

# OBITUARY

Alexandre A. Bennigsen  
1913-1988

Alexandre Bennigsen, a long-time friend of Keston College and a strong supporter of this journal, died on 3 June at the age of 75, following a long illness. He was the preeminent authority on the Muslims of the Soviet Union and a universally recognised expert on Turkic Muslim history.

Bennigsen was born on 20 March 1913, in St Petersburg, of Baltic German parents. In 1920 the family left Russia for Turkey. From 1922-24 Bennigsen lived with his grandparents in Tallinn, capital of independent Estonia. In 1924, the entire family settled permanently in Paris.

During the Second World War, Alexandre Bennigsen fought first in the French cavalry and then in the French resistance. In 1940 he was awarded the Croix de Guerre for gallantry on the battlefield, and in 1945 the Médaille de la Résistance. In 1940 he married Helene von Binderling, whose father, Baron Peter von Binderling, had been executed by the Bolsheviks at Maikop in 1920. The Bennigsens have four children.

Bennigsen trained with some of the most distinguished authorities on Turkic and Persian studies, for example Louis Massignon, Henri Masse, Kamuran Bedirkhan and Louis Bazin. His professional life began as head of the Russian language documentation service of the Présidence du Conseil in Paris. There, with the help of Azamat Altay, who later pursued a distinguished career at Radio Liberty in Munich, he translated newspapers in Central Asian languages, which was his first systematic exposure to Central Asian studies. In the mid-fifties, Bennigsen was appointed to the VIth Section of the École de Pratique des Hautes Études, which later became the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, where he was awarded the personal Chair of History of Non-Arabic Islam.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Bennigsen travelled extensively throughout Central Asia and the Middle East collecting data for his research. In the early 1960s, he formed a partnership with

Mme Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, and the two scholars rapidly produced some of the most important books on recent Central Asian history. Four books are of particular importance: *Les Mouvements nationaux chez les musulmans de Russie*, in 1960; *The Evaluation of the Muslim Nationalities of the USSR and their Linguistic Problems*, in 1960; *La Presse et le mouvement national chez les musulmans de Russie avant 1920*, in 1964; and *Islam in the Soviet Union*, in 1967.

In the 1960s Bennigsen devoted his energies to teaching his famous "groupe Turc" in Paris and to researching in Turkish archives. In the 1970s, he taught at Rochester University before settling for eleven years at the University of Chicago. At Chicago, he created his second "school" of scholars, whose special expertise is in Soviet nationality problems generally and the problems of Soviet Muslims in particular. He also conducted research and taught for significant periods at Florida University, the Kennan Institute in Washington, D.C., and the University of Wisconsin.

In his last decade, Bennigsen teamed with Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay to write the impressive *Le Khanat de Crimée dans les archives du Musée du Palais de Topkapi* (1978) and *Les Musulmans oubliés* (1981). He also wrote, with S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union* (1978), *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (1985); and *Muslims of the Soviet Empire* (1985); and, with his daughter, Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (1983). In addition to these major works, Bennigsen completed many specialised studies and articles. He spent his last years deep in research on Soviet Muslims and, particularly, the impact of the war in Afghanistan on Soviet Central Asia.

Bennigsen's last work, an article entitled *Islam Soviétique: Le détonateur caucasien* for the French magazine *Arabies*, was appropriate. He devoted a substantial effort to the study of North Caucasus throughout his life, and remained, almost literally to his last breath, convinced that, ultimately, the Soviet empire would founder here. Recently the Soviets themselves have revealed that they have had little success penetrating these mountainous regions; and in fact the authoritative Soviet newspaper *Literaturnaya gazeta* not long ago pointed to Bennigsen's work on the region as being of special importance. This represents a notable *volte face* for Soviet publications, which have unflinchingly vilified Bennigsen for nearly thirty years.

Bennigsen lived to see the beginning of the ethnic disintegration of the Soviet empire, an outcome he, as other experts like the late Hugh Seton-Watson, felt was inevitable. For years he challenged scholars and policymakers to show how and where the sovietisation of the

non-Russian lands of the USSR was sufficiently effective to prevent the kind of fragmentation one now sees from the Baltic states to Central Asia, even in the Siberian far north. They never could, Bennigsen insisted, because their basic assumptions about the permeability of most non-Russian cultures to Soviet pseudo-culture were hopelessly flawed. We now know just how correct his vision was. Beneath Bennigsen's profound learning was a sparkling intuition.

Alexandre Bennigsen will be remembered as a man of enormous intellectual power and imagination. His contribution to the creation of a modern discipline of Central Asian studies is second to none. These are legacies enough, and they will endure. Beneath them are the man's extraordinary human qualities, particularly his wonderful sense of humour. He leaves hundreds of respectful colleagues and adoring students and, of course, friends beyond number.

S. ENDERS WIMBUSH

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