

Islam in Russia and Russian Islam

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Abstract: Until recently the term “Russian Islam” was something difficult to imagine. Half a century ago Islam was considered only as a religion of ethnic minorities only. The pioneers of Islam among the ethnic Russians were Russian women married to Muslim foreigners, Russian soldiers captured during the war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and some spiritual seekers who were not satisfied with Christianity and found in Islam the true religion. Actually they were at the margin of the Russian society major parts of which were adepts of the Russian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless they successfully produced a strong wave. Although their number is still relatively small (about 100 000) they are young, energetic, vibrant and widespread in many Russian cities. There are among them politicians, famous artists and even some former Christian clergy. Many politicians share the opinion that Islam is a force of life in Russia and if the country want to exist further it must consider this force. A sector of Russian culture featured by Islam in the situation when other sectors are in decline, have opportunity to become one of the most important and influential force in the development of Russian society in the future.

Key words: Islam in Russia • Russian Islam • Religious interaction • Culture influence • Russian society
Islam in Russia

INTRODUCTION

One of the earliest Muslim areas on the territory of Russia was Volzhskaya Bulgaria (Bulgaria on the banks of the Volga river - don't confuse with the Bulgaria in Eastern Europe!) which is now a part of autonomous Republic of Tatarstan. It was an independent state before. The country emerged at the end of the 9th - early 10th century and quite for a long time was the only developed nation on the eastern tip of Europe [1].

The Bulgarian population originally came from the area around the Azov Sea and conquered local Finno-Uigur and Turkic tribes. Among the biggest Bulgarian cities were Bulgar and Bilyar which by their population and territory outnumbered London, Paris, Kiev (then the capital of ancient Russia) and Novgorod (a rich merchant city in Russia).

Volzhskaya Bulgaria had trade relations with Central Asia, China, Byzantium, Russia. The main merchandise was wheat, furs, timber, leather, footwear, weapons etc. Each year there were trade fairs held in which the

merchants from Baghdad, Damascus, Scandinavia and even Spain were taking part. Many of the foreign trade missions had its own premises in the capital of Bulgaria. Buildings in the capital city Bulgar in the 10-14 Century were built of stone and brick. Windows were covered with glass. The floor of the buildings was heated from below using a special heating system. There was a water pipe system in the city. Until now we can see the ruins of "Black House", Minor minaret, North Mausoleum, tomb of Khan, the Main Mosque.

In 922 Bulgaria was visited by the mission from Baghdad. During the meeting of all Bulgarian tribes they decided to accept Islam as the official religion. The ruler of the country Almaz have chosen Muslim name of Jafar ibn Abdallah. This was noted by Ibn Fadlan, the secretary of the mission from Baghdad sent by Khalif Al-Muktadir. The name of Jafar ibn Abdallah can be seen on the silver coins printed in that country. According to a local tale, in the city of Bulgar there are tombs of two Sahab - Muslims who had lived during the Prophet Muhammad's time [2].

With the acceptance of Islam the position of Bulgaria became stronger as it could rely on the support of other Muslim countries. It is also important that Bulgaria succeeded to sign the peace and trade agreement with such a powerful neighboring country as Russia.

The acceptance of Islam promoted also the cultural development. The old Turkic writing was replaced by Jawi (in 1928 with the creation of autonomous Tatar Republic Jawi was replaced by Roman script and in 1938 by Cyrillic). Since the beginning of the 10th century in many places in Bulgaria there were already schools. Among the people of Bulgaria were scientists and writers (poets).

In the first half of the 12th century, the scholar Yakob ibn-Nogman wrote a book *History of Bulgaria*. Another scholar Burhan ibn-Bulgari wrote a book about rhetoric art and medicine. *Syair About Yusof* written by Kul Gali (13th century) became popular at that time far beyond Bulgaria and influenced greatly the development of Bulgaria Tartar literatures later.

The people of Bulgaria were especially skillful in making jewelry of gold, silver, bronze, copper, porcelain plates with intricate carvings, jewelry from metal, the locks of copper in the form of animals, leather goods, clothes sewn with beads and silver thread. Some heritage objects were preserved later thanks to the interest of the Russian emperor Peter the Great towards culture. In 1722 during his trip near Volga river he made a stop at the premises of the ruins of the city of Bulgar and ordered to copy the inscriptions of more than 50 gravestones. Two experts were sent to do it and besides this they recorded a lot of Bulgarian myth and folklore [3].

