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The Embodiment of Orthodox Christianity in Central Asia

Sacred Objects and Orthodox Nationalism in Revolutionary Turkestan

DANIEL SCARBOROUGH

The Church of the Icon of the Mother of God, “The Life-Giving Spring,” is located on the edge of the village of Kosmos, about 40 kilometers northeast of Almaty.¹ The church sits atop a spring considered sacred by Orthodox Christians. Groups of pilgrims regularly travel down the rough dirt road by bus to visit the church and plunge into the spring, in the hope of receiving health benefits from the holy water.² Construction of this church and baptistery was completed in 2008. The project was initiated by the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Almaty on the basis of archival evidence of the sacred spring, the precise location of which was unknown. It was located and restored with the help of local residents, one of whom later became Hieromonk Gleb (Zhartovskii), the pastor of the church. When the church authorities expressed interest in reviving the site, Gleb personally cleared away decades of debris from the spring. In the process, he found the wooden planks of the old baptistery, as well as the bronze consecration plate of the original church, dated 1909. The waterlogged planks of the baptistery were dried and used to build the new church’s altar.³

The spring near Kosmos is one of hundreds of objects throughout Central Asia considered sacred by Orthodox Christians. In contrast to

¹ I would like to thank my former student Anastasiya Denisenko for introducing me to this place and to the rector of the church.

² “Khram v chest’ ikony Bozhiei Materi ‘Zhivonosnyi istochnik,’ poselok Kosmos,” *Mitropolichii okrug v Respublike Kazakhstan*, <https://mitropolia.kz/info/organizations/churches/issyk/149-khram-zhivonosnyj-istochnik-kosmos.html>.

³ Interview, 11 May 2019, Kosmos, Almaty Oblast. Rector of the Church of the Icon of the Mother of God, “The Life-Giving Spring,” Hieromonk Gleb (Zhartovskii).

its rich landscape of medieval Muslim, Buddhist, and Assyrian Christian sites, Central Asia's Orthodox sacred objects are relatively recent, dating back to the 19th-century conquest by the Russian Empire. During this period, Orthodox sacred objects were not unearthed or restored, as in the contemporary case of the sacred spring, but created in the process of Russia's colonial settlement of Central Asia. The hierarchy of the Orthodox Church promoted the creation of sacred objects as a means of sacralizing, and thereby assimilating, the spaces around them into the Russian Empire. Yet ecclesiastical leaders relied upon popular initiative in this creative process. The Orthodox settler population venerated objects that they recognized as sacred, with or without official sanction. The native population of Central Asia also contributed to the creation and maintenance of Orthodox sacred objects through trade, labor, and hospitality, even as they resisted colonial rule. The region's Muslim and pre-Muslim sacred landscape defined the context and parameters of Orthodox sacred objects. Orthodox objects and spaces emerged in Central Asia through the interaction and conflict of these social, political, and geographical factors.

My approach to Orthodox sacred objects in Central Asia is inspired by Manuel Vasquez's "non-reductive, materialist theory of religion." By this designation, Vasquez means the study of religion as it is practiced and experienced in the physical world, beyond the parameters set by ecclesiastical authorities. "We need not appeal to some transcendental, ontological category of the sacred in order to build a non-reductive theory of religious emplacement. Transcendence is immanent, part of our own untotalizable but still binding materiality."⁴ This approach facilitates the study of religion in its lived complexity, without reducing it to constituent factors, such as high doctrine or political ideology. Vasquez argues that religion is embedded in biology, environment, culture, and politics, and is embodied through the interaction of these various factors in "networks of relations."⁵ These networks can be organized through control as well as through cooperation. "We should, thus, not assume that intimacy, trust, and emotional attachment are automatic ingredients of all networks. Sometimes constraints, proximity, or lack of resources compel people to enter into networks on the basis of competition or antipathy."⁶

⁴ Manuel Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 268.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

Indeed, within the steep, vertical authority structure of the Synodal Church,⁷ as well as the colonial regime of the Russian Empire in Central Asia, Orthodox sacred objects were created through compulsion as well as consensus.

Certain church leaders used Orthodox sacred objects as sources of power over their own parishioners, the native population, and the territory they occupied. As Vasquez points out, the sacred is often emplaced in accordance with “the interests of a particular, situated group of people, namely, political and religious elites that derive their power *from the boundaries and divisions they sacralize*.”⁸ The diocesan hierarchy of Turkestan was such a group. They cited the “threats” of Islam and Christian heterodoxy to support their appeals to the government for support for the designation and expansion of Orthodox spaces. Within those spaces, ecclesiastical authorities policed Christian practices and restricted interfaith interaction. This use of sacred objects as instruments of power ensured that they became targets of the anticolonial violence that overtook Central Asia in 1916, of revolutionary terror, and of state repression after 1917.

Historiographical Context

Most of the limited scholarship on Orthodox Christianity in Central Asia has focused on the largely unsuccessful Orthodox mission to the native inhabitants of the Qazaq steppe. Multiple scholars have attributed the failure of this mission to the demand that Orthodox converts assimilate to Russian culture and to lack of cooperation by the imperial government.⁹ In a more expansive study, Niccolò Pianciola provides an overview of the establishment of Orthodox Christianity in Central Asia over the imperial and early Soviet periods.¹⁰ This important contribution is, however,

⁷ S. I. Alekseeva, *Sviatishii Sinod: V sisteme vysshikh i tsentral'nykh gosudarstvennykh uchrezhdenii poreformennoi Rossii, 1856–1904* (St. Petersburg, Nauka, 2006).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁹ Robert Geraci, “Going Abroad or Going to Russia? Orthodox Missionaries in the Kazakh Steppe, 1881–1870,” in *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia*, ed. Geraci and Michael Khodarkovsky (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 274–310; Tomohiko Uyama, “A Particularist Empire: The Russian Policies of Christianization and Military Conscriptation in Central Asia,” in *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Asia*, ed. Uyama (Hokkaido: Slavic Research Center, 2007), 23–63; Yuriy Malikov, “Disadvantaged Neophytes of the Privileged Religion: Why Qazaqs Did Not Become Christians,” in *Islam, Society and States across the Qazaq Steppe (18th–Early 20th Centuries)*, ed. Niccolò Pianciola and Paolo Sartori (Vienna: OAW, 2013), 181–212.

¹⁰ Niccolò Pianciola, “Orthodoxy in the Kazakh Territories (1850–1943),” in *Kazakhstan: Religions and Society in the History of Central Eurasia*, ed. Gian Luca Bonora, Pianciola, and Paolo Sartori (New York: Umberto Allemandi, 2010), 237–54.

confined to a book chapter and focuses on the Qazaq people. Russian-language scholarship is also largely limited to short articles, focusing primarily on religious architecture.¹¹ An important exception is the work of Ekaterina Ozmitel', including her 2003 monograph, in which she examines the development of Orthodox culture in prerevolutionary Kyrgyzstan, the modern borders of which encompassed most of the imperial oblast of Semirech'e, the epicenter of Russian settlement in Central Asia.¹² The only English-language monograph to seriously engage with the topic is Aileen Friesen's recent book on the Church's expansion into "Siberia," including the northern Qazaq steppe.¹³ This territory had been first nominally incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1731 after the submission of Abu'l-Khayr Khan of the Qazaq Junior Zhuz and was administratively consolidated into the Governor-Generalship of the Steppe in 1882. Friesen observes that the imperial government utilized the Orthodoxy of Slavic settlers as an agent for the assimilation of this territory into the Russian Empire. Yet the convergence of settlers from various corners of the empire revealed great diversity in the practice of Orthodox Christianity, leading to conflicts within newly established parishes. Friesen's observations hold true for Orthodoxy in the rest of Russian-controlled Central Asia, which was incorporated into the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan in 1867.

This article focuses on sacred objects as an essential feature of the spread of Orthodox Christianity in Central Asia.¹⁴ Sacred objects served as the nuclei of Orthodox sacred spaces, liturgical practice, and the social networks that sustained the official Church. I begin the article with a discussion of the centrality of sacred objects in Orthodox practice and of their consequent political significance in the Russian Empire. I also discuss the use of Orthodox objects and spaces in the anchoring of Russian identity in territories annexed by the Russian Empire. The article then turns to the creation of sacred objects in imperial Russian Turkestan, focusing on the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, built on the bank of Lake Issyk-Kul', and on the sacred spring described above. Although both of these objects,

¹¹ A. Bicherova, ed., *K istorii khristianstva v Srednei Azii, XIX-XX vv.* (Tashkent: Uzbekiston, 1998).

¹² E. E. Ozmitel', *Pravoslavie v Kirgizii XIX-XX vv.: Istoricheskii ocherk* (Bishkek: Kyrgyzsko-rossiiskii slavianskii universitet, 2003).

