

An Empire for the Faithful, A Colony for the Dispossessed

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Abstract

Tsarist officials proclaimed a “civilizing mission” in Central Asia, but, in ruling this territory, they saw in Islam both a tangible instrument of domestic policing and the essential element of a “forward policy.” Paving the way for the projection of tsarist power from Turkestan into neighboring regions, tolerance would, they hoped, allow Russia to undermine British rule and compete for the loyalties of Muslims throughout Asia.

Keywords: Religious tolerance, Civilizing mission, Race, Sunnis, Shi’ites, Ismailis, Baha’is, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, France, Great Britain, India, Afghanistan, Persia, Bukhara.

Résumé

Les fonctionnaires tsaristes ont fait état d’une « mission civilisatrice » pour l’Asie centrale, mais, en gouvernant ce territoire, ils ont vu dans l’islam à la fois un instrument de politique intérieure et un élément essentiel d’une « politique vers l’avant ». Préparant le terrain dans le but d’étendre le pouvoir tsariste depuis le Turkestan vers les régions voisines, les Russes espéraient, par leur tolérance, miner le pouvoir britannique et le concurrencer pour gagner la fidélité des musulmans dans l’ensemble de l’Asie.

Mots-clefs : Tolérance religieuse, mission civilisatrice, race, sunnites, shi’ites, ismaïlis, baha’is, Juifs, Sikhs, Hindous, France, Grande-Bretagne, Inde, Afghanistan, Perse, Boukhara.

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Religion and Imperial Politics

Russia's encounter with Central Asia inspired many new strategies of imperial rule. Born in defeat at the hands of the European powers in the Crimean War, the Russian advance into the region presented tsarist elites with an opportunity to demonstrate their credentials as Europeans. Foreign Minister Aleksander Gorchakov's famous circular of 1864 depicted the empire's actions in Central Asia as those of a "civilized state" obligated to bring order to "wild lands" along its borders. Tsarist expansion was motivated, he explained, "less by ambition than by necessity," making Russia an empire that acted in Asia just like "the United States in America, France in Africa, Holland in its colonies, [and] England in East India."¹

Echoing Gorchakov's evocation of a "civilizing mission" in Turkestan, Russian military authorities adopted a universalist idiom of humanitarianism and scientific progress. At the turn of the century, Governor-General Sergej Dukhovskoj (1838-1901; r. 1898-1901) proclaimed that the Russians had abolished "with one hand the coarse, arbitrary rule of petty despotic rulers, [and] with the other smashed the fetters of slavery and sowed the healthy seed of humane Christian culture," opening up "the path to universal progress for the numerous peoples of Central Asia."² As other essays in this book show, educated Russians – as well as some Muslim intellectuals – celebrated the introduction of the railroad, irrigation projects, European medicine and hygiene, and modernist urban design as signs that the Russian incorporation of the region had begun to awaken the local peoples from "a mediaeval condition of apathy and anarchy."³

Such declarations about Russia's affinity with contemporary European empires reflected tsarist elites' recent adaptation of colonial knowledge from abroad. In particular, they built upon several decades of Russian military scholarship. Since the second quarter of the nineteenth century, tsarist officers in the Caucasus had been studying rival empires, focusing especially on French policies in North Africa. In the 1860s and 1870s, the European-oriented "Great Reforms" of Alexander II and the attraction of nation-state formation in Germany and elsewhere drew tsarist elites closer to their imperial contemporaries. In metropole and colony alike, various sciences had become tools of exploration, conquest, and administration. Disciplines from cartography and

¹ Kappeler, 2006, pp. 142-143.

² RGVIA, f. 1396, op. 2, d. 448, l. 3.

³ Tcharykow, 1931, p. 159.

engineering to ethnography flourished in the colonies of Europe and the United States; tsarist subjects, too, participated in the international circulation of this knowledge, and the acquisition of Central Asia afforded Russian scholars a vast laboratory for further refining this scholarship.

Between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, elites of the European powers tended to share a vision of empire that opposed such secular knowledge to religious phenomena. According to this view, irrational, backward, and fanatical religions accounted for the “slumber” of colonized peoples. Confident of the superiority of Enlightenment ideas about science and reason, many Europeans nonetheless sought the conversion of colonial populations to Christianity. However, these efforts were often met with resistance, and colonial regimes frequently opted for other kinds of cultural transformation.⁴ The East India Company, for example, professed “neutrality” towards religious matters in opposition to the intense lobbying of evangelical Protestants who called for broader support for missionaries in India.

Despite such rhetoric, company officials, like other colonial rulers, intervened in a wide array of religious affairs in search of ways to strengthen their power. In some contexts, they acted as patrons of shrines and scholars; in others, they sought to incorporate “religious laws” into colonial judicial systems. “We have endeavoured,” one East India Company official in India explained, “to adapt our Regulations to the Manners and Understandings of the People, and the Exigencies of the Country, adhering as closely as we are able to their ancient uses and Institutions.”⁵

Warren Hastings, the author of such a scheme in late eighteenth-century India, reasoned that “in all suits regarding inheritance, marriage, caste, and other religious usages, or institutions, the laws of the Qur’an with respect to Mahometans and those of the *Shaster* with respect to gentoos [Hindus] shall be invariably adhered to.”⁶ In Egypt, Napoleon’s secular regime also professed support for Islam and its sacred law. By the 1830s, Europeans operating in Muslim societies from North Africa to India and Indonesia had begun to establish what David Robinson has called, in the French context, “institutions of control.” Primarily of a legal character, these were designed to show British, French, Russian, and Dutch tolerance for Islam and its authoritative spokesmen and, more broadly, to bring order to territorial possessions inhabited by

⁴ See, for example, Viswanathan, 1989.

⁵ Cohn, 1996, p. 26.

⁶ Van der Veer, 2001, p. 113.

Muslims. In the late nineteenth century, such institutions acquired an even greater significance: European powers increasingly competed with one another – and with Muslim states such as the Ottoman empire and Afghanistan – for the loyalties of Muslim subjects. By the early twentieth century, the French celebrated their identity as a “Muslim power” – an imperial state to which Muslims could pledge their loyalty. Where such states “were successful in institution building,” Robinson observes, “and in establishing a certain hegemony as a ‘Muslim power,’ they might reduce investment in the apparatus of repression.”⁷

Most of these broader European currents came together in Russia’s approach to the “Muslim question” in Turkestan. In administrative terms, Russian authorities had to manage a vast space, marked by a complex topography, and enormous population with a small number of officials. The tsarist regime pledged non-interference in local religious matters but simultaneously set about constructing institutions of control that, in turn, prompted wide-reaching religious, cultural, and social change. As agents of discipline and control, Islamic institutions and authorities could prove useful. Like their European rivals in Asia and Africa, Russian officials presented themselves as patrons of Islamic institutions and piety and attempted to use Islamic law to police Turkestani society and, like the French, to win over the allegiance of Muslim subjects by positioning themselves as the representatives of both a civilized European state and a Muslim power.

