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The Impact of Soviet Policy on Female Sufis in Chechnya

Lindsey Thomas ’08

I wrote this paper for a religion seminar Gender and Mysticism in Islam that I took with Professor Mahdi Tourage in the fall of 2007. The assignment was fairly open-ended: a research paper in any area of our choosing as long as the topic related to women and Sufism. A Russian history class I was taking concurrently with Professor Kira Stevens inspired me to study the influence of Soviet policy on Sufi women in Chechnya. While discussing Soviet policy within the Union in Russian history, we learned about how the Soviets sought to “free” the Muslim women from the shackles of Islam by physically ripping off their veils. This practice had a substantial backlash in Uzbekistan, and I was interested to see if the similar methods were utilized and a comparable reaction realized among the Sufi populations in the Soviet Union. I decided to focus my discussion on Chechnya, as the population had the most contact with the Soviet government. After much research, I concluded that Soviet policies which advocated gender equality did have an effect on female Sufi Chechens. Unlike in Uzbekistan however, the gender dialogue was forced into the background by the North Caucasian nationalist movement. In addition to gender policy the Soviets also forcefully deported the entire Chechen nation in 1944. One observed effect of these Soviet policies was the physical inclusion of women into the Chechen Sufi brotherhoods. Thus, while evidence exists to suggest Soviet gender policies influenced the position of women within Sufi orders, there is a lack of support for a subsequent change in societal attitudes toward gender norms.

In recent years the brutal war between Russia and Chechnya, a semi-autonomous region within the Russian Federation, has brought the nationalist tensions in the North Caucasus to international attention. However, the territory also has a long history of religious-based resistance to Russian rule. Islam arrived in Chechnya in the late 17th century. Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, gained a widespread following in the 18th century, and since then the region has exemplified what scholars call the “Sufi paradox.” This phrase is used to describe how Sufi leaders who follow the mystical path toward union with God also function as leaders in war.1 The Sufi paradox was first seen in Chechnya in the late 18th century with Sheikh Mansour, the first Naqshbandi imam in the North Caucasus, and his struggle against the Russians military advances.2 Moreover, this same phenomenon was also witnessed as recently as the first Russian-Chechen war from 1994 to 1996. During this period of fighting followers of the Kunta Haji, a branch of the Qadiri

order, supported the first Chechen president Dudayev and his goal of an independent Chechen nation. The Chechen Sufis began their national and religious struggle during the late centuries of Tsarist rule, but the push for independence continued under Soviet administration and still persists in the present Russian federation. Since the beginning of this prolonged resistance movement, the Chechens have continuously interwoven their nationalist goals with strong Sufi beliefs. Moreover, it is this formidable combination of religion and nationalism that the Tsarist governments, Soviets and recent Russian administrations have had trouble completely destroying.

Many authors have looked at the development and perseverance of the Chechen nationalist movement as well as the concept of “militant Sufism.” Two examples of such scholarship are Anna Zelkina’s In Quest for God and Freedom and Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush’s Mystics and Commissars. While these two aspects of the issue have been thoroughly studied, little scholarly attention has been paid to the role of female Sufis in the North Caucasus, and Chechnya in particular. Moreover, numerous historians including Gregory Massell and Marianne Kemp, have also looked at the impact of the Soviet ascension to power on Muslim women in the former Russian empire. This research has focused on how the Soviet revolutionaries furthered their ideology of female equality, and the subsequent impact on Muslim women in Central Asia. However, there is a lack of research that investigates whether or not Soviet policy had a similar impact on the Sufis of the North Caucasus. Thus, this study seeks to examine the effect of Soviet policy on the North Caucasus with a focus on Chechnya, however the nearby regions of Dagestan and Ingushetia will also be considered. It will also attempt to compare the experiences of female Sufis in Chechnya to the classical context of women within Sufism. This work aims to discover the impact, if any, of Soviet gender equality norms on both female Sufis and attitudes toward gender.

