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## Book Review

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# State Dept. adores Sufi fundamentalism

by Allen and Rachel Douglas

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### **Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union**

by Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush  
University of California Press, 1985  
195 pages clothbound, \$32.00

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We were not surprised to learn that the U.S. State Department, which welcomes the Gorbachovs' culture policy, spent taxpayers' money on "research funds" for the project published just over a year ago, as *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union*. It speaks the addiction of U.S. government circles to encouraging irrationalist currents abroad, which has otherwise been on display with Ambassador Richard Burt's hobnobbing with the West German Greens and the unending quest for Iranian mullahs—"moderate" or otherwise—to ship arms to.

In this case, the voice of enthusiasm for a movement whose leaders are prone to such statements as, "I am weaving a rope to hang engineers, students, and in general all those who write from left to right," comes from the very heart of the East-West nexus known as The Trust: The author is the notorious founder of Central Asian studies in America, Count Alexandre von Bennigsen, who collaborated, this time, with S. Enders Wimbush of London.

In 1984, the *EIR Special Report* "How Moscow Plays the Muslim Card in the Middle East" indicted Bennigsen as a major source of *dezinformatsiya*—in fact, in American policy-making circles. We showed how his book *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (1983, co-authored by Marie Broxup) had omitted powerful evidence of Soviet control over the destructive forces of Islamic fundamentalism, in order to bolster the strategic doctrine of the Arc of Crisis—which Zbigniew Brzezinski and Jimmy Carter so disastrously espoused. Key to grasping the insanity of the Bennigsen/Brzezinski thesis, that Islamic fundamentalism was a bulwark against Soviet power, we said, was the question of Sufism.

We explained: "As . . . Ayatollah Khoiniha put it, the

object of Iran's variegated activities is to eliminate can culture from the region,' . . . in favor of a fanatical sort of irrationality valued for its own sake, for its 'freedom' from rationality. In the Islamic world this outlook, in fact a heresy to the nation-building tendency of Islam which characterized the Arab Renaissance at its high point in the Abbasid Caliphate of the ninth century, is called Sufism. An outgrowth of pagan, pre-Islamic mother cults in the Arabian peninsula, combined with pseudo-Christian gnostic heresies propagated into the area under the rule of Byzantium, Sufism . . . ushered in the black night of collapse and despair in the Arab world, to last for nearly a thousand years. . . . As *EIR* founder Lyndon LaRouche recently stated, 'For any branch of Western culture to develop Sufism as a supposed agent of influence against some adversary is to behave like a man who takes poisonous snakes to bed to warm him on a cold winter's night.'"

### **Bennigsen becomes a moderate**

Bennigsen's recent tract is full of efforts to preempt any more exposés of his tendentious reporting; even in the tightly knit field of Central Asia studies, not a few people thought that *The Islamic Threat* had "gone too far" toward a claim that Sufi bands from the Caucasus would soon overthrow Moscow's rule. Bennigsen has modified his claims so as to avoid blatant errors of fact—and in so doing, virtually refutes his own thesis!

*EIR* reported that the bitterly anti-Western Sufis had been largely "turned" to advantage by the Soviets, and that thousands of Iranian mullahs were schooled in the Soviet city of Tashkent. Now, Bennigsen confirms that the leaders of the officially sanctioned Muslim Spiritual Board of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, Ishan Babakhan (chief, 1943-57) and his son Ziautdin Babakhanov (chief, 1957-82), were Naqshbandi Sufi "adepts," and that the same is likely true of the current member of this dynasty, Mufti Shamsutdin Babakhanov.

Bennigsen and Wimbush also report that leading Sufi adepts fought on the side of the Bolsheviks in the 1920s. They allow that many people think the Sufis "are so far socially and politically beyond the Pale that no sane person could find them attractive." But in the conclusion of the book, they offer, as appropriate for today, century Russian expert on Central Asia, that "Every new idea, any movement, political or religious, reactionary or revolutionary, will cover itself with the flag of Sufism."

Bennigsen demonstrated that he prefers this version of the discredited "fundamentalist card," with a fiery outburst in the *New York Times* of Dec. 30, 1986, after riots shook Soviet Kazakhstan, preparatory to a crackdown and Russification of the Kazakh leadership by the Gorbachov team. He wrote, "The ethnic, anti-Russian riots . . . in Alma-Ata are a reminder that racial tensions remain a serious threat to the Soviet empire—to its short-term stability and long-term survival."

## Soviet Sufis—and Italian

Most of the Bennigsen-Wimbush book comprises fond accounts of the practices of Sufi brotherhoods in the Soviet Union, which, as “dynamic religio-cultural systems which embrace all aspects of human existence,” are supposed to pose a growing challenge to “the atheistic establishment.” The authors stress the “vertical loyalty of disciple to master,” the Sufi disciple’s being like “a cadaver in the hands of an embalmer,” and his “life of spiritual militancy totally dedicated to Islam . . . [in which] there is no place for any real, long-lasting compromise with the communist world.”