¹³ Aileen Friesen, *Colonizing Russia's Promised Land: Orthodoxy and Community on the Siberian Steppe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

¹⁴ For another example of the study of Central Asia through physical objects, see the online museum project organized by Botakoz Kassymbekova, Alexander Morrison, and Edmund Herzig, *Soviet Central Asia in 100 Objects*, <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/soviet-central-asia-100-objects>.

or sites,¹⁵ were incorporated into the colonial project of the official Church, the spring was established on the basis of popular piety, while the monastery was established at the initiative of the bishop of Turkestan and heavily subsidized by the government. Because of its close association with the imperial regime, I argue, the monastery was attacked in the anticolonial uprising of 1916. Other Orthodox sacred objects, such as parish churches and icons, were destroyed or defaced by insurgents. The 1916 revolt was provoked by a variety of factors, including the conscription of native Central Asians into the military, the rapid influx of settlers, and the fact that “both the ideology and the exercise of empire proved hostile to the very existence of pastoral societies.”¹⁶ Yet I argue that the use of Orthodox sacred objects as tools of colonial hegemony was an important factor in inciting the uprising. These objects were also destroyed or repurposed for secular functions in the revolutionary violence of 1917, in an analogous campaign to alter the social and political orientation of the region. The monastery, which received the most generous state subsidies of all the Orthodox sites in Turkestan, ceased to exist as a sacred object after the revolution. While the sacred spring escaped the violence of 1916, the Soviet authorities later destroyed the original church and suppressed the site. The spring, however, along with many other sacred sites, continued to attract quiet veneration throughout the Soviet period and reemerged as part of the common religious heritage of the independent states of Central Asia. This outcome demonstrated the ultimately destructive influence of the imperial agenda on the Church in Central Asia, as well as the indispensability of a social foundation to the Church’s survival.

Sacred Objects as Beacons of Church and Empire

In Orthodox cosmology, God operates in the world through the medium of tangible matter. This understanding stems from the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ, which sanctified the material world. In the words of St. John of Damascus (676–749), Orthodoxy’s most important apologist for the veneration of icons: “I do not worship matter; I worship the creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease

¹⁵ “Sacred object” is my translation of the Russian word *sviatynia*, which describes sacred objects of all sizes, from the smallest relics to the largest consecrated structures.

¹⁶ Jeff Sahadeo, “Conquest, Colonialism, and Nomadism on the Eurasian Steppe,” *Kritika* 4, 4 (2003): 945.

honoring the matter that wrought my salvation!”¹⁷ Just as Christ healed the blind man by smearing mud over his eyes (John 9:1–12), so does the Holy Spirit flow through earthly matter. Writing from Paris in 1932, the Russian Christian philosopher Sergei Bulgakov explained:

All that is spiritual is material, is clothed in a body. Therefore, we perform all the sacraments having at our disposal a certain material of the sacrament—bread and wine, oil, myrrh, water, and, in the extreme case, word and touch. Therefore, we “sanctify” or “bless” water, icons, temples, and so on; and that, in general, is why we have holy things, holy places and objects.¹⁸

The most important of such objects are the bodily remains of saints, or relics (*moshchi*). Their physical presence can perform miracles, such as healing the sick. Moreover, Orthodox sacred space is derived from relics. In the same essay, Bulgakov described: “The rule according to which the liturgy is celebrated upon holy relics, sown into the antimension, and according to which the holy altar has holy relics at its foundation, this rule became a part of the Church’s practice early on and was confirmed by the Seventh Ecumenical Council.”¹⁹ In the absence of the actual remains of a saint, Orthodox Christians turn to what Robert Greene calls “proxy relics.” Items that have touched a saint’s body or icons of a saint, also perform miracles and make possible the establishment of sacred spaces in which the liturgy can be performed.²⁰ Moreover, the structures that are built around relics, churches, or monasteries are consecrated and become themselves sacred objects, capable of healing and other miracles.²¹ Finally, sacred objects such as holy springs can emerge within communities, often as a result of a vision or other mystical experience, and develop into a local tradition. Such sacred objects (*sviatyni*), such as the planks used to build the altar of the Church of the Holy Spring near Almaty, can perform the function of relics in the designation of sacred space.

Sacred objects have played important political roles throughout Russian history. In the heartland of medieval Muscovy, the Troitsa-Sergieva Lavra

¹⁷ John of Damascus, “First Apology,” in *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: The Essential Texts*, ed. Bryn Geffert and Theofanis G. Stavrou (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 198.

¹⁸ Sergius Bulgakov, *Relics and Miracles: Two Theological Essays*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

²⁰ Robert H. Greene, *Bodies Like Bright Stars: Saints and Relics in Orthodox Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 52–54.

²¹ “St. Sophia as a Miraculous Church (early 1200s),” in Geffert and Stavrou, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 177.

was built around the relics of the 14th-century St. Sergii of Radonezh, who blessed Moscow's first successful military operation against the Tatars at Kulikovo. By the 19th century, the lavra was a site of mass pilgrimage and a symbol of the Russian nation.²² The ecclesiastical authorities strove to regulate the veneration of these objects, with varying degrees of success. Diocesan consistories and parish priests were tasked with preventing "superstition" or fraud by investigating the appearance of unsanctioned holy objects, such as miracle-working icons.²³ This policing of religious practice provoked dissidence, and in some cases holy objects were created in acts of defiance of the hierarchy. In early 20th-century Bessarabia, for example, followers of the charismatic monk Inochentia of Balta, deemed heretical by the Holy Synod, dug holy wells to create their own sacred spaces.²⁴ More commonly, however, Synodal directives coexisted with local traditions.²⁵ The Synod lacked the capacity to exert complete control over the designation of sacred spaces and objects throughout the empire.

Russia's political and ecclesiastical leaders used sacred objects to consecrate territory seized from the non-Orthodox throughout the history of Russia's imperial conquests. Valerie Kivelson points out that Muscovite rulers marked the conquest of Siberian lands in the 17th century with the construction of churches, rather than attempting to convert subjugated populations: "ambitious plans for mass conversion made little sense in the world that the Russians inhabited, where religious divides were too fissiparous to be easily categorized and the struggle too multifaceted to be won."²⁶ This prioritization of land over people in the Church's expansion was reinforced in 1773 by the Synod's Edict of Toleration. Composed under the direction of Catherine II, the edict was primarily intended to mitigate discontent among the empire's Muslim subjects and forbade Orthodox clergymen from interfering with Muslim practices. The governor-general of "New Russia" even resisted the establishment of a diocesan see in Crimea until 1848, out of concern that it would provoke unrest.²⁷

²² Scott M. Kenworthy, *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism, and Society after 1825* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 173–83, 266.

²³ Vera Shevzov, "Petitions Regarding Miracle-Working Icons," in Coleman, *Orthodox Christianity*, 229–48.

²⁴ Roland Clark, *Sectarianism and Renewal in 1920s Romania* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 79.

²⁵ Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 173.

²⁶ Valerie Kivelson, *Cartographies of Tsardom: The Land and Its Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 165–66.

²⁷ Mara Kozelsky, *Christianizing Crimea: Shaping Sacred Space in the Russian Empire and Beyond* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 40.

By the mid-19th century, the mission to spread Orthodoxy was increasingly decoupled from the Russian imperial project at the administrative level by officials who were concerned to avoid provoking religious animosity among subjugated populations. Yet it was at this time that prominent members of the hierarchy came to identify the Church and its sacred objects with Russian national-confessional identity. This view stemmed, in part, from the strategy of conservative clergymen to secure the Church's privileged status through a political alliance with the autocracy.²⁸ Recent scholarship has discussed the role of miracle-working icons and monasteries in the empire's multiconfessional, multinational western provinces in serving as "bastions" of Russian identity and of monks as purveyors of Russian nationalist propaganda.²⁹ The Church's nation-building project confronted inconvenient circumstances there and on the southern and eastern frontiers of the empire, where Cossacks and migrant settlers were prone to adopt the languages and cultural practices of the non-Russian peoples with whom they interacted.³⁰ Religious diversity and interfaith contact among settlers provoked anxiety among church and state leaders that frontier communities would fall prey to the seduction of Christian heterodoxy or Islam. For "Orthodox nationalists," as I call them, the adulteration of official Orthodoxy amounted to the dilution of Russianness, which posed a threat to the territorial integrity of the empire. Some officials hoped that the establishment of sacred objects as centers of pilgrimage, veneration, and monastic contemplation would link the surrounding territory and population, via the official Church, to the Russian nation and state.