The Soviets worked to spread their ideology of gender equality to what they viewed as the “backward” Muslims communities with various policies and legislation. However, these actions were generally not well-received by Muslims. In Chechnya, Soviet ideology toward women coincided with the Chechen nationalist resistance movement. In effect, the Soviets attempting to change the role of women within traditional Muslim society gave the Chechen Sufis an additional reason to resist Soviet influence. The Chechens already viewed the Soviets as imperialistic for their invasion of the North Caucasus, and this further imposition of policies aiming to change female roles would be viewed as an additional hostile act. Chechen


struggles against this ideology as well as their continuous battles for independence became intertwined within the resistance movement. An additional development in Soviet policy occurred during World War II when Stalin deported the entire Chechen nation to Central Asia on the grounds that they had collaborated with the Germans. Although critics of Stalin’s policy maintain this was done to decrease the influence of Sufism in Chechnya, exile appeared to have only strengthened the Chechen religious identity. Furthermore, the war and deportation had significant effects on Chechen Sufism, and more substantially, the position of women within the religion. This paper will argue that Soviet policy toward Chechen Sufis altered the role of women within the Sufi brotherhoods, but was not as successful at fundamentally changing attitudes toward gender.

Although the presence of Islamic and Sufi institutions in the North Caucasus dates as far back as the 11th century, conversion to Islam did not take place until the 17th century. Sufism, in the form of the Naqshbandi order, which originated in 14th century Central Asia, initially spread into the North Caucasus from Azerbaijan in the early 1800s. By the late 18th and early 19th centuries the Naqshbandi order had spread from Dagestan to Chechnya. The Naqshbandi order is known for its “silent dhikr” which Uwe Halbach describes as the “voiceless invocation of God’s presence in the believer’s heart through inward repetition of a formula.” The dhikr is the main collective action of the Naqshbandi Sufis. This particular brotherhood is also known for their decentralized leadership structure, which Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush describe as “almost democratic.” As mentioned previously, Sheikh Mansour, the first Naqshbandi leader, led a military campaign against the Russians in the 1770s. In addition, Ghazi Muhammad, the first Naqshbandi imam, also fought against the Russians with a call for a ghazavat or holy war. Moreover, from 1829 to 1859 Sheikh Shamil, the third Naqshbandi imam, led a North Caucasian imamate until his eventual Russian defeat. The Naqshbandi brotherhood was not only the first Sufi order to gain widespread following in Chechnya, but it was also the first to combine nationality and religion in their struggle against the Russians.

In the 1850s an alternative form of Sufism appeared in the North Caucasus. This new brotherhood was led by Kunta Haji and preached within the framework of the Qadiri order. In contrast to the Naqshbandis, Kunta Haji preached nonviolence as well as self-purification and religious devotion. Spiritually the new order also differed from the Naqshbandi brotherhood by practicing a vocal dhikr, which consisted of music and dancing. According to Mikhail Roschin, the Kunta Haji followers believe “the sacred dance represents Angels dancing around Allah’s throne.” However, in the post-Shamil

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9 Bennigsen and Wimbush, Mystics and Commissars, 73-74.
10 Zelkina, In Quest for God and Freedom, 229-230.
11 Roskin, “Sufism and Fundamentalism in Dagestan and Chechnya.”
era the Qadiri order became more militant toward Russian encroachment. These two Sufi orders, the Naqshbandi and the Qadiri, as well as their various branches have remained prominent, and still continue to command a widespread following in Chechnya and other regions of the North Caucasus.

In order to accurately assess the impact of Soviet revolutionary policy on Sufi women in Chechnya it is necessary to evaluate their status prior to the Soviet Revolution. During the early years of Sufism in the North Caucasus Ghazi Muhammad, the first Naqshbandi imam in Daghestan, implemented Sharia in both public and private life. These laws forbade men and women “mixing” in public, as well as required women to cover their faces when outside the home. Similar legal restrictions were also instituted in Sheik Shamil’s North Caucasus Imamate, which lasted from the mid 1840s until 1859 comprising both Chechnya and Daghestan. Shamil mandated that all women dress “modestly” as well as cover their faces and not interact with men. However, other sources discuss that women did play a role in Shamil’s resistance movement, more specifically noting that his wife was a central figure. In addition, Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, who wrote about the state of Chechen society in the late 1850s, stated that although Chechen women were “kept in the background” they had more freedom than their veiled counterparts in Daghestan. This illustration of women as removed from mainstream society and generally restricted from public life, indicates that they could not publicly participate in the dhikr. Thus, this evidence coupled with the lack of mention of female membership in the brotherhoods, solidifies the conclusion that women did not participate in the Sufi orders to the same extent as men.

