active, the religious figures carrying on with their work regularly and punctiliously'. Making a sarcastic comparison between the dedication of religious figures (*religiozniki*) and the pusillanimity of party cadres, Magomedova suggests that because of the great many unresolved economic and social problems, 'religion has the capability of conquering all customs and rituals, if not in essence at least in form', in other words all outward aspects of everyday social life. To appreciate this statement fully, it should be

²⁰ M. Muslimov, 'Esli byt' otkrovennym', *Sovetski Dagestan*, No. 4 (1988), pp. 26-30.

²¹ Estimates given by K. M. Kharchev, the former chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs of the Council of Ministers of USSR, in an interview with *Nauka i religiya*, No. 11 (1987).

²² P. Magomedova, 'Prishlos' po serdtsu — budet zhit' *Sovetski Dagestan*, No. 4 (1988), pp. 31-35.

remembered that since the early 1970s anti-Islamic propaganda has been focused specifically on eliminating religious rituals.

It is evident from Muslimov and Magomedova's writings that state-sponsored atheistic dogma and its supporting administration are in total disarray — Muslim believers are now confident enough to seek an open ideological confrontation with the official doctrine. Schools of scientific atheism have been unable to function since 1986 (according to Magomedova), and recent visitors to Dagestan have reported that 200 mosques are due to reopen officially before the end of 1990. Most importantly the debate reveals that in Dagestan unofficial religious leaders and Sufi *tariqat* have remained the true representatives of the 'people', and that their appeal is not merely religious but also has a populist vein. This is made clear by a remarkably outspoken 'confession' of a believer published by *Sovetski Dagestan* in 1989. In this testimony Tazhudin Aliev proclaims that 'today an honest mullah is better for society than a bad communist', and clearly explains the position:

If believers are going to have doubts about God, follow atheists and accept their ideas, then they will have to be convinced that the atheists' teachings are true and that their intentions are honourable. But what is the real situation? Some members of the party which personifies the honour and conscience of our system have not presented a model of honesty. People have found themselves in the claws of a bureaucratic apparatus, and have begun to turn away and escape from it. But what about party leaders? Haughty and swaggering, they deal with ordinary people only as a formality, for show. The favourite place of such leaders is the chairman's seat at meetings, plenary sessions and festivities. They surround themselves with people who are dependent on them, who agree with them about everything, sing their praises, ingratiate themselves with them and are afraid to speak the truth. Such leaders can condemn and persecute anyone they like. They have many privileges. Even when laying a wreath at some monument, they are always surrounded by the 'elite'. But what about ordinary people? They are somewhere at the back. Surely, Lenin, who was always in close contact with the peasants and workers, was not like this?

The people know that the leaders who preach atheism have an ingrained habit of profiteering, money-grabbing and corruption. Their words do not correspond with their deeds. The mullahs, of course, are not guiltless either and they have many defects of character, but these defects are not expressed so strongly and sharply as they are in the case of some leaders. The mullahs are

closer to the people and the believers. They are on the same level as other people, be they scholars or workers, rich or poor. They have a common language with everyone, they do not offend or frighten, they only teach and preach. This is why all believers are equal, nobody demonstrates their superiority, nobody ingratiates themselves or grovels. Almost all believers are open with each other, speak the truth whatever it is, and do not give bribes to the mullahs. That is the watershed! That is why believers are attracted to the mullahs, not to the party workers. That is why the mullahs have great authority.²³

Reappraisal of Shamil

Today most Soviet national republics are challenging Moscow's interpretation of their 'voluntary' union with Russia. The Mountain Republic which for a short time (1918-1920) united the nations of the North Caucasus, remains a closed subject to this day, as is the ferocious and heroic last stand resistance led by the Naqshbandis in Dagestan and Chechnia for nearly two years afterwards, when the Transcaucasian republics of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia had already fallen to the Soviets. Therefore nationalist energies are focused at present on the full rehabilitation of Shamil. The history of the Caucasian war, of North Caucasian muridism, and the personality of Shamil himself, have fascinated successive generations in Russia, and inspired resistance movements from Poland to Afghanistan. The treatment of Shamil during the Soviet period varied considerably — Frunze hailed him as a military genius and the leading Muslim figure of the last century, comparing him to the Algerian hero Abdel Qadir. Soviet authors writing in the early 1980s at the time of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, tried, on the other hand, to justify the Russian conquest by pretending that the heroism of Shamil was a 'myth', and that the Mountaineers were fighting under his leadership only to acquire booty, and not for the sake of freedom. Efforts to discredit Shamil in the last decade went as far as forbidding the representation of Tolstoy's *Haji Murat* by the Avar theatre, vilifying the Mountaineers as 'bloodthirsty bandits', and Shamil's family as 'monsters', 'apes' and so on.²⁴

The campaign to rehabilitate the liberation struggle led by Shamil began with a letter sent by a leading Dagestani poet, Osmar Gadzhi

²³Tazhudin Aliev, 'Ispoved' veruyushchego', *Sovetski Dagestan*, No. 3 (1989), pp. 26-27.

