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APPROACHES OF RUSSIAN ORIENTALISTS TOWARDS ISLAM

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Abstract

Russian Orientalism represents a unique trajectory in the broader history of Western engagement with Islam. Shaped by Russia's imperial expansion into Muslim-majority regions of the Caucasus, Volga-Ural, and Central Asia, Russian scholars developed critiques of Islam that were inseparable from state policy, Orthodox missionary activity, and later Marxist-Leninist ideology. This article examines the works of nine prominent Russian Orientalists from the 19th to late 20th centuries: Nikolai Il'minskii, Nikolai Ostroumov, Evgenii Beliaev, Liutsian Klimovich, Ignaty Krachkovsky, Valentin Ditiakin, Mikhail Reisner, Mikhail Tomara, and Gleb Snesev. It analyzes their contributions to Arabic, Persian, Turkic, and Islamic studies, with particular attention to missionary polemics, Marxist historical materialism, and ethnographic modernization theory. The study argues that Russian Orientalism functioned as both academic discipline and ideological apparatus, consistently reducing Islam to politics, economics, or culture while denying its self-understanding as revelation. The legacy of these critiques continues to influence post-Soviet scholarship and contemporary debates on religion, secularism, and state formation in Eurasia.

Key Words: Russian Orientalism, Islam, Soviet Marxism, Missionary Critique, Sharia, Qur'an, Central Asia, Red Orientalism, Historical Materialism, Ethnography

1.Introduction:

Orientalism, as a field of scholarly inquiry, emerged in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, but its Russian variant followed a distinct trajectory. Unlike British and French Orientalism, which was primarily oriented toward overseas colonies, Russian Orientalism emerged from direct contact with large Muslim populations within and adjacent to the empire's borders¹. From the conquest of Kazan in 1552 to the annexation of Central Asia in the 19th century, the Russian state confronted Islam as both a theological rival and a political-administrative problem.

Consequently, Russian Orientalists were rarely detached academics. They were missionaries, state officials, educators, and party ideologues whose scholarship served to define, classify, and ultimately transform Muslim societies under Russian and Soviet rule. Their critiques of Islam thus passed through three broad phases: Orthodox missionary polemics, Soviet Marxist materialism, and late Soviet ethnographic modernization theory.

Russian Orientalism refers to the scholarly, literary, and administrative engagement with Eastern societies by Russian academics, travelers, and imperial officials. Like Western Orientalism, it involved the production of knowledge about the “East” as culturally different, often represented as exotic, traditional, or underdeveloped. However, Russian Orientalism developed under a distinctive historical condition: Russia’s geographical and cultural position between Europe and Asia, which produced a dual imperial identity.

As Edward Said has argued, Orientalism functions as a discourse through which Western powers construct knowledge about Eastern societies in order to justify domination and control². In the Russian case, Orientalist knowledge similarly supported imperial expansion into Central Asia, the Caucasus, Crimea, Siberia, and the Volga-Ural Muslim regions. However, Russian intellectual discourse also contained a self-reflective dimension, as Russia itself was often perceived as partially “Eastern,” complicating its imperial ideology.

Russian Orientalism emerged more systematically during the eighteenth century under the reforms of Peter the Great, when the Russian Empire began expanding its political and cultural influence into Asia. The annexation of Muslim-majority and Asian regions created an administrative demand for experts in local languages, religions, and cultures³. Consequently, institutions specializing in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Mongolian, and Islamic studies were established to serve diplomatic, military, and governance needs.

According to Vera Tolz, Russian Oriental studies were closely integrated with state structures and imperial governance, as scholars frequently collaborated with military and administrative authorities in frontier regions⁴. This close relationship between knowledge production and state power made Russian Orientalism an essential component of imperial state-building.

A defining feature of Russian Orientalism was its ambiguous identity between Europe and Asia. While Western Europe often perceived Russia as semi-Asiatic, Russian intellectuals simultaneously viewed Asian societies as culturally “other” and also as part of Russia’s imperial space. This tension contributed to competing ideological interpretations of Russia’s civilizational identity. As Tolz further

notes, Russian self-definition depended heavily on constructing the East both as foreign and as internal to its imperial geography⁵.

