

AN EXAMINATION OF SUFISM'S RESISTANCE AGAINST THE REGIME IN THE SOVIET PERIOD (1922-1991)*

Sovyetler Döneminde Sufiliğin Rejime Karşı Direnişinin İncelenmesi (1922-1991)

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Abstract

The introduction frames the main issues underscoring the contributions made by eminent scholars such as Bennigsen, Rahman, and Froese articulating Sufism and its major role in preserving traditional Islam under the Soviet regime. Taking into consideration divergent explanations on the protection of Islam in the existing scholarship, the author emphasizes the role of Sufi brotherhoods in preserving Islam while retaining the core values of Islam despite the violent persecution by the anti-Islam campaign. This article adheres to objective, unbiased principles during the study, while also laying the base for further research. This research intends to reveal the role of Sufi brotherhoods in protecting Islam in Central Asia during the Soviet regime that was hostile against Islam. Thus, the contribution of Sufism in protecting Islam is analyzed by examining the resistance of Sufism against the Soviet regime. This scholarship, in order to validate the claim made throughout the research, will mostly draw upon the existing secondary materials from the research of Bennigsen who carried out comprehensive research on the role of Sufism in Central Asia between 1930-1989. This study employs the historical method in evaluating the role of Sufi brotherhoods. Thus, the first part covers the role of underground mosques and sacred venues in protecting Islam by demonstrating the case studies of Keller and the examination of Bennigsen. This is followed by the analysis of the role of Muslim clerics who assumed the main responsibility in perpetuating Islamic education. Subsequently, the final part emphasizes the moral virtues of Sufism, such as compliance and tolerance, which they applied in resisting the communist regime.

Keywords: Sufism, Central Asia, Soviet Period, Communist Regime, Sufi Brotherhood

Öz

Giriş bölümünde tasavvufu dile getiren Bennigsen, Rahman, Froese gibi seçkin bilim adamlarının Sovyet rejimi altında geleneksel İslam'ı korumadaki temel rolünün altını çizen ana konular ele alınır. Yazar, mevcut araştırmalarda İslam'ın korunmasına ilişkin farklı açıklamaları dikkate alarak, İslam karşıtı kampanyanın şiddetli zulmüne rağmen İslam'ın temel değerlerini korurken tarikat mensuplarının İslam'ı korumadaki rolüne vurgu yapıyor. Bu makale, çalışma sırasında nesnel, tarafsız ilkelere bağlı kalarak, aynı zamanda kendisinden sonraki araştırmalar için temel oluşturur. Araştırma, İslam'a düşman olan Sovyet rejimi döneminde Orta Asya'da tarikat mensuplarının İslam'ı korumadaki rolünü ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Böylece tasavvufun Sovyet rejimine karşı direnişi incelenerek tasavvufun İslam'ı korumadaki katkısı analiz edilecektir. Bu çalışma, araştırma boyunca ileri sürülen iddiayı doğrulamak için, çoğunlukla, 1930-1989 yılları arasında Orta Asya'da tasavvufun rolü üzerine kapsamlı araştırmalar yapan Bennigsen'in araştırmalarından

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elde edilen mevcut ikincil materyallerden yararlanacaktır. Çalışmada, tarikat mensuplarının rolünü değerlendirmede tarihsel yöntem kullanılacaktır. Böylelikle ilk bölümde, Keller'in vaka çalışmaları ve Bennigsen'in incelenmesi ile İslam'ın korunmasında yer altı camilerinin ve kutsal mekânların rolü anlatılacaktır. Bunun ardından İslami eğitimin sürdürülmesinde ana sorumluluğu üstlenen Müslüman din adamlarının rolü analiz edilecektir. Son bölümde ise tasavvufun komünist rejime direnirken uyguladıkları uyum ve hoşgörü gibi ahlaki erdemler vurgulanacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Süfilik, Orta Asya, Sovyet Dönemi, Komünist Rejim, Tarikat.

