



BENNIGSEN, ALEXANDRE

BENNIGSEN, ALEXANDRE (1913-1988), scholar of Soviet Islam. Born in St. Petersburg, the son of Count Bennigsen, a colonel of the Horse Guards who fought on the side of the Whites during the Russian Civil War, he was taken out of Russia by his parents in 1919. After two years in newly independent Estonia, his family settled in Paris in 1924, where young Bennigsen received his education. After graduating from his lycée, he tried different fields before settling at the Ecole des Langues Orientales. Among his teachers there was the famous French Iranist Henri Massé. Bennigsen subsequently entered the prestigious cavalry school at Saumur, fought the Germans as an officer in the French army during World War II and, after the fall of France, became a captain in the resistance movement. In 1940 he married the former Hélène baroness von Bildering. The couple, whose marriage lasted until Bennigsen's death, had four children, the elder of whom, Marie Broxup, became director of the Central Asian Research Center in London.

After the liberation, Bennigsen was put in charge of the Russian documentation service of the Prime Minister's office and began to further his studies of Turkic and Iranian languages, starting with Uzbek. From the mid-1950s Bennigsen was at the 6th section of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes (en Sciences Sociales) and was later named to the chair of history of non-Arab Islam. For over fifteen years Bennigsen traveled in the Middle East—Turkey, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Afghanistan—studying materials in local archives. He finally concentrated on the archives at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, where he studied documents dealing with the Crimean, Kazan, and



Astrakhan Tatars, and with peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The resulting publications stretch over a quarter of a century.

Starting from 1969, Bennigsen usually taught a semester per year in the United States: at Rochester and Columbia, then at Chicago, also at Wisconsin and Florida (plus a stay at the Kennan Institute in Washington). It is his Chicago period that led to the birth of an entire “Bennigsen school” of young American specialists on Soviet Islam. Some of them shared their teacher’s views, others fought with him, but none denied his influence. During his lifetime, Bennigsen was a frequent target of Soviet “rebuttal writers” who specialized in attacking Western scholars. It was only by the end of his life that he had the satisfaction of hearing complimentary Soviet voices, advising their own scholars to pay due attention to his work.

Bennigsen saw the unassimilable quality of Soviet Muslim peoples and the continued strength of Soviet Islam based on the national-religious symbiosis. He also foresaw the refusal of Soviet Muslims to migrate outside of the community. Bennigsen rejected the official Soviet contention that “the Soviet people, a new community of nations” had been born, and religion reduced to the state of superstition. With the breakup of the USSR (occurring only a few years after his death) it became evident that many aspects of Sovietization had struck deeper roots than he had anticipated, and that Muslims in Central Asia and the Caucasus were reacting in ways other than his studies would have predicted. Working with primary sources and original documents, Bennigsen had nonetheless established the framework for serious study of Soviet Islam. No book in this field can disregard his contributions.

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