

A Review of Alexandre Bennigsen's Studies on Central Asian Ethnic Groups

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ABSTRACT

French scholar Alexandre Bennigsen is hailed as an authority in the study of Muslim ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. His research on Central Asian ethnic groups has provided detailed and brilliant theoretical achievements and academic methods for the Western academic community. This article focuses on the research achievements of Bennigsen on the Central Asian ethnic groups, tracks the theoretical framework of his academic research, and based on this, provides a review of his research on the Central Asian ethnic groups. After decades of academic development, Ben's research on Central Asian ethnic groups has developed into an ethnology that integrates historical issues, social investigations, and religious issues. The study of Central Asian ethnic groups by Bennigsen still holds value for understanding the history of Soviet Muslim ethnic studies in Western academia.

Keywords: *Alexandre Bennigsen, Studies on Central Asian ethnic groups, Research review.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early stages of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Central Asian region was often the focus of Western scholars due to its unique geopolitical position and Turkic ancestry. The latter's research focused on issues such as Central Asian society, politics, and Turkism. As the Cold War progressed, the Soviet government's interest in the Middle East became increasingly evident, [1]^{pp.1-3} which also led Western academia to gradually pay attention to the role of the Soviet Islamic nation. French scholar Alexandre Bennigsen was one of the earliest researchers to focus on the Muslim ethnic group and its Islam in the Soviet Union. Bennigsen is known as "the greatest pioneer and scholar in the Islamic research community in Central Asia and Russia... He almost independently pioneered the field of Islamic research in Russia after 1945". [2]^{pp.i-ii}.

Looking back at Bennigsen's more than forty years of academic career, he devoted all his energy to research and creation, and has published over 200 works and articles. The research field of this

institute covers disciplines such as ethnology, religious studies, history, etc. His works are mostly written in French and English, such as *Les mouvements nationaux chez les musulmans de Russie, 1: Le 'sultangalievism' au Tatarstan*, *Les musulmans d'Oulie: L'islam En U.R.S.S. Aujourd'hui*, *Mystics and Commissioners: Sufficism in the Society Union*, *The Islamic Threat to the Society State*, and many other papers. Given that there is no comprehensive evaluation in the academic community on Ben's study of Central Asian ethnic groups, this article will provide a review of the study of these ethnic groups based on the publication time of the literature.

Referring to the publicly published works by Bennigsen, the study of Central Asian ethnic groups can be roughly divided into two themes: the study of Central Asian ethnic groups and the study of Slavonization of Central Asian ethnic groups. For the study of Central Asian ethnic groups, Bennigsen analyzed and discussed the family structure, language, and beliefs of Muslim ethnic groups in Central Asia of the Soviet Union; For the study of Slavification among Central Asian ethnic groups, Bennigsen delved into a series of Slavism policies since the tsarist Russian conquest of Central Asia and the Soviet administration of Central Asia, starting from a long-term historical

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perspective. These two interrelated research themes constitute Bennigsen's unique paradigm of Central Asian ethnic research.

2. ALEXANDRE BENNIGSEN'S STUDIES ON CENTRAL ASIAN ETHNIC GROUPS

Bennigsen's discourse on Central Asian ethnic groups has been appearing in newspapers since 1955, and his first detailed discussion of the situation of Central Asian ethnic groups appeared in his academic paper "La famille musulmane en Union Soviétique"[3]^{pp.83-108}. published in 1959. In the paper, Ben carefully analyzed and compared the structure and characteristics of Muslim families in Central Asia before the October Revolution and under the rule of the Soviet government. Before 1917, Muslims in Central Asia were mostly organized together as a large family, which was a typical patriarchal family consisting of parents, married sons, unmarried daughters, and grandchildren. The authority of fathers in the family was not to be challenged. Fathers would choose spouses for their children and take responsibility for the family's income; and women were in a lower position, which was reflected in phenomena such as wearing veils and strict gender segregation, and even in some families where polygamy occurs. In addition, the marriage system of clans in traditional Muslim societies also persisted. Due to Islamization, the conquest of tsarist Russia, and the settlement of nomads, some ethnic groups in Central Asia (such as the Karakalpak people in Fergana) no longer followed the traditional intermarriage system. However, Ben still summarized the intermarriage characteristics of some ethnic groups, such as Turkmens, Uzbeks, and Tajiks, who mainly practice intermarriage within clans or tribes (endogamy). In terms of traditional customs, Ben has listed the widely existing customs among Central Asian ethnic groups - betrothal gifts (kalym). Ben believes that with the conquest of Muslim society by tsarist Russia, most traditional customs gradually disappeared, leaving only customs such as kalym still present in the folk. [3]^{pp.83-90}. In summary, the Muslim society on the eve of the October Revolution basically maintained its clan and family structure and characteristics. During the Soviet era, although the Soviet government was committed to breaking down the clan and family structure of Muslim society in order to achieve the goal of ethnic integration, Muslim society also made "flexible" changes. Although the Soviet government broke the family