1. Introduction

The countries of Central Asia were part of the USSR for over seven decades during the time of the Soviet Union. Following the collapse of the communist regime, several Western academics turned their attention towards Central Asian countries as an area of interest, particularly of Islam during the Soviet era. Scholars including Froese, Rahman, and Bennigsen researched the survival of the Muslim faith throughout the region, despite the staunch anti-religious stance of the communist regime. Experts remain uncertain as to how Islam managed to survive and retain Islamic education, religious rites, and faith. It has been posited by some scholars that communism failed due to a combination of the Second World War and the 'backwardness' of Islamic followers. It is claimed by some that religious feeling is increased under oppression (Keller, 1992: 28), while others assert that Islam and communism existed peacefully alongside one another with a degree of compatibility. However, academics such as Rahman and Bennigsen argue that it was the exceptionally well-organised efforts of the Sufi brotherhoods – *tariqa* – which enabled the survival of the Muslim faith in Central Asia. This assertion piqued the interest of many researchers worldwide. Western scholars have a tendency to incorrectly perceive Sufism as a heretical movement or sect, often implying that it does not truly relate to Islam. On the contrary, Sufism does have strong roots in Islam as a mystical religious movement dealing with the ethics, morals, and spiritual issues of Muslim life (Bennigsen, 1983: 87). Islam is made up of three spheres: faith, practice, and *ihsan* or *akhlâq*, meaning morals/ethics. Sufism focuses heavily on this third sphere – the inner workings of the human psyche. The aim of this research is to illustrate how the Sufi brotherhoods succeeded in maintaining and promulgating Islam in Central Asia during the time of Soviet control, often in incredible and almost invisible ways. The role played by the Sufis in preserving the Muslim faith is explored through analysis of Sufism's resistance to the communist regime. This study, in order to justify the argument made throughout the research, will mostly draw upon the existing secondary materials from the research of Bennigsen who conducted extensive research on the role of Sufism in Central Asia between 1930-1989. This research analyses the role of the Sufi brotherhoods using the historical method. The first section covers the role played by underground mosques and other sacred locations in preserving Islam, using Keller's case studies and Bennigsen's analysis as illustrations. The second part examines Islamic education, including *mullahs* who were responsible for maintaining Muslim faith-based education. Finally, the last section focuses on Sufism's moral characteristics, like

subservience and submissiveness – qualities that were especially useful in resisting the communist regime.

2. The Communist Suppression of Islam, and the Resistance of Sufis through the Usage of Underground Mosques and Holy Sites

The goal of the Soviet government was to amalgamate one great Soviet nation and create socialism, for which Islam was an obstacle (Rakowska-Harmstone, 1983: 25). Thus, Islam was indoctrinated as an opiate and full of fanaticism by the communist campaign (Rahman, 1979: 35). To instill this belief, a scientific atheism program was developed to undermine Islam. (Rahman, 1979:36). Nonetheless, it was futile, so the anti-religious movement began attacking Islam aggressively (Tasar, 2018: 256) by prohibiting religious activities and damaging Islamic schools and mosques (Kemp, 2009: 31). Many kinds of ways were used for anti-religious propaganda, and the teachings of militant atheism began to spread; Islam was portrayed as the greatest enemy of the Soviet system (Nurmatov, 2019: 194). Froese shows in his research that 20,000 mosques operated in Central Asia in 1917, yet the number of mosques reduced to fewer than 4,000 by 1929, and by 1936 only 386 mosques was recorded as registered in Central Asia – a 98 percent decrease in less than 20 years (Froese, 2015: 489). During this harsh time, the unofficial (or parallel) Islam of Sufi brotherhoods were involved in resisting the anti-religious campaign by assuming the form of tea houses and underground mosques that played an indispensable role in protecting traditional Islam (Broxup, 1987: 288). Bennigsen maintains that the Sufi brotherhoods ran these underground mosques and sites (Bennigsen, 1988: 776). He goes on to state that the Sufi brotherhoods operated as a proxy for the official Islamic institution, which means they sustained a network of private Qur’an schools (*madrassah*) and ran thousands of parallel and secret ‘houses of prayer’ that were situated next to sacred sites (the tombs of Sufi *sheikh*). This suggests that the functioning of Sufi brotherhoods as a proxy is an explicit indication of unofficial Islam (parallel) assuming the obligations to protect Islam while official Islam was paralyzed. Despite his evidence concerning the sustenance of underground mosques by Sufi brotherhoods as a way of preserving Islam, he fails to provide evidence regarding the existence of such sites, and this obfuscates knowing where and how many underground sites functioned under the tough regime. Moreover, Tasar asserts that the increase in numbers of underground mosques was observed between 1943-44 during the Second Cold War when Stalin allowed the normalization of religious policy by alleviating the tight control on Islam and Islamic activities. Thus, due to Stalin’s amiable religious policy, the number of underground mosques increased (Tasar, 2018: 260).

