

**«MUSLIM MATTER» IN THE MIRROR OF PUBLIC DISCUSSION (XIX -  
BEGINNING OF XX CENTURY)**

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Published online: 24 November 2017

**ABSTRACT**

The relevance of the studied problem is determined by the socio-political processes that have embraced the modern Islamic world, connected with the substantial politicization of the Muslim community, religious revival movements and the spread of radical currents. The paper is aimed at studying the public debate in Russia (XIX-early XX century) regarding the future of domestic Muslims. The leading approach to the study of this problem is the concept that modernization attempts in Russia had compensatory nature and were aimed at strengthening the imperial system. Based on the study of the works by the experts of the "Muslim matter", the authors came to the conclusion that the public discussion arrived at a view that it is necessary to strengthen the spiritual and cultural assimilation of foreigners on the ways of activating both administrative and cultural methods. Reliability of the results of the study is determined by the authors' appeal to a representative sample and analysis of the works by Russian scientists and publicists, who most clearly reflected the position of their socio-political group regarding the future of the Muslim community in Russia. Along with the opinions of academic orientalist and Islamologists, the views of representatives of the scientific missionary circles, Muslim modernists, revolutionary democrats, etc. are presented. The materials of the paper can be useful for further development of scientific problems on the history of Islam and Muslim peoples, as well as the history of culture and public thought of the peoples of Russia.

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doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jfas.v9i7s.115>



**Keywords:** history, social studies, Islamic studies, Russian empire, "Muslim matter", public discussion.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Muslimization of the country, as well as the threat of an escalation of the military conflict on the southeastern frontiers, aroused quite justified fears among the "sensible" part of Russia's political elite. However, "imperial greed and the relative ease of Russia's advance ... (in this direction) were forced to forget about the reasons for the expediency of such an expansion and the opportunities for developing new territories". The ensuing series of uprisings in Kazakhstan, Central Asia and the Caucasus, unrest in the Volga region and Cisuralian area have led to a certain sobering of the upper strata and stirred up heated debates in the broadest layers of the Russian public.

A prominent Westerner, Chicherin B.N. wrote, expressing his concern, that "none of sane Russians, of course, thinks about the conquest of Turkey and the annexation of Constantinople. It would not be strengthening, but weakening of Russia. The center of gravity would move to the south, and Russia would cease to be Russia" [1]. On the other hand, Slavophile Koialovich M.O. was also not delighted with the annexation of vast lands in the East. In his opinion, this could only lead to the reflux of "forces from our middle whole," to bring "a share of Asian rudeness" to the environment of the Russian people" [2].

Responding to such sentiments, Muslim modernist Gaspinsky I., proceeding from considerations of preserving the identity of Muslims, called for a "Russian-Eastern agreement" (1896): Russia's foreign policy should be focused on not to seize Muslim countries, but to alliance with them against the "common" Western threat [3]. However, the traditional movement of Russia to the south-eastern borders (to Istanbul, the straits, the Persian Gulf, Khorasan, Herat) of the very end of the empire remained the main direction. The corresponding goals of imperial social and cultural policy were vividly expressed by St. Petersburg Metropolitan Anthony at the missionary meeting. Despite the recognition as a "shameful deed and a sign of powerlessness to resort to coercion and violence in the cause of faith", he spoke quite frankly: "Russia ... has turned its treatment of its Mohammedan subjects into a system, which simultaneously serves as both a springboard and a ram to gain power over throughout Asia" [4].

At the same time, a steady increase in its activity and the growing influence of Islam in principle, rather than the growing number of the already existing Muslim population, caused a

growing anxiety of the imperialized part of Russian society. In the middle of the XVIII century, the board of foreign affairs, considering the question of nationalization of Eastern immigrants, warned the Siberian governor Miatlev V.A. that “there are many enough Mohammedans in Siberia, and in the Orenburg province”. In 1765, the Senate passed a decree "on the non-acceptance ("in any way") of Kazan and Astrakhan Tatars to settle in the Orenburg Province" [5]. But even after a hundred years, despite the active Russian colonization, Muslims accounted for half the population of the eastern part of the empire. Ilminskii N.I. stated that “the Muslim matter begins generally in Russia” [6].

## 2 METHODS

The theoretical and methodological basis of this paper was the concept that modernization attempts in Russia were purely compensatory and were generally aimed at strengthening the imperial system [7]. Obviously, imperial psychology penetrated deeply into all strata of Great-Russian society, becoming an organic part of the mentality and giving rise to stable stereotypes of sociocultural perception. The so-called "Muslim matter" provoked a heated discussion, presenting a wide range of opinions of prominent representatives of Russia's spiritual and intellectual elite, which had a significant impact on the evolution of the state ethno-confessional policy.

