

# Russia and the Region's Muslims: A History of Relations

Reaching from Eastern Europe, running across the entire north of Asia and spanning nine different time zones, Russia is, by area, the largest country in the world. From its northwest to southeast, the Russian Federation shares land borders with Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, China, Mongolia, and North Korea, while Japan is its maritime neighbor. According to the 2015 data, the population of the country is 142,423,773, of which about 30 million are Muslim. With a multi-ethnic and multi-religious social structure, 20% of the Russian population are Orthodox, 15% are Muslim, and 2% are from other Christian denominations, while 1% are Jewish, 1% Buddhist, and 61% are atheist or do not associate with any form of religion, a remnant of the 70-year Communist regime. The majority of Muslims in Russia adhere to the Sunni sect while the Shia (who represent 3% of the Muslims) consists of citizens of Azeri descent located in Dagestan. The high number of Muslims in Russia makes Islam the second largest religion in the country, and although it is not a Muslim state, it is one of the five observer states in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Unlike other countries where Muslims are mostly foreign immigrants, the Muslims of Russia are local or indigenous peoples who have been living in the country for centuries. Most of the Muslims live in the Volga-Ural and North Caucasus regions. The two largest cities in Russia –the capital Moscow and St. Petersburg– have substantial Muslim populations.

Although an official definition is absent in the Russian Constitution, the official name of the country is the Russian Federation which comprises of nine federal divisions; the Central, Southern, Northwestern, Far Eastern, Siberian, Ural, Volga, North Caucasian, and Crimean. Each federal region has many federal units within it and each has a regional presidency representative whose duty can be described as duly authorized representative of the Russian Federation presidency. As an outcome of the federal system, Russia is thought to consist of more than 190 different ethnic groups. The Federation includes seven republics where Muslims make up the majority: Bashkortostan and Tatarstan in the Volga-Ural region, and Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia in North Caucasus.

Islam arrived within Russia's modern-day borders in the 7th century. In 641 the Muslim army led by Abd Al-Rahman Ibn Rebia advanced towards the northeast of South Caucasus after taking Iran and Jerusalem. Following the victory over the Khazar Khanate in 737, the Umayyad Caliphate took over North Caucasus. Since Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were Islamized, the region has been ruled by Muslim dynasties for 1200 years. As a result of a central Muslim administration, the region produced many scholars of hadith and fiqh as well as prominent philosophers, physicists, and mathematicians.

## The Arrival of Islam in the Region

The European Russians located around Moscow came into contact with Islam in the 10th century through Muslims merchants. Islam gradually spread into the Volga river basin through trade and other economic relationships with Muslim merchants. Today there are about 10 million Muslims living in the Tatar, Bashkir, Kazan, and Ural regions, as well as in the Volga river basin. The second wave of Islamic expansion in Russia came with the Golden Horde Khanate in 1242.

In the early 15th century, several independent Muslim khanates emerged following the Golden Horde's downfall. These khanates covered almost all of what is now Russia, except the region between the cities of Moscow and Kiev where the Russian principalities were dominant. The Ottoman Empire began supporting these small Turkic and Muslim states in this period. Islam dominated most of Russia incessantly until these Muslim khanates were defeated by the Russian Empire in the 16th century. With the importance that the Volga River had on logistics and transportation within the Tsarist Russian Empire, the first thing the newly-founded Russian Empire did was to capture this region. In 1552, a Russian army of 50,000 soldiers invaded Kazan and massacred a large number of Muslims. Following the fall of the Kazan Khanate, Islam was wiped out from these region for 200 years, an era known as the "the silent period" by Muslims. Muslims practiced their religion in secret during this period when mosques and Islamic scholars were completely absent from social life. Forced to live in hiding, the Muslims of Russia took part in all insurrections against the Russian Empire, including the Razin Rebellion, Pugachev's Rebellion, and the Bashkir Uprising. On the other hand, the invasion of Kazan proved to be a turning point for Russo-Ottoman relations, which had been quite positive until then. As a consequence, the two empires

entered a period of conflict. However, the conflicting relations suited Russia's interests better as it was now able to suppress the Ottoman-backed small communities, and expanded its influence as it became more powerful. With the annexation of Crimea, the number of Muslims in the empire naturally increased. Russia's next ultimate goal was to annex the Kazakh and Turkic steppes where the Muslim population was high.

Catherine the Great, who assumed the throne in 1762, worked to change Russia's traditionalized policy for its Muslim subjects. The tsarina realized that she could not promote Christianity by massacring and suppressing Muslims, who had been oppressed and tormented for 200 years, and decided to keep the Muslims under control rather than destroying them.