As Gregory Massell examines in The Surrogate Proletariat, the Soviets employed a specific policy toward Muslim women within the USSR, because the Soviets believed these women held important revolutionary potential. This initially occurred because the Soviets wanted to spread the proletarian revolution and had difficulty applying the notion of class struggle in Muslim communities. There was a lack of consciousness about class as well as relative social position. As such, the Soviets needed a “surrogate proletariat” in order to bring about class warfare, and ultimately designated Muslim women for this role. Massell quotes Nukhrat, a female Soviet party propagandist as remarking, “before the October Revolution, there was, throughout the vast expanse of Russia, no human being more ignorant, more downtrodden and enslaved, than the eastern woman.” This firsthand account accurately summarizes the Soviet stance toward Muslim women. Moreover, the Soviets argued females were unequal in terms of education, employment, social activities

12 Zelkina, In Quest for God and Freedom, 237.
13 Zelkina, In Quest for God and Freedom, 220-221.
14 Zelkina, In Quest for God and Freedom, 221.
17 Nukhrat, OZV, p. 8 quoted in Massell, The Surrogate Proletariat, 96.
and family life. Thus, the Soviets instituted various policies in order to “free” the female Muslim “slaves,” which ended legal restrictions on women. These included outlawing polygamy, as well as promoting female participation in all public areas of society. However, in some instances Soviet policy took a more forcible route. This was seen in Central Asia where Soviets targeted the physical symbol of the veil. In 1955 there was a ceremonial burning of the “last veil in Bukhara.” These public demonstrations condemning veiling caused great turmoil within the traditional Muslim societies, and often resulted in a religious backlash. From all this evidence, it is clear the Soviets consistently attempted, sometimes with force, to convince the “enslaved” Muslim women to rise up in class warfare.

Although the Soviets continuously implemented the abovementioned policies, the “communist liberation campaign” did not succeed, and in many instances encountered strong resistance. Marianne Kamp examines the outcome, looking specifically at the impact of forced unveiling in Uzbekistan. She notes that these campaigns were met religious resistance and had negative societal effects. In Uzbekistan, the movement advocating unveiling was referred to as “the attack,” which referred to its assault on the traditional Uzbek way of life. In general this policy was not supported by the majority of society, including most women, as it was viewed as the “emasculating of men and defeminization of women.” The communist campaign in Central Asia did not succeed in the way the Soviets had envisioned, but the memory of this “attack” has had a lasting influence on Muslim society. Moreover, what this example illustrates is that Soviet attempts to emancipate Muslim women were met with violent resistance, and did not result in women assuming the role of a revolutionary force. Overall, these Soviet attempts in Central Asia to change women’s traditional roles did not overwhelmingly alter attitudes about gender, but did, on average, lead to more visible female participation in many aspects of society.

While significant documentation on the immediate effect of revolutionary policy in Central Asia exists, there is remarkably little evidence detailing the outcome in the North Caucasus. Although this gap in research exists, it is clear the Soviets attempted to further the same type of ideology in the North Caucasus. According to Marie-Carin Von Gumppenberg “the Soviet Communists regarded the inclusion of Central Asian and Caucasian women in their very concept of citizenship as a strategic priority.” However, although their ideology toward women in the North Caucasus was similar, it must be noted that major differences existed between the North Caucasian and Central Asian areas of the Soviet empire.