²⁴See 'The Debate on Shamil', *Central Asia and Caucasus Chronicle*, Vol. 8 No. 1, (1989).

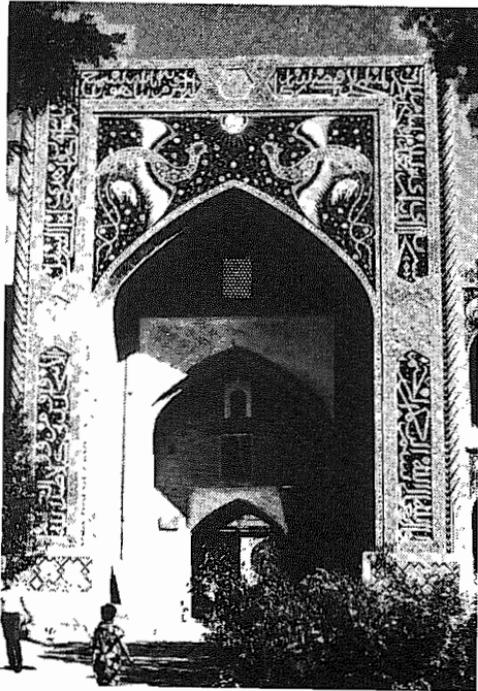
Shakhtamanov, to the Central Committee of the CPSU, demanding that past resolutions condemning the movement be revoked. The official reply and apology for past 'tendentious' attempts to misrepresent Shamil was entrusted to the Institute of History of the USSR Academy of Sciences, and published by *Sovetski Dagestan*, together with an article by A. Khalikov which is one of the most spirited vindications of Shamil to be published in the Soviet Union since the 1930s.²⁵ It was followed by an all-Union historical conference held in Makhachkala in June 1989, at the very time when the Dagestani capital was in the throes of religious demonstrations. The few reports which have reached the West show that the conference was a tumultuous triumph of pan-Caucasian solidarity, and that the continuity between Shamil's struggle and that of the Sufis demonstrating in the main square of the city was not lost on the intellectuals gathered at the conference.

Shamil's *Imamat* was a theocratic state, and Shamil himself was a Naqshbandi. Russian and Soviet authors, even those who have admired Shamil's courage and military genius, have usually downplayed the religious aspect of the *ghazawat*. Khalikov in his article comments that the *Imamat* was a strong and progressive government, that Shamil's interpretation of the Shariat law was 'creative' and humane. He praises him not only for the able administrator, fearless warrior, and talented commander that he was, but also for being a great religious scholar and Arabist, not forgetting to stress his pan-Caucasian character. For North Caucasians, the rehabilitation of Shamil implies a total vindication of the role of the Sufi *tariqat* in the past and present history of their nations.

Conclusions

Dagestan is a country which has over twenty indigenous ethnic-linguistic groups. In the past the only unity possible was around the Arabic language and Islam. Significantly, Dagestan is the only Caucasian republic which has not yet given birth to a serious national front movement. This is because today, as in the past, 'national' unity and political dissent can only be articulated with the collaboration and support of the *tariqat* and in the name of Islam. Similarly the only successful pan-Caucasian movements were led by the Sufi *tariqat*, from the first jihad of Sheikh Mansur to the uprising of 1920. Thus, developments in Islam — the main pan-Caucasian force in the region, have greater political implications in Dagestan than in the other Muslim regions of the USSR. Today, parallel to an upsurge of all

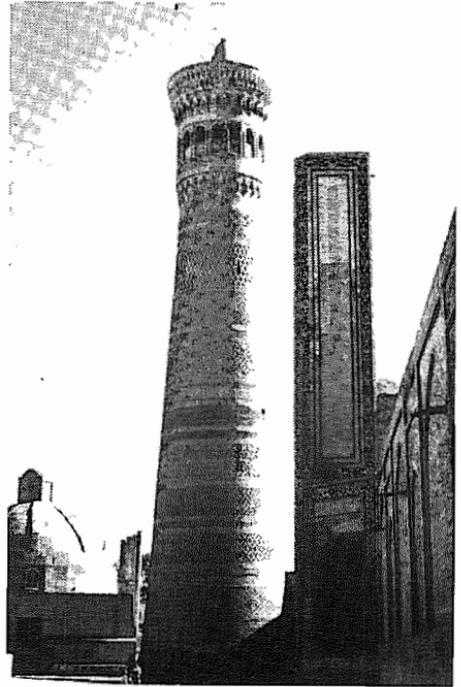
²⁵ A. Khalikov, 'Shamil v istorii pamyati naroda', *Sovetski Dagestan*, No. 55 (1988), pp. 31-137.



