

Editorial

There are already between 25 and 30 million Muslims in the Soviet Union, and this number is rising owing to a higher birthrate than that of the Russians. Islam is a faith, but it is also a way of life. Its customs, traditions and rituals are an integral part of Muslim society and culture. The term "non-Believing Muslims" is now sometimes used (see *Documents* p. 43). Some Muslims may not believe the claims of Islam, but nevertheless continue to observe Muslim customs : they will be circumcised, marry a Muslim, be buried according to the Islamic rite and despise Christians and Jews. But it is very hard to judge what beliefs lie behind a Muslim's national consciousness. Nationality and religious belief are closely allied : an Uzbek, a Tadjik or a Kirgiz will think of himself as a Muslim and observe religious rites because this is part of his national identity.

Resistance to Russification by Soviet Muslims is interpreted in the Soviet press as "nationalism", a centrifugal tendency feared and resented by the centralized Soviet polity. But the Central Asian republics are not making political demands for autonomy or representation abroad. Resistance to Russification is so far an expression of "national consciousness" and not of separatism. But this cultural resistance is very strong. Some Central Asian Muslims speak Russian perfectly, but many others appear to have learnt unwillingly and are scarcely able to carry on a conversation in Russian. Conversely, Russians going to Central Asia become more conscious of themselves as belonging to a Christian nation.

The Soviet attempt to break up the traditional Muslim clan structure has helped promote this national consciousness. With the settlement of nomadic Muslims and the collectivization of agriculture, the old patriarchal family structure was undermined. Instead of identifying themselves with a clan, Muslims began to see themselves as members of a nation. But the *elat*, a subdivision of the clan, continues to exist. The new Muslim *intelligent* is still much influenced by his family and has not, as a rule, matured into the post-revolutionary human type, the "new Soviet man". The educated élite of the pre-revolutionary era was mostly destroyed during the 1930s. The new intelligentsia is the product of the uniform Soviet educational system. Although the new Muslim *intelligent* generally outwardly accepts Marxism-Leninism, is proud of the modernization of his society, below the surface he maintains his traditional way of life, speaking his native language, observing religious customs, and feels that he belongs to the *Umma*, or Muslim community.

The official Muslim leadership, believing that the *Umma* can co-exist with Marxism-Leninism, has been trying in recent years to adapt Islamic religious practice to the requirements of life in Soviet society (see pp. 12-19). The Soviet government on the other hand has an ambivalent attitude towards Islam. Ideologically opposed to all forms of religion, the Communist Party nevertheless in practice tolerates from necessity the existence of organized religion in the Muslim areas as elsewhere. Two documents in this issue illustrate this ambivalence: one (pp. 42-43) demands more militant propaganda against Islam; the other (pp. 44-48) is a detached assessment of Muslim practices in a particular town. The Soviet government's policy towards Islam has swung between tolerance and suppression. In theory the Bolsheviks saw Islam as part of a capitalist superstructure which deflected the masses from creating the new society. But in practice, so as to gain the support of Muslims during the Civil War, they often adopted a lenient attitude. For example, in Turkestan, after regaining control, the Bolsheviks handed back mosques, restored *Sharyat* courts and re-opened religious schools. Between 1921-27 the government began preparing its attack. At first little was done to suppress Islam. The constitutions adopted in 1922-23 in Central Asia were tolerant of religion; the mullahs, unlike the Christian clergy, had electoral rights like other citizens; religious schools and courts of law continued to function. But in 1925 the government began to confiscate the *waqfs*, the Muslim property which provided material support for mullahs, mosques and other religious institutions. By 1927 the last Muslim schools had disbanded. With the adoption of the first five-year plan, the offensive against Islam gathered momentum: after 1928 Muslims were attacked as "counter-revolutionaries" and after 1935 as "spies in the pay of Japan and Hitler's Germany". The pilgrimage to Mecca was banned, the Ramadan Fast was attacked and a campaign for closing mosques was launched.

During the war years Muslims, like other religious denominations, were granted a period of respite. In 1941 an organizational structure was set up to administer Muslim religious life, and in 1952 one religious school for the training of clergy was re-opened – the Mir-i-Arab *medresseh* of Bukhara. According to an article in this issue, Islam is now experiencing a period of renewal: "not only has Islam survived but it appears to be undergoing a revival" (p. 18).

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