A closer look at Russian rule in Central Asia also reveals important differences between the tsarist and other empires. The Tsars had ruled Muslim populations since the fifteenth century, and the regime continuously adapted its policies to new settings and populations, ultimately resulting in approaches that changed over time and varied in their specificities from location to location. From a comparative perspective, the Russian case stands out not only in the duration of tsarist rule over Muslims but in the wide geographic distribution of the Muslim communities themselves and, most importantly, in the persistence of some fundamental understandings of religious tolerance in the minds of tsarist elites. Since the late eighteenth century, tsarist tolerance did not mean neutrality or non-interference. Just as the Orthodox Church remained supreme, the state claimed the power to intervene on behalf of officially established authorities and canonical texts. Since the early nineteenth century, the Ministry of the Interior had largely been responsible for administering the non-Orthodox Christian confessions of the empire. In Central Asia, many of these

⁷ Robinson, 2000, pp. 75-76.



Church Sergeevskaja at Tashkent, after 1910.

responsibilities shifted to military authorities. Between the late eighteenth century and the 1860s, official ideas about Islam evolved in key aspects, and the rise of Russian nationalist ideas amplified some officials' hostile views of the faith. Thus, when the empire's military authorities constructed the governor-generalship of Turkestan, they rejected the institutional architecture for the administration of Muslim affairs established by Catherine the Great. Yet they retained many of its fundamental principles, namely those that envisioned Islam as a force for social discipline that would play a central role in governing these populations. In Russia, policies varied by region and population, but resort to the politics of confessionalization – rule through religious personnel and institutions – transcended administrative boundaries.

Among the European empires, by contrast, differences between religious policies in the colonies and the metropole were greater than in the tsarist empire. This disjuncture was most striking in the case of France. At the height of French colonial expansion and republican anti-clericalism under the Third Republic, tens of thousands of Catholic priests and *religieux* won official support for their contribution to the empire. J. P. Daughton has shown that “from

the 1880s to the First World War, the daily operation of the so-called republican civilizing mission in the French empire was regularly carried out by the republic's sworn 'enemies' – Catholic religious workers – many of whom not only had serious reservations about colonialism but were openly hostile to republicanism."⁸ Religious policies in the British colonies differed considerably from those in the metropole as well. Peter van der Veer has noted "a definite secularity of the British state in India that was much stronger than in Britain itself." "The British," he contends, "considered a sharp separation of church and state essential to their ability to govern India."⁹

The vulnerable geopolitical position of Russian Turkestan further distinguished religious politics there from other European colonial scenarios. Stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Chinese border, these new possessions brought Russia into closer contact with Persia, Afghanistan, British India, and China. Tsarist authorities faced the challenge of severing their Muslim subjects' ties to their co-religionists in neighboring states. While the Persians, Afghans, and Chinese might trouble Russia's strategic thinkers at particular moments in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they understood the real danger – and opportunity – to reside in India.

In Turkestan, officials saw in the regime's religious policies the tangible instruments of domestic policing; and, somewhat more abstractly, these policies also appeared as the essential elements of a "forward policy." The emancipatory rhetoric of tolerance pointed in multiple directions. Seeking political advantage, St. Petersburg had long championed the cause of persecuted religious communities and dissidents in neighboring states, from Poland to the Ottoman empire.¹⁰ In Central Asia and neighboring regions, tsarist authorities found a wealth of opportunities to liberate slaves, rescue minority groups from discrimination and persecution, and ameliorate the condition of women suffering under the rule of ostensibly corrupt and unjust rulers. At the same time, tolerance would allow Russia to win the sympathies of Muslims throughout Asia, and Islam would serve as a means to challenge British power. Tsarist authorities hoped to mobilize the promise of liberation from the British yoke to pave the way for the projection of Russian power from Turkestan into neighboring regions.

In declaring the empire a refuge for the Muslim faithful as well as for the dispossessed communities within these Muslim societies, tsarist authorities

⁸ Daughton, 2006, p. 6.

⁹ Van der Veer, 2001, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰ See LeDonne, 1997.

aspired to create a powerful wedge. The tsarist practice of tolerance offered leverage against “despotic” Muslim rulers and customs when the interests of Jews, Baha’is, Shi’ites, or others intersected with the emancipatory rhetoric of Russian officials. To tsarist officials who dreamed of utilizing Turkestan as an outpost for the liberation of India, Islam appeared to be an asset that Russia alone could deploy on the world stage.

The Tsarist House of Islam

The Russian military arrived in Central Asia in the 1860s bearing the banner of European civilization and proclaiming an end to the tyranny of local khans and *amīrs*. Governor-General Konstantin von Kaufman (1818-1882; r. 1867 to 1882) echoed British claims to neutrality when he proclaimed a policy of “ignoring” Islam, by which he meant a shift from policies developed on the Orenburg frontier that had elevated a *muftī* and the Orenburg Muhammadan Ecclesiastical Assembly over the mosque communities in the Volga River and Ural Mountains provinces, Siberia, and the imperial capitals. Like their contemporary rivals, however, Russian officers nonetheless looked to salvage whatever they could from the local landscape of indigenous institutions and men of influence. In each town seized by tsarist forces, Russian commanders sought out local clerics and notables to negotiate the terms of surrender and, when hostilities came to an end, to act as intermediaries and clients.¹¹

Religious authorities were not the only intermediaries and religion was not the only taxonomy available to tsarist authorities. Military geographers, ethnographers, and travelers debated the historical origins and linguistic, cultural, and racial attributes of the “nationalities,” “tribes,” and “peoples” they found in Turkestan. As Sergej Abashin has shown, most Russian scholars tended to divide the settled population they encountered into “Uzbeks” and “Tajiks.” The relationship between these two groups and a third ethnographic category of people, the “Sarts,” provoked interpretive disputes that continued into the early Soviet period.¹² Where these categories offered confusion, the world of religion seemed to be more accessible to people and institutions of influence, especially in the region’s major urban centers. To tsarist administrators, Islam may have been inferior to Christianity, but it still offered a useful form of social regulation. Muslim institutions recommended themselves because they policed

¹¹ See Crews, 2006.