Russian expansion into Asia was accompanied by systematic Orientalist practices, including the classification of ethnic groups, translation of Islamic texts, study of tribal structures, and regulation of religious institutions. These practices resemble what Edward Said describes as the relationship between knowledge and power, where scholarship becomes a tool of governance rather than neutral inquiry⁶. In a similar vein, Alexander Etkind describes Russian imperial expansion as a form of “internal colonization,” where contiguous territories were incorporated and governed through cultural and administrative control⁷.

Within this historical and intellectual framework, major Russian Orientalists such as Vasily Bartold, Sergei Oldenburg, Viktor Rosen, and Nikolai Przhevalsky contributed significantly to the development of Central Asian, Islamic, and Asian studies. While some of these scholars demonstrated genuine academic interest in Eastern civilizations, their works also functioned within broader imperial and ideological structures.

This article traces these shifts through nine representative scholars, analyzing their specific critiques, methods, and political contexts.

2. Major Russian Orientalists and Their Criticism of Islam

Orthodox Missionary Orientalism: (The Kazan School)

2.1 Nikolai Ivanovich Il'minskii (1822–1891)

Nikolai Ivanovich Il'minskii (1822–1891) was a Russian linguist, Turkologist, and Orthodox missionary scholar whose work played a foundational role in shaping nineteenth-century missionary Orientalism in the Russian Empire. Educated and later employed at the Kazan Theological Academy, Il'minskii developed a distinctive educational and linguistic program known as the “Il'minskii System,” which aimed at converting and integrating non-Russian Muslim populations, particularly Tatars, Chuvash, and other Volga-Ural groups, through native-language instruction combined with Orthodox Christian teaching⁸. Rather than producing a systematic theoretical treatise on Islam, his Orientalist contribution is reflected in his pedagogical writings, missionary reports, and translation projects commissioned by the Russian Orthodox Missionary Society, where he consistently emphasized the role of language in shaping religious identity⁹. Il'minskii argued that the dominance of Arabic in Islamic education and the madrasa system fostered rote memorization and intellectual rigidity, which in

his view limited critical thinking and scientific reasoning among Muslim communities¹⁰. His solution was not immediate coercion but gradual cultural transformation through the creation of Cyrillic-based alphabets for Turkic languages and the translation of Orthodox religious texts into local vernaculars, thereby weakening the authority of Islamic scholarly traditions while strengthening imperial cultural integration.¹¹ In this sense, Il'minskii's works functioned both as linguistic scholarship and as instruments of imperial policy, as his system was designed to produce loyal, Russified indigenous elites who could mediate between the Orthodox Church and Muslim populations. Modern scholarship interprets his approach as a form of "soft imperialism," in which education, language reform, and religious instruction collectively served the broader objectives of Russian state expansion and cultural assimilation in Muslim regions of the empire¹².

2.2 Nikolai Ostroumov (1846–1930)

Nikolai Petrovich Ostroumov (1846–1930) was a Russian Orientalist, ethnographer, and colonial administrator who played a significant role in shaping imperial knowledge about Muslim societies in Turkestan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Educated within the Russian academic system and later employed in administrative positions in Central Asia, Ostroumov combined scholarly activity with direct involvement in colonial governance, particularly in Tashkent, where he served as an inspector of native schools and editor of the *Turkestanskaya Tuzemnaya Gazeta*¹³.

The Critique: Ostroumov's central argument was that Islamic institutions were incompatible with modern statehood. In *Islam and the Foundations of Statehood* (1898).

His Orientalist work is primarily reflected in his ethnographic writings, administrative reports, and studies on Islamic institutions rather than in a single systematic theoretical book. In these writings, Ostroumov focused on the structure of Islamic legal and educational systems, particularly Sharia courts (qazi courts), waqf institutions, and traditional maktab schooling¹⁴. He argued that these institutions functioned as obstacles to modern state formation within the Russian Empire because they operated outside the centralized legal and administrative framework. In his analysis, Sharia law created a form of legal dualism that weakened imperial authority, while the waqf system was criticized for limiting economic productivity by removing resources from state control¹⁵. Similarly, he viewed traditional Islamic education as intellectually restrictive due to its reliance

on religious memorization and its exclusion of secular disciplines such as mathematics, geography, and the Russian language. For Ostroumov, Islam was therefore not only a religious tradition but a comprehensive socio-legal system that shaped governance, education, and economic life in Muslim societies. His works reflect a distinctly administrative form of Orientalism in which knowledge about Islam was closely linked to the practical objectives of colonial governance and the integration of Muslim populations into the Russian imperial system¹⁶.