Nevertheless, Keller managed to compile a list of unregistered houses of prayer from local libraries across Central Asia in 1936 (Froese, 2005: 493). Her findings show a significant number of unregistered places of prayer in both urban and rural areas (see Table 1), suggesting that the underground mosques existed in high numbers before the Second Cold War. This means that the unregistered houses of prayer flourished, even during difficult periods when Islam was being harshly persecuted.

Table 1: Houses of prayer (1936 survey)

	Pre-1917	Closed	Open	Registered	Unregistered
Total Ration Records (Rural Districts)	9,720	6,160	3,590	386	2,583
Total City Records	10,489	6,544	3,724	686	2,588

Source: Keller (cited in Froese, 2005: 493).

According to a study conducted by Keller, approximately 2,500 underground mosques functioned before the Second Cold War (Froese, 2005: 493). She notes a significant number of unregistered mosques in comparison to registered mosques both in urban and rural areas, indicating that one of the ways of preserving Islam was by increasing the number of underground mosques. It might be assumed that the relentless repression by the communist government led the Sufi brotherhoods to build underground mosques in order to promote unity and corporate prayer congregations. The mosques took on another function: the practice of life-cycle rituals such as marriage, circumcision, and burial, along with the function of places of prayer (Bennigsen, 1988: 771). It must be acknowledged that every underground mosque served to strengthen the solidarity and unity of Central Asian Muslim people as Islam teaches that community life is crucial in bringing people together and reinforcing cohesion, and therefore unofficial mosques played a central role in protecting traditional Islam. The Soviet regime targeted the destruction of sacred places such as the graves of saints, and consequently, a significant number of tombs of saints were demolished or closed (Shahrani, 1994: 144). This suggests that the Soviet government tried to eradicate the shrines or tombs of *sheiks*, cognisant that they maintained a place for teaching and preaching traditional Islam. It seems that the reason behind obliterating sacred sites was possibly to degrade Islam through the deprivation of ordinary Muslims of holy places that functioned as a sanctuary for divine guidance and assistance. However, Froese asserts that Muslims visited *mazar* (burial chambers or tombs) in order to hide from assault (Froese, 2005:493). He goes on to elaborate that these were built in a pyramidal form. Under the atmosphere of terror and repression, tombs were deliberately erected to look decrepit so that when financial inspectors inspected them, they found them to be derelict and out of service. Although he states that Muslim people visited and used tombs, his argument seems less compelling because he fails to note the critical reason why Muslim people visited these holy sites. Throughout his study, he attempts to show that Muslim people only visited such places for safety. However, it could be challenged by arguing that Muslim people visited tombs not only for security reasons, but rather to meet spiritual needs. For instance, Bennigsen argues that holy sites or tombs firstly substituted the pilgrimage, one of the essential columns of Islam, that was prohibited during the communist period (Bennigsen, 1988:777). Secondly, it served as the place for reinforcing spirituality rather than just the safety of the Muslim people.