In 1223 Volzhskaya Bulgaria was invaded by Tatar-Mongol troops led by Subudai-Khan. This Commander who had lost no battle before, who quickly crossed the whole of Asia while destroying the Russian army on the river Kalka suddenly was defeated at the hands of Bulgarian troops. He was trapped by Bulgarian army and lost many soldiers and much of the property robbed before. With great difficulty he managed to escape himself with a small group of soldiers and return to his home. Only 13 years later he could come back and on that occasion conquered Bulgaria. But for some reason Tatar-Mongol forces couldn't stay in Bulgaria, the control wasn't tight and Bulgaria managed to restore its power. The situation lasted until 1236 when Batu-Khan again invaded the country destroying its capital Bulgar and other towns. Many of Bulgarians fled to Russian territory. Since then, Bulgaria became part of the Golden Horde. Nevertheless Bulgaria was continuing the struggle for

freedom. In subsequent years the city of Bulgarian rebuilt its palaces, mosques, churches, tombs. Trade again was restored. The Golden Horde's khan didn't like it and in 1361 Khan Bulat Timur attacked invaded Bulgar again and burnt it. But it was useless. The city was rebuilt again! And only after the military invasion of Tamerlane the city of Bulgar was completely destroyed.

After the Golden Horde collapsed in the early 15th century, the Kazan Khanate emerged on the former territory of Bulgaria. More lately in the year 1552 the Russian tsar Ivan IV (Terrible) conquered Kazan city and included this region into Russia. Since then, Bulgaria remains a part of Russia with the name of Tatarstan.

Later, mostly in the 19th Century the vast territories of Central Asia (about 3 501 510 km²) with predominant Muslim population (7.7 million people, 1897) were included into the realm of Russian Empire [4]. Partly it was due to the expansion policy, partly on the request of some local authorities who were seeking the Russian protection against their enemies. An important factor was also the necessity to counteract against the British expansion in this region near the borders of Russia [5]. There was no open discrimination towards Muslim in Russia. At least there were no pogroms (massacre) which were frequently organized against Jewish population by Russian ultranationalist. On the contrary there was clear desire to know the Muslim culture and to study it. Many statesmen and public figures of Muslim origin got the high position in the Russian society while the Islamic theme became very popular in the works of travelers, writes and philosophers.

Reflection of Islam in the Works of Travelers, Writes and Philosophers: In the second half of the 15th century, merchants, travelers and ambassadors of Russia began publishing their impressions on Islam. Russian merchant Afanasy Nikitin who was probably the first Russian to visit India (30 years earlier before the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama "open" India), Persia, Ethiopia and Arabia in the 15th century, in his book *The Adventures Through The Three Seas* in quite objective manner depicted the life of the Muslims, but still was wondering, should Christians appraise the other religions. Among others he also described how Khan Junnar in India was trying to persuade him to embrace Islam promising the reward of thousand gold money and how he had been fasting with the Muslims, although had always worried whether it was contradictory with his own religion [6]. Another Russian merchant Fedot Kotov in his book *Adventures in Persia*

(1623) described in details some Islamic celebrations, but also noted that he wrote the book not because he wanted "to glorify Islam."

The first personality who was talking about Islam with great respect was the Russian poet Gavrila Derzhavin (1743-1816) who was proud of his genealogy line that started from Khan Bagrim and who spent his childhood in the Islamic region, namely Kazan city. All his nostalgia of his native place is reflected in the line of his poem: "Even the smoke is nice and sweet when it is the smoke of the homeland." Compare for instance it with a Malay proverb: "Hujan emas di negeri orang, hujan batu di negeri sendiri, baik juga di negeri sendiri" (Gold rain in the foreign land, stone rain in the homeland, still it's better in the homeland!) [7].

Other poets were talking of the elements of similarity between the Christians and Muslims. Besides, a lot of translations of the works of Muslim poets and the works of Western writers who favored East countries took place that time. Among the original works of Russia's most prominent school of sentimentalism was the novel in verses *Pigeon's Nest* by Pavel Katenin (1792-1853) in which he praised highly the birth of Islam and stated that the spread of religion among the Arabs was good for the people. Great interest in Islam was shown also by such Russian poets as Griboedov (1795-1829), Vyazemsky (1792-1878) and Muravyev (1794-1866).

Islamic culture inspired the genius Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799 - 1837) who admitted in one of his poems: "I take pleasure in the beauty of the Quran ..." He expressed his personal experience of interaction with Muslims in Southern Russia in the poems *The Bakhchisarai's Fountain* and *The Caucasian Prisoner*. Religious themes in his works were side by side with the ethnic themes. In a small poem *Tacit* he depicted the blood revenge of Chechens and traditional elements of their culture linked with Islamic elements.