structure of Muslim society and made it lose its economic significance by implementing measures of rural socialization, this large family structure was then transferred to collective farms. For example, the Uzbekistan collective farm in 1950 basically included all members of a large family, and the family members were not affected in any way. In this way, this large family structure can legally exist in societies under Soviet rule. In terms of customs, although the custom of betrothal gifts was strictly prohibited by the Soviet government, Muslim people turned to giving them in a different form. For example, the male family would give gifts of equivalent value to the female family in the form of gifts. Although the Soviet government encouraged gender equality in Muslim families, most families in Central Asia still retained clearly defined patriarchal characteristics, even though they were no longer as absolute as before. [3]^{pp.82-108}. Overall, the Soviet government was committed to breaking the traditional family structure, tribal sense of belonging, and local characteristics of Muslim society, but did not achieve its goal of ethnic integration and coexistence. Instead, it deepened the awareness of ethnic groups among Muslim people. Obviously, although Muslim families in the Soviet Union tended towards Western style (Russian style) families, they did not truly Slavonize Muslim society.

In 1974, Bennigsen discussed the ethnic situation in Central Asia during the tsarist Russia era in his article "Muslims in Tsarist Russia, 1865-1917".[4]^{pp.46-48} In the article, Bennigsen analyzes the ruling policies of tsarist Russia towards the Muslim ethnic group from 1865 to 1917 to explain why many Muslim ethnic groups joined the Bolshevik Party to resist the tsarist Russia regime in 1917. With the establishment of Turkestan Governorate in 1867, its territories¹ became one of the colonies of the tsarist Russia Empire. This area was not only a supplier of cotton to tsarist Russia, but also a dumping ground for Russian industrial exports. Ben believes that the colonial policy implemented by the first Governor General of the Turkestan Governorate, Kaufman, could be compared to South Africa's apartheid policy. [4]^{p.46} Kaufman's policy prohibited local people from contacting non-local ethnic groups (including

1. This area is under the jurisdiction of the Governorate of Turkestan, consisting of the Seven River Oblast and the Syr River Oblast, roughly including the former Turkestan Oblast, Tashkent region, the land on the left bank of the Syr River occupied in 1866, and a portion of the territory south of Semipalatinsk Oblast.

Russians, Kazans, etc.) and prohibited all Orthodox missionary activities, which resulted in no cooperation between tsarist Russian officials and the local upper class. Kaufman intended to maintain the medieval stagnation of the region, preserving the oldest aspect of traditional Muslim society, in order to facilitate colonization of the region. But in the early 20th century, the failure of this plan could be seen. The tsarist Russian government did not have the ability to completely isolate such a vast Central Asian region. Modern and revolutionary ideas infiltrated from regions such as Kazan, Crimea, and Iran, and local resistance grew day by day. By the eve of the 1917 Revolution, the tsarist Russian government could only suppress the rebellion by force. Compared to the rule of the Governorate of Turkestan, tsarist Russia's policy of governing the Kazakh grasslands has changed. In the Kazakh grasslands under the rule of Catherine II, due to Russia's moderate cooperative policy, the upper class of the Kazakh grasslands were recruited into the military and civil affairs departments to serve the monarch, making local nobles loyal assistants to the tsarist Russian government. But this cooperative relationship came to an end around 1891, and Russians began to colonize the grasslands. It wasn't until around 1914 that nearly a million tsarist Russian immigrants occupied the richest land on the Kazakh grasslands, severely damaging the local economy and living conditions. In this way, the hostility of the local people towards the conquerors also grew day by day, and eventually a Kazakh tribal uprising occurred in 1916. [4]^{p.47}In addition to the colonial policy of the tsarist Russian government towards Central Asia, Ben believed that since the early 20th century, with the influx of modern ideas, local ethnic groups have been unable to make any concessions from the tsarist Russian government or temporary government. Although local people had individual freedom, they had not met the demands of collective ethnic groups. [4]^{p.48}Therefore, during the 1917 revolution, it can be said that the large-scale resistance of Central Asian ethnic groups against the tsarist Russian government and their joining of the Bolshevik Party were reasonable.