Furthermore, Bennigsen maintains that people gathered around the tombs in order to practice *dhikr* (exaltation) rituals and to pray. This implies that these sacred sites functioned as a source of spirituality, meaning that these places served as a focal point of commitment for the rural Islamic group of people, as the shrines or tombs of saints sustained inspiration and consolation to their convictions and beliefs by influencing their hearts and feelings. Therefore, the anti-religious campaign, observing Muslim people still retaining a strong belief in Islam by visiting tombs, took steps to discourage them from visiting and reconstructed them as restaurants and museums (Bennigsen, 1983: 83). This suggests that the Sufis, by encouraging people to visit the shrines and tombs of saints, could impact ordinary people to comprehend and know Islam through mystical means that influence the emotions and heart. Thus, it could be argued that it was this – the devotional and spiritual features of their conviction – that allowed them to maintain their commitment and increase their numbers under harsh oppression. Bennigsen claims that despite the inexorable attempt of the Soviet regime to eradicate the sacred sites, they were unsuccessful (Bennigsen, 1988: 777). This is supported by Ro'i and Wainer who assert that visitation of sacred sites, one of the main rites of Sufism, can still be observed sharply across Central Asia (Wainer, 2009: 311). This shows that the performance of rituals not only survived Soviet harassment, but it even thrived owing to the contribution of Sufi fraternities (Tasar, 2018: 257). Islam in Central Asia experienced an existential crisis (with 98 percent of mosques shut down in less than 20 years and a high number of sacred sites also closed down), so it was forced to shift to unconventional means, strategies and underground tactics to persist. Run by the zealous Sufis, Islam reoriented itself from the official mosque to the unofficial tea room and holy places. This research suggests that the radical actions of the Sufis maintained the existence of Islam and led to the preservation of its core values.

3. Roles Played by *Mullahs* and *Samizdat* in Islamic Education

Within the Sufi brotherhoods, the roles played by *mullahs* and *ishans* (unregistered clerics) were significant in the resistance to the communist regime (Quelquejay, 1983: 26). According to prominent academician and expert in anti-Islamic scholarship Liutsian Klimovich, a dynamic religious dissident group was active across the USSR (Nurmatov, 2019: 195). Klimovich asserts that there were two opposing establishments in Islam: the official mosques, led by the *muftis*; and the murid movement, an unofficial organisation led by the *mullahs*, *ishans*, *sheikhs* and *pirs* (Bennigsen & Quelquejay, 1978: 155). This argument for two distinct establishments appears to suggest that there were different approaches between the official and unofficial groups towards propagating Islam. The Sufi's murid movement taught Islam from a mystical and internal approach, with a focus on the heart using *dhikr* – the exaltation of God through music – an approach that would have attracted many Muslims, both erudite and uneducated (Lipovsky, 1996: 2). Contrastingly, *imams* from the official mosques taught Islam through explanations of Muslim jurisprudence and doctrine, which may

have been less stimulating for some in comparison (Quelquejay, 1983: 26). With official mosques and *imams* being highly visible, the government of the Soviet Union presumed that their eradication would lead to Islam being defeated in these regions. Thus, the communist regime made considerable efforts to significantly reduce or entirely eliminate the number of official *imams* (Wimbush, 1984: 16-17). Despite these efforts, however, the Soviet regime was unsuccessful as unbeknownst to them, the unofficial *mullahs* simply replaced the official *imams*, carrying out the important tasks of preaching and teaching about folk-based Islam (Malashenko, 1993: 66). The records of unofficial and unregistered clerics were collected by Keller (Froese, 2005: 494), and are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Islamic religious leaders (1936 survey)

	Registered Clergy	Unregistered Imams	Unregistered Ishans	Unregistered Mullahs
Totalled Ration Records (Rural Districts)	108	1,151	118	806
Totalled City Records	0	98	25	0

Source: Keller (cited in Froese, 2005: 494)