2.3 Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold: A Famous Russian Orientalist

The study of Orientalism in Russia emerged as a major intellectual tradition during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Russian Orientalists made significant contributions to the study of Islamic civilization, Central Asia, Arabic and Persian literature, and Turkic societies. Among these scholars, Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold occupies a distinguished place due to his groundbreaking research on Central Asian and Islamic history.

Bartold's scholarship is considered foundational in the field of Oriental Studies because of his critical methodology, linguistic expertise, and extensive use of primary historical sources. Unlike many Western Orientalists whose studies were often linked with colonial agendas, Bartold approached Eastern civilizations from a broader historical and cultural perspective. His works continue to influence contemporary historians, researchers, and scholars of Islamic and Central Asian studies¹⁷.

Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold was born in 1869 in Saint Petersburg into a family of German origin. He received his education at the Faculty of Oriental Languages at Saint Petersburg University, where he specialized in Arabic, Persian, Turkic languages, and Islamic history.

During his academic training, Bartold developed a deep interest in the history and culture of Central Asia. His teachers encouraged rigorous philological and historical research, which later became the hallmark of his scholarly work. His linguistic proficiency enabled him to study original Arabic, Persian, and Turkic manuscripts, giving authenticity and depth to his research¹⁸.

Bartold is best known for his extensive work on the history of Central Asia. His most celebrated book, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, is regarded as one of the most authoritative works on pre-Mongol Central Asia. In this study, he analyzed the political structures, economic conditions, and cultural developments of the region before the Mongol invasions¹⁹.

His research provided valuable insights into the interaction between Islamic civilization and the Turkic world. He demonstrated how Central Asia functioned as a bridge connecting the Middle East, South Asia, and China²⁰.

Bartold made significant contributions to the study of Islamic civilization and Muslim political institutions. He viewed Islam not merely as a religion but as a comprehensive civilization that shaped intellectual, social, and political developments across Asia and beyond²¹.

His writings explored the expansion of Islam, the development of Muslim societies, and the role of Islamic scholarship in the medieval world. He emphasized the contributions of Muslim scholars in science, philosophy, literature, and administration.

Bartold's approach was particularly notable because he relied heavily on primary Islamic sources rather than secondary European interpretations. This gave his work greater historical credibility and scholarly value²².

Bartold is also considered one of the pioneers of Russian Turkology. He conducted extensive studies on Turkic languages, cultures, and political traditions. His research contributed significantly to understanding the historical identity of Turkic peoples and their role in world history²³.

His works remain essential references for scholars studying the history of Turkic civilizations, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus region²⁴.

One of the defining features of Bartold's scholarship was his methodological rigor. His research methodology included:

Critical analysis of historical sources, Comparative historical approach, Use of original Arabic, Persian, and Turkic manuscripts, Interdisciplinary analysis involving history, linguistics, and culture, Academic objectivity and analytical reasoning.²⁵

Bartold believed that historical research should be based on authentic documents rather than assumptions or ideological biases. His commitment to scholarly objectivity distinguished him from many contemporary Orientalists.²⁶

The tradition of Orientalism in Russia was often associated with imperial and political interests. However, Bartold transformed the field into a more academically grounded discipline. He emphasized the importance of understanding Eastern societies on their own historical and cultural terms.²⁷

His contributions greatly influenced Soviet Oriental Studies and inspired future generations of historians and researchers. Many Russian scholars who specialized in Islamic and Central Asian studies considered Bartold their intellectual mentor.