¹² Abashin, 2004, pp. 38-101.

morality and kept order. Islamic law structured commercial contracts, for example, and knowledge of this law could be used to pursue administrative goals such as state acquisition of land.¹³ Moreover, Muslim prayer leaders, scholars, endowment managers, teachers, and judges were, in this view, government clients in the making. As tsarist rule expanded outside of urban centers such as Tashkent and Samarkand, constant rivalries among clerics drew tsarist officials into mediating disputes, which gave district officials numerous opportunities to conduct surveillance of urban and rural communities. Russian officers were still haunted by anxieties of rebellion, of course, but many were buoyed by constant Muslim appeals to tsarist officials seeking salaries, some piece of legislation, confirmation in office, or police intervention. In nearly all such cases, these demands grew out of the search for leverage against Muslim rivals.¹⁴

The recruitment of indigenous personnel was crucial to the functioning of institutions of control that still claimed legitimacy in Islamic legal terms but which were now subordinated to the direction of Russian authorities. In the case of law courts, for example, incorporation meant substantial reorganization, which had important implications for local society and, in particular, for religious authority. The courts oversaw litigation according to the *sharī'a*, but their jurisdiction was limited largely to matters that Russian judicial experts regarded as belonging to “civil” affairs. At the same time, they retained some power over “criminal” matters relating to morality and religion; tsarist law even amplified their powers by standardizing prison sentences for some offenses. Court procedures became, at once, more bureaucratic, and more participatory. In a major departure from indigenous judicial systems, the judges were now to stand for popular election, and their writ was geographically formalized. At the same time, just as townspeople participated in the selection of judges, they increasingly had recourse to alternative venues. These included not only the Russian courts, where tsarist law prevailed and where appeals could be pursued. They also entailed more informal exchanges, often initiated by a denunciation or petition, between dissatisfied litigants and Russian officials eager to act as guardians of justice. In the settled regions of Turkestan, officials assumed that the *sharī'a* represented the appropriate law for this population. They aimed to wield this law – or at least the legal norms that they could derive from ostensibly canonical texts – both to legitimize their rule and to order this society.

¹³ See, for example, Nalivkin, 1904, pp. 1-56.

¹⁴ Crews, 2006, chapter 5.

Russian entanglement in religious disputes among Turkestanis may not have achieved both goals, as tsarist officials conceived them, but it did significantly contribute to the solidity of administrative control in the region while offering Muslims powerful incentives to engage with tsarist institutions. While some ‘*ulamā*’ counseled against contact with the regime, petitions, denunciations, and court records reveal that in this sphere, as in so many others, Muslim men – as well as a number of women – frequently ignored their prescriptions. From the late 1860s on, Muslim appeals to the regime became widespread. These overtures were no doubt inspired by complex motivations. Some supplicants may have been critical of the Russian presence but still open to its use against more dangerous enemies: impious or heretical Muslims or other rivals such as competing Jewish merchants. Recourse to the tsarist state offered an avenue for challenging hierarchy or for advancing alternative interpretations. In adopting the practice of petitioning, denouncing, and taking their neighbors to court, the inhabitants of Turkestan quickly acclimated to the imperial environment. Non-scholars were not just consumers of religious knowledge; they were also producers, who engaged in religious controversies with their co-religionists in a variety of ways. Although tsarist institutions were not as dense in the governor-generalship as in other parts of the empire, both urban and rural Turkestanis became skilled at engaging with the regime just as other tsarist subjects had learned to do, whether in the western borderlands, the Caucasus, or in the core Orthodox Christian provinces of “European Russia.”

Even if more remote settlements or recalcitrant milieus generated fewer denunciations, a local district chief [*uezdnyj nachal’nik*] needed only one written accusation or a single oral complaint to launch an investigation and solicit further testimony from an entire mosque community, *madrassa*, settlement, or town quarter. The former are well documented in local and central archives (especially collections such as that assembled by Count Konstantin K. Palen [Pahlen] during his inspection of the region in 1908-1909), but the latter surely played a critical role as well. Orientalist scholars might dismiss these voices as inauthentically “Muslim” and thus illegitimate, but such an approach would ignore windows onto the thinking of non-elite men and women who otherwise left few records behind. Though inspired by specific grievances that varied from place to place, their cumulative effect was to draw the state into local life – and the population into the administrative machinery – and, from the point of view of tsarist authorities, to offer a degree of popular assent to the Russian-led liberation of Central Asia. Officials generally welcomed such

overtures because they affirmed Russian authorities' self-image as the emancipators of an oppressed population. Moreover, they supplied valuable intelligence and shed light on the inner workings of a variety of communities.

Tsarist patronage of Islamic institutions and support for what officials took to be "orthodox" rites and practices did not, of course, win over all opponents and critics of Russian rule. Nevertheless, in the wake of the Andijan uprising of 1898 led by Dukchi Ishan [Dūkchī Īshān], Muslim intellectuals' debates about the rebellion prompted a defense of the state of Muslim religious life under Russian rule. As Hisao Komatsu has shown, thinkers such as Muḥammad Yūnus Khwāja Tā'ib criticized such rebellion [*fitna*] because, he reasoned, Turkestan belonged to the Hanafī legal category of *Dār al-Islām*; as part of the "House of Islam," Turkestan was a territory where Muslims could reside and meet the obligations of the faith. A former official of the Khanate of Kokand, Tā'ib had emigrated to Kashgar (where he served Ya'qub Bek in the *jihād* against the Qing) and India before returning to Russian-ruled Kokand, where, in 1886, he became an Islamic law court judge and worked with Russian officials. Tā'ib argued that

"At present, the population of the Ferghana Valley and Turkestan should make use of their positive conditions as much as possible. This country can be considered *Dār al-Islām*, where Muslim *qāḍīs* and officials work. Islamic law, *sharī'a*, is enforced by those in power. It is a great situation for them to be able to solve any legal issues according to *sharī'a*. They should give thanks."¹⁵

Defending Muslims like himself who assumed the pivotal role of judges, and who thereby guaranteed the country's status as *Dār al-Islām*, he condemned "instigators of *fitna*" and "Sufis who are worse than mad dogs in bazaars." The Andijan revolt had only "deprived Islam of its shrine, and all the Muslims were driven away from the house of peace. Peaceful Egypt was damaged and the ease of the Nile turned into a mirage."¹⁶ Not all influential Muslims shared this view, however. In the 1890s, after returning from pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina and having received directions from the Prophet in a dream, Dukchi Ishan set out to reform the religion of the ostensibly wayward people of the Ferghana Valley and is said to have directed particular criticism at figures such as Tā'ib, who, he charged, were corrupt and ignorant.¹⁷ Dukchi

¹⁵ Komatsu, 2007, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 11-14.