In 1981, Bennigsen conducted his first comprehensive and detailed study of the Muslim ethnic group in the Soviet Union, which focused on discussing various ethnic groups in Central Asia. This study mainly focuses on the work *Les Musulmans Oubliés: L'Islam En U.R.S.S. Aujourd'hui*, co-authored by Ben and Chantal LeMessier. [5]In the first part, the author

comprehensively discussed the ethnic movements that occurred in Muslim areas under the rule of tsarist Russia before the 1917 revolution by collecting data. Bennigsen divided ethnic movements into three categories and discussed them, including religious reform, cultural reform, and political reform. Regarding the religious reform, Ben mentioned the religious movements initiated by several Iranian Muslim theologians, including Shihabadin Mardjani² and Musa Bigiev³. The main theme of the religious reform they led was that Islam was not an obstacle to social development and opened up the path of reform in other fields such as language, culture, education, and political organization, this religious reform had a profound impact on the national movement. [5]^{p.32} For the cultural reform, Ben believed that the implementation of religious reform laid the foundation for the process of cultural reform. As many Muslim ethnic groups under the rule of tsarist Russia used a mixture of languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Kazan Tatar, creating new literary languages and making culture more easily accepted was the main content of the reform. In 1875, Tatar, Azerbaijani, and Kazakh languages were born with the efforts of numerous linguists and writers. Until 1917, Central Asian languages such as Uzbek, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz established their literary language status. But at the same time, new local languages can also bring potential crises, which may disrupt the language and even cultural unity of Muslim communities (Umma)⁴. Therefore, in 1880, a reform of the Pan Turkic literary language was carried out, which aimed to create a Pan Turkic literary language that could be understood by all Turkic ethnic groups under the rule of tsarist Russia. In this cultural reform, Crimean Tatar intellectual Ismail bey Gasprinsky⁵ made significant contributions. Under the efforts of a group of reformers led by Gasprinsky, the cultural level of Russian Muslims has significantly improved, laying

2. Sihabedin Markani (1818-1899) was one of the earliest Muslim scholars in the Russian Empire to conceptually address the academic challenges of the Russian Empire.

3. Musa Bijiyyev (1975-1949) was a Tatar theologian, philosopher, politician, and one of the leaders of the Jaidid movement.

4. Umma, in a narrow sense, refers to religious groups, also known as Islamic communities; Broadly speaking, it refers to political groups, including other religious organizations under Muslim rule.

5. Ismail bey Gasprinsky (1851-1914) was a Crimean Tatar intellectual, educator, publisher, and pan Turkic politician who inspired the Jaidid movement in Central Asia. He was one of the first Muslim intellectuals of the Russian Empire, and he realized the need for education and cultural reform as well as modernization in the Turkic and Islamic communities.

