John Schoeberlein
History and Culture of the Islamic Peoples of the Former Soviet Union (Islamic Civilizations 125)
Syllabus for the course offered in Spring 2002
Harvard University
Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

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The Course

Themes in the history of cultural change, from prior to Russian expansion into Muslim lands until the post-Soviet period. The course encompasses territories falling under Russian dominion by the nineteenth century that are inhabited by peoples which are culturally more akin to Asia and the Islamic Middle East than to Europe: Central Asia, the Caucasus, and southern Russia. Themes include the background of Iranian, Turkic, and Islamic culture, problems of induced cultural change (Russification/Europeanization/modernization), social transformation under the establishment and dissolution of Russian rule and the Communist system, the institutionalization of national identities, and changing family and community organization.

Note: Intended primarily for graduates and advanced undergraduates; some background in the Near East and/or the Soviet Union desirable. Enrollment limited.

Islam and Russia’s “Orient”

The focus of this course may be defined roughly as Russia’s “Orient” — the intersection of the Islamic world and the Russian Empire/Soviet Union. Geographically, this is primarily Central Asia (the current republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), the Caucasus (often designated as the Transcaucasus — south of the Caucasus Mountains — and the Northern Caucasus within today’s “Russia Proper”), and Southern Russia. Political or geographic boundaries do not define a neat domain, however, because Islam ranges widely across Russia, and at the same time, Islam is not a fully adequate definition of what the “Orient” means. In thematic terms, the Soviet “Orient” might be defined as the “Otherness” encompassed by Russia on the south. As such, it constitutes a domain of cultural and political clash: between Russian Imperialism and Muslim resistance, between Soviet modernization and Islamic and other kinds of tradition, between political integration and cultural homogenization on the one hand and community integrity and alternative cultural universes on the other.

The Soviet “Orient” is doubly peripheral. The days when Central Asia was the center of the world largest empires — those of Chinggis Khan and Timur — are long past. Russia is peripheral and “Oriental” in the context of European Civilization as it has formed over recent
centuries, and this part of the former Russian Empire is at a further remove, as the “Oriental” periphery of Russia. Many of the Islamic regions of the Russian Empire were, in times past, integral to the Islamic world, but in recent centuries they have been peripheral in this context as well. This doubly peripheral status is epitomized by the world public’s stance regarding the recent wars in Tajikistan and Chechnya: Are they only Russia’s business? And do we even care much about Russia’s business?

As a periphery, this region has been seen as a relatively unimportant part of other wholes: the Soviet Union and the Islamic World. The importance of the region waxes in Western eyes when it threatens to disturb the surrounding world about which we care more: The Civil War in Tajikistan and the rise of Islamic opposition movements, the war in Chechnya, the war in Karabagh, and now — most prominently — with the America military in Afghanistan. One important consequence of this is that only sporadically has there been institutional support for the study of the region. When trouble arose in Tajikistan or Chechnya, there was almost no one who could explain it to the world. The war in Afghanistan has been followed by a blossoming of “instant expertise”, but is this more helpful or harmful? This course will take us into this “largely unknown territory” and hopefully bring us out with some relatively scarce knowledge.

At the same time that this region resembles in some ways an unknown abyss, it also shares much with the experience of other parts of the world. In the context of the Soviet “Orient”, we may examine many of the issues that are of most current concern for inquiring minds: The notion of the “Orient” and Otherness in the (post-)colonial world, Modernity and Modernization, Islam as a belief system and a social system, the role of women in tradition and anti-tradition, and so on. There is a particular advantage in exploring our central intellectual questions in a world about which we have only relatively weak preconceptions.

Requirements

Corresponding to the relatively unstudied character of the region, there is no established canon of essential knowledge. Our goal will be less to absorb a specified body of knowledge, than to develop the intellectual tools that will be of use in exploring this world. We will develop the basic factual knowledge that is necessary to address the important questions: What is the nature of Islamic tradition and civilization in this part of the world? What are the cultural strains from which it has emerged? What diversity does it encompass? How has it changed? What has been the role of domination in defining culture? What is the nature and role of community in cultural integrity and political integration? What are the cultural and social strains and counter-strains which define the Islamic culture of Russia/the Soviet Union? What has independence meant for these societies? What can we expect from the American intervention in this region? And what are the pitfalls that we face in our effort to comprehend this doubly Oriental Orient?