Ishan's critique appealed to many in the restive Ferghana region, but his revolt was an extraordinary occurrence. In 1892, the population of Tashkent revolted during a cholera epidemic, while settled and nomadic communities alike clashed with the authorities on a smaller scale in various places. But such events did not mobilize a unified opposition animated by an Islamic idiom or leadership, contrary to the anxious warnings on the part of officials such as Dukhovskoj about the dangers of Sufism and Pan-Islam after 1898. Even the rebellion of 1916 divided Muslims: a number of clerics continued to call for respect for Russian authority, while others rejected these pleas. From the 1860s through the First World War, most Hanafī 'ulamā' appear to have regarded Turkestan as *Dār al-Islām*, a judgment that may have been based on a *fatwā* establishing this juridical consensus.¹⁸ As in other regions of the empire, tsarist authorities attempted to reinforce the notion that submission to tsarist rule was a religious obligation by circulating sermons and poems in praise of the emperor and by organizing mosque prayers and other public ceremonies at which Muslim notables pledged their loyalty to the dynasty and empire.¹⁹

In the early twentieth century, many Turkestanis nonetheless challenged the status quo of life in the empire in a number of complex ways. Some reformist thinkers turned their energies to the reform of Turkestan society independent of the state, while many more local elites looked instead to the regime. Samarkandi notables who spoke on behalf of their town and district in a petition to Count Palen in October 1908 reflected the latter approach. They envisioned a central place for the tsarist state in the amelioration of their "religious, economic, and political needs."²⁰ The Samarkandis began their petition by protesting their exclusion from the Third State Duma. Muslims from other parts of the empire were represented, they conceded, but none knew the "completely different way of life" of "we Turkestanis." The petitioners sought electoral parity with other parts of the empire (specifically requesting revision of the temporary law of June 3, 1907). While seeking a greater voice in the affairs of the empire as a whole, these notables also pushed for the autonomy of Muslim religious institutions, especially schools, courts, and endowments [*waqfs*], for the "right to fulfill all religious commands of the Qur'an, Muhammad and

¹⁸ See Komatsu's discussion of a *fatwā* mentioned by the chronicler Mirza 'Abd al-'Azim Sami in *ibidem* pp. 16-17. Regarding the motives of the rebels of 1916, Adeeb Khalid argues, "the Revolt was a protest against colonial oppression, land expropriation, and military conscription; Islam was never an issue." Khalid, 2007, p. 49.

¹⁹ See Erkinov, 2004; Sahadeo, 2007; Crews, 2003a.

²⁰ "Peticija tuzemcev g. Samarkanda i uezda (usl.)": RGIA, f. 1396, op. 1, d. 264, ll. 30-237 ob., at <http://zerrspiegel.orientphil.uni-halle.de/t896.html>.

the interpretations of the scholars,” and for legal and educational affairs to be conducted “according to the *sharī‘a*.” Such calls for autonomy were circumscribed, however, by an awareness of the institutional architecture constructed by the tsarist state for Muslims elsewhere: echoing other Turkestani communities of the time, the Samarkandis demanded an “ecclesiastical assembly” led by a single figure, a *Shaykh al-Islām*, to regularize legal judgments and to discipline law court judges and other clerical figures.²¹

These supplicants clearly imagined that the power of the empire could be brought to bear on behalf of a wider and more systematic application of God’s law, as they interpreted it. They envisaged a single form of *sharī‘a* to be introduced uniformly among all the diverse inhabitants of the governor-generalship:

“All peoples [*narodnosti*] of Turkestan, namely: Kirgiz, Kazakhs, Afghans, Iranians, Sarts and Uzbeks should be subject to the *sharī‘a*, because they are all Muslims. And their law court judges and other clerical figures should be appointed according to the *sharī‘a* and ‘*Ādati*’ (custom) should be abolished.”²²

Without openly identifying themselves as Sunni adherents of the Hanafi school of law, the petitioners called on the regime to impose their legal principles on Shi’ites as well as nomadic populations that followed customary legal norms that sometimes differed from those of the *sharī‘a*. They called for the prosecution of all who insulted the faith and of women who appeared in public without the veil. Their confidence in the validity of their claims extended to the demand that Muslims be accorded equal rights with Christians in all matters, including those concerning clerics of the different faiths. Although they requested equality with Christians, the Samarkandis also asked that the government affirm social distinctions:

“People [should be] divided among four ranks, the first, second, third, and fourth, so that they have preference with respect to their rank when giving evidentiary testimony.”²³

In an appendix to their appeal, these petitioners also demanded that the government reinforce another kind of hierarchy, the one between Muslims and Jews. From the earliest days of the tsarist conquest, Russian observers had identified slaves and indigenous Jews as the most unfortunate victims of the region’s despotic fiefdoms. But as with other aspects of Russian administration

²¹ RGIA, f. 1396, op. 1, d. 264, ll. 30-237 ob., at <http://zerrspiegel.orientphil.uni-halle.de/t896.html>.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ RGIA, f. 1396, op. 1, d. 264, ll. 30-237 ob., at <http://zerrspiegel.orientphil.uni-halle.de/t896.html>.

in Turkestan, officials articulated conflicting positions about the desirability of defending Jews against Muslims.²⁴ Having declared an end to slavery, official policies toward Jews were far more ambivalent. Kaufman presented his administration as a force against all forms of exploitation, targeting the money-lending practices of Indian merchants in Turkestan and ultimately driving many to emigrate.²⁵ At the same time, while tsarist officials criticized local Jews' subordination to Islamic law, they disagreed about whether or not legal cases involving Muslims and Jews should be removed from the jurisdiction of the *qādis*. From the Samarkandi petitioners to *Jadids* such as Mahmudxo'ja Behbudiy [Maḥmūd Khwāja Bihbūdī], Muslim notables repeatedly pressed the regime to make Jews subject to the *shari'a* in mixed cases.²⁶ In 1903, the Minister of Justice argued that Jews should no longer be subject to Islamic law. The Ministry of War rejected this view, however, and local courts continued to interpret the issue in conflicting ways until a Senate resolution of 1913 finally removed them from the *qādis*' jurisdiction and assigned them to state courts.²⁷

Another concern for these petitioners, the position of women, reflected even more dramatically tsarist ambivalence about embarking on a civilizing mission where administrative practice called for adaptability and where, in the end, the state apparatus still depended upon local participants, if not elites. As Tomohiko Uyama has argued, tsarist officials consistently reasoned that "failure to adopt particularistic ways to implement measures would lead to revolt and other tragic situations."²⁸ Russian observers made the need for the reform of gender relations in Turkestan a constant refrain of their commentary, but, in practice, the administration remained dependent upon Islamic institutions and the centrality of the *shari'a*. As in Orthodox Russia itself, the strictures of religious law continued to govern marriage, divorce, and the family.

The Saviors of Asia

Islam was both a domestic and a geopolitical concern. Despite treaty agreements in 1873, 1881, 1887, and 1895 that formally demarcated Russian territory, the borders of Turkestan, like those of Transcaucasia, never acquired the

²⁴ Crews, 2004.

²⁵ See Levi, 2002, pp. 250-260.