Sacred Objects in Turkestan

The Church first established a presence in what was to become the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan in the oblast of Semirech'ye. The fortress of Vernoe was built there in 1854 and grew into Verny (modern Almaty), the capital city of the oblast, in 1867. Over the next decade, more Cossack *stanitsy* were established in Semirech'ye, each with its own garrison

²⁸ John Strickland, *The Making of Holy Russia: The Orthodox Church and Russian Nationalism before the Revolution* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Publications, 2013).

²⁹ James M. White, "Russian Orthodox Monasticism in Riga Diocese, 1881–1917," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 62, 3–4 (2020): 373–98; Liliya Berezhnaya, "Bastions of Faith in the Oceans of Ambiguities: Monasteries in the East European Borderlands (Late Nineteenth–Beginning of the Twentieth Century)," in *Rampart Nations: Bulwark Myths of East European Multiconfessional Societies in the Age of Nationalism*, ed. Berezhnaya and Heidi Hein-Kircher (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 146–87.

³⁰ Yuri Malikov, *Tsars, Cossacks, and Nomads: The Formation of a Borderland Culture in Northern Kazakhstan in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Berlin: Klaus Schwartz, 2011).

church.³¹ Yet the colonial government limited the Church's ability to expand its presence in the new territory. On 9 December 1871, Ober-Procurator of the Synod Dmitrii Tolstoi informed Konstanin von Kaufman, the first governor-general of Turkestan (1867–81), of the decision to create a diocese in the province and to ask for assistance in the establishment of headquarters for the new bishop, Sofoniia (Sokol'skii), in Tashkent. Kaufman responded in January that the residence of a bishop in Tashkent would likely incite unrest. Jeff Sahadeo points out that the governor-general was concerned that a strong church presence in the capital could both provoke discontent among the Muslim population and present a challenge to his own authority.³² Kaufman therefore suggested that Sofoniia take up residence in the more rural region of Semirech'e.³³ The "Diocese of Turkestan and Tashkent" was, therefore, headquartered in Verny in 1872. From then until 1917, the bishops of Turkestan would be enthusiastic supporters of Russian imperial hegemony in Turkestan, despite the colonial government's restriction of their influence in the region.

The creation of Orthodox sacred objects was more challenging in Turkestan than in other frontier regions of the empire, as there was no historical legacy of Orthodox Christianity to be restored. Bishop Aleksandr (Kulchitskii) of Turkestan (1878–83), nevertheless, designated a sacred site with complex religious associations for the first Orthodox monastery in the territory. This was on the northern bank of Lake Issyk-Kul', about 12 kilometers from the town of Przheval'sk (modern Karakol). The geographer Petr Semen-Tian-Shanskii (1827–1914) and other scholars had written of evidence contained in a Catalanian atlas from 1375 of an Armenian monastery at this location, long since submerged within the lake and purported to contain the relics of St. Matthew.³⁴ There was also an aspen grove on this part of the lake, which, according to the Qazaq intellectual Chokan Valikhanov, was venerated by the native Kyrgyz as a holy place.³⁵ The area

³¹ Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 183–84.

³² Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865–1923* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 49.

³³ Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv respubliki Uzbekistan (TsGA RUz) f. I-1, op. 20, d. 6464, l. 2 ob. (Ob otkrytii Turkestanskoi eparkhii).

³⁴ The ruins of the Armenian monastery were finally discovered in 2005 (E. E. Ozmitel', "Monastyr' 'brat'ev-armian' na ozere Issyk-Kul'," *allKyrgyzstan*, 30 January 2008, <http://www.allkyrgyzstan.com/kyrgyzstan/history/historic-monuments/armenian-monastery-on-lake-issyk-kul.htm>).

³⁵ V. G. Sobolev, "Ak Bulun (Svetlyi Mys) kak primer religioznogo sinkretizm v Tsentral'noi Azii," in *Lavrovskii sbornik: Materialy XXXVI i XXXVII Sredneaziatsko-Kavkazskikh chtenii 2012–2013 gg. Etnologii, istoriia, arkheologii, kul'turologii*, ed. Iu. Iu. Karpov and M. E.

contained large numbers of kurgans, the burial mounds of the ancient Saka people, as well. It is likely that Aleksandr's selection of the site was at least partially motivated by its sacrality, which he intended to make Orthodox. The territory also contained some of the best farmland in the region, as well as fishing and pasture for livestock, which would all be appropriated for the Church.

The oblast of Semirech'ie was administratively separated from Turkestan and attached to the new Governor-Generalship of the Steppe from 1882 to 1899, meaning that the capital of the diocese was removed from the administrative boundaries of Turkestan.³⁶ This transfer allowed Bishop Aleksandr to circumvent Kaufmann's restrictions against missionary activity in Turkestan and appeal to Governor-General of the Steppe Gerasim Kolpakovskii for permission to establish a "missionary monastery" on Lake Issyk-Kul'. He argued that the monastery, in addition to serving as an object of veneration for Russians, could attract the native Kyrgyz to the Church: "With the establishment of a monastery, which is itself a sacred object [*sviatynia*], and in which, one hopes, there will be installed some holy icon or part of an imperishable holy relic, a local center will be created, which will attract the offerings of pious people as well as worshippers, eager to pray and fast within the monastery, near the holy objects."³⁷ Kolpakovskii approved the petition, and the Orthodox Missionary Society designated 20,000 rubles for construction of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity or, as it was more commonly known, the Monastery of Issyk-Kul'. The monastery never obtained an incorrupt holy relic, and its most sacred object was to be an icon of the Trinity, commissioned to mark the consecration of the community's first church in 1887. Dedicated to the "eternal memory of those selfless parents" who had sponsored the monastery, the icon was engraved with the names of Kolpakovskii and Konstantin Pobedonostsev, ober-procurator of the Synod, indicative of the endeavor's close association with imperial officialdom.³⁸

The first monk to die in 1888 was buried in one of the kurgans. The last archimandrite of the monastery (1915–17) later remarked that the "monastery kurgans" must date back to the time of Tamerlane or Batu Khan.³⁹

Rezvan (St. Petersburg: Muzei antropologii i etnografii Rossiiskoi akademii nauk [MAERAN], 2013), 443–49.

³⁶ Pianciola, "Orthodoxy in the Kazakh Territories," 241.

³⁷ Dmitrii Bulgakovskii, *Issyk-Kul'skii Pravoslavnyi missionerskii monastyr' v Srednei Azii* (St. Petersburg: V. S. Balashev, 1896), 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁹ E. E. Ozmitel', "Arkhimandrit Irinarkh (Shemanovskii), Dnevnik o razgrome Issyk-Kul'skogo monastyria," *Vostok svyshe* 40, 1–2 (2016): 35.

Despite this underestimation of their antiquity, the monks perceived the kurgans as a significant feature of the region's sacred landscape, which they sought to make Orthodox: "and, on a kurgan near the monastery's dwellings, there appeared the first wooden cross on a fresh grave."⁴⁰ In an ironic inversion of this symbolic appropriation, the monks purchased a yurt from the Kyrgyz to shelter their altar, icons, and other sacred objects when an earthquake destroyed their church later that year.⁴¹

As a sacred object, the monastery enjoyed little success at attracting either the native population or devout Orthodox Christians. Monks were recruited from other parts of the empire. Several novices came and went before 1886, when the monastery acquired an archimandrite and seven other monks from the St. Michael Trans-Kuban Athos Monastery. Two years later, however, this archimandrite and five other monks abandoned the community. In 1894, eight monks from Valaam joined the monastery. Despite the instability of the community, the monastery continued to receive funding and additional land grants from the government. The monks relied on the native population to provide them with agricultural workers, as well as markets for their products. Nevertheless, their relationship with the Kyrgyz was not amicable. Conflicts arose when nomads infringed upon the monastery's land to graze their herds. During one such confrontation, a terrified monk found himself lassoed by a mounted Kyrgyz.⁴² The only service that the monks performed for the local population seems to have been instruction at the monastery's grammar school, which had only three students in 1906, two Russians and one Kyrgyz boy.⁴³ For the native people, the monastery's primary significance was likely its demonstration of Russian domination of the territory, quite similar to the mission that Orthodox nationalists envisioned for it.

Other Orthodox sacred objects were spread thinly throughout the vast territory of Turkestan. In 1898, a government decree returned Semirech' e to Turkestan, and added Transcaspia. The diocese of Turkestan and Tashkent, which once again coincided with the administrative boundaries of the province, also encompassed the oblasts of Samarkand, Fergana, Syr-Darya, and Amu-Darya, a territory larger than that of France and Germany combined.⁴⁴ The migration of colonial settlers increased significantly at

⁴⁰ Bulgakovskii, *Issyk-Kul'skii Pravoslavnyi missionerskii monastyr'*, 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17–19, 29.