The highlight of Pushkin's creativity inspired by Islam is the poem *The Reflections of the Quran* (1824). Especially interesting for Pushkin were the philosophy and moral aspects of the sacred Scripture. Once he used to admit that "... a lot of moral principles are displayed in the Quran in a very convincing and poetic style." His interpretation of the character of the Prophet Muhammad completely different from the interpretation of the French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) who in one of his play described him as a fanatic who wanted to seize power. Pushkin argues with Voltaire: "Not the blood of defenseless people is demanded by the Heaven, but love and trust" [8].

The Imitation of the Quran is viewed by critics as a work in which the Oriental traditions accepted by Pushkin were produced especially productive. A Famous Russian writer Dostoevsky (1821-1881) used to write that Pushkin had a unique ability to understand the true essence of Eastern civilization. Western writers while telling about other races were using it just as exotic and ethnography elements. While Pushkin was trying to maintain the mindset of other nations. With reference to the *The Reflections of the Quran* in particular Dostoevsky then exclaimed: "Do not we see here a Muslim, a true spirit of the Quran and a sword, majesty and power of a strong faith?" [9].

Two years later Pushkin returned to the theme of Islam and wrote a poetry *Prorok* (Prophet) in which depicted the birth of a poet. Allah gave him eyes to see everything but he was not a poet. Allah gave him the ears to listen to everything but he was still not a poet. Allah replaced his heart but he was still "a dead body in the desert." Allah gave him the ability to understand Allah and only after that he became a poet [10].

Muslim life was depicted by the writers Bestuzhev-Marlinsky (1797-1837) and Polezhaev (1805-1838) (*Ammalat-Bek, Harem, Sultan*, etc). Shadow of Eastern Islamic world with its fascinating beauty became the source of inspiration to the Russian poet Lermontov (1814-1841). The problem of human destiny and the destiny of the creation of the His Almighty was raised by the author Alexei Tolstoy (1882-1945) in the *Crimea Notes*. The character of an oriental beauty was created by Nikolai Nekrasov (1821-1877) in his *Turkish Lady*. The writer Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) wrote much about Islam as well. He was attracted by the Islamic architecture. According to him, Islamic architecture is "full of flowers." In the article *Al Mamun* he was talking about this Baghdad ruler (813-833) with admiration.

Islam and Islamic civilization attracted the attention of renowned Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900). He tried to think about Islam from philosophic point of view. He was of very high opinion of the role of Prophet Muhammad and Islam in the development of world civilization: "Islam will surely grow and spread more because the "spiritual milk" of Al Quran is needed by mankind."

The writer Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) who studied the Islamic tradition and personality of the Prophet Muhammad was also of great esteem of Quran and Islamic culture in general. To understand Islam better he even had correspondence with Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). The main hero of his novel *Haji Murat* (published in Malay by

DBP in 2001, second printing 2007) [11] shows many characteristics of Muslims from Caucasus Mountains.

In the early 20th century, we find Islamic themes in the poems of Nobel Prize winner Ivan Bunin (1870-1953). He studied the works about Muslim countries and was captivated by the "mosques, minarets and domes of high art." He appreciated highly the pride and identity of Muslims who faced the Western colonialists. In one of his poems he once declared: "Cursed be someone who does not listen to the Qur'an command ... Cursed be someone who rejects prayers and holy war ..." People say, Ivan Bunin always brought with him an anthology of poetry of Persian famous poets Saadi (1184-1291) that influenced much his creativity. Can not be denied that in his poems such as *Night of Al Kadr*, *The body of the Holy* etc. Bunin showed himself as a Sufi. Another poet Nikolai Gumilev (1896-1921) was keen to visit Muslim countries. Influenced by Islam he composed a poetic play *A Child of Allah* (1917) a chapter of which was written in pantun berikat. Sergey Esenin (1895-1925) in his poem *The Persian Songs* described himself as a traveling Sufi.

Islam During the Communist Time: During the communist time (after 1917) due to the negative attitude of communists to any religion we see the set back in the development in any religion of Russia including the religion of the majority of Russians - Russian Orthodox Church. The religious moral principles were replaced with communist ideology, the people were discouraged to profess the religion and many worship houses were closed or destroyed.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist ideology opened a new era. We witness the process of the revival of the religious life in Russia. It concerns all the main religion including Islam. But moreover there is a new phenomenon - the interest of ethnic Russians towards Islam, or we can call it "Russian Islam" to differ from "Islam in Russia".