The data indicates that there were far more unofficial *mullahs* and *imams* than official, registered clergy. Most unofficial *ishans* and *imams* were found in rural regions, suggesting that they were mainly based among communities of common people such as peasants and farmers (Lipovsky, 1996: 13). Rates of literacy among rural populations were low at the time, and therefore Islamic books would be too difficult to understand for most people (Keller, 1992: 28). For this reason, unofficial *mullahs* would use vernacular language to explain Islam to local communities in the same way as the Sufi brotherhoods (Bennigsen & Quelquejay, 1978: 158). While empirical data is provided regarding the number of unregistered clerics operating during this time, Froese posits that many of these unofficial *mullahs* were actually older people or young students who had received no training and had very little knowledge about Islamic doctrine or practices such as prayers: “When Muslims have little or no knowledge of the writings, teachings, and rituals of Islam, are they still Muslims?” (Froese, 2005: 494). Here, Froese is evidently criticising the unofficial *mullahs* – and, by extension, the Sufi brotherhoods – by implying they had insufficient knowledge of Islamic practices and doctrine. Questioning the ability to properly maintain Islam without the right knowledge is valid; how can an unqualified cleric who lacks the required religious knowledge possibly lead others in the Muslim faith? Yet there does exist evidence demonstrating the competency of these clerics. Sartori highlights the crucial role played by the *hujras* – secret learning rooms – in continuing Islamic education at the time (Sartori, 2010: 323). When Islamic education was banned across the Soviet Union from 1928 to 1945, *mullahs* would travel across Central Asia and the

North Caucasus teaching Muslims using these secret places of learning. In Arabic the word *hujras* is plural, meaning ‘rooms’ or ‘places’, indicating that there were a number of secret places of education. It is logical to assume that if several schools teaching Islam had been set up and maintained, it would be necessary for teachers to be well educated in this field; therefore, it can also be assumed that the *mullahs* were, indeed, qualified to provide Islamic teaching. During the 1980s in Turkmenistan, a report in the *Turkmenkaya iskra* periodical stated that during school hours, a teacher taught materialism but after school hours, he became an *ishan* (Wimbush, 1985: 161). From this example it can be seen that *mullahs* were key in maintaining Islamic teaching; not only were they well educated in Islam, but also in materialism, demonstrating their intellect and commitment. Additionally, Bennigsen (1983: 88) reveals that *samizdat* (meaning ‘self-publishing’) of handwritten covert books, writings, and other literature by the Sufi brotherhoods were used for distribution of Islamic teachings during the Soviet era. The use and distribution of this type of literature was dangerous and could result in persecution and torture, yet the persistence of the *ishans* and *mullahs* highlights the importance they placed on Islamic education. Soviet authorities mentioned the presence of these books and other writings, which confirms they existed (Bennigsen, 1983: 91). For example, Decree No.65, Article 3, of the Ministerial Council of the Uzbek SSR dated 7th February 1969 states that as part of their reinforcement of the country’s laws pertaining to ‘religious cults’, significant efforts were made to seize supplies and prevent distribution of religious books and cassette tapes of religious songs and poetry. This shows that the existence of Islamic books and other materials concerned the government at the time, indicating that the work that the Sufis were doing was extensive. The religious songs and poetry also point to Sufi involvement as these were the methods used both in their rituals and to attract interest from people in the community. It has been claimed that in comparison to the Soviets’ more sombre ceremonies, the Sufi rites were uplifting and appealing, even to those with no religious tendencies or interests (Bennigsen & Quelquejay, 1978: 157). This suggests that the religious teaching methods used by the Sufis often involved emotional material. In research carried out by Bennigsen (Bennigsen, 1983:84), he notes that prominent scientist M.A. Abdullaev discusses two important collections: *Chto dolzhen znat’ i delat’ Musulmanin* (What a Muslim Must Know and Do), and *Usul ud-din vua’l-iman* (The Basis of the Faith and of Religion), both of which were written in Arabic. Abdullaev goes on to state that a Naqshbandi *sheikh*, Abdurrahman Haji of Akhty, was the composer of these religious *samizdat* books which were given out as manuscripts. Considering the author of these books and the books’ titles, it would be reasonable to assume that they did belong to the Sufi brotherhoods and this would again indicate that they made considerable efforts to provide Islamic education to local Muslims in order to ensure that ordinary people could effectively follow Islamic rules and practices. With all of the aforementioned evidence in mind, including the large number of unregistered/unofficial *ishans* and *mullahs* and their unrelenting efforts to educate Muslims through the use of Islamic writings, this indicates that the survival