²⁶ See, for example, RGIA, f. 1396, op. 1, d. 264, ll. 223-226, <http://zerrspiegel.orientphil.uni-halle.de/t895.html>; and CGA RUz, f. I-18, op. 1, d. 1600. Behbudiy's scenario envisioned that a Jewish scholar would also participate in such deliberations. See Hablemitoğlu and Kocaoğlu, 2001, pp. 440, 445.

²⁷ Crews, 2004, pp. 476-489.

²⁸ Uyama, 2007, p. 60.

permanence of other imperial boundaries. Local Muslim populations continued to move across porous borders, despite tsarist efforts to prohibit repeated waves of in-migration from Persia and Afghanistan and sever ties between Turkestan and Xinjiang; moreover, political allegiances remained in flux.²⁹ Although there was no consensus in Russian or British military circles about how these spaces should be managed, a number of tsarist officers lobbied for the further annexation of neighboring regions and even for a campaign to expel the British from the subcontinent.³⁰ From the Russian perspective, it was the religious identity shared by these diverse peoples that carried the greatest weight in discussions of the political future of the region. In 1875, Kaufman had warned that Russia's future position in the region might be threatened by "an enormous, general Muslim movement not only among us, but also in India."³¹

The unsettled frontiers of Turkestan, from Mashhad to Chitral and Kashgar, were arenas for intrigue in which the Russians and British vied with one another – and with local notables – for influence. While questions of strategy, military technology, and transportation infrastructure all figured into tsarist debates, the Russians were also interested in the political loyalties and attitudes of the populations under the rule of their rivals. A series of buffer states, as well as the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountain ranges, separated the governor-generalship from the territory under the direct control of the Government of India. The British nonetheless responded to the Russian challenge with alarm, and exaggerated accounts of tsarist troops appearing at the "gates of India" prompted the British to devise elaborate plans for the defense of the subcontinent. The British thus pursued an intelligence network based in Khorasan, in northeastern Persia with information-gathering contacts among Afghans, Turkmen, and Persians throughout Turkestan, Afghanistan, and Persia. British agents focused their efforts on thwarting Russian plots aimed at winning over men of influence and inciting anti-British rebellions in Afghanistan and the North West Frontier Province. Like the Russians, they looked to Muslim religious networks to gain leverage against their geopolitical rivals. In Mashhad, the British consulate made payments from the late 1880s to the leading Shi'ite clerics (including several *mujtahids*, the chief *mullā*, and, later, the head of the

²⁹ See, for example, Zhigalina, 2002. On the Transcaucasian borders, see Tapper, 1997.

³⁰ See the excellent studies by Morrison, 2006; Marshall, 2006; Siegel, 2002; as well as the documents in Zagorodnikova, 2005.

³¹ Vigasin, 1997, p. 161.



Mosque of Skobelev (Ferghana), after 1910.

shrine of Imām Reza). Following instability in the Russian empire from 1904, British intelligence-gathering from Mashhad intensified.³²

If Islam posed a threat in the minds of men like Kaufman, it also presented Russia with opportunities. When tsarist ministers and diplomats surveyed the map of Turkestan and its surrounding territories seeking advantage against the British world empire, they imagined themselves in competition with the British for the sympathies of the “native population” of India. From at least the 1850s, many Russian observers of the British in India saw great promise in Russia’s advance to the south. Various schemes to invade India echoed one that was drawn up in 1863 by General-Lieutenant Stepan A. Khrulev (1807-1870), a veteran of the sieges of Sevastopol’ and Ak-Mechet’, who called for “an uprising of the natives” and a “union with the Afghans.” Commenting on the revolt of 1857, Khrulev concluded that the “sepoys’ *bunt* revealed how uncertain English rule is beyond the Indus and how easy it might be to spark by external incitement and support a revolt on the part of Muslims and Hindus.”³³ In Asia,

³² Morris, 1984; and Johnson, 2003.

³³ Vigin, 1997, pp. 128-130.

Russians were to appear as “defenders of the native population against English domination.”³⁴

Contacts with British subjects further bolstered this confidence as news of the Russian arrival in Central Asia spread throughout the subcontinent: in 1865, the head of the princely state of Indore offered his backing to Alexander II in the event of a Russian invasion of India. The ruler pledged to support the Russians, as long as they swore an oath not to interfere with his internal government affairs, disarm his forces, prevent the minting of coins, interfere in matters relating to Islamic law or “touch our religion.” In July 1867, an envoy arrived in Tashkent from Indore carrying a letter (apparently written in invisible ink) in Hindi, with a Russian translation, asking for protection against the British. Though the military governor of the Turkestan district chose to give “no serious consideration to the envoy,” others followed, including Sikh dissidents from Punjab who also agitated for a Russian invasion.³⁵ In 1879, Baba Ram Singh sent an appeal to Kaufman. His letter told the story of Guru Govind Singh who had predicted that “the English will appear, they will oppress all the peoples of India and will torment the small and the great; afterwards the Russians will arrive in India and drive the English out: the Russian hero [*bogatyr*] will seize it and take possession of it.” “The prophecy of Guru Baba Nanak Sahib says,” the message continued, “that you will come and save us. 315 thousand Sikhs will join you.”³⁶ In 1887, Dulip Singh, the son of one of the last Punjabi maharajas, traveled to Russia after several years in England. Though he left Moscow in 1888, he published an address in a newspaper in Geneva in June 1889 in which he called on “All Indians, Brahmins, Sikhs, Muhammadans, and Christians” to choose “between independence and eternal slavery” and to “pronounce prayers to God for our impending triumph.” Victory against the British would come, Singh intoned, “only with the help of the Almighty and with the material support of Russia.”³⁷

The administrative center of Turkestan, Tashkent, was a strategic hub for the coordination of anti-British activities. Although diplomats in India and elsewhere reported to the foreign ministry in St. Petersburg, the Governor-General of Turkestan also formed an essential part of this network. The consul general in Bombay addressed correspondence to St. Petersburg, London, and

³⁴ Zagorodnikova, 2005, p. 52. See, also, Morrison, 2006.