Moreover, his works gained international recognition and were translated into several European languages, increasing their influence beyond Russia.²⁸

Although Bartold's scholarship is highly respected, some critics argue that certain aspects of his work reflected the intellectual climate of the Russian Empire. A few scholars believe that his interpretations occasionally aligned with Russian geopolitical interests in Central Asia.²⁹

Nevertheless, these criticisms do not diminish his immense scholarly contributions. His careful use of primary sources, linguistic expertise, and comprehensive historical analysis continue to make his works indispensable in the field of Oriental Studies.³⁰

Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold remains one of the most influential Russian Orientalists in modern academic history. His pioneering research on Central Asia, Islamic civilization, and Turkic peoples established new standards in historical scholarship.³¹

Through his commitment to authenticity, critical inquiry, and interdisciplinary research, Bartold significantly advanced the field of Oriental Studies. His works continue to serve as essential references for students, researchers, and scholars at the postgraduate and doctoral levels.³²

3. Early Soviet Red Orientalism: (Marxist-Leninist Materialism)

The 1917 Revolution reoriented Orientalism from missionary to Marxist goals. The new Soviet state saw religion as "opium of the people" and Islam as a particularly dangerous feudal relic in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Institute of Oriental Studies became a center of "Red Orientalism"³³.

3.1 Yevgeny Primakov:

Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov was one of the most influential Soviet and Russian Orientalists of the twentieth century. Trained at the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, he specialized in Middle Eastern affairs, Arab politics, and international relations. Before becoming Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of Russia, Primakov established himself as a prominent scholar of the Arab world and served as Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences. His academic career combined Oriental scholarship with practical engagement in Middle Eastern politics, making him one of the leading Russian experts on Islam and the Arab region.³⁴

Primakov's Orientalist contribution is reflected in a number of influential works, particularly *Anatomy of the Middle East Conflict* (1979) and *Russia and the*

Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present (2009). In these works, he examined the historical development of Arab nationalism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the political transformation of Middle Eastern societies. Rather than treating Islam primarily as a theological system, Primakov analyzed it as a significant social and political force that shaped state formation, identity, and regional politics throughout the Middle East.³⁵

Unlike earlier missionary Orientalists such as Il'minskii and Ostroumov, Primakov did not regard Islam as an obstacle to civilization or modernization. His approach was largely geopolitical and historical. He argued that many political developments in the Middle East could not be understood without considering the cultural influence of Islam and the legacy of colonial intervention. At the same time, he maintained a secular analytical framework characteristic of Soviet academic traditions, interpreting religious movements in relation to social, political, and economic factors rather than divine revelation.³⁶

Primakov's scholarship contributed significantly to Russian understanding of the Arab and Islamic world. His works emphasized the importance of indigenous political dynamics and challenged simplistic Cold War interpretations that reduced Middle Eastern societies to mere arenas of superpower competition. Consequently, he occupies a distinctive place in the history of Russian Orientalism as a scholar who combined academic research, diplomatic experience, and regional expertise in the study of Islam and the contemporary Middle East.³⁷

3.2 Evgenii Beliaev (1895–1964)

Evgenii Aleksandrovich Beliaev was one of the leading Soviet Orientalists and historians of Islam whose scholarship was shaped by the principles of Marxist historical materialism.³⁸ Unlike the missionary Orientalists of the Tsarist era, Beliaev examined Islam through historical, social, and economic frameworks rather than through theological criticism. After receiving his training in Oriental Studies, he devoted his academic career to the study of Arab history, early Islam, and the Arab Caliphate.³⁹ His major works include *The Role of Meccan Trade Capital in the Origin of Islam* (1930), *Muslim Sectarianism* (1957), and *Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate in the Early Middle Ages* (1965), all of which sought to explain the emergence and development of Islam within its historical context.⁴⁰ Beliaev argued that Islam arose in response to changing socio-economic conditions in seventh-century Arabia and reflected broader transformations in trade, tribal organization, and political authority.⁴¹ Applying

the Marxist theory of historical materialism, he interpreted religious beliefs and institutions as products of material and social circumstances rather than divine revelation.⁴² Although many of his conclusions reflected the ideological environment of Soviet scholarship, his extensive use of Arabic historical sources and his detailed analysis of early Islamic society contributed significantly to the development of Soviet Oriental Studies and the academic study of Islam.⁴³

The Critique: Applying Marxist class analysis, Beliaev argued that Islam emerged from the specific socio-economic conditions of Meccan merchant society. The Qur'an's emphasis on trade, contracts, and charity was, for him, evidence that Muhammad articulated the ideology of the rising merchant bourgeoisie. Islam's claim to abolish tribal inequality was "a bourgeois illusion," Beliaev wrote, because the religion preserved slavery, private property, and patriarchal authority⁴⁴. Zakat was not genuine redistribution but a mechanism to stabilize class hierarchies. Thus, Islam was not revelation but ideology: a superstructure reflecting the material base of 7th-century Hijaz.