Russian Islam: Until recently the term "Russian Islam" was something difficult to imagine or it was an expression which didn't reflect the real situation. Half a century ago the expression "Russian Muslims" was odd. Islam was considered as a religion of Russian Tatars and other non-Russian population only. The pioneers of Islam among the ethnic Russians were Russian women married to Muslim foreigners, Russian soldiers captured during the war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and some spiritual seekers who were not satisfied with Christianity and found in

Islam the true religion. Actually they were at the margin of the Russian society major part of which were adepts of the Russian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless they successfully produced a strong wave that felt not only in religion departments of several universities but also at the high government level.

The advisor to the Russian President's Representative in Federal Volga Region, namely Sergey Gradirovsky in several interviews openly stated that "Russia has its Islamic sector. And this sector will increase and widespread" [12]. It was stated in the context that Islam is a force of life in Russia and if the country wants to exist further it must consider this force ("power if it wants to be legitimate must rely on the live processes below"). Spiritual revival in Russia not necessarily should be contacted only with the rise of the Russian Orthodox Church. Policy like this can divide Russia on religious principles (such as India was divided in 1947) and will promote the isolation of Russia in regional and world scale. Conclusion is: not Islam itself is a danger to national security of Russia, but anti-Islamic policy.

There is no accurate statistics about the number of ethnic Russians embraced Islam. The figures vary usually around 100 thousand. Is it much or little? If you compare that figures with the data of the Soviet Encyclopedia (1977) this 100 thousand is 6 times more than the population of ethnic minorities in the Russian North as *Chukchi* or *Evenki*. Moreover Russian Muslims are usually young and vibrant community and widespread in many Russian cities. There are among them politicians such as Abdul-Wahed Niyazov (Vadim Medvedev) who is also a member of the Russian parliament and a leader of the Union of Russian Patriots, famous artists such as a singer Yulian (Jabrail) and even some former Christian clergy, such as Ali (Vyacheslav) Polosin.

The activity of Russian Muslims are organized by the National Organisation of Russian Muslims (NORM) (Natsional'naya Organizatsiya Russkih Musul'man) and the Movement "Straight Way". Until recently, the most active Islam community was the community in the region of Karelia (the Russian North) which exists thank to da'wah activity of Ahmat Abu Mustafa (Russian name is Oleg Starodubtsev). According to some of the observers the number of Russian Muslims will increase greatly. And there are several reasons for this conclusion.

Russians now can freely enjoy the translations of the Holy Al Qur'an including the poetic translation (1991) made by Iman (Valeria) Porokhova, a Muslimah of Russian origin who accepted Islam under the influence of her husband, a citizen of Syria [13].

If previously the Muslims mixed in mosque with each other in the languages of their ethnics (at that time there were almost no Muslims of ethnic Russians), now they socialize in Russian. Many Islamic mass media emerged in Russian, including electronic one partly owned by the Muslims of ethnic Russians. One of the government television channel (channel 2) introduced in 2004 a special program about the life of Muslims in Russia entitled "Muslimat" with the host Dinara Sadretdinova [14].

Slowly a perception that Islam in Russia is the religion of ethnic minorities and their core characteristics completely vanished. Now to become Muslims for Russians does not mean that they will belong to Chechens or Tatars. According to Sergey Gradirovsky, Russian Islam is not a sect or a new movement and certainly not a distortion of principles of faith but "cultural support" that corresponds Russian culture with Islam.

One can only rejoice with this kind of opinion from the staff of the Russian government. If this opinion is shared by all Russian government servants then Russia becomes a territory of jihad without bloodshed because the purpose of jihad is not violence but the spread of the faith.

Why do ethnic Russians accept Islam? Of course the most important is divine inspiration like in the case with Russian popular singer Yulian (Jebrail) who embraced Islam in 2005. He used to say that during all his life, he was preparing himself to accept Islam: "I love Islam and ibadat and stand in it in earnest" [15].

But some forward different arguments because the acceptance of Islam for them is the result of their deliberate choice [16]:

- "Rationalism", in other words the simplicity of Islamic dogma. Contrary to the Russian Orthodox Church which shrouds the dogmatic ambiguity with mystics, Islam gives a clear understanding about God, Life after death and causes of the violence in the world.

Actually the problem was highlighted at the beginning of the last century by Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), Russian genius, author of the novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, great thinker who much contributed to world literature and Russian history.