In order to keep a tight rein on the Muslims as well as the scholars and sheikhs in the Muslim-majority regions, Russia founded the Orenburg Islamic Court in 1788, and later the muftiates in Crimea and Baku. The muftiates, which worked to improve communication between the administration and its Muslim subjects, became official institutions that controlled the appointment of imams to the regions and maintained a civil registry of Muslims.

Before Catherine II, Muslims were not allowed to settle along important routes, including the Volga River, and other major river lines, as well as certain regions close to the main roads in the country, in order to ensure that they could not improve economically or make use of new technologies. After Catherine II abolished these bans, Muslims made grand advances and developments in this period.

But although the oppression against Muslims was moderated under the rule of Catherine II, the Muslims in Russia never had full freedom. In 1859, the Muslims of Dagestan (which as a single region used to include Chechnya and Ingushetia), were unable to stop their land from being annexed by Russia at the end of a 34-year struggle led by Sheikh Shamil. Thus, the state drew a new roadmap for the region's administration and established full control over the region through the Shia and Sunni muftiates in South Caucasus. Despite the law to secure a common liberty for other religions and ethnic groups along with the Orthodox belief, the main source of motivation of the state, the assimilation policies were continued, particularly when it came to Turkic and Muslim peoples. Forced to obey their overlords' commands in their native land, the Muslims in Russia decided to fight against the Tsarist regime of the period. Within this period, 600,000 Caucasians and Circassians migrated to the Ottoman Empire following the relocation policy of Tsarist Russia, often named the Circassian Exodus of 1864.

The Muslim communities took advantage of the political gap that emerged following the defeat of Russia in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War and formed political organizations. Besides the Muslim peoples, there were other ethnic groups within the Russian Empire who were discontent with government policies, and this helped lead to the Russian Revolution of 1905. As a consequence of the revolution, Nicholas II, the tsar of the period, decreed that all religions deserved the same rights and that tolerance would be the principle. Liberal policies began to be applied immediately and allowed Muslims found political parties within the Russian Empire.

The Kazan Turks who had come under the rule of the Russians in 1550 were fueled by an atmosphere of freedom that followed 1905's Bloody Sunday, and *Jadidism*, promoting religious, linguistic, cultural and ideal unity, was revived by Ismail Gasprinski. Gasprinski led congresses and meetings that brought together the Turkic-Muslim peoples in Crimea and Russia. As a prominent figure among the Turkic peoples within the Russian Empire, Ismail Gasprinski became the symbol of Turkic unity with his "unity in language, idea, and work" discourse. Three congresses entitled "Muslims in Russia" were held between the years 1905-1906. However, the topics discussed in the congresses did not go any further than the religious education of the Muslims.

Previously banned from founding political parties, the Muslims in Russia now had a party in the Duma, the Russian Parliament, and began publishing newspapers and journals. The Muslims in Russia have been politically and ideologically active ever since then. However, the rights and liberties bestowed did not help Nicholas II win the Muslims' support, and instead drove them closer to the Bolsheviks, who were at that time preparing to stage a revolution. As the Bolsheviks knew that the policy that was blighting the Russian Empire was that followed towards the Tatar Muslims, they established a dialog with the Muslims promising them rights and administrative positions. Thus, the Bolsheviks led by Lenin received the support of the Muslims along with the majority of the people living under the Russian Empire.

## **Communist Russia and the Muslims**

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), founded after Tsarist Russia collapsed with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, marked the beginning of a very difficult era, not just for the Muslims, but for all of Russia's people. The Bolshevik Movement, led by Lenin, made fresh promises to the Muslims who had been subject to humiliation in Tsarist Russia, but took a completely different stance after gaining power. Within just a decade, the USSR government had made several reforms and sanctions including changing the alphabet in order to destroy Muslim languages, religion, culture, and traditions. They even forced different versions of the Cyrillic alphabet on various Turkic peoples in order to reduce the linguistic unity among them.

Following Lenin's death in 1922, Stalin took over and proved to be even more violent than his predecessor. The Communist regime under Stalin waged a war against all religions, including Christianity, from 1924-1926. Stalin considered Islam, the predominant religion of the Turkic peoples, to be the greatest threat to Soviet imperialism, and believed that Communism would not succeed without Islam's removal. Thus, he assumed an even crueler policy against the Muslims. Between 1926-1927, religious schools were closed and mosques were demolished and rendered unusable. The small number of remaining mosques were only allowed to be used by the elderly. Remembered as one of the cruelest dictators in history, up until 1936 Stalin ordered the demolition of about 30,000 mosques, had some of the mosques used as barns, and ordered the collection and burning of Qurans. During his rule, hundreds of thousands of Muslim scholars were killed, and millions were exiled to the freezing wastelands of Siberia where they faced certain death.