³⁵ Zagorodnikova, 2005, pp. 139-141.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

Tashkent. The capital of the governor-generalship was also the destination of Indian petitioners and envoys – including Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs – appealing to Russia for assistance against the British. From Tashkent, Russian intelligence officers traveled widely to gather information on the ground. These men typically had a background that allowed them to compare the outlooks of both British and tsarist subjects. Nearly all had prior experience in Russia's Muslim borderlands. Many began their careers in the Crimean War and were veterans of the pacification and administration of the Caucasus, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, as well as the conquest of Central Asia. The imperative to contrast tsarist and British rule yielded celebrations of the superiority of tsarist rule, in general, and Russian justice, in particular. One Russian spy sent on a mission to India reflected on whether

“[...] our brief experience in Central Asia [does] not give us glaring examples of the fact that once the native population, having become convinced of the sincerity and fairness of the conquerors, thanks to their responsiveness to the needs of the population, [their] accessibility and dogged work for their benefit, willingly turns to them with all of their needs and often prefers the individual judgment of the representatives of Russian authority in conflicts among themselves to judgments according to the *shari'a* or custom.”³⁸

Juxtaposing the merits of Russian tolerance and the British obsession with race, these officers tended to share the perspective of Lieutenant-Colonel Nikolaj Ja. Shneur, who highlighted in a report of 1881 the “extraordinary yoke, moral and material” under which the population of India suffered. The British constantly reminded the “natives” in “all of their colonies” that “they belong to a lower race.” British subjects' hatred of their rulers made them ripe for an “open rebellion” at the slightest pretext.

“Russia's name,” he concluded, “definitely enjoys among the native population enormous respect, as the primordial enemy of the English and thus as the anticipated deliverer in the future from the yoke of the latter.”³⁹

Without even crossing into Indian territory, Shneur maintained, St. Petersburg could prompt an uprising by moving on Herat. Should Russian forces enter India itself, he predicted, uprisings would accompany their arrival, and the Russians could anticipate the backing of the rulers of the princely states and even mutiny within the ranks of the Indian army. This vulnerability – “like

³⁸ Vais, 1990, p. 220.

³⁹ Vigasin, 1997, pp. 254-255.

the sword of Damocles” – presented London with an “Indian question,” Shneur contended, which Russia could instrumentalize “in all questions of international politics.”⁴⁰

This view presented Russia’s Muslim neighbors as pawns in the struggle with Great Britain, and even induced many such observers to disregard evidence that did not actively support the representation of Russia as “liberator.” In February 1890, General Nikolaj G. Stoletov (1834-1912) wrote to Minister of War Dmitrij A. Miljutin (1816-1912) describing his recent visit to India in which he posed as a Swiss professor and managed to “get to know many native Muslims.”

“The natives are convinced,” he reported, “that war between England and Russia will begin soon, and that the hopes placed on us are enormous among all classes of native society.”⁴¹

For Stoletov, not just Afghanistan, but Persia figured into any Russian strategy against India. Though the British claimed to have the Persians on their side, Stoletov boasted that tsarist influence could be increased there, and the Persians turned against the British:

“Knowing the country sufficiently well, I have the basis to think that we can do whatever we like with Persia.”⁴²

Seeking information about the impact of Russian expansion, another officer found in 1881 that the Indian population had been impressed by reports from Akhal-Teke and expected Skobelev’s imminent arrival: “it is in Russia that the masses see their future deliverer.”⁴³ As he neared the Afghan border, however, he encountered “complete apathy” rather than the enthusiasm he had expected, though he was not sure whether this was due to the “intolerable heat” or the “terrible yoke of the English.”⁴⁴ Pointing to the British insistence on demonstrating that their colonial subjects “belong to a lower race,” the same report asserted that the unpopular British “strongly fear Russia” and spy on every Russian who appeared there.⁴⁵ In the early twentieth century, Russian travelers continued to highlight the enlightened character of tsarist rule vis-à-vis the British empire. In a secret report of 1905, a Russian officer recounted a conversation (conducted in Persian) with Indian army officers who were, he claimed,

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 245.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 246.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 252.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 253.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 254.

“clearly astounded, having learned that we have even in the highest positions of officers who are of Asian background and Muhammadan.”⁴⁶

This image of Russia’s appeal among Muslims and Asians inspired grandiose schemes for the extension of tsarist power from Turkestan and, at the same time, this power remained fundamentally intertwined with the domestic administration of the territory. Muslims emigrated from the Caucasus and the Crimea in significant numbers during this period, often fleeing violent assault at the hands of tsarist troops, and, in smaller waves, elites departed from the defeated states of Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand. With the establishment of the governor-generalship, however, Muslims and other religious communities inhabiting adjacent lands began to migrate to Russian-controlled territory. From the early 1890s, for example, Hazara, Aimaq, and Turkmen tribes fled the expanding state of the Afghan Amīr Abdur Rahman, who himself had sought asylum in Turkestan from 1870 to 1880. They attempted to emigrate to Turkestan following a series of uprisings, repression, forced resettlement, and Pashtun colonization.⁴⁷ According to tsarist authorities, these refugees sought “rescue from persecution” by Afghan authorities and saw “our territory” as “the last sanctuary from brutal reprisals.”⁴⁸ Although such appeals affirmed Russian officials’ image of Turkestan as a refuge for the dispossessed, their approach frequently reflected a cautious appreciation of the wider geopolitical consequences. In the case of Afghan *émigrés*, they feared antagonizing Kabul and generally discouraged flight in large groups across the border. Though they frequently permitted small groups and individual families, in other cases they returned them to Afghanistan or dispatched them on to Persian territory.⁴⁹ In some instances, local authorities gave some refugees small parcels of land near the border. A number of tribal notables received stipends in Tashkent or Samarkand, where they were “interned,” often along with their families. These tribal elders repeatedly offered to join the Russians in waging war against the Afghan state. Russian authorities, in turn, kept them on the payroll as clients in the event they would be needed in a time of war – and to forestall the risk of their flight back to Afghanistan. Such payments to Afghan *émigré* notables continued through 1917.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *Otchet*, 1905, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁷ Mousavi, 1998, pp. 111-154.

⁴⁸ See, for example, RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 2767, ll. 16-16ob.; and RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 3692.

⁴⁹ RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 2767.

⁵⁰ RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 3692, ll. 103-109ob.

Where Russian officials sensed greater advantages, they acted more forcefully to provide safe haven to religious dissidents. Since the 1840s, tsarist diplomats had closely followed the appearance in Persia of a new religious community, the Babis, inspired by the millenarian teachings of Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi. Faced with severe repression by the Qajars, the movement gave rise to new leadership, under a nobleman who assumed the title *Baha’u’llah*. Initially wary of some of the social practices adopted by these communities, Russian scholars gradually began to see the Baha’is as a community evolving from devotion to Islam toward an approximation of Christianity. Like other European observers, tsarist diplomats attempted to trace the spread of these communities and gauge their impact on the stability of the country. One Russian diplomat put the number of one of these groups, the Babis, at one million, and George Curzon speculated that they might drive Muslims out of Persia. Seeking clients that might offer Russia leverage against the Qajar regime, Russian officials, in turn, recognized their potential geopolitical value and permitted Baha’is to flee the underground in Persia to settle in the empire. The Russian consul general in Beirut, Vil’gel’m [Wilhelm] O. von Klemm (1861 – post-1927), remained in contact with the exiled Baha’u’llah and his relatives, apparently acting as an intermediary between Baha’is in Russia and their leader in Ottoman Akka. Within Persia itself, the Russian embassy in Tehran seems to have offered protection to Baha’is as well.⁵¹ Although Baha’u’llah rejected both tsarist and British overtures to relocate his community to Russia or India, he consented to the emigration of a community of merchants under the leadership of his son-in-law to the Russian Transcaspien region. The tsarist-sponsored Baha’i colony at Ashkhabad, just across the border from Khorasan, opened up schools (with instruction in Arabic and Esperanto), established libraries, and printed religious literature. The Russian general Dean I. Subbotich (1852 – post-1906) laid the foundation stone of their “House of Worship,” the first such institution in the history of the Baha’is.⁵²