The authors survey the roots of Sufism in the Russian Empire and the U.S.S.R., yet they omit evidence that would mar this portrait of a powerful, indigenous spiritual movement. Narrating the life of Naqshbandi Sheikh Mansur, who waged holy war against the Russians in the 18th century, they come down in favor of Mansur’s having been a home-grown initiate with “Central Asian origins,” citing “analysis of the Ottoman archival material” to reject a story that he came from Turkey. They black out the discovery in the State Archives of Turin, Italy—reported by Sir Fitzroy Maclean in his *To Caucasus*—of letters written by Sheikh Mansur to his father. According to these, the Sufi firebrand was originally one Giovanni Battista Boetti, a Dominican monk who converted to Islam!

Bennigsen does not care to advertise such evidence of the sometimes strategically designed, synthetic nature of Sufi movements. The very same, however, is also suggested by a recurrent sub-theme in his book: the similarity of Sufism to certain Russian sects and extreme Russian Orthodox hesychasm. He is most fascinated with the Sufi *zikr*, the chants, augmented by hyperventilation and whirling dances, through which Sufis “reach God.” The *zikr* “can assume what for Russians must be an undesirable political coloring,” but Bennigsen likes its closeness to certain practices of his own Russian Orthodox faith, especially among the hesychasts: “The Sufi practice of *zikr* can be compared to similar mystical practices, . . . above all to the Christian Greek and Russian Orthodox technique of the ‘Jesus Prayer.’ According to St. John Climachos, in the ‘prayer of one word’ the name of Jesus must be united to the breath.”

In another tell-tale analogy, Bennigsen says that “Sufi activities and their influence may be compared to the role played by the Russian Old Believers in the preservation of Russian national identity.” The Old Believers were Russian schismatics, thousands of whom burned themselves to death in the 17th century, to avoid changes in the liturgy; later generations of Old Believers, who regarded the state as the Anti-Christ, funded the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries against the Romanovs.

### The Bennigsen dossier

Since Bennigsen’s line still pollutes the estimates of U.S. intelligence agencies, we must pose the question:

Who is Count Alexandre von Bennigsen and where did he come from? The answer we find in unpublished archival materials of the Bennigsen family, is: the Eurasian wing of The Trust.

Born in 1913 to a centuries-old Baltic noble family, Bennigsen emigrated via Istanbul and was trained in Paris by the dean of French orientology, the practicing Sufi mystic Louis Massignon. His interest in Central Asia got a head start from his father, Adam Bennigsen, a Russian army officer who served there.

Adam Bennigsen was one of three sons of Pavel Bennigsen, Czar Nicholas II’s keeper of the hounds. His brother Georgi P. Bennigsen was a close associate of Vladimir Burtsev, who helped found the Battle Organization (assassination squad) of the Socialist Revolutionaries. Another brother, Emmanuel P. Bennigsen, was an intimate of the famous Ignatiev family, members of which excelled in Okhrana affairs, the geopolitics of the Eastern Question, and—in the next generation—Soviet military intelligence. The Bennigsen family, too, went both ways after the revolution. Some members emigrated, but others stayed on in responsible positions in the new Soviet state. The Bennigsen brothers’ sister Olga worked in the Soviet ministry of agriculture until the 1940s. Their maternal Uncle Kolya was assigned by Trotsky to work up a plan for attracting foreign capital to restore the rail system; Uncle Kolya was later shot, like many of Trotsky’s associates, but his widow received a Soviet pension, as a niece of the composer Tchaikovsky.

Emmanuel also sat on the board of the Volga Kama Bank (founded by Old Believers) from 1910-17, where his associates included A.I. Guchkov, a key figure in the February 1917 revolution, who later, in Berlin, sponsored meetings of the Eurasian wing of The Trust. During the Civil War, Emmanuel worked closely with General von Monkevitz, a counterintelligence officer for the Whites, who later turned out to be a Soviet agent.

In his unpublished memoir, *What Life Taught Me*, Emmanuel Bennigsen described the family philosophy: “American policy is dictated above all by economic considerations, while Russian policy—above all by ideological motivations. . . . The idea of the ‘Third Rome,’

16th century by a modest monk in the north of the country of that new Rome—Moscow, which was supposed to dominate religiously the entire world—had few political repercussions, for . . . Moscow was too weak. But we find echoes of it in Dostoevsky’s

resuscitated, in a lay form, by communist ideology?” The communists, he observed, revived “Russian national sentiment.”

What life has taught the Bennigsen, it appears, is that mystical, gnostic ideas can flourish under the communist Czars even better than with the old regime. What life has taught the Soviets, is that Western policy-makers, who buy irrationalist movements as supposed assets, are useful fools.