Libraries holding millions of Islamic books located in the important learning centers of Islam, such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Derbent, Kokand, Kashgar, Timurhan, Almasta, and Termez, were burned down. The period also saw the application of policies promoting atheism, conferences and publications antagonizing religion, and the oppression of the Muslims who were subjected to extreme poverty.

When WWII commenced, the Muslims living in the southwestern part of Russia (Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Balkars, etc.) were forced to flee their lands. With the relocation movement that began on February 23, 1944, about 350,000-400,000 Chechens, as well as 91,250 Ingush, were deported from their homeland, despite the cold winter. On May 17, about 230,000 Muslim Tatars from Crimea were deported from their native land to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Mari El and other regions in Soviet Russia.

## **Post-Soviet Russian Policy on Islam**

Challenged by a financial bottleneck after the 1980s, the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and was succeeded by the Russian Federation. 1990 was a turning point for both Russian and world history. Having suffered 74 years of oppression, the Muslims were able to breathe a sigh of relief at the collapse of Communism and along with other religious groups in the country, regained their right to practice their religion freely. The Muslim population that had decreased due to migration, conflicts and other reasons began to increase after the 1990s. Having lived for almost a century severed from their religion the Russians either resumed their Christian identity or converted to Islam. In this new era, Muslims began to organize themselves more and proselytize within Russia more actively, which led to the spread of Islam among ethnic Russians. Currently, the number of Muslims in Russia is about 30 million. At the same time, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the number of mosques within the federation increased from 500 to 5,000.

The majority of Muslims in Russia are Sunni and follow local Islamic Sufi orders. Banned under Soviet Rule, Sufis now collaborate with regional administrations and are supported by the state itself. As part of the special measures conducted by the Soviets to control the Caucasus region, the Sunni-majority Caucasus Muslims were supervised by a Shiite Shaikh al-Islam, while a Sunni mufti was in charge of a religious management unit centered in Baku. This administrative system, which has continued even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, caused an uproar among the peoples of the Caucasus. The close relations established between the Russian government and the Shiite Shaikhs al-Islam create another dimension of tension in the region. On the other hand, a conflicting atmosphere has been created between the Muslim groups who refused to be ruled by a non-Muslim state and the Sufis. At this point, the Tablighi

Jamaat, which spread to almost all the cities in Russia, and Hizb ut-Tahrir, which promoted an Islamic union, are seen as threats to Russia.

Despite being a secular state, Russia does not consider Islam a threat as long as it remains within the framework established by Russia itself and brought together all the muftiates founded in the 18th century under Tsarist Russia to found a Directorate of Religious Affairs within the government in order to keep all religious affairs under the control of the central government. Obligated to work under the Directorate of Religious Affairs, religious functionaries and the muftis were forced to explain how Islam would fit in with the Russian Federation's Constitution. In addition, the Sunni Muslims who are uncomfortable with the close relations between the Russian government and the Shiite Shaikh al-Islam, as well as the clientelism in favor of the Shia, are faced with severe oppression under the pretext of the war on terror.

The Salafist groups located in the North Caucasus who refuse to be ruled by a non-Muslim state are considered extreme Islamist segments of society by Russia. Salafism is more popular among the Chechens and attracts the youth in particular. Unlike with Sufism, Russia cannot control the groups fed by Salafism, and Wahhabi ideologies were thus banned throughout the country in the early 2000s as part of the war on terror with Al Qaeda following 9/11. Also, the houses of people who were suspected of being Salafis were illegally raided and burned down. The 2015 report by the Russian Federation Security Organization claims that 2,500 Russian citizens from the North Caucasus region have joined Daesh to fight in Syria.

Since the Cold War, Russia has sympathized and supported the Shiite world as a counter policy to America's support for the Sunni world. Even though the minority under Russian rule is a Shiite group, Russia's support for the Shia is nothing but an effective weapon to exploit the Shia-Sunni tensions. On the other hand, the negative stance against the Salafist groups stems from the secessionist and jihadist agenda of these groups.