the foundation for subsequent political reforms. [5]^{pp.31-35} For political reform, Ben believed that the Muslim ethnic group in Russia has a common foundation, namely religion and ethnicity (Islam and Turkic ancestry), and even some non-Turkic Muslim ethnic groups (such as Tajiks) were deeply influenced by Turkicization. After the successful cultural reform, Russian Muslims began to seek ways to have equal rights with Russians, during the Russo Japanese War in 1905, (Русско-Японская война) the disastrous defeat in the Middle East also aroused the resistance and confidence of the Muslim community conquered by Russia. In 1905, the Muslim political movement first appeared in Russia. Ben listed several local political movements in Central Asia and the Caucasus, such as the "Alash Autonomy"⁶ established on the Kazakh grasslands. [5]^{pp.35-42} In the second and third parts, Bennigsen analyzed the Muslim Socialist Republic, Autonomous Republic, and Muslim Autonomous Region within the Soviet Union in sequence. He took multiple aspects such as geographical location, administrative structure, main ethnic groups, number of people, language, and national identity as entry points, and provided a detailed introduction and analysis of the Muslim ethnic group in the Soviet Union. It is worth mentioning that Ben's analysis and discourse on Central Asian ethnic groups focused on the similarities and differences among socialist republics before the 1979 Soviet census.

3. ALEXANDRE BENNIGSEN'S STUDIES ON SLAVONIZATION OF CENTRAL ASIAN ETHNIC GROUPS

Bennigsen's Slavonization research on Central Asian ethnic groups began in the early stages of his academic creation. In his 1955 article "Russes et Musulmans en Asie Centrale", Bennigsen mentioned the Soviet government's immigration policy towards Central Asia. Ben believed that in the view of the Soviet government, there were three reasons for implementing this policy: firstly, communist theory advocated for racial equality among all ethnic groups within the federation and the necessity of racial integration; Secondly, at the cultural level, Russians and other ethnic groups are equal, and culture will gradually form a fusion in

the process of communication; Thirdly, at the political level, the integration of the two ethnic groups is a united front of the proletariat, not colonization. [6]^{p.2} Ben emphasized that although the Soviet government interpreted immigration policies under the discourse of ethnic equality, it never denied the absolute superiority of Russian culture over Muslim culture in Central Asia. Later, Ben discovered that the Central Asian people's response to this immigration policy was a firm desire to maintain their racial integrity and refuse to "integrate" with Russians. [6]^{p.2} In the immigrant areas of Central Asia, although locals and Russians lives together, their lifestyles were completely opposite, such as Russian urbanization residences and local villages coexisting on the streets. However, local people did not actively learn or eliminate the emerging technologies brought by Russian immigrants, which also led to significant differences in the division of labor in local society: most Russian professions were railway workers, drivers and other salaried professions, while local professions were mostly cleaners, porters and other professions. Even if a portion of the local people in Central Asia reach the upper echelons (such as state officials, scholars, and intellectuals), this is insignificant in terms of quantity and cannot be called "ethnic symbiosis". [6]^{p.3} Obviously, in Ben's view, the Soviet government's implementation of the so-called "ethnic symbiosis" policy towards Muslims within its borders did not achieve the expected results. This theoretical viewpoint also appeared in Ben's article published in 1969.

In January 1969, Bennigsen published "Colonization and Decolonization in the Soviet Union". [8]^{pp.141-151} In this article, Ben discussed the management policies of tsarist Russia and the Soviet government towards Muslims within their borders. He believed that the Turkestan Governor General's Area established by tsarist Russia in Central Asia was a typical colonial case, and the tsarist government did not attempt to "educate" the locals, but rather extracted the only local wealth — cotton. Compared to tsarist Russia, although the Soviet government's policy towards Central Asia was based on "breaking the inequality between Russians and non-Russians," in fact, the Russians were still the dominant ethnic group. This is reflected in: (1) a large influx of Russians into Muslim residential areas, leading to Muslims gradually becoming a "minority" in the area; (2) In government institutions, the main positions still belong to Russians, and the military forces stationed in the Muslim Republic are almost

6. Alash Autonomous, also known as Alash Orda, was the interim government of Kazakhstan. The Alash Autonomous Organization was founded by Kazakh elites in 1917 and disbanded after the Bolsheviks abolished the ruling Alash Party.