The authors of the paper in their pursuit of showing a representative series turned to the selection and analysis of the works by scientists and publicists, who most clearly reflected the position of their socio-political group regarding the future of the Muslim community in Russia. The views of experts on the "Muslim matter" are considered in the context of the search by the authorities for ways to activate the spiritual and cultural assimilation of non-Russians.

## 3 RESULTS

Trying to find an explanation of the situation that prevailed in the XIX century (the failure of Christianization of Muslims, mass secession of the newly baptized from Orthodoxy, the Islamization of Finno-Ugric non-Russians, etc.), many missionary-oriented scientists and publicists wrote about the extremely detrimental impact of the policy of religious tolerance. According to Bazilevich A.F., by the beginning of the reign of Nicholas I "the enlightened policy of Catherine the Great and her successors in relation to Islam" was very sad". In his opinion, government orders that granted too many benefits to Islam were misrouting" [8]. His

colleague, priest Bagin S.A., shares his view. He also believed that thanks to the policy of tolerance, "a flaming center of Mohammedanism was created at the expense and with the assistance of the Russian administration, which under favorable circumstances could evolve into a flame"; Therefore, "the non-Russian issue in Russia has a very important ecclesiastical and state significance and requires an immediate, attentive attitude, both on the part of the administration and on the part of the entire Russian society" [9].

Criticizing the policy of "godless tolerance", Voronets E.N. in his work "Do Russia Need a Mufti?" argued that Catherine II made a fatal mistake, paying tribute to the "Western atheistic spirit" [10]. At the same time, the legislation of Alexander III was set as an example, where "the return of the government to the ancient Russian prudent policy of the domestic power in relation to Islam is noticeable". Bazilevich exclaims that "were it not for their (the rulers, supporters of Western liberalism) mistakes, a good half of the current Russian Muslims would be Orthodox". Although religious tolerance, according to critics, had strengthened temporarily the ethno-confessional balance in the country, but at the same time weakened the administrative levers of Christianization, allowed legitimizing the multi-million Muslim community, taking the path of modernization, it thus laid the bomb under the fundament of the imperial system. Conservative circles of the Russian public categorically opposed the integration of Islam into the sociopolitical and sociocultural space of Russia.

In the second half of the XIX century, a fierce campaign was launched to discredit Islam. At all levels, in numerous newspapers and magazines, the thought was held about the undoubted fanaticism of Muslims, stemming from the characteristics of their religious culture. Russian society was frightened by the coming "Muslim matter", capable of deforming the socio-cultural foundation of the country. The anti-Islamic campaign reflected the general atmosphere of the counter-reforms of Alexander III, aimed at strengthening the imperial foundations of the Russian state. This focus of minds has retained its power in the future. In 1917, Bazilevich A.F. also wrote that "the propaganda of Islam ultimately brings death to Russia, the loss of unity and the Orthodox image of holy Russia".

A particularly irritating factor, which had a significant impact on the course of the polemic, were the works by Muslim modernists. Their works, written in Russian, reveal the ideas of Islamic modernization to a broad Russian-speaking public. In their effort to protect Islam and Islamic culture from attacks and stereotypes, the modernists tried to present the reader with an attractive image of renewed Islam. At the same time, they make an appeal to the co-religionists to overcome their own prejudices and join the achievements of world civilization.

However, the reformist shifts in the Muslim world caused a mixed reaction in the intellectual community. Reflecting a negative outlook on the ongoing processes, Orientalist Berezin I.N. wrote: "It is vainly thought that transformations, in the spirit of mitigation, are possible ..." [11]. N.P. Ostroumov echoes his words in his own paper, where he tries to "educate Russian society" in its "indulging" the Muslim culture [12]. N.A. Dingelstedt also got tough on Muslim modernists [13]. The desire of Muslim reformers to present Islam as a pure religion, alien to fanaticism, in the opinion of critics, is a "gross fraud". Bishop Alexy even stated that "Muslim reformers, in order to change the social status of Russian Muslims according to their own taste, must join the struggle with Russian government power" [14].

"European defenders of Islam" aroused a particular indignation. Islamologist Krymskii A.E. put on this list Voltaire, Gibbon, Sedillo, Berthelemy Saint-Hilaire, Henri de Castries, Dreper, and Vamberi [15]. It is no coincidence that the brochure by Renan J.E. "Islam and science", which states that Islam and science are in principle contradictory [16], was widely replicated in Russia. Following Renan, some representatives of official (academic and missionary) orientalism accused Islam of fanaticism and intolerance. All the shortcomings of the lives of Muslims stem from their religion, which is supposed to have no moral ideals; it focuses exclusively on rituals and is incompatible "with any innovations", and their books are full of superstition and ignorance. The theme of the notorious intolerance of Islam and its militancy was continued by the historical essay by Ostroumov N.P., where the author treats relations between Christianity and Islam in purely antagonistic, irreconcilable tones. Dingelstedt argued in the same spirit that "enlightenment and Islam would remain forever in irreconcilable contradiction" and "hardly anyone would deny that the Christian and Muslim civilization is decisively incompatible or, rather, that the very Islamism excludes any civilization".