⁴³ TsGA RUz f. I-961, op. 1, d. 821, l. 9 (Vedomosti ob Issyk-Kul'skom monastyre).

⁴⁴ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA) f. 796, op. 442, d. 2676, l. 1 (Otchet o sostoianii Turkestanskoi eparkhii za 1914 god).

the end of the 19th century. By 1911, the official number of settlers had reached 406,607, over half of whom lived in Semirech'e.⁴⁵ This population was dwarfed by that of Turkestan's native Muslims, estimated to be around seven million.⁴⁶ Articles in *Turkestanskije eparkhial'nye vedomosti* complained of the "fanaticism" of the Muslim population and of the "mass of Muslim sacred objects [*sviatyni*] in the region."⁴⁷ Church leaders were concerned that unmediated proximity to Muslim places of worship would cause settlers to "succumb to the predation of Islam" and periodically appealed to local authorities to deny authorization for the construction of new mosques, "which may present a religious temptation for those Christians living alongside Mohamedans."⁴⁸ Thus diocesan leaders continually turned to state authority to defend the Church against the threat they perceived from Islam, despite the reticence of the colonial government to openly do so. According to Bishop Innokentii (Pustynskii) of Turkestan (1912–23), nowhere else in the empire was the Church so closely associated with the Russian military. Cossack detachments escorted the bishop when he traveled, while the governor-general and other colonial officials were greeted by the ringing of church bells and icon processions when they arrived in urban centers.⁴⁹ For Innokentii, this association was a logical feature of the Church's bond with the Russian nation and empire. In a 1914 report to the Synod, Innokentii declared: "Thus, ... on the borders of the great Russian land there is created a living wall composed of the blood of Rus', faith and enlightenment."⁵⁰ Innokentii and other diocesan leaders hoped to secure state support for the Church's physical presence in the region by identifying Orthodoxy with imperial expansion.

Church leaders obtained government resources, via the Synod, to disseminate sacred objects throughout Turkestan in order to carve Orthodox spaces out of the territory. The Synod funded the construction of churches "east of the Urals," through the Special Council on Satisfying the Religious Needs of Settlers, established in 1908.⁵¹ As Friesen points out, this council

⁴⁵ Jennifer Keating, *On Arid Ground: Political Ecologies of Empire in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 106.

⁴⁶ Daniel Brower, *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.

⁴⁷ Protoierei E. Eliseev, "Uchrezhdenie protivomusul'manskoi missii v Turkestanskoj eparkhii," *Turkestanskije eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 16 (1913), 356.

⁴⁸ "Raz"iasnenie Sviatogo Sinoda," *Turkestanskije eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 7 (1914), 169.

⁴⁹ RGIA f. 796, op. 442, d. 2676, l. 40.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 22.

⁵¹ L. I. Sherstova, ed., *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' v tsentral'noaziatskikh okrainakh Rossijskoi imperii (vtoraia polovina XIX–nachalo XX veka): Sbornik dokumentov i izvlechenii* (Barnaul: Altaiskij gosudarstvennyj universitet, 2017), 82–83.

remained in operation until the revolution and worked to ensure that funding for church construction was incorporated into plans for the ongoing colonization of Siberian and Central Asian territories.⁵² A Turkestan affiliate of this committee was established in Verny in order to identify communities most in need of places of worship and to obtain funding for their construction. While settler communities were encouraged to take out loans to establish parishes, Bishop Antonii (Abashidze) of Turkestan (1906–12) remarked at the committee's first meeting in 1908 that "parish houses as well as churches can be built only through the disbursement of state funds."⁵³ Turkestan's diocesan leaders regarded newly consecrated objects as something like vulnerable outposts in hostile territory. In 1909, Antonii halted the sale of an abandoned military church to prevent its appropriation for Islam: "And only thanks to my petition to the local military authorities was I able to prevent the disgrace of a public sale of an Orthodox temple, probably to some Muslim dreaming of turning it into a mosque."⁵⁴ Despite this church-building campaign, many Orthodox communities remained cut off from Orthodox sacred objects and spaces. Newly established settlements could be separated from the nearest parish church by many miles and by geographic obstacles. The Synod addressed this problem by dispatching "parish-less priests" to travel through the territory on horseback. Each carried an antimimension, the altar cloth with a small relic sewn into it that is required for the liturgy in the Orthodox tradition.⁵⁵ These traveling priests often shared the episcopate's belief that the settlers' Orthodox identity was threatened by their immersion in a Muslim environment, including the very landscape. One priest from Moscow compared the settlers to the Israelites living in Babylonian captivity, "among the Muslim mountains."⁵⁶ The hierarchy's depiction of Islam as a looming threat to the Church in Turkestan served to justify their requests for state funding to build, circulate, and protect sacred objects.

Christian heterodoxy presented another challenge to the imperial agenda of Orthodox nationalists in Turkestan, especially after the

⁵² Friesen, *Colonizing Russia's Promised Land*, 44–45.

⁵³ Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Respubliki Kazakhstan (TsGA RK) f. 115, op. 1, d. 51, l. 9 (Turkestanskii eparkhial'nyi komitet po ustroistvu tserkovnogo byta pereselentsev, g. Verny, 1908–15).

⁵⁴ RGIA f. 796, op. 442, d. 2307, l. 10 (Otchet o sostoianii Turkestanskoi eparkhii za 1908–9 g.).

⁵⁵ TsGA RK f. 115, op. 1, d. 51, ll. 10–10 ob.

⁵⁶ Raz"ezdnoi sviashchennik Ioann Sokolov, "Moi putevyia vpechatleniia i pervoe znakomstvo s Turkestanskim kraem," *Turkestanskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 4 (15 February 1912), 96.

1906 Edict of Toleration legalized conversion away from Orthodoxy to other Christian denominations. For Orthodox nationalists, the refusal of Protestant “sectarians” to venerate saintly relics and other sacred objects completely unmoored them from the Russian imperial project.⁵⁷ In the same year as the edict, at the urging of diocesan leaders, the colonial government restricted state subsidies for migration to the Turkestanian oblasts of Syr-Darya, Fergana, and Samarkand to “individuals of Russian descent and Orthodox confession.”⁵⁸ In 1911, members of “sectarian” confessions were officially, albeit ineffectively, prohibited from migrating to Turkestan.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Orthodox communities themselves presented a more subtle challenge to the hierarchy’s efforts to anchor national-confessional identity in sacred objects. Due to their “priestlessness” (*bezpopovshchina*), isolated settler communities often created places of worship and other materials necessary for religious practice, such as holy water, without the sanction of ordained clergy. Traveling priests frequently complained of these unsanctioned sacred objects, which they associated with superstition or regional identity. One such priest questioned settlers’ motives for creating their own sacred spaces and attributed questionable Orthodoxy to their Siberian origins. “Many, especially the Siberians, fail to attend liturgy for as long as a year; and the same people act as readers for the sake of money, reading akathists, commemorative services, and even blessing holy water, claiming that they were permitted to do so in Siberia.”⁶⁰ The clergy of Turkestan sometimes suppressed unsanctioned sacred objects. In 1911, for example, a clerical superintendent (*blagochinnyi*) in Semirech’e concluded that the local veneration of a holy spring was based on “fantasy” (*vymyshlenie*) and forbade the practice.⁶¹ Due to their limited capacity to supervise the far-flung Orthodox population of Turkestan, however, the diocesan clergy sometimes compromised with popular piety, acknowledging sacralization of the landscape by settler communities when convenient.

In 1910, the archpriest, missionary, and prominent Orthodox nationalist Ioann Vostorgov visited the diocese of Turkestan and Tashkent.

⁵⁷ “Pochemu sektanty ne pochitaiut sviatykh i sv. moshchei?” *Turkestanskii eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, no. 19 (1 October 1913), 456–61.

⁵⁸ TsGA RUz f. I-961, op. 1, d. 989, l. 4 ob. (Perepiska po voprosu proektu zasedaniia turkestanskogo kraia litsam tol’ko pravoslavnogo veroispovedaniia).

⁵⁹ “Vospreshchenie pereseleniia v Turkestanskii krai sektantov i ratsionalistov,” *Turkestanskii eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, no. 22 (15 November 1912), 567.

⁶⁰ Sviashchennik P. Shvabe, “Pereselencheskii prikhod,” *Turkestanskii eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, no. 6 (15 March 1914), 129.

⁶¹ “Po povodu zametki ‘Sviatoi Kolodets,’” *Turkestanskii eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, no. 16 (15 August 1911), 345.