entirely controlled by Russian officers; (3) Due to occupational division of labor, communication between Russians living in Central Asia and locals is very limited, and there is still a colonial style ethnic separation between towns (mainly Russians) and villages (mainly locals); (4) The local religious customs and way of life hinder the infiltration of Russian culture. These situations also led to a certain degree of resistance and resentment among local Muslims towards the Russians, but Ben believed that this sentiment could not be directly explained as a "colonized" attitude, as Soviet Muslims received material benefits equivalent to those of the Russians. These resentful emotions were more reflected in the desire to reduce the immigration of Russians and the refusal to transfer administrative powers of the Muslim Republic to Russians or non-locals. [8]^{pp.148-151}

Besides, in the article "The Russification of the Tadjik language" [7]^{pp.25-33} published in 1958, Bennigsen analyzed the degree of Russification of Tajik language in Central Asia based on Tajik language publications and dictionaries published during the Soviet era. The Soviet authorities intended to achieve the gradual Slavonization of Central Asian ethnic cultures through the Russianization of various languages in Central Asia, and the implementation of this policy also led to the basic Russianization of Tajik language. These are reflected in: firstly, since 1940, the official language of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic has been written in Cyrillic script; Secondly, in Tajik language dictionaries, new words related to disciplines such as political science, economics, and military are heavily borrowed from Russian vocabulary, while some old words expressed in Arabic and Tajik are deleted or replaced with Russian. Although some ethnic elites resisted the infiltration of Russian into the local language, the Soviet government successfully defeated this resistance and achieved the goal of Russification. [7]^{pp.27-30} Bennigsen expressed a pessimistic view on this language reform plan, as he said: [7]^{p.32} "The desperate resistance of the Tadjik nationalists to the degradation of their language proves more than any speculation the political extent of a plan of russification which has only a theoretical linguistic significance." Obviously, in Ben's view, this reform of the national language is not a natural or spontaneous phenomenon, but an administrative measure.

Bennigsen also analyzed a series of anti-Central Asian ethnic epic movements implemented by the Soviet government during the Soviet era, as well as

the resistance of Central Asian ethnic intellectuals against this movement, using the Soviet Muslim ethnic epic as a starting point. This argument is reflected in Ben's article published in 1975, "The Crisis of the Turkish National Epics, 1951-1952: Local Nationalism or In Nationalism?" [9]^{pp.463-474} The Muslim ethnic groups in the Soviet Union (including various ethnic groups in Central Asia and the Caucasus) have many cultural heritages, and the national epic is one of them. Most Muslim intellectual elites in the Soviet Union believed that these cultural heritages were "progressive," but the Soviet authorities opposed them and regarded them as "feudal" or "bourgeois nationalist.". The author discussed numerous examples of Soviet authorities opposing national epics through the organization and analysis of official Soviet literature and newspapers in the article. For example, from 1951 to 1952, the Soviet government mainly criticized the epic "Dastan"⁷, and the Soviet Union referred to this epic as an obstacle to building socialism; In August 1951, the Soviet government condemned the Turkmen epic "Korkut Ata"⁸ as a poem promoting religious fanaticism, and referred to the people who praised this epic (mostly local Turkmen writers) as bourgeois nationalists. Subsequently, there was strong opposition from local knowledge elites in Turkmenistan, including senior party members who refused to accept new official explanations. However, in January 1952, this rebellion was "resolved", and intellectuals who supported "Korkut Ata" were condemned by the government and were likely to be purged. Subsequently, in 1952, the Soviet authorities shifted their main criticism to the Uzbek epic "Alpamysh"⁹, calling it the poison of feudalism and reactionism, and condemning those who defended "Alpamysh" as "pan Turkic nationalists". Other epics that have also been criticized by the Soviet authorities include the Kazakh national epic "Kobrandy battyr"¹⁰ and the Kyrgyz national epic

7. "Dastan" is an epic in the form of gorgeous oral history originating from Central Asia, Iran, Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Dastan's themes typically revolve around an individual who protects his tribe or people from foreign invaders or enemies.

8. "Korkut Ata" is the most famous epic of the Ughuzian Turks (mainly Turkmenistan, Türkiye and Azerbaijan). These stories contain important morality and values in the life of nomadic Turks.

9. "Alpamysh" is a magnificent oral epic of the ancient Turkic people, usually narrated in poetic form, and is one of the most important Central Asian Turkic oral literary works.