Islamic scholarly research did not clarify, but rather obscured the essence of the matter, actively serving the ideological needs of imperial policy. A.A. Davletshin notes in his expert paper that acquaintance "with Islam using such materials hardly meets the goals of the government on the outskirts; dissemination through official publications of such extreme ideas that Muslims are the most implacable enemies of Christianity, and that Islam teaches us to hate all other religions, prescribes the extermination of Christians at every opportunity ... should cause distrust and hostility towards the natives ... This kind of a judgment about their religion always leaves Muslims with a feeling of some deep resentment and contributes to an even greater increase in historically formed discord" [17].

The manifestations of xenophobia found a worthy response in the nascent democratic press. It is no accident that Ilminskii N.I. in his letter to Pobedonostsev K.P. lamented that "our Russian intellectuals are not averse to sympathizing with the dawn of Mohammedan culture". So, in 1858, Dobroliubov N.A. in his review of V. Irving's book "The Life of Mohammed", noting the positive approach of the American author, criticized the domestic scientific literature. Speaking against the demonization of the image of Muhammad, the critic called for greater objectivity in covering the historical events in general, the origin of Islam in particular, explaining the historical processes not only by the activities of great personalities, but also by the particular conditions of the people's life [18].

#### **4 DISCUSSION**

The problem of studying the attitude of the domestic expert community of the XIX century to the "Muslim matter" until recently was poorly studied. Objective coverage of the subject matter for a long time was restrained by political, ideological obstacles. However, some researchers managed to express a number of conceptual provisions. "Islam", according to Bryan-Bennigsen F., "was regarded as a tumor, as an alien religious phenomenon within an empire, which spiritual centers were outside its borders, as an enemy to be destroyed, and Russian Muslims as enemies to be exposed" [19]. The appeals of Muslim modernists to the "Russian-Eastern agreement" "did not find the proper support either in the tsarist government or among the monarchical parties of the right wing" [20]. Progressive reformed Islam, ready to accept the achievements of Western civilization, was, according to their (Islamophobic) point of view, a greater danger for Orthodoxy than conservative Islam. At the same time, recent studies have also revealed positive trends, which (along with critical assessments) found their reflection in this paper. Democratic journalism not only saved the honor and dignity of the Russian intellectuals, but also preserved the opportunity for a positive ethno-cultural dialogue. The innovative development of the subject was the appeal to public discussion, which brought the various aspects of the acculturation of the Muslim community of Russia to the forefront.

#### **5 SUMMARY**

A benevolent trend towards Islam and Muslims has certainly come into view. However, such publications were rather the exceptions, manifested against the background of the amicable chorus of Islamophobic literature, which, along with other issues, was actively discussing

measures to "curb Islam" in Russia. Measures in this respect, of course, should have been found, because, as stressed by Krymskii A.E., "Russia has long been a crusher of Islam". In addition, the traditional recommendations basically did not go further than strengthening measures of control and regulation that would limit the sociopolitical and sociocultural framework of the life of the Muslim community. Permanent proposals were made to strengthen repressive norms for apostates, censorship of Muslim literature, control over confessional schools, and the introduction of a permanent ban on the Mohammedans' journey to Mecca.

Along with this, the opinion on the prospects of acculturation policy has been gradually crystallizing. Many ideas in this regard were expressed long before their subsequent implementation. Pashino P.I. already in 1868 proposed, after waiting twenty-five years, "to oblige persons wishing to obtain the title of Imam to withstand an examination in the Russian language" [21]. The key direction in terms of socio-cultural integration of Muslims was their involvement in the public education system, as well as publishing and educational activities.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS**

The Russian cultural carriers, despite all the diversity of socio-political views, united the broadest strata of the Russian intellectuals, from the missionary N. Ilminskii to the democrat Iadrintsev N.M. Sincerely interested in European education of the national borderlands, they realized the responsibility of Russia's cultural mission and sought, above all, to form public opinion in favor of expanding acculturation of non-Russians. They tried, as far as possible, to convey the idea that Russia can band together not by force of arms, but by socio-cultural rapprochement of peoples, the power of enlightenment and science. Violence, however, and the manifestation of xenophobia can only sow distrust of Russian cultural initiatives. At the same time, civilization, which did not initially include the tasks of development and flourishing of national cultures, was understood by cultural carriers as part of the establishment of spiritual, religious and ethnocultural values dominating the empire.

## **7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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**How to cite this article:**

Gafarov A A, Nabiev R A, Fazliev A M, Nafikov Z I. «Muslim matter» in the mirror of public discussion (xix - beginning of xx century). J. Fundam. Appl. Sci., 2017, 9(7S), 1257-1265.