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18 Massell, The Surrogate Proletariat, 97-120.
23 Kamp, The New Woman in Uzbekistan, 164.
in the period following the 1917
revolution. Most importantly, the
peoples of the North Caucasus took the
Bolsheviks up on their declaration of self
determination for all nationalities and
declared independence. In 1918 a
religious movement led by the
Naqshbandi declared a North Caucasian
Imamate modeled on Shamil’s mid 19th
century state. Shortly thereafter, the
Soviets invaded the new state to reassert
central control. After 1918 a constant
state of fighting in the North Caucasus
ensued with violent clashes between the
Sufi and Soviet forces. It was this
ongoing and bitter battle that shifted the
main focus of Soviet policy away from
women and gender. Thus, although the
Soviets did attempt to implement gender
policies similar to those in Central Asia,
these measures often took a backseat to
the war. Moreover, Chechen Sufi
women typically subordinated gender
issues to focus on nationalist concerns.
In effect, the Chechen Sufi female
identity became entrenched within the
“nationalist task.”24 It is clear Soviet
policy did not have the same immediate
effects in the North Caucasus that it did
in Central Asia, and this was primarily
due to the North Caucasian
independence movement resisting Soviet
forces.

In 1944 a further development in
Soviet administration of the Chechens
occurred. During the Soviet Union’s
brutal fighting with Germany in World
War II, Stalin accused the Chechen
country of collaborating with the Axis
Power. As a result, Stalin dissolved the
Republic of Chechen-Ingush, and
deporated all the people to Kazakhstan
and Siberia. Many historians doubt the
validity of the Chechens aiding the
Germans during the Second World War,
including Reza Shah-Kazemi and Birgit
Brauer. Brauer, in “Chechens and the
survival of their cultural identity in exile”
argues this allegation was outlandish, and
cites Chechen historian Abdurahman
Avtorkhanov who states that the
Germans never penetrated into Chechen
territory.25 Moreover, Brauer holds
Stalin’s real aim was to destroy the
Chechen nation. She cites Chechen
resistance to collectivization and militant
struggle against the Soviet forces, as
potential impetuses for this end. Here
Brauer alleges that Stalin believed
deportation would cause the Chechen
resistance movement to fall apart and
prevent strong leadership from forming.
26 However, this aim was not achieved, as
the years of exile from 1944 to 1957
further strengthened Chechen identity,
as well as the integral role played by
Sufism.

Not only did Chechen Sufism
survive the horrors of forced deportation
but the so called “parallel Islam” thrived
in exile. The Chechen presence in
Central Asia resulted in the spreading of
Sufism to the Kazakhs, Uzbeks and
Karakalpaks. The Soviets, upon
ascension to power, attempted to destroy
Islam by tearing down mosques and
outlawing the dhikr, as part of their
campaign against religion. Sufism,
however, did not require these more
formal institutions, and as a result was

25 Abdurahman Avtorkhanov, “The Chechens and Ingush during the Soviet period and its
anecdents,” as quoted in Birgit Brauer,
“Chechens and the Survival of the Cultural
Identity in Exile,” Journal of Genocide
26 Brauer, “Chechens and the Survival of the
Cultural Identity in Exile,” 389-400.
not suppressed. Moreover, not only did Sufism spread to new converts, but the years in Central Asian exile also resulted in the formation of a new branch of the Qadiri brother: the Vis Haji. The new order was created by the Chechen Sufis while they labored in Kazakh work camps. Vis Haji, a “secret order” was named after its founder Uways “Vis” Haji Zagiv, and created as an offshoot of the Kunta Haji branch.  

Similar to other brotherhoods within the Qadiri order, Vis Haji followers invoked the popular dhikr involving drums and violins. Another source depicts the adepts as wearing white fur hats. Most strikingly, however, was that the new branch allowed women to participate in the dhikr ceremonies. Furthermore, David Damrel, writing in the Religious Studies News, provides instances of woman sheikhs leading their own circles of female Sufis. It is also clear that this order with its reported “anti-Russian and anti-Soviet” rhetoric was formed partially as a response to harsh Soviet treatment. Moreover, it appears probable that the inclusion of women after centuries of clear exclusion may also have been influenced by Soviet policies advocating gender equality.