10. "Kobrandy Battyr" is a heroic epic of the Kazakh people, mainly praising the legendary warrior Kobrandy Battyr of the Kara Kipshak tribe in the 15th century. The epic is written

"Manas". The reaction of Kyrgyz people to this criticism was fierce, and the new interpretation of the Soviet government was rejected by various classes of the Kyrgyz nation. Numerous intellectuals and social elites had publicly praised the heroic epic of "Manas" and cited the theories of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin to defend it. The response of the Soviet authorities to this widespread resistance movement was different from before, but rather quite cautious. The response of the authorities was only to publish two debates opposing "Manas" on the "Soviet Kyrgyz Newspaper", but they were immediately refuted by Kyrgyz intellectual elites. After the initial efforts to crush "Manas" were thwarted, the Soviet authorities organized three hundred representatives from four Central Asian Republic academies of science to jointly decide the fate of "Manas", but two opposing factions emerged among scholars, The "anti-Manas" and "pro-Manas" factions, in turn, led to the failure of the academic crushing plan. But then Moscow strongly condemned this result and criticized several scholars who defended "Manas". [9]^{pp.463-470} Although the rebellion was once again resolved, Khrushchev exposed the truth after Stalin's death. The reputation of those who once defended epics was restored, and those national epics that were once disparaged were once again praised as "great works of the masses". The anti-national epic movement implemented by the Soviet government was gradually forgotten by the masses. Ben referred to the resistance of Soviet Muslim intellectual elites during this anti ethnic epic movement as "mirasism", a term derived from Arabic that means "heritage" and is commonly used to describe the protection and restoration of ethnic heritage. [9]^{p.464} In Ben's view, this rebellion was the first victory of local intellectuals over the central authority of Russia, and also marked the local people's appreciation of national culture.

4. CONCLUSION

Bennigsen is undoubtedly a prominent figure in the Western academic community who pays attention to the Muslim nation and Islam in the Soviet Union, among which the study of Central Asian ethnic groups provides people with fascinating texts and theories. Perhaps due to his personal growth experience, Bennigsen, who was originally born into a noble family in Russia, was forced to travel to France, which also gave him

to commemorate the fighting achievements between Battyr and the Kalmyk people.

special humanistic care for the Muslim nation under Russian rule.

Bennigsen's study of Central Asian ethnic groups effectively analyzed many topics related to the Muslim ethnic group in the Soviet Union, including the religious legacy of the Muslim people, the structure of Muslim families, the status of Muslim ethnic groups, and the Slavonization of Muslim ethnic groups. In addition, in the context of the Cold War, Bennigsen's theory of Central Asian ethnic studies was also incorporated into the Nationalities Working Group of the United States.[10]^{pp.219-221} The group aimed to complete the Carter administration's strategy of "competing politically with the Soviet Union" by studying the Muslim ethnic group and Islam in the Soviet Union.¹¹ Obviously, a clear understanding of the historical background of Bennigsen's research on Central Asian ethnic groups helps to trace the academic framework of his theory, and also allows people to glimpse a glimpse of the overall style of research on Soviet Muslim ethnic groups in the Western academic community at that time.

Although Bennigsen's studies of Central Asian ethnic groups have presented brilliant theories to the Western academic community, from today's perspective, there are also many areas that need to be reflected on Bennigsen's theoretical views. For example, Ben's theory of "supranational" identity (i.e. the identification of Muslim identity) needs to be reflected on, as in reality, a common Islamic culture is not enough to become a force for uniting Central Asian countries. Whether during the Soviet era or during the period after the independence of the five Central Asian countries in 1991, Muslim identity was more of a reflection of traditional beliefs and values.

Of course, people cannot deny the historical background factors at that time. In fact, the study of Central Asian ethnic groups needs to be combined with the social structure, ethnic customs, and religious relics of local Muslim communities, as well as to understand their substantive situation from a historical perspective.

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11. The electronic website for Presidential Directive No. 18 signed by Jimmy Carter on August 24, 1977 is: <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/pd/pd18.pdf>, visited on July 1, 2023.

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