Islamic Institutions and Education in Imperial Russia

The study of Islamic culture in Russia, and especially in imperial Russia, is a newly emerging field in the area of Islamic studies, yet one which promises considerable dividends. Emerging both as a field of Inner Asian Islam and for Islamic studies as a whole. When speaking of Islam in Russia, we have in mind a specific region, namely the Volga-Ural region and western Siberia, where substantial sedentary and nomadic Turkic Muslim communities came under Russian rule at a relatively early stage, in the middle of the 18th century. In the context of Russian colonial expansion in the 19th century we can consider this region ‘metropolitan Russia’.

The development of Islam, specifically Islamic intellectual and institutional life, in this region differed in several important ways from the other Muslim areas of the Russian empire, such as Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and the North Caucasus. The Volga-Ural region and Siberia were conquered by Russia in the 17th century and were populated by large settlements of Russian colonists and indigenous non-Russian and Turkic non-Muslims. By the second half of the 18th century Muslims in the Volga-Ural region and Siberia had already experienced two hundred years of Russian rule, and many Muslims figured prominently among the elite of Russia’s merchants and gentry. At the same time, a small proportion of Muslim peasants were serfs, and the vast majority were either state peasants or tribute-paying tribemen, which placed them in a more privileged position than the vast majority of Russia’s non-Muslim peasants. By the second half of the 18th century, the Volga-Ural region and Siberia’s Muslim communities were firmly integrated into the Russian state’s systems of estates and privileges, and overall can be said to have held a generally favorable position in comparison with the empire’s Christian majority. Except for localized and largely unsuccessful Christianization campaigns, the Muslim territories were essentially a part of the Islamic world, and Muslim communities in Russia were allowed to practice their faith freely, and this was especially true along the frontiers, where Russian officials depended upon Muslim translators, Cossacks and agents to maintain imperial authority over Muslim communities on the other.

Islamic revival

Another defining feature of Islam in Russia proper, which separated it intellectually and institutionally from other Muslim communities in the Russian empire, was the existence of state-sponsored and funded imperial Muslim educational institutions. At the beginning of the 20th century in this district, ‘traditional’ educational institutions were in no way ‘in crisis’, but in fact had a regionally specific geo-religious identity. For instance, in the Novouzensk district in Samara province, 4,000 Muslims were actually expanding. Both parents and scholars multiply several times over in his own community. Momentum carried this growth through the 1917 Revolution and ensuing civil war. New mosques were being built and new Islamic scholars were being trained. When the Soviet authorities began closing mosques and arresting Islamic scholars in earnest.

A detailed examination of Russia’s rural Muslim community, which modernists cite as a failure of the traditional curriculum, was actually examining the curriculum and effective curricula were being actively sought. Furthermore, the system of patronage of institutions and financial support by the community as whole in- tended close interaction and cooperation between the community and instructors. Local instructors and ulims were closely in- tegrated into the regional Islamic network and into larger networks as well.

As a result, the curriculum both in madrasas and maktab was fairly uniform throughout the Volga-Ural region and en- abled literate villagers to express them- selves in an Islamic discourse that linked them both regionally and to the Islamic world as a whole. Thus, isolation from Rus- sian education, which modernists cite as a failure of the traditional curriculum, was ac- tually seen by these Muslims as desirable, not only because it distinguished them from non-Muslims, but also because it helped link them to the Islamic world. In fact, when modernist jadidists, schools opened in Novou- zensk district during the first decade of the 20th century, they were forced to close, not in opposition but out of apathy on the part of the villagers. Clearly they deemed modernist education to be of little value.

Islamic education in Novouzensk district

Islam in Russia was firmly integrated into the Russian state in political and economic terms, cul- turally the Volga-Ural Muslims in imperial Russia were for the most part isolated, or rather insulated, from Russian cultural influ- ence. In fact, the establishment of imperial- level Islamic institutions undermined traditional models of Islamic institutions as ‘traditional’ Islamic institutions were in no way ‘in crisis’, but in fact had a regionally specific geo-religious identity. For instance, in the Novouzensk district in Samara province, 4,000 Muslims were actually expanding. Both parents and scholars multiply several times over in his own community. Momentum carried this growth through the 1917 Revolution and ensuing civil war. New mosques were being built and new Islamic scholars were being trained. When the Soviet authorities began closing mosques and arresting Islamic scholars in earnest.

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