The idea that women’s roles changed in North Caucasian Sufi orders at least partially in response to the Soviet revolution and its ideological impacts, is furthered by Alexander Bennigen and S. Enders Wimbush. In their comprehensive study of Sufism in the Soviet Union entitled Mystics and Commissars, the two authors not only detail the participation of women in the dhikr ceremonies of the Vis Haji order, but also discuss additional developments in the position of females in Sufi orders. According to Bennigen and Wimbush, after World War II several brotherhoods in the North Caucasus allowed the formation of special female Sufi circles led by women Sheikhs. They reference an example of this in Nizhnie Inkho, a district of Dagestan, where it was witnessed among both the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders. Additionally, the authors note that in the Chechen-Ingush region female Sufi groups were formed within the Qadiri order. Bennigen and Wimbush claim this was an extraordinary development, as these were the first female Sufi groups led by woman Sheikhs that had ever been observed. This evidence further substantiates the idea that Soviet revolutionary ideology and its aim of equalizing women’s position in society may have had an impact on Sufi orders in the North Caucasus.

As discussed above, it was in the decades following the Soviet revolution that these fundamental changes to Sufi orders in the North Caucasus transpired. After the Soviets seized power in 1917 they formulated a clear policy toward Muslim women in the newly formed Soviet Empire. As noted, Muslim women fulfilled the role of the proletariat for Soviet revolutionaries. The Soviets viewed Muslim women as unequal to men, and attempted to convince them to rise up in class warfare against Islam. While the majority of literature focuses on the violent clashes between Soviet revolutionaries and Muslims in Central

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31 Bennigen and Wimbush, Mystics and Commissars, 67-70.
Asia, it is clear this same policy was also applied to the North Caucasus, and thus to the Chechen Sufis. The advance of this ideology coupled with Stalin’s deportation of the Chechens in 1944, form the foundation of Soviet policy toward the Chechen Sufis. Based on the information provided, it is difficult to separate out the impacts of these two policies from each other. Thus, it is impossible to conclude to what extent exile was responsible for the formation of these new roles for women, or whether Soviet gender ideology played the larger role. Therefore, the most accurate conclusion to draw is that a synthesis of these two elements had an impact on the increased inclusion of women in North Caucasian Sufi orders. Thus, Soviet policy toward the Chechens and other Sufis in the North Caucasus does appear to have had an impact on the position of women within these Sufi orders.

After establishing the argument behind Soviet policy altering the physical roles played by women in Chechen Sufi orders, it is now necessary to determine if there was any impact on attitudes toward gender. While the inclusion of women does indicate females had more agency within the religious sphere, it does not relay anything about how this was received. Basically, it is important to determine if this substantial change also altered how women and gender roles were conceived more generally. For instance, were female Sufis considered as pious as male Sufis? Did traditional conceptions of what it meant to be female in Chechen society change? One way to assess the impact on gender roles and attitudes toward gender is to consider the current situation for female Sufis in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. This approach will help determine the presence of any long term effects, which will be useful in identifying any effects on attitudes.

While it is certainly clear a myriad of factors have influenced the present position of female Sufis in Chechen society, it can be argued that Soviet policy in the post-revolutionary period was a substantial factor. Moreover, as mentioned previously, deliberate attempts to wipe out Islam were one aspect of the Soviet administration that had a significant influence on the Chechens. Unsurprisingly, policies to this end were met with much resistance by the Chechen Sufis, and helped fuel the nationalist struggle. Similarly, in the early post-Soviet years the Russians responded to Chechen declarations of independence with force, which resulted in the First and Second Russian-Chechen wars. It is interesting to consider the impacts of prolonged war and fighting on female Sufis in Chechnya. An analysis of the evidence available will illustrate that while war has altered traditional gender roles it is not obvious that this change will prove long lasting.

