



## Pilgrims on the Silk Road: A Muslim-Christian Encounter in Khiva

By *Walter R. Ratliff*

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They were seeking religious freedom and the Second Coming of Christ in Central Asia. They found themselves in the care of a Muslim king. During the 1880s, Mennonites from Russia made a treacherous journey to the Silk Road kingdom of Khiva. Both Uzbek and Mennonite history seemed to set the stage for ongoing religious and ethnic discord. Yet their story became an example of friendship and cooperation between Muslims and Christians. *Pilgrims on the Silk Road* challenges conventional wisdom about the trek to Central Asia and the settlement of Ak Metchet. It shows how the story, long associated with failed End Times prophecies, is being recast in light of new evidence. *Pilgrims* highlights the role of Ak Metchet as a refuge for those fleeing Soviet oppression, and the continuing influence of the episode more than twelve decades later.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

While Ratliff's historical presentation is a major accomplishment, the fascinating effect of his book is due largely to his storytelling skill. -- Waldemar Janzen, Canadian Mennonite Univ.

This encounter is a touching as well as teaching one... It constitutes a mind-broadening experience in an atmosphere of ever escalating religious tensions between Muslims and Christians throughout the world. --Izzet Ahmet Bozbey, *Journal of Central Asia and Caucasian Studies*

Walter Ratliff's book is a very successful attempt to demonstrate how the peaceful and industrious Mennonites established, while remaining true Christians, a mutual understanding with Muslims and built exemplary relationships with them. --Ahmet ?eyhun, Prof. of Islamic History, University of Winnipeg

*Pilgrims on the Silk Road* fills in with rich detail the fascinating story that [Ratliff's film] *Through the Desert Goes Our Journey* began. --Mennonite Weekly Review

Ratliff weaves the personal letters, diaries and publications of the pilgrims themselves, together with an extensive bibliography of sources into a story well worth reading. --Laurie Gray, ReadersFavorite.com

In *Pilgrims on the Silk Road*, Ratliff has brought to light a fascinating but little known chapter in the history of European involvement in Central Asia, along the silk road. His portrait of the Mennonite mission to Khiva makes for great reading and an excellent companion to such classic works as Peter Hopkirk's *The Great Game*. --Charles M. Stang, Harvard Divinity School

*Pilgrims on the Silk Road* is a captivating story. The book has planted the Mennonite presence deeply in the encounter with a multi-sided Islamic culture. I cannot think of any Mennonite group buffeted by such a series of cross-cultural experiences-from prophets of millennialism, to Russian imperialism, to the last hurrah of an Muslim Khan. I was impressed with how the Ak Metchet people had so many confrontations with violence to which they responded in a modest, nonresistant way. --Robert S. Kreider, Kansas Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Emeritus

Walter Ratliff's history of the Mennonite Great Trek to Central Asia offers a new angle of vision upon one of the most remarkable events of Mennonite history. *Pilgrims on the Silk Road* puts the Great Trek into the context of nineteenth-century imperial rivalry and of the Russian conquest of Khiva. The author tells tales of Muslim-Christian cooperation that resonate with meaning in our twenty-first century of religious polarization. Ratliff's perspective is revisionist without being contentious. I hope this book will find a wide readership. --James C. Juhnke, Bethel College, Emeritus

#### From the Author

In researching this book, I joined a team of scholars and descendants to retrace the steps of the Mennonite trek from Russia to Central Asia. What we found upturned many of our basic assumptions about an old story that focused on failed End Times prophecies. We learned how the Mennonites built lasting friendships with their Muslim neighbors. We also learned of their modernizing impact. Uzbeks do not remember anything about the strange theologies of Claas Epp Jr. To them, the Mennonites were farmers, entrepreneurs, and

valuable neighbors. The old narrative of the trek as a shameful episode in Mennonite history began to make room for a proud history of positive engagement between Muslim and Christian communities.

#### About the Author

Walter Ratliff is a religion editor and content manager at the Associated Press. He is also author of *Christians and Muslims at the Epicenter: How the Sept. 11th Attacks Shook and Transformed American Evangelicalism*, and the producer/director of the Emmy Award-winning documentary *Through the Desert Goes Our Journey: The Mennonite Trek to Central Asia*. He holds degrees from the University of New Mexico, Wheaton College and Georgetown University.

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