3.3 Liutsian Klimovich (1907–1989)

Liutsian Ivanovich Klimovich (1907–1989) was a prominent Soviet Orientalist, historian of religion, and specialist in Islamic studies whose scholarship reflected the official Marxist-Leninist approach to religion in the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ Educated within the Soviet academic tradition, Klimovich devoted much of his research to the history of Islam, the Qur'an, and Muslim societies in Central Asia and the broader Islamic world. Unlike the missionary Orientalists of the Tsarist period, he did not approach Islam from a Christian theological perspective; instead, he analyzed it as a historical and social phenomenon shaped by economic, political, and cultural forces.⁴⁶ His major works include *Islam* (1962), *The Book about the Qur'an* (1988), and several studies on the origins and development of Islamic institutions.⁴⁷ In these writings, Klimovich argued that Islam emerged within specific historical circumstances and evolved in response to changing social conditions. Applying the Marxist theory of historical materialism, he viewed religion as a product of material realities rather than divine revelation and interpreted Islamic doctrines through the lens of class relations, economic structures, and political authority.⁴⁸ Klimovich was particularly interested in the historical formation of the Qur'an and the development of Islamic law, which he examined using textual and historical analysis.⁴⁹ Although his interpretations were strongly influenced by Soviet ideological assumptions, his works became widely used in Soviet Oriental Studies and contributed significantly to academic

discussions on Islam, religious history, and Muslim societies. As a result, Klimovich occupies an important place in the history of Russian Orientalism as a scholar who combined Islamic studies with Marxist theories of religion and society.⁵⁰

The Critique: Klimovich rejected the historicity of Muhammad and the early dating of the Qur'an. In *The Contents of the Qur'an* (1928), he argued that the Qur'an was a composite text compiled in the 8th–9th centuries to legitimize the Abbasid feudal state. Muhammad was “a legendary figure constructed to unify Arab tribes under a new exploiting class”⁵¹. He depicted Islamic rituals as “reactionary superstition” that drugged the working masses and prevented class consciousness. During collectivization, Klimovich wrote pamphlets demanding the closure of mosques and unveiling campaigns. For Klimovich, Islam was not to be studied but eliminated.

3.4 Ignaty Krachkovsky (1883–1951)

Ignaty Yulianovich Krachkovsky (1883–1951) was one of the most distinguished Russian Orientalists and Arabists of the twentieth century, renowned for his contributions to Arabic studies, Islamic literature, and Qur'anic scholarship.⁵² A graduate and later professor of St. Petersburg University, Krachkovsky devoted his academic career to the study of classical Arabic texts and Islamic intellectual history. Unlike many earlier Russian Orientalists whose works were closely linked to missionary or colonial objectives, Krachkovsky approached Islam primarily as a cultural and historical civilization deserving rigorous scholarly investigation.⁵³ His most influential works include *Among Arabic Manuscripts* (1945), a memoir of his experiences with Arabic manuscripts and scholars, and his celebrated Russian translation of the Qur'an, published posthumously in 1963, which remains one of the most respected translations in Russian scholarship.⁵⁴ Through extensive engagement with Arabic sources, he emphasized the richness of Islamic literary and intellectual traditions and argued that the study of Islam should be grounded in philological accuracy and historical context rather than ideological assumptions.⁵⁵ Krachkovsky's methodology was based on textual criticism, manuscript analysis, and linguistic scholarship, enabling him to reconstruct the historical development of Arabic and Islamic literature.⁵⁶ Although he worked within the Soviet academic environment, his writings generally avoided overt ideological polemics and instead sought to promote a deeper understanding of Islamic civilization through primary sources. As a result, Krachkovsky occupies a unique position in Russian Orientalism as a scholar who

significantly advanced the academic study of Islam, Arabic literature, and Qur'anic studies through rigorous philological research.⁵⁷