Protection of this dissident community gave tsarist diplomats, merchants, and spies access to a growing transnational network of Baha’is, but it complicated the regime’s management of the local confessional landscape. Muslims protested the presence of the Baha’is to both tsarist officials and the shah, who filed a protest with the Russian ambassador, and the Samarkandi petition cited above requested that Baha’i literature be censored and prohibited from

⁵¹ Bazilenko, 1996, p. 57.

⁵² Momen, 1991, pp. 278-305.

appearing in “Muslim script.”⁵³ Shi’ite scholars, in particular, criticized latitude toward the Baha’is. Many tsarist officials had long viewed Shi’ites as a counterweight to Sunnis – and their more powerful political supporters, but, as a celebrated murder case in 1889 revealed, the imperial regime sought to cultivate the Baha’i community. When a Baha’i was murdered by Shi’ites in an Ashkhabad bazaar in September, Alexander III dispatched a special investigative commission and discovered a network of conspirators that stretched to Tehran and Tabriz. The military tribunal’s guilty verdicts were celebrated in the Baha’i community as

“the first instance of justice and assistance that the world afforded this community through the equity of this great Monarch and renowned Tsar, which bolted out the threat of inveterate enemies towards a handful of meek who have no other champion save the exalted God.”⁵⁴

Praising “the potency of the Russian Government, which has become the haven of justice in the East,” a Baha’i chronicle contrasted “the ways that the Russian and the Iranian Governments administer justice and conduct trials,” noting that “the governmental authorities in Russia did not accept a single coin from anyone and in fact, due to their devotion to equity and justice, no one dared to even mention the word ‘bribe’ or mediate on behalf of defendants.”⁵⁵

Such representations of tsarist power bolstered Russian official images and strengthened ties between the Russian administration and international religious networks, but they did not dispel all anxieties about communities that crossed imperial borders. Through their experience with the Baha’is, Russian officials came to appreciate some of the risks that the dissident question entailed. The Governor-General of the Caspian region (and future Minister of War), Aleksej N. Kuropatkin (1848-1925; r. 1890-1898), apparently cooled toward the Baha’is when word reached him that the dissident communities whom he hoped to use against Persia may have, in fact, served as a Trojan horse for British interests.⁵⁶ International ties might cut both ways, leaving the tsarist empire vulnerable to espionage and subversion.

As in other parts of the empire, the regime attempted to appropriate transnational networks and pursue a policy of prophylaxis simultaneously in Central Asia. Officials worried not only about spies and missionaries from Istanbul.

⁵³ RGIA, f. 1396, op. 1, d. 264.

⁵⁴ Gulpaygani, 2000.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ Bazilenko, 1996, p. 62.

They saw British agents at every turn. Local Muslims were also suspected of spying for the Afghans and Chinese. In the early twentieth century, German reconnaissance teams were not far behind. Russia's defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1905 seemed to embolden all of Asia as well as the European powers who would challenge the tsarist position there.

The geopolitical challenge appeared more daunting where, as with the Baha'is, religious conflicts between different communities afforded rivals opportunities for meddling. In a region where Sunni Muslims predominated, Shi'ites became candidates for particular attention from the state. In the Caucasus, agents of the *Pax Russica* had prided themselves in managing confessional differences between these two groups. In Central Asia, the administration welcomed Persian *émigrés* who worked in railway construction, though it sought to mute the public celebration of potentially divisive rites, including the processions of flagellating mourners that accompanied the annual commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn – and that persisted in secret.⁵⁷ But the management of relations between Sunnis and Shi'ites proved especially difficult because the administration did not directly govern all of the territories where mixed settlements existed. In 1868, St. Petersburg had made the Emirate of Bukhara a protectorate, assuming responsibility for its foreign relations but allowing significant domestic autonomy. Celebrated throughout the Muslim world as a bastion of Sunni orthodoxy, Bukhara's emirs had engaged in heated controversies with Shi'ites, even though the latter played an important role in governing the Emirate. In 1910, the two groups came to blows in Bukhara during the Shi'ite mourning commemoration, prompting renewed calls for Russian annexation of the territory by critics of Bukharan autonomy.

But the Shi'ites in the Bukharan capital were not the primary concern of Russian administrators. Instead, their attention largely focused on the small Ismaili communities dotting the Pamir Mountains. The Anglo-Russian delimitation of the border between Afghanistan and the tsarist empire in 1895 along the upper reaches of the Amu Darya, the Panj, prompted official worry about these mountain communities. In order to fulfill its obligations toward London (which negotiated on behalf of the Afghan Emir), St. Petersburg had to convince the Bukharan Emir to give up territory on the left bank of the Panj to Kabul's control. In contentious negotiations, tsarist officials proposed to compensate him for Darvaz (on the left bank of the river) with the Pamir principalities of Rushan, Shugnan, and Vakhani (all on the right bank). Impoverished and

⁵⁷ RGVIA, f. 400, op. 1, d. 2895.

sparsely populated, the region offered little for the Bukharan treasury, especially after Russian officials had attempted to mollify the local population by granting them tax exemptions. Conflicts between the Emir's Sunni administrators and local Ismailis only intensified the Emir's displeasure with the arrangement. For their part, Ismaili delegations repeatedly appealed to the tsarist administration to accept them as imperial subjects and rule them directly from Tashkent. "We have always prayed to God to free us from the Bukharan Emir," one Ismaili petition of 1890 complained, because "the Bukharans persecute our faith and scoff at us, they do not eat with us or sit with us, regarding us forbidden to them, and they say that we are unbelievers."⁵⁸ A Russian military outpost at Khorog constantly intervened in Bukharan administrative affairs, and its officers lobbied vigorously for their Ismaili charges in dispatches to Tashkent and St. Petersburg, criticizing Bukharan misrule and highlighting the Sunni persecution of the Ismailis.