Vostorgov was a member of the Special Council on Satisfying the Religious Needs of Settlers, then working in collaboration with the Resettlement Administration to provide settlers with churches and religious schools. He had been tasked with traveling through Central and East Asia to personally assess the specific needs of Orthodox communities in Russia's frontier territories.⁶² Upon his arrival in Tashkent, Vostorgov delivered a speech in which he argued that peasant settlers, rather than soldiers, had made Turkestan part of the Russian Empire.⁶³ On 24 June, he attended a meeting in Verny of the Turkestan affiliate of the committee. In addition to funding church construction, Vostorgov suggested that the committee obtain land grants and funding for the establishment of

religious points [*religioznye punkty*], particularly the renovation of old and the establishment of new monasteries as centers of religious, educational, and economic culture. It is preferable to place ascetic monks in charge of these monasteries. And, in order to give them greater religious significance, the monasteries themselves should be provided with sacred objects [*sviatyni*], preferably mobile [*khodovyye*] ones, so that they can be taken to visit settlements in their region.⁶⁴

Through the creation of sacred objects, Vostorgov hoped to sacralize more of Turkestan for the Church, and to create beacons of the Orthodox Russian nation. Vostorgov proposed six potential sites: the Ili River, the Chu River, Lake Zankul', the Naryn Valley, Lake Ala-Kul', and the Holy Spring near Verny, described at the beginning of this article. Yet the diocese of Turkestan and Tashkent would receive neither the funding nor the relics from Russia proper to accomplish Vostorgov's grand strategy. Of the proposed sites, the only one to serve as a "religious point" was the Holy Spring, which was already venerated by the Cossack communities of Semirech'e. In this case, the hierarchy would endorse the popular veneration of a sacred object.

The spring was overseen by nuns of the Ivero-Serafim Convent, which had been established in the city of Verny in 1908.⁶⁵ The nuns built summer lodgings near the spring, and in 1909, the Church of the Icon of the

⁶² Friesen, *Colonizing Russia's Promised Land*, 45.

⁶³ Aileen Friesen, "Building an Orthodox Empire: Archpriest Ioann Vostorgov and Russian Missionary Aspirations in Asia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 27, 1–2 (2015): 62.

⁶⁴ TsGA RK f. 115, op. 1, d. 51, l. 32 ob.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the rapid growth of female monasticism in the late Russian Empire, see William Wagner, "The Transformation of Female Orthodox Monasticism in Nizhnii Novgorod Diocese, 1764–1929, in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Modern History* 78, 4 (2006): 793–845.

Mother of God was consecrated over the spring. The main reservoir lay in the center of the church, from which it flowed through pipes to a baptistery.⁶⁶ Perhaps in accordance with Vostorgov's proposal to endorse its sacred status, Bishop Innokentii participated in a pilgrimage to the spring in 1914. On 6 June, he joined an icon procession of several thousand people in honor of the sainted martyr Paraskeva, which set out from the Ivero-Serafim Convent at six in the morning. Just outside of the city, he was met by a detachment of Cossacks, who escorted his carriage in formation along the pilgrimage route. The bishop performed the liturgy at the first stop on the pilgrims' route, the Cossack stanitsa of Sofiiskaia. There he was told that the tradition of the procession, on the ninth Friday after Easter, had begun in the 1860s, in gratitude to God for having spared the village from locusts, and that the tradition had protected them ever since. The pilgrims then traveled another 22 versts (about 24 kilometers), arriving at the Holy Spring the next morning. In his report, Innokentii praised the piety and tenacity of the pilgrims but seemed less enthusiastic about the spring itself:

After performing the liturgy, although my clothes were soaked in sweat and my doctors had forbidden me to bathe in cold water to prevent a return of my rheumatism, I nevertheless decided to plunge into the spring.... Having crossed myself, I plunged into the water, but could remain for no more than a few seconds as it was cold as ice. Thanks to God, I sustained no harm.⁶⁷

Innokentii's fear of physical harm from the same water believed by pilgrims to cure ailments highlighted the distinction between his perception of sacred objects and the piety of those Orthodox communities that he sought to instrumentalize. The bishop demonstrated even more skepticism of local religious practice at the next stop on the route of the procession, at the settlement of Nadezhdinskoe. A month earlier, a novice from the convent in Verny and native of the settlement claimed to have found an icon in a spring after being told of its location in a dream. Much to the dismay of the owner of the property on which it was located, the community now considered the spring to be sacred. The bishop told the people that the icon should be shown the same respect as any other and decreed that it should be brought back to the Ivero-Serafim Convent: "Thus popular religious feelings were satisfied."⁶⁸ He expressed

⁶⁶ RGIA f. 796, op. 442, d. 2676, l. 25 (Otchet o sostoianii Turkestanskoi eparkhii za 1914 god).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 14 ob.–16 ob.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 20 ob.

the hope that, with the icon gone, the people would cease their veneration of this inconvenient site.

The native Muslim population was another integral component of the “sociocultural and ecological networks of relations” that facilitated the embodiment of the sacred for Orthodox Christians in Central Asia.⁶⁹ To be sure, many devout Central Asians objected to non-Muslim rule, which disrupted their faith and values. Writing in 1886, one Bukharan religious scholar complained that, under the Russian colonial government, “to live a life according to the rules of sharia is difficult because Christian women do not have the habit of covering their faces; alcoholism, gambling, and other forms of debauchery have no obstacles here and seem to be held in great esteem among all the available amenities.”⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Muslims contributed in many ways to the physical presence of Orthodox Christianity in the region. In 1854, for example, the Cossack regiment in Akmola (modern-day Astana) hired a Muslim Tatar contractor for 1,300 silver rubles to assist with the construction of the Cathedral of Constantine and Helena.⁷¹ Ozmitel’ points out that in Turkestan, Muslim merchants and even clergy contributed significant sums of money during general collections for the construction of “Russian mosques”—that is, churches.⁷² Priests accepted the hospitality of nomadic communities while traveling across the steppe to perform the liturgy for remote parishes.⁷³ Moreover, Central Asians who found themselves subjugated to the colonial economy supported Orthodox centers of worship less voluntarily. As Adeeb Khalid points out, “As Russian settlers put more and more land under the plow, they disrupted the nomadic way of life, forcing many Kazakhs to settle and take up agriculture or, in many cases, to become wage laborers for the settlers.”⁷⁴ Such was the situation of the Kyrgyz people who worked for the Issyk-Kul’ Monastery.

⁶⁹ Vasquez, *More Than Belief*, 296.

⁷⁰ Paolo Sartori, “What Do We Talk about When We Talk about ‘Decolonizing Russian History?’” *Austrian Academy of Sciences: Study of Islam in Central Asia*, 10 September 2022, <https://www.oaew.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/what-do-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-decolonizing-russian-history>.

⁷¹ TsGA RK f. 345, op. 1, d. 327, ll. 64–65 (Raport nachal’nika Akmolinskogo voennogo otriada).

⁷² Ekaterina Ozmitel’, “Pravoslavnye eparkhii na territorii Kirgizii (dorevoliutsionnyi period),” in *Russkie v Kirgystane: Nauchno-issledovatel’skie stat’i i materialy* (Bishkek: KRSU, 2002), 195.

⁷³ “Moi putevyia vpechatleniia i pervoe znakomstvo s Turkestanskim kraem,” *Turkestanskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, no. 4 (15 February 1912), 97.

⁷⁴ Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 104.

The embodiment of Orthodoxy in Turkestan was thus contingent on the settlers' ability to coexist and cooperate with Muslims.

Despite the potential for cooperation and coexistence, diocesan leaders saw peaceful interaction between Muslims and Christians as a threat to the Church. After all, Muslim charity could result in conversions, as in the case of a Cossack who accepted Islam when he found shelter in a Qazaq aul after receiving no relief from his poverty among Christians.⁷⁵ The hierarchy, therefore, called upon the secular authorities to enforce existing laws against proselytism among the Orthodox. In 1913, the governor-general of Turkestan responded to complaints of conversions to Islam, largely among "empty-headed women" who had married Muslim men, by sending the following instructions to military officials, district administrators, and city police of the province: "Maintain strict vigilance against the seduction of Orthodox Christians by Muslims; legally prosecute all natives for even the smallest attempt to seduce the Orthodox to accept Islam, and monitor Orthodox people who maintain close association with Muslims."⁷⁶ An account by one traveling priest of his reception by a settler community in 1914 suggests that these efforts to equate interfaith contact with apostasy bore fruit: "one woman quickly ran up to meet me, and said through tears: 'Thank God, we have been waiting for a priest. Living here for three years among the Kirgiz without hearing the liturgy, without fasting, without receiving communion, we have become Muslims.'"⁷⁷ The strategy of defining Orthodox space in opposition to Islam contributed to the dehumanization of Muslims in the eyes of some Christians, including the "missionary" monks of the Issyk-Kul' Monastery. According to the account of one Major General Korol'kov, someone within the monastery fired on a group of Kyrgyz who had led their starving herd to the monastery's hay barn during a period of hard frost (*dzhut*).⁷⁸ Orthodox nationalism thus exacerbated

⁷⁵ "Popytka k sovrashcheniiu v magometanstvo posle izdaniia Vysochaishago manifesta o svobode sovesti i prichiny sravnitel'noi uspehnosti magometanskoii propagandy sredi pravoslavnago naseleniia prilagaiushchikh k Vernomu mestnosti (vyvody osnovany na vsestoronnem izsledovanii imevshikh zdes' mesto sluchaev)," *Turkestanskii eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 2 (15 January 1910), 17–25.