The Critique: In his *Introduction to the Qur'an*, Krachkovsky treated the text exclusively as a 7th-century Arabic literary document reflecting the social conditions of the Hijaz. He analyzed its style, lexicon, and parallels with pre-Islamic poetry, but bracketed all claims of divine origin as “theological, not historical.” Post-Soviet Muslim publishers later added footnotes “Islamizing” his commentary because his original text implied the Qur'an was a human product of its environment⁵⁸. Thus, Krachkovsky's critique was methodological atheism: he did not polemicize like Klimovich, but his historicist method denied revelation by definition.

3.5 Valentin Ditiakin (1896–1956) & Mikhail Reisner (1868–1928)

Both Mikhail Reisner and Valentin Ditiakin approached Islam through the framework of Marxist historical materialism and rejected traditional religious explanations regarding its origin. Reisner argued that Islam emerged primarily as a response to the socio-economic conditions of seventh-century Arabia rather than as a divinely revealed religion. According to him, the rise of Islam reflected the interests of the emerging merchant class in Mecca, which required greater political unity and economic stability for the expansion of trade.⁵⁹ In his analysis, the Qur'an represented a social and ideological expression of contemporary material conditions rather than a transcendent revelation. Similarly, Ditiakin maintained that Islam developed within a specific historical context characterized by tribal conflicts, economic transformation, and changing social relations.⁶⁰ He interpreted Islamic doctrines and institutions as products of historical circumstances and class interests rather than divine intervention. Both scholars therefore viewed prophecy, revelation, and religious authority through a socio-economic lens, arguing that religious ideas are shaped by material realities and social structures.⁶¹ Their critique of Islam was not theological but ideological, seeking to explain the emergence and development of Islam through economic forces, class relations, and historical processes rather than through the concept of divine revelation.⁶²

Reisner's Critique: In *Ideologies of the East* (1927), Reisner argued Islam was the “ideology of an urban merchant society.” The Meccan elite needed a monotheistic legal code to secure trade routes, protect property, and unify markets. Islam's prohibitions on usury were “regulations of merchant capital,” not ethics.

Ditiakin's Critique: Conversely, in *The Origins of Islam* (1930), Ditiakin claimed Islam arose from "the crisis of Bedouin nomadic culture." As pastoralism collapsed, tribal chiefs invented monotheism to suppress blood feuds and consolidate early feudalism.

Synthesis: Both reduced Islam to economic determinism, denying any autonomous religious logic. Their debate illustrates Soviet Orientalism's internal contradictions: Islam was simultaneously bourgeois and feudal, depending on which class schema was applied.⁶³

3.6 Mikhail Tomara (1868–1936)

Mikhail Tomara was a Russian and early Soviet Orientalist whose work focused on the historical development of Islamic societies within the broader framework of imperial and post-imperial governance. His scholarship reflected the transitional phase of Russian Orientalism, in which classical philological traditions were increasingly combined with socio-political analysis of Muslim societies. Unlike missionary Orientalists of the nineteenth century, Tomara did not engage in theological critique of Islam; instead, he examined Islamic institutions as historically formed systems that interacted with political authority, legal structures, and social organization.⁶⁴ His writings, particularly his studies on Islamic governance and the administrative structure of Muslim regions under Russian influence, emphasized the role of Sharia, local customary law, and religious authority in shaping state-society relations. Tomara argued that Islamic legal and administrative systems could not be understood in isolation from the socio-economic environment in which they developed, and he interpreted them as adaptive mechanisms responding to historical conditions rather than fixed religious absolutes.⁶⁵ His approach was influenced by early Soviet historical methodology, which sought to analyze religion through material and structural factors rather than metaphysical explanations. Although less ideologically rigid than later Marxist Orientalists such as Beliaev and Klimovich, Tomara contributed to the gradual shift in Russian Orientalism from missionary discourse to socio-historical analysis of Islam and Muslim societies.⁶⁶

The Critique: In *The Economic Foundations of the Caliphate* (1931), Tomara argued that Islamic land law, kharaj taxation, and zakat were instruments of feudal control. Muhammad's Medinan state "tied the peasantry to the land" by sacralizing landlord-peasant relations. Islam prevented class struggle by promising heavenly reward instead of material redistribution. For Tomara, Sharia

was not divine law but “the legal code of early feudalism,” designed to pacify agricultural revolts. This critique aligned with Soviet collectivization: if Islam was feudal, then abolishing Islamic land practices was historically necessary.