The constant fighting plaguing the North Caucasus during the 1990s and continuing to the present day has had serious and sustained impacts on society. More specifically it has had significant effects on female Sufis in Chechnya and altered their gender roles. Alice Szczepanikova conducted a study of Chechens refugees in the Czech Republic, which was published in the Journal of Refugee Studies. The author acquired a first-hand account of Chechen attitudes toward femininity and masculinity, in addition to gender roles. Szczepanikova reports that as a result of
the war Chechen women have been forced out of the home to work, as there is a current shortage of men in Chechnya. Moreover, women have also played a pivotal role in rescuing family members taken prisoner by the Russian military. In contrast, however, when interviewed about femininity Chechen women still strongly associated it with the domestic sphere. From this it is clear that although Chechen women did undertake roles outside of the home these new positions were considered of secondary importance to their core identity as mothers and wives. Thus, while the influence of war has led to women fulfilling new gender roles it is not obvious that this has led to a fundamental shift in attitudes toward gender.

An additional way that war has had an impact on gender is in actual female involvement with the nationalist movement. Although there was brief mention earlier of women, namely Shamil’s wife, playing a role in the resistance movement, the sources did not suggest that this practice was either accepted or widespread. However, there is evidence to suggest that in recent years women have played an increasingly important part in the Russian-Chechen wars. Anne Nivat, a French journalist, has provided a firsthand look at the role of women in the second Russian-Chechen war in her book Chienne de Guerre. She interviews female Sufi Chechen fighters who are quoted as aiming to first drive the Russians out and then the Wahhabi fundamentalists. Her comprehensive portrayal of the fighting indicates that women play a large role in the Chechen resistance. These accounts illustrate an increased female involvement in the military aspect of the nationalist and religious cause.

The dedication of female Sufi Chechens to the religious ends of the resistance movement is further supported by Omar Ashour and Uzma Jamil in “Political-Social Movements: Islamic Movements and Discourses,” a chapter in the Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures. As noted by the two authors, in 1999 the Union of Women of the Don Region conducted a study in the North Caucasus on Chechen women’s attitudes towards making Chechnya into an independent Islamic state. The study reported that two out of three Chechen women would support the formation of an Islamic state. Moreover, the chapter by Ashour and Jamil also provides insight into female Chechen views on veiling. The authors conclude that while women most women look favorably upon Islam, many choose not to don the veil, viewing it as a personal decision and not a determinant of their political identity. This indicates that Sufi Chechen women


33 During the 1990s a large amount of Wahhabi fundamentalists, mostly from Saudi Arabia, have been taking part in the nationalist and religious struggle against the Russian Federation. Many Chechen Sufis, as evidenced from the quote, are not only fighting against the Russians but the Islamic fundamentalists as well.


35 Ashour and Jamil, “Political-Social Movements: Islamic Movement and Discourses,” 602

36 Ashour and Jamil, “Political-Social Movements: Islamic Movement and Discourses,” 602
continue to be religious even if they do not view it as the sole source of their identity. Moreover, it is clear this religiosity is strongly intertwined with the nationalist movement in Chechnya, as evidenced by the female Sufi’s desire for an Islamic state.

A careful analysis of the material present above allows several conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, although it is clear that visible female roles within society have changed as a result of war, it not obvious whether or not this will be a permanent transformation. Therefore, while women are currently acting as breadwinners it is hard to determine whether this will continue in the future if the men return to Chechnya. Moreover, evidence seems to suggest not only that eventually the traditional gender roles will be resumed, but that attitudes toward gender have not changed. This conclusion draws upon the Sufi Chechen women interviewed who continue to associate women and femininity with the domestic sphere. Lastly, it is also clear that in addition to women taking on increasingly public roles in the resistance movement, there is also support among female Sufi Chechens for the movement’s desired ends, namely an Islamic state. Overall, this indicates that while both Soviet policies as well as continuous war have led to changes in female roles within society, there is not strong evidence that these developments have had any significant effects on attitudes toward gender.