⁷⁶ Protoierei Efrem Eliseev, "Mozhno li prirodnyim russkim pravoslavnyim perekhodit' v islam? Blagoe rasporiazhenie," *Turkestanskii eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 15 (1 August 1913), 329.

⁷⁷ "Iz dnevnika raz'ezdnoho sviashchennika," *Turkestanskii eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 7 (1 April 1914), 159–60. The word "Kirgiz" was used to refer to the peoples now known as Qazaqs and Kyrgyz.

⁷⁸ It is unclear from the account in what year this took place. "Protokol doprosa mirovym sudei 3-go uchastka przheval'skogo uezda V. N. Runovskim svidetelia-otstavnogo general-maiora Ia. I. Korol'kova o prichinakh i khode vosstaniia v przheval'skom uezde," in

the animosities woven into the social networks that supported Orthodox sacred objects.

Despite the colonial government's policy of preventing religious conflict, the persistent hostility of the diocesan leadership toward the Muslims of Turkestan made such conflict inevitable. In 1898, a charismatic Sufi sheikh, Muhammad Ali Sabyr, led a brief uprising in the district of Andijan, which killed 22 Russian soldiers before it was crushed. This uprising was generally condemned by Muslim intellectuals, most of whom saw violent resistance to colonial rule as futile.⁷⁹ Yet frustration at the religious harassment that Central Asians endured under Russian rule figured prominently in a 1905 speech delivered by the Qazaq intellectual Mukhamedzhan Tynyshpaev to the First Union of Autonomists, an organization convened in St. Petersburg to advocate greater freedom for the empire's national minorities:

The closing of mosques, madrasas, and houses of prayer, the banning and confiscation of religious books, the distribution of the Gospels in the Kirgiz language and the threat of exile to Siberia for those who do not want it ... the requirement that Kirgiz religious seminaries teach the Russian language, teaching by missionary teachers ... and a whole list of other insults and acts of violence against people's bodies and consciences—all of this, gentlemen, took place in the 19th and the 20th centuries, and it continues to take place to this very day in a distant land forgotten by people and by God. What can we call this but a crusade by the ignorant, theocratic, bureaucratic government of the Russian autocracy against the non-Russians and the non-Christians?⁸⁰

Tynyshpaev was elected to represent Turkestan at the Second Duma in 1906 but lost his seat the following year when election reform completely excluded Central Asian Muslims from representation. In 1916, the grievances of Russia's colonial subjects erupted in a brutal conflict across Central Asia.

Sacred Targets of Revolution

The 1916 uprising was a tragedy for settler communities and an even greater tragedy for the native population. The proximate cause of the violence was the decree of 25 June 1916, which ordered the conscription

Vosstanie 1916 goda v Kirgyzstane: Sbornik dokumentov, ed. E. S. Kaptagev (Bishkek: Uchkun, 2011), 91.

⁷⁹ Alexander Morrison, "Sufism, Pan-Islamism, and Information Panic: Nil Sergeevich Lykoshin and the Aftermath of the Andijan Uprising," *Past and Present*, no. 214 (2012): 258.

⁸⁰ Mukhamedzhan Tynyshpaev, *Istoriia Kazakhskogo naroda* (Almaty: Sanat, 2009), 27.

of native subjects of the empire (*inorodtsy*) to support military operations in Europe. The outrage provoked by this decree exacerbated more long-term resentment of the colonial regime, which had overseen the continual expropriation of native lands for use by peasant settlers. The revolt first broke out in the district (*uezd*) of Jizzakh on 12 July and spread to other parts of Turkestan and the steppe region over subsequent months. Approximately 3,000 settlers were killed, while an estimated 150,000 Central Asian people died in reprisal attacks or from starvation and exposure while attempting to flee the territory. The victims of this disaster far outnumbered all the deaths that had resulted from Russia's conquest of Central Asia over the preceding century.⁸¹ Bishop Innokentii began his report on these events with the declaration: "Last summer, the mountains and steppes of Turkestan witnessed a repetition of the bloody campaigns of Tamerlane."⁸² The revolt indicated that Orthodox nationalists had successfully connected Orthodox sacred objects with imperial Russian hegemony, for native Central Asians as well as for settlers.

Parish clergymen provided some of the most vivid descriptions of the attacks on settlements. According to these accounts, parish churches served as shelters for noncombatants, hospitals for the wounded, and as rallying points for defenders. Sacred objects and spaces served as focal points of their communities and were zealously defended. A priest in Jizzakh, for example, shunned the safety of the military fortifications after the first attack was repulsed in order to guard his church and the liturgical objects inside:

At six in the evening, everyone left the city. I alone remained, having resolved to fulfill the obligation of a pastor not to abandon the church entrusted to me until the last moment of my life. Having locked the church, I made preparations to burn the Host, antimensions, and consecrated oil so that they would not be desecrated by the fanatic natives and then to die myself. But the Lord showed mercy to His temple and to me, sinful one.⁸³

Almost every account included in the bishop's report on the uprising to the Synod expressed a similar concern for the community's sacred objects. When settlements were abandoned, vestments and liturgical instruments were taken along with food and other essentials. During one such exodus,

⁸¹ "Editors' Introduction," in *The Central Asian Revolt of 1916: A Collapsing Empire in the Age of War and Revolution*, ed. Aminat Chokobaeva, Cloé Drieu, and Alexander Morrison (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 1–26.

⁸² RGIA f. 796, op. 422, d. 2767, l. 68.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, l. 73 (Otchet o sostoianii Turkestanskoi eparkhii za 1916 god).

a priest instructed his parishioners to take these objects from his body if he were killed.⁸⁴ The priest of a village called Mikhailovskii in Semirech'e described the attack on his community on 10 August, which began with the killing of peasants working in the fields and then advanced to the settlement itself.

Some of them dashed at the prayer house and set fire to the barn next to it. I ran to it. One of the peasants fired at the Kirgiz, and as they fell back, I managed to rush into the prayer house to retrieve the sacred objects [*sviatyni*]: the antimention, cross, and Bible. When I ran back out, the mob of Kirgiz ran toward the prayer house again, but thanks to the shots fired by the peasants, they became confused and moved toward my home. Then I ran back to the prayer house and retrieved the vestments, epitrachelion, and prayer book. When I returned to the fortification, everyone rushed to kiss the holy cross. That is when it was clear that our Russian Orthodox people, in spite of any harmful influences from the enemies of Orthodoxy, bear great faith in their hearts.⁸⁵

In this case, the attack on Orthodox objects reinforced their sacrality and identification with the community's national-confessional identity.

The specific aims of the insurgents have been a subject of debate among historians because of the lack of written accounts by native participants in the uprising. Nevertheless, their specific targeting of churches and other sacred objects strongly suggests that the rebels intended to eliminate Orthodox sacred spaces, along with settler communities. Soldiers in Semirech'e reported that the Kyrgyz systematically destroyed all the icons and portraits of the imperial family in the churches of the villages they overran.⁸⁶ Around Lake Issyk-Kul', where some of the most extreme violence of the revolt took place, ten parish churches were destroyed. In his journal, the archimandrite of Issyk-Kul' Monastery, Irinarkh (Shemanovskii), described the defacing of icons: "In this church, all the faces of the saints on the lower level of the iconostasis had been gouged out with some kind of blunt instrument."⁸⁷ He also composed a detailed account of the attack on the monastery, the most conspicuous sacred object in the region.

⁸⁴ Ibid., l. 104.

⁸⁵ Ibid., l. 91.

⁸⁶ Pianciola, "Orthodoxy in the Kazakh Territories," 244.

⁸⁷ Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Kyrgyzskoi respubliki f. 75, op. 1, d. 45, l. 52 (Dnevnik nastoiatelia Issyk-Kul'skogo monastyrnia po kirgizskomu vosstaniuu 1916 goda). I am grateful to Aminat Chokobaeva for this reference.