Disused madrasah in Bukhara.
(Photo © Keston College)

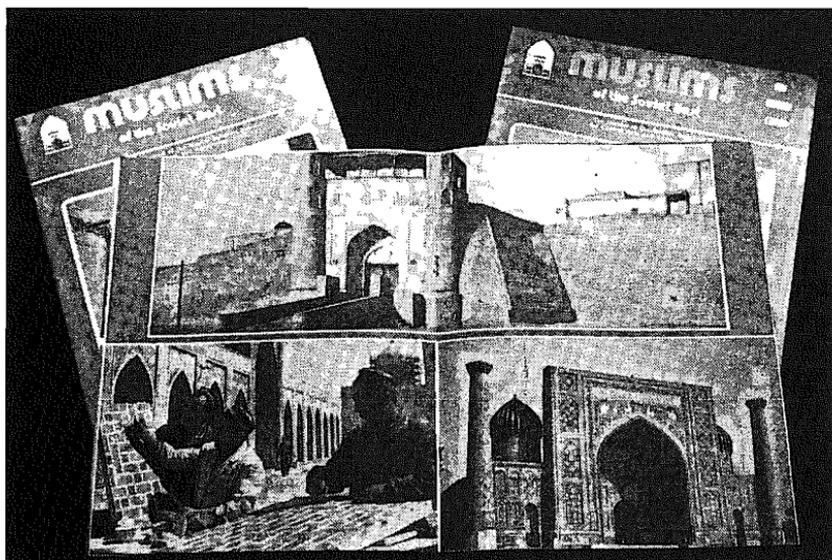


Tajik girl reading the Koran
(Photo courtesy of Keston College)

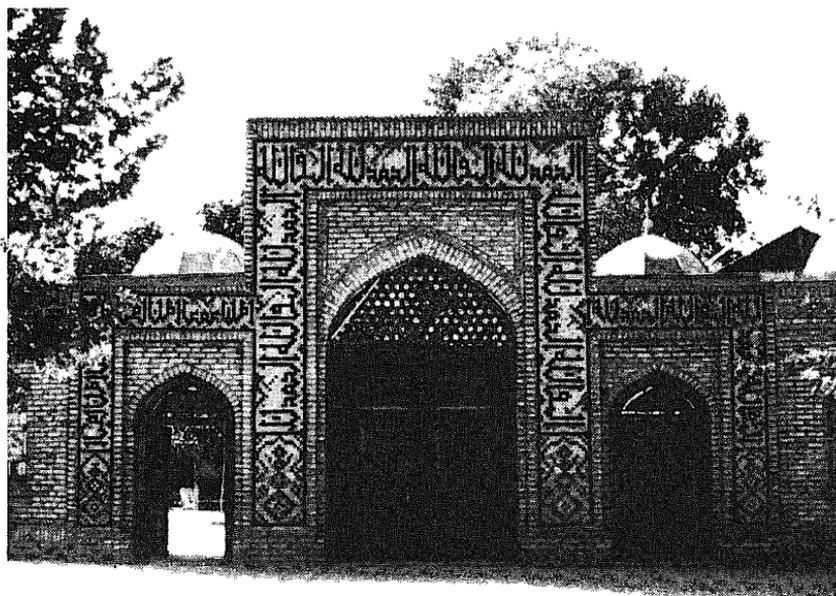


Kalyan minaret, Bukhara.
The Kalyan Mosque has recently been restored
and handed back to believers.
(Photo © Keston College)

Scenes from Central Asian Life



Publications of the Muslim Board of Central Asia and Kazakhstan.
(Photo © Keston College)



“Khodzha Zudmurad” mosque in Samarkand.
(Photo © Keston College)

regional nationalisms and centrifugal forces, one can already detect a trend towards a pan-Caucasian consensus, for example in the very practical agreement for long-term economic, scientific and cultural co-operation, signed by the *Gosplan* of four Muslim North Caucasian autonomous republics — Dagestan, Chechnia-Ingushetia, Kabardina-Balkaria, and North Ossetia. The object of the agreement is to integrate the economies of the four republics into a 'common market'.²⁶ Despite the disparities, the common history of these nations, epitomised in Shamil's struggle and their reverence for Islam and muridism, will provide a strong bond for future co-operation. Combined with the new effort at regional economic collaboration, a future confederation of the North Caucasus may be envisaged. But as long as Moscow is not prepared to give full political and economic independence to all the national republics, the spectre of a united stand by closely related nations remains threatening. The religious turmoil which Dagestan witnesses today will undoubtedly lead to articulated political revendications. It is therefore more than likely that the authorities are trying to manipulate the direction of the Muftiat, opposing one religious group against another, and isolating the Dagestani believers from their North Caucasian neighbours. This would explain the scarcity of the reports and their obscure nature.

²⁶See a short report on this agreement by A. Kazikhanov, 'Respubliki ob'edinyayut usiliya', *Izvestiya*, 20 February 1990.