It is now necessary to examine how the Chechen experience of women in Sufism fits into the larger tradition of gender roles in mysticism. Sufism is an Islamic tradition in which women have historically played significant roles. This is evidenced by the presence of great mystics such as Rabi’a and other female saints like Maryam of Basriyya. Carl Ernst, in his introductory work to mystical Islam The Shambhala Guide to Sufism, also notes the existence of important female saints within mysticism. Moreover, in addition to women physically functioning as mystics, they are also symbolically essential to the Sufi tradition. Annemarie Schimmel discusses this idea at great length in My Soul is a Woman. The author notes a recurring theme in the sacred sources of Islam of depicting women as part of love stories. She looks primarily at the Queen of Sheba (Biqlis) and Zukhaila in making this point. Shimmel notes that these two women have become themes of many Sufi epics and poetry. In each instance, the woman is estranged from her beloved, and has to live in turmoil and longing for him. Shimmel contends that in this sense women represent the nafs or woman-soul. The nafs is important in Sufi tradition as it represents the soul longing for the beloved, and the journey of a mystic is to become one with the divine. Both the symbolic role of women as the nafs and the presence of female mystics underlie the idea that women have played a role within the mystical tradition.

The experiences of female Sufis in Chechnya and the North Caucasus fit into this general framework in several important ways. While women in the North Caucasian Sufi orders have more recently been allowed to participate in all

37 Annemarie Schimmel, My Soul is a Woman (New York: Continuum, 1997), 37.
39 Schimmel, My Soul is a Woman, 54-68.
aspects of the Sufi ceremonies, this was not traditionally the case. Moreover, there was no mention of any famous female mystics in the literature on the origins of Sufism in the North Caucasus, namely by Zelkina or Bennigsen and Enders. However, in contrast, in the post World War II decades there were North Caucasian Sufi groups led by female Sheiks. While it is unclear to what extent Chechen Sufi piousness is related to the role of the woman as the nafs, there is evidence that women are held to high esteem in Chechen culture. Brigit Brauer, in her study of Chechen culture in exile, notes that respect for women is an important cultural trait, and that the Chechens seek to keep women “pure, chaste and sheltered.”

It is certainly possible that the Chechen emphasis on respect for women has religious roots in the Sufi tradition. Overall, these examples illustrate that the importance of women in the classical Sufi context holds true in several ways for the instances of Chechnya and the North Caucasus.

The Sufis of the North Caucasus have a long history of national and religious struggle against the Russians. For over two centuries the resistance movement with its intertwined religious and political ends has continuously plagued both Soviet and Russian forces. Moreover, neither the Russian tsarist administrations, nor the Soviets or the present Russian governments have succeeded in suppressing the opposition movement entirely. The Soviet revolutionaries had several important effects on the Chechens and Sufi women in particular. In the decades following the Soviet ascension to power the

revolutionaries implemented legislation to spread their ideology of gender equality among Muslim communities. In both Central Asia and the Caucasus the Soviets viewed Muslim women as the “surrogate proletariat” who would rise up from their oppressed state and begin class warfare. However, these new policy measures were met with marked resistance, particularly the unveiling of women, as evidenced in Uzbekistan. In the North Caucasus the implementation of the new gender policies coincided with Soviet battles against the North Caucasian nationalist movement. Consequently, gender issues were forced into the background by the religious and nationalist cause. During the initial years of Soviet rule, due to continuous war, the new ideology toward gender had little measured impact in the North Caucasus.

However, the combination of Soviet gender ideology as well as forced deportation of the Chechens in 1944 did lead to several important developments later in the 20th century. During the years of Central Asian exile, Sufism gained even more prominence among the Chechens, and the Vis Haji was formed. This new branch, part of the Qadiri order, allowed women to participate in the dhikr ceremonies. In addition to the creation of the Vis Haji, many other branches within the Qadiri and Naqshbandi orders allowed the formation of female Sufi circles led by woman Sheikhs. However, although it is possible to conclude Soviet revolutionary ideology had an impact on the increased inclusion of women in the Sufi orders, it is less clear whether or not attitudes toward gender changed. Evidence collected from female Chechen Sufis in a refugee camp indicates that although

women were taking on new roles in society as a result of war, their main identity continued to be strongly linked to the domestic sphere. This suggests that while women continue to be involved and in support of the resistance movement, these developments have not resulted in a significant shift in attitudes toward gender or gender roles. In sum, while Soviet policy toward women appears to have influenced the position of women within the Sufi orders, it has not resulted in fundamentally changing societal attitudes toward women or traditional gender roles.