It is revealing of the native people's prominent role in the local economy that Irinarkh's account begins by describing the withdrawal of Kyrgyz workers from their employment at the monastery and surrounding settlements as a prelude to the violence and the economic hardship this created, especially for the families of soldiers serving in the war.⁸⁸ News of the uprising reached the monastery on 10 August, after which Irinarkh and 20 other monks took refuge on an island in the lake. Twelve monks resolved to remain. One among them, Rafael, declared that the Kyrgyz would not harm them. The next day, the insurgents set fire to the monastery stables and surrounded the remaining monks in their church. Of these 12, 3 managed to hide and escape. The rest were dragged from the church, mutilated, and impaled. According to one survivor, the attackers were all known to the monks, and Rafael was decapitated by a former pupil of the grammar school.⁸⁹

In the aftermath of the revolt, the Church's sacred objects in Turkestan became the focus of a dispute between the diocesan authorities and the Orthodox population. Innokentii designated no diocesan funding for the restoration of parish communities but called on Orthodox Christians throughout Turkestan to contribute funds for the relief of victims of the violence. The chronic scarcity of resources among settler communities rendered such grassroots efforts challenging. By September, parish churches in Semirech'ie and Merv had raised a modest 572.94 rubles for this effort.⁹⁰ This sum was later augmented by the seizure of livestock and other resources from native communities in retribution for the uprising. In November, Irinarkh composed a detailed account of his monastery's losses, including money, cattle, buildings, agricultural equipment, and liturgical instruments, the combined value of which he estimated at a staggering 135,690 rubles. He presented this report to the Przheval'sk committee for the provision of compensation to victims of the revolt. The committee replied that compensation would be provided only for the monks' personal losses, not for common monastic property.⁹¹ It was clearly beyond the capacity of the devastated settler communities of Semirech'ie to rebuild this state-subsidized monastic complex. Yet parish communities were anxious

⁸⁸ Ozmitel', "Arkhimandrit Irinarkh (Shemanovskii), Dnevnik," 29.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 35–41.

⁹⁰ "K svedeniiu zhertvovatelei na voennye nuzhdy i na nuzhdy bezhentsev," *Turkestanskii eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 19 (1 October 1916), 267–68.

⁹¹ TsGA RUz f. I-961, op. 1, d. 1320, ll. 1–5 (Opis' imushchestva sv. Troitskogo Issyk-Kul'skogo monastyria).

to restore their own sacred spaces, and the bishop's neglect of their devastated churches fueled popular resentment of the hierarchy.

Innokentii, meanwhile, seized upon the outrage against the native population to once again petition for the transfer of his see to Tashkent. He argued that he could more effectively administer his diocese from the capital city: "If one looks at a map of Central Asia, the centrality of Tashkent becomes apparent, as this city connects the rail lines of all Russia's Central Asian domains. While Verny, bordering the Chinese Empire, lies on the periphery of this enormous, wealthy country."⁹² He obtained the support of Turkestan's new governor-general, Aleksei Kuropatkin, who had been assigned to restore order in the province in July 1916. In the aftermath of the revolt, Kuropatkin had no qualms about permitting a more conspicuous church presence in Tashkent. He endorsed the bishop's petition to the Synod for the designation of 33,000 rubles from diocesan coffers for the move and for construction of a new bishop's headquarters in Tashkent.⁹³ Innokentii also requested the elevation of his rank to archbishop and the creation of a Vicar Bishopric of Semirech'ie to replace him in Verny. On 1 January 1917, Innokentii announced the happy news that the Synod had granted his request:

Our joy should be doubled when we add that the Holy Synod, in its fatherly concern for the happiness and well-being of our remote province, has decided to elevate the diocese of Turkestan to the status of an archbishopric, as is usually the case for governor-generalships in the Russian Empire, so that we can adopt the prophetic words, spoken about Bethlehem: "and you, Turkestan, a pearl in the crown of the Russian tsar, you are no less than the other jewels adorning the tsar's crown" (Matthew 2:6).⁹⁴

Yet the tsar's crown was toppled the very next month, and Kuropatkin was expelled from Tashkent shortly thereafter by the revolutionary administration.

The news of his move to Tashkent was not met with the elation that Innokentii seemed to have expected. In the following summer of 1917, the parish clergy and laity of Turkestan planned a diocesan congress to discuss church reform. In anticipation of this congress, a group of clerical superintendents assembled in Przheval'sk on 30 May to prepare a statement:

⁹² RGIA f. 796, op. 202, d. 634, l. 3 (O perenesenii kafedry Turkestanskogo preosviashchennogo iz Vernogo v Tashkent).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, l. 7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, op. 422, d. 2767, l. 114 ob.

“The Przheval’sk superintendent congress, having discussed the question of the rebuilding of churches, prayer houses, schools, and clerical houses that were burned during the uprising of the Kirgiz, resolved to express their regret that the diocesan leadership, over the course of ten months, has taken no part in the restoration of church buildings.”⁹⁵ On 6 July, the diocesan congress convened in Verny with 22 clerical delegates and 23 lay delegates, including the mayor of Verny and the ataman of the Semirech’e Cossack Host. One delegate proclaimed, “The diocesan authorities have been shamed for their failure to take serious measures for the restoration of destroyed and defaced churches and prayer houses.”⁹⁶ Another delegate echoed the authorities’ own rhetoric by suggesting that the absence of sacred objects would tempt the Orthodox toward apostasy. “They have come up with 33,000 rubles for the construction of a bishop’s house and rush to satisfy this inconsequential need. Meanwhile, they have given us over to the sectarians, for we have neither prayer houses nor priests.”⁹⁷ The consistory secretary later responded to this comment in the diocesan journal: “and if Przheval’sk District is threatened by sectarians, which is doubtful, then the Issyk-Kul’ Missionary Monastery is nearby, under the leadership of Archimandrite Irinarkh, who is very experienced in antisectarian work.”⁹⁸ The congress, nevertheless, voted 23 to 21 in favor of a largely symbolic vote of no confidence (*nedoverie*) against Innokentii before his departure for Tashkent and the seizure of power there by the Bolshevik-dominated soviet.⁹⁹ Ever the survivor, Irinarkh dismissed the remaining monks at Issyk-Kul’ the following summer, declared himself an atheist, and joined the Bolshevik Party in Verny.¹⁰⁰ The monastery was officially closed in 1919 and was never restored.

After the suppression of the uprising, another movement emerged at the forefront of the struggle for control of Turkestan’s sacred landscape. The revolutionary movement had long targeted Orthodox places of worship

⁹⁵ Fr. Zaozerskii, “Pis’mo redaktsiui,” *Turkestanskii eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, no. 20 (15 October 1917), 342.

⁹⁶ Arkhimandrit Damaskin (Orlovskii), *Urmiiskaia tragediia: Zhitie sviashchennomuchnika Pimena (Belolikova), episkop Semirechenskogo i Vernenskogo* (Moscow: Regional’nyi obshchestvennyi fond ‘Pamiat’ muchenikov i ispovednikov Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi,” 2020), 438.

⁹⁷ Damaskin, *Urmiiskaia tragediia*, 437.

⁹⁸ “Turkestanskaia dukhovnaia konsistoriia,” *Turkestanskii eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, no. 17 (1 September 1917), 215–16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁰⁰ Ozmitel’, “Arkhimandrit Irinarkh (Shemanovskii), Dnevnik,” 26.

throughout the Russian Empire as symbols of tsarist authority.¹⁰¹ In 1908, five men broke into the Convent of St. Nicholas in Tashkent, stole money from the nuns at gunpoint “for the needs of the revolutionary committee,” and devoured the communion bread before making their escape.¹⁰² Soon after their seizure of power in Verny, the Bolshevik leadership launched a campaign against the Church that focused on the destruction or conversion of Orthodox sacred objects into organs of the new regime. On 13 March 1918, in a move reminiscent of the Issyk-Kul’ monks’ conversion of the kurgan into a Christian grave, the revolutionary administration repurposed the Ivero-Serafim Convent as an agricultural collective.¹⁰³ At the end of that year, they seized the building of the Semirech’e Church Consistory for use as the oblast marriage registration bureau (ZAGS). Among the workers in this new institution was the former Archimandrite Irinarkh. The consistory was transferred to the headquarters of Pimen (Belolikov), who had arrived in Verny in 1917 to serve as vicar bishop of Semirech’e. On 16 September, Pimen was arrested and murdered by revolutionary soldiers.¹⁰⁴ On a national scale, the Soviet authorities used the confiscation of sacred objects as a means of provoking protests, by which to justify the suppression of religious communities. In February 1922, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee announced the forcible confiscation of liturgical objects from parish churches as a means of purchasing food for famine victims. Clergy and parishioners, who had been delivering donations and nonessential church decorations to the authorities voluntarily, now resisted these confiscations and were punished with arrests and executions.¹⁰⁵ Like the Orthodox nationalists, the Soviet authorities perceived sacred objects and the spaces surrounding them as a source of identity for the population they sought to control.