Class time will be a balance between exposition of information and concepts, and group exploration of what these things should mean to us as we explore the history and culture of the region. Thus, the conduct of the course hinges crucially on the students’ thought and group discussion.

The following are the requirements of the course:

1) Presentations: Each student will occasionally have specific responsibility for selected assigned readings and will offer her/his own creative responses to them.
2) **Participation:** Each student is expected to keep current on the readings and to make regular, constructive contributions to discussions.

3) **Short exam:** This will aim to ensure that students have basic, essential knowledge of the history, geography, and cultures of the region. The exam will be held in the week of March 11.

4) **Two short papers:** These will not be exhaustive studies, but rather thematic explorations. The aim should be to make use of the subject matter of the course to explore issues of import. Topics will be selected in consultation with the instructor. The first paper will be due on the week of April 5, and the second, on the last day of reading period (May 15).

**Readings**

The reading load will amount to about three articles or book chapters per week. All students will be expected to keep up with these readings. The beginning of the semester will include some introductory sessions, but subsequently, class will be conducted as a seminar, and students will be expected to participate actively in discussion of the weekly topic and to critically assess the readings. One student will have specific responsibility for each given reading, leading the discussion and raising salient issues. Copies of the readings will be distributed as photocopies. The specific topics and corresponding readings will be finalized taking into consideration the particular interests of the students in the course.

**Week of February 4**

**Introduction**

**Week of February 11**


Machleder, Joshua


New York: Open Society Institute/ EurasiaNet,

http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav012802.shtml

Allworth, Edward A.


Micallef, Roberta and Ingvar Svanberg

Freedman, Robert O.  

**Week of February 18**

**Formation of Peoples and History**

Golden, Peter  

Caroe, Olaf Kirkpatrick [Sir]  

Bacon, Elizabeth Emaline  

**Week of February 25**

**Understanding History —Russian Imperial Expansion**

Atkin, Muriel  

Wheeler, Geoffrey  

Bregel, Yuri  

**Week of March 4**

**Trends of History: Islamic history; Russian expansion; Origins of group concepts**

Bosworth, Clifford Edmund  
Slezkine, Yuri

Altstadt, Audrey L.

Atabaki, Touraj

*Week of March 11*

**Group Concepts Over Time — I**

Allworth, Edward

Rorlich, Azade-Ayşe

Bregel, Yuri

*Week of March 18*

**Group Concepts Over Time — II**

Baldauf, Ingeborg

Schoeberlein, John

Manz, Beatrice
Week of March 27 - Spring Break

Week of April 1

Islam, Politics and Identity under Soviet Government
Bennigsen, Alexandre, and S. Enders Wimbush
1985 Part 1 (pp. 1-44) in Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A guide. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University. NOTE: You needn’t focus on the section covering the pre-Soviet period.

Atkin, Muriel

Hetmanek, Allen

Tyson, David

Week of April 8

Post-Soviet Developments: “Transition”, Social Transformation, National Identity, Conflict
Smith, Graham, et al.

Roy, Olivier

Schoeberlein-Engel, John

Week of April 15

Social Politics of Language, Culture, Gender, and Minorities
Landau, Jacob M. and Barbara Kellner-Heinkele
Levin, Theodore

Tadjabkhsh, Shahrbanou

*Meskhetian Turks: Solutions and human security*

**Week of April 22**

*Visions of Society in Transformation: Marketization, Democratization, Islamization*

Ilkhamov, Alisher

Polat, Abdumannob

Mandel, Ruth

*Islamist mobilisation and regional security*

**Week of April 29**

*Security Challenges: Unrest, Drugs and Corruption, International Context*

Tishkov, Valery
1995 “‘Don’t kill me, I’m a Kyrgyz!’: An anthropological analysis of violence in the Osh ethnic conflict,” *Journal of peace research*, 32(2) 133-149.

Khamidov, Alisher

Goodhand, Jonathan
Olcott, Martha Brill

Ram, Harsha