A Russian woman married to a Muslim named Vekilov wrote to Leo Tolstoy that her son wants to embrace Islam and asks for advice. Here is the answer to that woman by Leo Tolstoy: "As for the advantages of

Islam compared to Christianity then I am very sympathetic to those who change religion and become Muslims. Maybe it is strange, but I who carry high the value of the true teachings of Christianity, no longer doubt that Islam outwardly is higher than Orthodox Church. So if there are only two options whether to hold Orthodox Church or to embrace Islam, then all sensible people without doubt will choose Islam with its simple declaration of belief in the oneness of God and acceptance of Muhammad as his prophet ("There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah") and not Christianity with its complex and ambiguous teaching of the Trinity, sin, redemption, secret institutions, Saints and their drawings, complex prayers and rituals". (Yasnaya Polyana, March 15, 1909) [17].

- "Comfort" or the simplicity of worship. Islam does not require its followers to fast too much like Orthodox Church: all kinds of fasting are in fact often are not to be fulfilled and consequently this leads to hypocrisy. In the case of Islam, it offers fasting only at day time during Ramadan. Islamic rituals such as wedding or funeral ceremony are also simple and don't burden its followers.

In Islam, its adepts can make a direct confession to God, they do not require intermediate in the form of the church bureaucrats. Spirit of bureaucracy generally is alien to Islam. In spite of this, Russian Queen Ekaterina II tried to instill bureaucratic structure of Islam in Russia. In 1778 she established the Islamic Religious Council (muftiat) to the Orenburg region led by the mufti paid by the government [18] (Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov 1830). After some transformation this Council is up till now serves as a tool to control the Muslim community from the Kremlin. In general hierarchy of the Islamic umma based on the authority of Islamic scholars.

- "Antisistem nature". Islam is a serious alternative to the consumer's society. Not everybody is satisfied with the idea that the only form of culture should be pop commercial culture based on promotion of sex and violence. Not everybody wants to be a tool to acquire and spend money that often becomes not means for living but a server of images that match a particular status. Not everybody wants to see the moral decline when youth crime, corruption and husband-wife infidelity become the norm of the life. Old age in consumer's society becomes horrible. In the West, parents who abandoned by their children

are living lonely at old people's homes. In Russia, their destiny is also loneliness. Often they become the object of the adventurers. Islam is an alternative to all that. The Holy Al Qur'an allows adjusting the positive aspects of all areas of politics: market without speculation and social justice without cruelty.

All these arguments are confirmed by ethnic Russians converted into Islam. The deputy Chairman of the National Union of Russian Muslims is Taras (Abdul-Kerim) Chernienko. He is 30 years old, graduated from two universities, holds the post of the head of international department at a bank. In the early 1990s he told his parents that his name would be Abdul. Taras was brought up in Christian intelligencia family but his parents were always teaching him to search for truth by his own. That's why they understood and accepted his choice. He explained with what aspects of Christianity he was not satisfied:

"All of it is based on the irrationality. I believe because it is absurde. But I want to believe because it is reasonable. Islam is a religion of knowledge and intellect. Everything in Islam based on reliable information or on the law and logic. Of course every religion states things that can not be proven - the existence of God. From this point of view, each religion is absurde. Religion, but not God. Allah can not be absurde because absurde can not create. So the true religion must have the inner logic. Islam has it. At least Islam can explain many things that Christianity can not. Why should we avoid alcohol? Because half of crime committed in a state of intoxication. Why should we avoid pork? Because it contains too much cholesterol. And the most important - Christian dogma about the Trinity. How something can be a single and equivalent to that consists of three parts? Actually this dogma was confirmed by people at the World Assembly-2 three and a half centuries after the death of Jesus Christ. There are a lot of such ambiguity in Christianity. That is why I accepted Islam" [19].

Two years ago Shamil Matveev's name was Russian name Vladimir. 12 years he was active in the human rights movement. During the first Chechen war (1994-1996) he began to participate in demonstrations and to show interest in Islam. "I understood, so Shamil, that Islam is not an authoritarian religion as some think. It is more liberal than Christianity. For example imams are elected and not appointed from above. In Islam there are firm law statutes. Besides, the religious leaders stand above the government, not below it" [20].

CONCLUSION

Conclusion is that Russian Islam is a proper and positive development. A sector of Russian culture featured by Islam in the situation when some other sectors tend to be in decline, have opportunity to become one of the most important and influential force in the development of Russian society in the future.

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