It is significant that two of the most prominent advocates of Orthodox nationalism in the Church embraced the new regime soon after the revolution. Archimandrite Irinarkh joined the Bolshevik Party in 1918. Innokentii moved to Tashkent on 14 July 1917, where he was recognized as archbishop shortly before the seizure of power by the Bolshevik-dominated soviet. In an attempt to divide and weaken the Church, the Soviet dictatorship

¹⁰¹ Daniel Scarborough, *Russia’s Social Gospel: The Orthodox Pastoral Movement in Famine, War, and Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 55–56.

¹⁰² TsGA RŪz f. I-461, op. 1, d. 53, ll. 9–10 ob. (O vooruzhennom ograblenii Sviato-Nikolaevskogo zhenskogo monastyria, 1908).

¹⁰³ Damaskin, *Urmiiskaia tragediia*, 434.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 463–66.

¹⁰⁵ Anatolii Levitin and Vadim Shavrov, *Ocherki po istorii russkoi tserkovnoi smuty* (Küsnacht: Institut Glaube in Der 2. Welt, 1977), 76.

sponsored the dissident “renovationist” movement among the clergy. An obscure group that rejected the restoration of the Moscow Patriarchate in 1917, the renovationists were able to seize ecclesiastical positions and sacred buildings throughout the Soviet Union after forging an alliance with the regime.¹⁰⁶ In 1923, Innokentii himself became a renovationist bishop and was transferred to another diocese.¹⁰⁷ The defection of these diocesan leaders to the new regime was indicative of their reliance on political power, above and beyond the apostolic authority of the Church.

Tension had been building between the Orthodox laity and the Synodal hierarchy long before 1917 over the latter’s hegemonic control over the Church’s sacred objects. Laypeople had expressed growing resentment of the ecclesiastical administration’s appropriation of their financial contributions to their parishes for general diocesan needs, often to the neglect of their parish churches. Verny’s congress of clergy and laity was one of many diocesan congresses that convened in all 67 dioceses of the former empire over the summer of 1917 to discuss church reform, and in some cases to depose unpopular prelates. An almost universal demand of these assemblies was for parish communities to be recognized as legal owners of their churches and other parish property, in place of the diocesan leadership.¹⁰⁸ This movement within the Church to empower the laity helped Orthodox Christians to retain possession of their places of worship after a decree by the Soviet of People’s Commissars on 20 January 1918 deprived the Church of the right to own property. In June of that year, the Turkestan Orthodox Brotherhood was established by clergy and parishioners in Tashkent to organize charity and maintain parish churches. After Innokentii’s defection in 1923, the Union of Orthodox Parishes of the Diocese of Turkestan was founded to oppose the “renovationist” schism and administer the diocese in the absence of a canonical bishop.¹⁰⁹ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Orthodox communities mounted legal challenges to the destruction of their churches, hid relics to prevent their exhumation, and continued to venerate sacred objects after they were desecrated or placed in museums.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰⁷ Damaskin, *Urmiiskaia tragediia*, 439.

¹⁰⁸ Scarborough, *Russia’s Social Gospel*, 182.

¹⁰⁹ Liliia A. Kleimenova, “Sozdanie v Turkestanskoii eparkhii pravoslavnogo bratstva i soiuza prikhodov kak otvet tserkvi na goneniia 1918 i 1923 godov,” in *Pravoslavnye bratstva v istorii Rossii: K 100-letiiu vozzvaniia patriarkha Tikhona ob obrazovanii dukhovnykh soiuзов. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, ed. Iuliia Balakshina and Sergei Smirnov, 2 vols. (Moscow: Kul’turno-prosvetitel’skii fond “Preobrazhenie,” 2018) 1:135–57.

¹¹⁰ Greene, *Bodies Like Bright Stars*, 160–95.

After the first decade of Soviet rule, state persecution of religious practice intensified. Some Orthodox objects, such as the Ascension Cathedral in Alma-Ata, were closed to worshippers but preserved for their artistic value.¹¹¹ Others, such as the Holy Spring, were venerated in secret. The last archival evidence of the spring is found in an appeal on 29 October 1918 to the district ispolkom of Verny for “permission to move the church building of the Holy Spring to the settlement of Alekseevskoe.” Ol’ga Khodakovskaia speculates that the intention of the petitioners may have been the creation of some monument near the spot where Pimen (Belolikov) was murdered shortly after assuming the position of vicar bishop of Verny. The petition was denied, and the church was likely destroyed not long afterward.¹¹² In 2008, when Fr. Gleb was clearing debris from the spring for its restoration as a sacred site, he discovered large numbers of coins from almost every decade from the 1860s to the 1990s. The spring had been considered sacred long before the site was consecrated by the diocesan authorities in 1909. If the coins that Gleb discovered are evidence of veneration throughout the Soviet period, this would mean that the spring has been continuously venerated longer than any other Orthodox object in Central Asia, and with minimal involvement of the state or the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Conclusion

Church leaders, whom I have described as “Orthodox nationalists,” served as a driving force behind the initial embodiment of Orthodoxy in Central Asia. Despite the restrictions that the colonial government placed on the Church’s activity in the region, particularly under Kaufman’s administration, the leaders of the Diocese of Turkestan and Tashkent secured funding for church construction and “parish-less priests” so that Orthodox objects and spaces could spread throughout the region. The bishops and their allies in the Synod and imperial government supported their campaign for the Church’s expansion in the region by linking Orthodox objects with the Russian nation and empire. This utilization of sacred objects as instruments of empire entailed the imposition of control over the social networks that venerated and maintained them. Certain objects were selected and funded for their strategic value, while others were suppressed, and interfaith

¹¹¹ V. N. Proskurin, “Pravoslavie Semirech’ia v pamiatnikakh istorii i kul’ tury Kazakhstana (XIX–XX vv.),” in *K istorii khristianstva v Srednei Azii*, 55–56. Verny was renamed Alma-Ata in 1921.

¹¹² Ol’ga Khodakovskaia, *Tam gde siiaiat gornye vershiny: Dokumental’noe issledovanie zhizni i trudov preosviashchennogo Pimena episkopa Semirechenskogo i Vernenskogo, sviashchennomuchenika* (Almaty: n.p., 2012), 226.

contact was discouraged. The capacity of the diocesan hierarchy to control the religious practices of settlers across the vast territory of Turkestan was limited and compromise with popular religiosity inevitable. Yet the Orthodox nationalist agenda succeeded in exacerbating tensions between Christians and Muslims, contributing to the outbreak of violence in 1916. This anticolonial uprising devastated any semblance of Muslim-Christian collaboration. The revolt exposed both the volatility and the fragility of the Orthodox nationalist project. Of all the Orthodox sacred objects in Turkestan, none had received more generous or sustained support from the state than the Issyk-Kul' Monastery. Yet the monastic complex did not survive as a sacred site after the fall of the tsarist autocracy.

Orthodox nationalism composed only part of the "networks of relations" that supported the embodiment of Orthodox Christianity in Central Asia. Despite the substantial resources that diocesan leaders were able to deploy for church construction, the survival of Orthodox sacred objects in Central Asia depended on the sustained, broad-based support of Christian communities and their Muslim neighbors. By the early 20th century, much of the Orthodox population of the Russian Empire had become alienated from those members of the hierarchy who identified the Church with the increasingly unpopular autocracy. The February Revolution expedited a revolution in the Church, in which congresses of parish clergy and laity asserted the sovereignty of parish communities over their sacred objects.¹¹³ This ecclesiastical revolution unfolded in Turkestan when the parishes of Semirech'e found themselves abandoned in the aftermath of the 1916 uprising by their bishop, who had turned his attention to Tashkent and promotion to archbishop. Once the new Bolshevik regime began its campaign of antireligious terror against both Muslims and Christians, religious communities throughout Central Asia maintained their places of worship in the absence of centralized leadership. It is a great irony that a union of Orthodox parishes preserved their Church's sacred objects and sites from the control of an uncanonical, Bolshevik-affiliated hierarchy in the 1920s, when diocesan leaders had policed the religious practices of those very parish communities during the imperial period in order to preserve the purity of their Orthodoxy. The living and diverse sacred geography of contemporary Central Asia bears witness to the endurance of Muslim and

¹¹³ Catherine Evtuhov, "The Church's Revolutionary Moment: Diocesan Congresses and Grassroots Politics in 1917," in *Russian Culture in War and Revolution, 1914–1922*, Book 1: *Popular Culture, the Arts, and Institutions*, ed. Murray Frame, Boris Kolonitskii, Steven G. Marks, and Melissa K. Stockdale (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2014), 377–402.

Christian communities despite decades of persecution and to the capacity of these communities for peaceful coexistence.

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