Though sympathetic to the humanitarian rhetoric of such protests, tsarist authorities hesitated to annex the region, fearing that such a move would tip the geopolitical balance and lend support to British demands for territorial compensation elsewhere. Yet the status quo in the Pamirs presented dangers as well. The Ismailis, officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs observed, were not the conventional Shi'ites that Russians had encountered elsewhere. They owed allegiance (and tithes) to a single leader who bore the hereditary title *Aga Khan* ["lord and master"]. In the 1840s, the forty-sixth Nizari Ismaili imām, Aga Khan I, had fled Persia for Afghanistan and then India, where the British backed the establishment of a permanent seat for the imām in Bombay in 1848. British support was critical to the Aga Khan's claims to supremacy in the religious affairs of the subcontinent's Ismaili communities. In the "Aga Khan Case" of 1866, the Bombay High Court affirmed his leadership. In 1905, the same court rebuffed a group of plaintiffs led by the Aga Khan's cousin who questioned the imām's status as head of the community. The ruling solidified the position of the Ismailis under British rule and aided the Aga Khan in further distinguishing the community under his guidance from both Sunnis and Twelver Shi'ites.⁵⁹

The Russians watched the extension of his authority through Ismaili communal organizations with alarm. Their objection was not simply that he represented the spiritual master of communities in Russia and its protectorate. Worse, they suspected him of being an "Anglophile." The Aga Khan's support for an English-style university at Aligarh and other reformist measures placed

⁵⁸ RGVIA, f. 400, op.1, d. 2329, l. 42ob.

⁵⁹ See Daftary, 1998, especially, pp. 193-209.

the imām in this category of subversives. The tsarist authorities regarded him as an exploiter of his people who was determined to keep his followers in blind ignorance. All of these factors suited him to become “a simple tool of the Anglo-Indian government” and, simultaneously, a servant of “Pan-Islamism,” with aspirations to unify the world’s Muslims.⁶⁰

Russian fears that the British would use the Aga Khan to manipulate the 800,000 Ismailis in four neighboring states under his power inspired a complex prophylactic strategy within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its architect was none other than Klemm, the former consul general in Beirut, who had cultivated contacts among Baha’is and their spiritual head in Ottoman exile in Akka. Through contacts in Bombay, Klemm had learned that a schism had occurred within the Ismaili community under the Aga Khan. In early 1904, he proposed a conspiracy to discredit the Aga Khan among his followers within the Russian orbit. In Bombay, he identified a group of critics chafing under the imām. They formed “not a dogmatic schism” but one triggered by dissatisfaction with the leader’s disposal of economic resources and his supposed plans to marry an English woman. By the fall, a representative of the Russian consulate had recruited two missionaries, Musa Guljam Khusein and Pir Muhammad Ibrakhim; the Russian agent liked the latter in particular because he knew Persian, was very religious and “truly does not love the Aga Khan and the English.”⁶¹ In October, they signed contracts obliging them to travel to Russian Central Asia to preach in exchange for payment and travel expenses. They were to bring with them the appropriate literature and photographs of the Aga Khan, preparing the way for his “unmasking” [*oblichenie*] before followers who resided in the Pamirs and in small pockets within the governor-generalship of Turkestan.

These missionaries turned out to be ill-equipped for conspiracy, however. Officials complained that they blew their cover as merchants by showing up at the government offices immediately upon arrival. Moreover, the Ismailis they encountered in Turkestan, themselves emissaries from the Pamiri mountain communities, found their arguments nonsensical. Seeing the apparent incompetence of their agents and fearing a wider scandal, the tsarist officers quickly abandoned the scheme and sent them packing for home (though without much of their luggage), by way of Odessa. The anti-Aga Khan conspirators never saw the Ismaili communities in the Pamirs.

⁶⁰ AVPRI, f. 214, op. 779, d. 24.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

Conclusion

Tsarist military and diplomatic officials continuously probed the limits of Russian power in Central Asia. While building an administrative apparatus to secure Turkestan for the empire, they still looked to the east – to China’s “New Frontier” (Xinjiang) – and to the south – to British India, Afghanistan, and Persia. Events in Europe and the Far East often determined the scope of Russia’s opportunities in its borderlands. Yet tsarist elites reasoned that their ability to project power in Asia also depended upon Russia’s image in these territories. Russian tolerance of Islam formed a strategy both for the administration of Turkestan and for the assertion of tsarist authority beyond the formal borders of the state. For the diplomats and generals who charted the course of Russia’s imperial mission in Asia, the fate of the empire hinged on the ability to do both.

Many of Russia’s generals in Turkestan may have been committed Pan-Slavs and pious Orthodox Christians, but their approach to the faiths of the governor-generalship and its neighboring countries reflected extraordinary flexibility. At the same time, they were guided by more than pragmatism. Like tsarist diplomats in the Ottoman empire and Persia, Russian officials in Turkestan cultivated a strong sense of a moral calling – a condition they found lacking in the “Muslim East.” Though serfdom had barely been abolished and tsarist law enshrined gender inequality in the Russian empire, these men highlighted slavery, the oppression of women, sexual depravity, and the persecution of religious and other minority groups as the key features of the “despotism” that they sought to supplant in Central Asia. Wary of the constraints that law might place on the autocracy elsewhere in the empire, tsarist authorities championed law as a force to liberate the peoples of the east. Decades before the Bolsheviks sought out Muslim women to act as a “surrogate proletariat” and bring about revolution in Central Asia, the tsarist regime looked for support among religious and other communities who ostensibly suffered under the yoke of religious persecution or oppression at the hands of “Asiatic” despots – or, more frequently, British colonial masters – along Turkestan’s frontiers. Rejecting the calls of the faithful, the Bolsheviks focused on the cries of the dispossessed; and without being conscious of the continuity, the Soviet regime, like the one it replaced, imagined itself as the savior of Asia, a contagious proposition that would continue to shape the policies of the great powers toward Central Asia into the twenty-first century.

Abbreviations

- AVPRI Arkhiv vneshnej politiki Rossijskoj imperii [Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Empire]
- RGIA Rossijskij gosudarstvennyj istoričeskij arkhiv [Russian State Historical Archive]
- RGVIA Rossijskij gosudarstvennyj voenno-istoričeskij arkhiv [Russian State Military History Archive]
- CGA RUz Central'nyj gosudarstvennyj arkhiv respubliki Uzbekistan [Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan]

Archives

- AVPRI fond 214, Rossijskoe general'noe konsul'stvo v Bombej [Russian General Consulate in Bombay].
- CGA RUz fond I-18, Samarkandskoe oblastnoe upravlenie [Samarkand Regional Administration].
- RGIA fond 1396, Revizija senatora K.K. Palena Turkestarskogo kraia [Inspection of Turkestan by K. K. Palen].
- RGVIA fond 1396, Shtab Turkestarskogo voennogo okruga [Turkestan Military District Staff].

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