of Islam depended on not only the secret educational centers and mosques but also on the dedication of the *mullahs* who faithfully served both God and the community. The *mullahs* and *ishans* would have found it difficult to teach had it not been for the existence of the Islamic books; however, the very existence of such *samizdat* literature is a significant indicator of a systematic approach to the delivery of Islamic education in the region.

4. The Peacefulness and Submissiveness of Sufi Orders in Resisting Communism

Although there were continuous attacks on the faith, Islam's impact remained clear to Communist Party members, including those in higher ranks. Froese gives more evidence to support the notion that Islam continued to have significant influence. For instance, a report published in 1965 revealed that one in ten Komsomol party members in Kazakhstan attended the mosque. A 1985 report noted that more than half of all Communist Party members in Tajikistan were Muslim, and many others across Central Asia identified themselves as following Islam whilst being members of the Communist Party. This evidence shows that people were able to live an Islamic life at the same time as being Communist Party members, and many did so. With this in mind, Froese asserts that the ideologies of both communism and the Islamic faith were compatible with one another, thus allowing Party members to maintain both identities simultaneously. Froese suggests it was this compatibility that enabled Muslims to maintain their faith and stopped them from resisting the communist regime (Froese, 2005: 494). That said, Froese's compatibility argument is rather nebulous and hazy making it difficult to grasp his true meaning, thus opening the door to challenges such as the fact that there can be no reconcilability between a faith such as Islam and the atheist-based communist movement. According to Wheeler, Klimovich, the prominent orientalist, found Islam to be anti-scientific and entirely opposed to Marxist-Leninist ideation, thus demonstrating its incompatibility with communism (Wheeler, 1977: 40). His argument is that coexisting alongside each other does not equate to compatibility. Instead, it can be perceived as tolerance of one another, and on the part of Islam, illustrates the subservience of Muslims towards communism in order to meet the Islamic requirements of remaining respectful and compassionate. These moral characteristics are what ultimately allowed Islam to be protected and to thrive. Bennigsen points out the submission and subservience of the Sufi brotherhoods towards other regimes, such as the Buddhist Chingisid Mongols and the Qara Khitai in the 12th century, and later in the 16th and 17th centuries towards the Kalmyks and Jungars; the Sufi brotherhoods successfully used this approach to protect Islam from these Buddhist groups (Bennigsen, 1983: 84). Conversely, other Muslim groups such as the *Jadidists* who were visibly opposed to communism did not succeed and were sent to prisons or executed (Rakowska-Harmstone, 1983: 25). The open and highly visible strategy of opposition by the *Jadidists* did not work in their favor, while contrastingly, the approach of the Sufis – to demonstrate tolerance and acceptance