4. Late Soviet Ethnographic Orientalism: Islam as “Cultural Survival”

By the 1950s, overt atheist propaganda declined, replaced by ethnographic fieldwork. Yet the goal remained modernization.

4.1 Gleb Snesarev (1910–1989)

Gleb Pavlovich Snesarev was a Soviet ethnographer and Orientalist whose research contributed to the anthropological study of Islam and Muslim societies in Central Asia. Working within the framework of Soviet ethnography, Snesarev focused on the lived religious practices of Muslim communities rather than theological or purely textual interpretations of Islam. His scholarship represents the late Soviet shift in Oriental studies toward field-based ethnographic research, where Islam was examined as a social and cultural system embedded in everyday life.⁶⁷ Instead of treating Islam as a monolithic doctrinal structure, Snesarev analyzed regional variations in religious practice, including rituals, folk Islam, shrine culture, and the interaction between Islamic norms and pre-Islamic traditions. His studies emphasized how Islamic beliefs were adapted and localized within specific cultural environments, particularly in Central Asia and the Volga region.⁶⁸ Snesarev’s works, including his ethnographic studies on Islamic rituals and popular religious practices, contributed to Soviet understandings of Islam as a dynamic and socially embedded phenomenon.⁶⁹ In contrast to earlier Marxist Orientalists who focused on the origins of Islam or its socio-economic foundations, Snesarev’s approach highlighted the persistence of religious tradition in everyday life and its integration into local cultural systems. His methodology combined participant observation, ethnographic description, and comparative cultural analysis, making his work significant for the development of Soviet Islamic ethnography.⁷⁰

Snesarev conducted decades of fieldwork in Khorezm, Uzbekistan. His *Relics of Pre-Islamic Beliefs and Rituals among the Uzbeks of Khorezm* (1969) became a model for Soviet ethnography of religion.

The Critique: Snesarev argued that Central Asian Islam was not “pure” monotheism but a syncretic mix of animism, shamanism, and Zoroastrian survivals. Veneration of saints, shrine pilgrimage, and rituals against the evil eye were classified as *perezhitki*, or “cultural survivals” of a primitive past. These

survivals, he wrote, “block the development of scientific worldview and socialist consciousness”⁷¹. Islam was thus doubly backward: its theology was feudal, and its practice was pre-feudal. The solution was not mosque closure but secular education and medical modernization to make survivals “wither away.”⁷²

5. Major Themes of Their Criticism

Methodological and Political Functions of Russian Critiques

The critiques of Islam developed by Russian Orientalists reveal several recurring intellectual themes that evolved across Tsarist and Soviet scholarly traditions. One of the central themes is the interpretation of Islam as a socio-economic product rather than a divinely revealed religion. Soviet Marxist scholars such as Mikhail Reisner and Evgenii Beliaev argued that Islam emerged within the commercial and tribal environment of seventh-century Arabia and reflected the material interests of emerging social groups, particularly merchant classes, rather than supernatural revelation.⁷⁴ Another important theme is the understanding of Islam as a comprehensive legal and political system. Scholars like Nikolai Ostroumov emphasized Islamic institutions such as Sharia law, qazi courts, and waqf structures as alternative systems of governance that often conflicted with centralized imperial authority.⁷⁵ A further recurring theme, particularly in missionary Orientalism associated with Il'minskii, is the portrayal of Islam as an obstacle to intellectual and educational modernization, where madrasa-based learning and reliance on classical Arabic texts were criticized for limiting critical thinking and scientific development.⁷⁶ Soviet Orientalists such as Klimovich and Ditiakin extended this critique by rejecting the concept of divine revelation altogether and interpreting prophecy and Qur'anic discourse as historical phenomena shaped by social and economic conditions.⁷⁷ In addition to these substantive critiques, Russian Orientalist scholarship also performed important methodological and political functions. Methodologically, Islam was reinterpreted through frameworks such as philology, ethnography, and historical materialism, which shifted the study of religion away from theology toward social-scientific analysis. Politically, this knowledge production was closely linked to imperial and later Soviet governance, as Orientalist scholarship provided tools for classifying, managing, and integrating Muslim populations within the state system.⁷⁸ Ethnographic scholars like Snesev and Tomara further contributed by analyzing Islam as a lived social system embedded in ritual practice and community organization, highlighting both its integrative social role and its potential as a structure of local autonomy.⁷⁹ Overall, across both imperial and Soviet phases,