### **Russia's Muslims and Problems Faced in Society**

The recent increasing birth rate among Muslims has been a cause of concern for Russia. Especially in the North Caucasus Federal Region, one of the nine federal regions where Muslims constitute the majority, the birth rate in 2000-2012 increased by 170%, strengthening Russia's worries. Research shows that the population is decreasing in ethnic Russian and Orthodox majority regions, while the birth rate is remaining the same or increasing within the borders of Russia in the Muslim-majority national autonomous regions. Another factor in the population increase also stems from the influx of refugees from Muslim countries such as Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It is estimated that 4 million refugees emigrating from the Turkic republics live in Russia. The anxiety that Russia is being Islamized has caused more Islamophobic incidents in the country. Some Russian media channels broadcast anti-Muslim programs, which in turn has led to an increase in the number of Russian nationalist groups. These groups have been involved in many fascist actions, including attacking mosques and blocking Muslim immigrants from coming into Russia. The temporary and illegal status of the refugees in Moscow makes them vulnerable to harassment, abuse and racial violence from the police. The Muslims who try to make their living in Moscow are generally employed in the lowest level works. The government's discrimination of the Muslim minority and its indifference to serious levels of xenophobia among its citizens is another problematic area.

Muslims have difficulty in finding jobs, especially in Orthodox Russian-dominant regions, and feel obliged to hide their faith. Most of the time this situation makes it difficult to distinguish who is Muslim and who is not within the country. Though such problems are not really common in the Muslim-majority regions, investments and job opportunities are rare in these regions, such as North Caucasus, which makes Muslims move to Russian-majority places with more investments where they feel they need to keep their religion secret.

In recent inter-religious marriages, there are more Muslims converting to Christianity than the other way around. Since 1991, about 2,000-5,000 Christians have converted to Islam while the Muslim to Christian conversion is about 2 million.

Although Muslims do not face extra hindrance when it comes to opening media organs such as radio or television, they are closely watched and controlled. As with everything else, the government demands

Islam to be in the form and extent that it determines. Russia has always seen the uncontrollable Islamic centers as a threat. The state's control over the entire printed press and demand that the imams prepare their sermons in collaboration the Russian Federation Security Service has steered Muslims towards informal, independent Islamic resources of information. The subsequent use of the internet by Muslims as an alternative has alarmed the Russian government. Especially when anti-Putin protests broke out in 2013, the active use of the internet by Muslims concerned the government and it took a series of precautions to counter it. In the same year, Duma Information and Communication Technologies Committee Spokesperson Alexey Mitrofanov signaled sanctions: "The unconstrained age of the internet is now over. When the number of users was only two million, the internet was neither a political nor economic factor. However, internet users in the country now number 45 million. And this has turned the internet into something that needs to be controlled."

While the number of Orthodox churches is increasing thanks to the financial and moral support of the state, the government tries hard to prevent new mosques from being built. Especially in Moscow, the most populous city, the Muslim population increases but there are only four mosques, which comes far short of meeting the need, and this sparks tension from time to time. As such, during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, Muslim citizens must perform their religious rituals outdoors as there is not enough space provided for them, which in turn causes the non-Muslim residents to provoke disturbances.

Muslims in Moscow face difficulties in society even when they exercise their political rights. Requests to protest against Islamophobia and the discrimination they are experiencing are rejected by the local authorities. Even though some Islamic political parties succeeded in becoming politically involved in the 1990s, their participation in the elections was blocked by unofficial means. In 2004, with an amendment to its constitution, Russia classified the increasing Muslim population as an existential threat to itself, for which reason the state banned religious or ethnic based political parties, and thus the Muslims in the country are not politically represented. Muslims can become members of the extant political parties only.

Islam has appeared in different forms in Russia, from the moderate Euro-Islam approach of the Tatars, to the Sufism in Caucasus, and the radical Salafist ideologies popular among some young Muslims. These different Islamic identities have recently interacted with a state that stands out as ethnically Russian and Orthodox Christian. While the Russian state has become more powerful, its influence on the daily life and religious practices of the Muslim community is now stronger.

The Crimean crisis in 2014 once again proved how important Islam is to modern Russia. During this time, the Russian government exerted pressure on the state-sponsored Muslim foundations to get Crimean Tatars on board with the Russian policy. Moscow used this strategy to overlap with the policy which it has had for some time of appointing representatives to religious groups. Since the days of Catherine II, the government has expected the Islamic authorities to interpret Islam in a way that suits its interests. Needless to say, the state's efforts to convince Muslims to support its preferred interpretation of Islam has brought about the risk that those who disagree with the interpretation will become an enemy of the state. The resulting struggle for power has played a determinant role in the formation of Muslim identity in post-Soviet Russia.

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