– became a remarkably successful strategy, not only maintaining the Central Asian Muslim community but allowing it to thrive. Not only did the covert Sufi brotherhoods successfully evade infiltration by the Soviet authorities, but they themselves managed to infiltrate the Communist Party and associated groups (Quelquejay, 1983: 28-29). The indication is that in showing subservience and tolerance the Sufis were able to penetrate the Soviet government’s administration, thereby evidencing that the Sufis were not restricted to their secret mosques and covert education activities only; indeed, they were able to not only win over ordinary people but also many within the Soviet administration as well. This view is shared by Malashenko who discusses how Islam was publicly denounced by many Party officials, particularly those of high rank, while in private these same individuals made efforts to safeguard the faith. Once retired, many ex-Soviet bureaucrats finally felt able to openly admit their loyalties to Islam (Malashenko, 1993: 65). It is also asserted that reports sent to Moscow regarding how well the atheistic agitation was progressing at the time were fabricated. Individuals working on the reports knew this, and the communist ideologues and commissioners who read the reports in Moscow also knew (Malashenko, 1993: 65). This evidence indicates that there must have been Sufis working within the Communist Party at all levels of the administration, including in high-ranking official positions. The Sufi movement, promoting Islam with its mystical and profound characteristics, managed to attract both ordinary people and those of higher status – including prominent writers and poets – with its compassionate moral values. A number of the more popular Soviet writers and poets were influenced by Sufism, yet were regarded as national heroes by the Soviet regime. Esteemed writers such as Molla Nepes, Abdurrahman Djami, Mahtum Quli, Alisher Navoi, and Zelili were all members of Sufi brotherhoods (Bennigsen, 1983: 88). Sufism is a movement that brings spirituality into the Muslim faith and promotes ethical concepts such as social justice, ‘purity of heart and hands’, fighting against evil, conscientiousness, equality of all before God, brotherhood among all people, and the assertion of kindness. These concepts are fully aligned with a Muslim’s spiritual needs, and so the provision of these ideals at the time helped to fulfill these needs within the Muslim communities in Central Asia. For this reason, Sufism was able to develop a new layer within the Islamic religion: a layer of ethical and moral concepts that were identified and accepted by the people as spiritual ideas to adhere to. All of the aforementioned literature that refers to the Sufi brotherhood movement points to the fact that their unrelenting efforts and exceptional contributions to Islam enabled the faith to survive throughout the Soviet occupation of Central Asia.

Bennigsen states:

Today Sufi brotherhoods are accomplishing their humble but essential task by means less spectacular than armed uprising but in a way without which Islam would have long ago lost its hold over the masses and the elite (Bennigsen, 1983: 88).

Bennigsen's words express the essential message that it was the tolerance and submissiveness of the Sufi brotherhoods that ultimately protected Islam against the onslaught of communism. Such a pacifistic approach may seem less impressive in the face of a brutal regime; however, had the movement selected to utilize more violence in opposition, their efforts would have failed and Islam would have been eradicated in Central Asia. Their decision to adopt a peaceful strategy without violent resistance was instrumental in saving Islam in this region. Ultimately, the moral values held by the Sufi brotherhoods – namely tolerance, modesty, humility, submissiveness, and peacefulness – won out against the atheistic Soviet regime, alongside their use of sacred places, underground mosques, and covert educational systems.

5. Conclusion

This research has provided an analysis of the persecution inflicted upon Islam through the closing down of mosques and the destruction of holy sites during Soviet control of Central Asia between 1922 and 1991. The significant reduction in the number of official *imams* and places of worship constituted an existential threat to Islam at this time. Unofficial Sufi brotherhoods stepped up to fill the gap and sought to preserve Islam through the development of an extensive underground movement, meeting in shrines and tea rooms instead of official mosques, distributing religious material written in the simple local language instead of more complicated Arabic, and promoting a strategy of peaceful resistance rather than violent opposition to the Soviet regime. Ordinary Muslims were allowed to develop a deeper understanding of mystical Islam as the Sufis encouraged them to visit the shrines, thus enhancing their spiritual path to God. This approach to faith resonated more deeply with many people; it was easier to connect with and was more appealing in comparison to the more traditional Islam that tended to be drier and less accessible to the layperson. It can therefore be suggested that it was this move towards the more devotional and spiritual side of the religion that allowed it to both survive as well as flourish under Soviet oppression. The Sufis' chosen approach was highly effective. Had the unofficial *imams* and *mullahs* not risked their own lives in the preservation of their faith, then Islam would have certainly perished. The *mullahs* also deserve credit for their use of simple vernacular language when preaching Islam, as this way rural communities were able to access and understand the religion more easily. The use of simple language was key to Islamic teaching during this period and permitted the education of those without any proper knowledge of Islam. The fact that *samizdat* religious books and other materials existed is evidence that there was a systematic approach to the delivery of Islamic education. This way, the Sufis could promulgate Central Asian Islam as the preferred way of living, thus making it a fundamental element of Central Asian Muslim identity and culture.

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