Russian Orientalist discourse consistently linked the study of Islam with broader questions of governance, modernization, and imperial administration, thereby transforming religious knowledge into a tool of socio-political analysis.⁸⁰

Three patterns emerge across these scholars:

1.Instrumentalization:

Critiques of Islam served state goals. Il'minskii and Ostroumov wanted Orthodox assimilation; Beliaev and Klimovich wanted class revolution; Snesev wanted socialist modernity.

2.Reductionism:

Islam was consistently reduced to something else. For missionaries, it was spiritual error; for Marxists, economic superstructure; for ethnographers, cultural survival. Transcendent claims were systematically bracketed.

3.Regional Specificity:

Russian Orientalism focused heavily on Inner Eurasia Tatars, Bashkirs, Central Asians rather than Arab heartlands. This gave it empirical depth but also a colonial gaze: Islam was studied to govern Muslims inside the empire.

6. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

Post-Soviet Russia saw both a revival of Islamic studies and a continuation of secularist assumptions. Krachkovsky's Qur'an remains standard, but now with Muslim commentaries. Snesev's "survivals" framework still influences Russian anthropology. Meanwhile, Klimovich and Beliaev are rarely cited except as historical artifacts of Soviet atheism.

This history matters for three reasons:

1.Source Criticism:

Many 19th–20th century editions of Central Asian manuscripts were produced by these scholars. One must read them critically, aware of ideological framing.

2.Historiography:

Understanding how Islam was constructed as "backward" helps deconstruct both Orientalist and nationalist narratives today.

3.Method:

The shift from theology to sociology to ethnography in Russian Orientalism mirrors broader global trends in religious studies.

7. Conclusion

From Il'minskii's missionary schools to Snesev's ethnographic expeditions, Russian Orientalists produced a sustained, state-linked critique of Islam. Their work moved from Christian theological polemic to Marxist economic determinism to Soviet modernization theory. While their scholarship produced invaluable linguistic and archival resources, it consistently denied Islam's self-understanding as revelation, reducing it to politics, economics, or culture. Recognizing this genealogy is essential for contemporary researchers seeking to use Russian sources without reproducing their ideological premises. Future Islamic studies in Eurasia must engage these texts both as archives and as artifacts of a particular imperial and Soviet episteme.

In conclusion, Russian Orientalism presents a diverse but connected tradition in which Islam was studied and interpreted in different ways according to changing historical and political contexts. During the Tsarist period, scholars such as Il'minskii and Ostroumov viewed Islam mainly as a challenge to education, modernization, and imperial administration. In the Soviet period, Orientalists like Reisner, Beliaev, Klimovich, and Ditiakin explained Islam through Marxist ideas, focusing on social, economic, and class factors rather than religious belief or divine revelation. They tried to understand Islam as a product of historical conditions and material reality. At the same time, scholars such as Krachkovsky and Snesev contributed by studying Islamic texts and Muslim societies through philology and ethnography, which made the field more academic and research-based.

Overall, although their methods and opinions were different, most Russian Orientalists shared a common feature: they studied Islam within the framework of state interests and broader political contexts. Their work was not only academic but also linked with imperial and Soviet goals of understanding and managing Muslim populations. Therefore, Russian Orientalism shows how knowledge about Islam was shaped by both scholarly methods and political needs, making it an important part of Oriental studies history.

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