

Speaking Sharia to the State

Muslim Protesters, Tsarist Officials, and the Islamic Discourses of Late Imperial Russia

JAMES H. MEYER

In the final decades of the 19th century, a crisis broke out in the relations between government officials and Muslim communities in the province of Kazan. A cultural borderland located within a centralizing imperial heartland, Kazan represented one of the oldest and most important sites of Muslim–state interaction in the Russian Empire.¹ From the late 1870s onward, however, Muslim–state relations in the region deteriorated sharply in the face of state efforts to assert more direct control over the administration of the region’s Muslim populations. Muslim opposition to these initiatives, taking the form of demonstrations and mass petition campaigns, would occur on an almost yearly basis throughout the final three decades of the century.

How did Muslims in late imperial Russia view the tsarist state and its institutions? For decades during the Cold War, scholars discussing the relations between the tsarist state and non-Russian communities in the empire emphasized the theme of conflict, stressing the importance of identity and “national resilience” in the face of “Russian” rule.² More recently, however,

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¹ Although Kazan was conquered in 1552, Crimea did not become a Russian possession until 1783. The northern and southern Caucasus were incorporated incrementally at the beginning of the 19th century, while Russia’s Central Asian conquests took place in the second half of the 19th century.

² At a time when Soviet archives were largely off-limits to foreign scholars—especially those working on sensitive issues pertaining to religion and nationality—these studies put together admirable bibliographies consisting of little-known Russian and Turkic-language publications.

this conflict-oriented view of Muslim–state relations in the empire has come under increasing pressure from scholars, mainly working with tsarist state archival sources, who instead have stressed the importance of state institutions³ and their engagement by Muslims in the empire.⁴

Perhaps the most forceful critique of older conflict-oriented scholarly narratives has come from Robert D. Crews.⁵ Crews argues that Muslims “looked to the state” to protect their interests, particularly with respect to matters pertaining to faith.⁶ Instead of viewing tsarist officials as enemies, writes Crews, Muslims saw them as “agents of a shari’a to be realized in its entirety,” and as allies of Muslims seeking to protect the cause of “true religion.”⁷ Muslims meanwhile viewed threats to Islam as emanating less

See Alan W. Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978); Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Azade-Ayşe Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986); Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); and Edward J. Lazzerini, “Ismail Bey Gasprinskii and Muslim Modernism in Russia, 1878–1914” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1973). A more recent study with a similar approach is that of Hakan Kırımlı, *National Movements and National Identities among the Crimean Tatars (1905–1916)* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). Two notable studies looking at other non-Russian communities in late imperial Russia are Eugene M. Avrutin, *Jews and the Imperial State: Identification Politics in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); and Mikhail Dolbilov, *Russkii kraj, chuzhaia vera: Etnoreligioznaia politika v Litve i Belorusii pri Aleksandre II* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010).

³ Stephen Kotkin has been particularly outspoken in this regard, remarking, “It is through institutions in the broadest sense, not ethnicities or nations, that we can best understand where locales have come from and where, if anywhere, they are going.” See his “Mongol Commonwealth? Exchange and Governance across the Post-Mongol Space,” *Kritika* 8, 3 (2007): 487–531, here 531. Daniel Brower likewise emphasizes the importance of “deeds, not discourse” in discussing the role of Muslims in late imperial Russia (*Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire* [London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003], 191).

⁴ In recent years, there has been a veritable boom in studies produced by historians working on the theme of Muslim–state interactions in imperial Russia. See, esp., Robert Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Paul Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia’s Volga–Kama Region, 1827–1905* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Crews, “Empire and the Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia,” *American Historical Review* 108, 1 (2003): 50–83.

⁵ Crews criticizes Cold War–era narratives focusing on the theme of “unrelenting state hostility toward Muslims—and [Muslim] resistance to the state” (“Empire and the Confessional State,” n. 5).

⁶ On Muslims looking to the state over matters of religion and faith, see *ibid.*, 56, 66, 68, 73, 74, 76.

⁷ Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 21.

from state authorities than from “within the community in the form of neighbors who did not attend communal prayers alongside other villagers or townspeople.” In the view of Muslims, Crews writes, “religion” not only found accommodation among tsarist officials but in fact “came to depend upon the institutions of state.”⁸

This article looks beyond these narratives of rejection and embrace in an investigation of a series of protests taking place within Muslim communities in the Volga region in the late 19th century.⁹ I argue that, while Muslims did not reject tsarist institutions to the degree outlined in many older studies,¹⁰ neither did Muslim subjects of Russia commonly view tsarist officials as defenders of the Islamic faith.¹¹ Indeed, in the second half of the 19th century, Muslim–state relations in the region were becoming increasingly complex, with Muslims looking to strengthen the role of some institutions of state authority while resisting others. Even in Kazan, one of the most administratively integrated regions of the empire, Muslims were becoming increasingly alienated from tsarist authorities in the region, including both civil and spiritual officials.¹²

Beginning with a discussion of Islamic spiritual (*dukhovnoe*) administration in Russia, this article examines a series of protests, petition campaigns, and mass rumors circulating in and around the province of Kazan in the final decades of the 19th century, as well as the response of local officials to these events. I pay special attention to the language of Muslim–state communications, especially with regard to what I describe as the use of “Islamic discourses”—that is, the invocation of terminology drawn from Islamic civilization.¹³ How, I ask, did a series of conflicts pertaining mainly

⁸ Ibid., 10; see similar points on 21, 96, and 165.

⁹ The leading contemporary authority on Muslim agrarian revolts in the Volga region is Il’duš Zagidullin. For a discussion of the protests over the *instruktsiia*, see Zagidullin, “Tatarskii krest’iane Kazanskoi gubernii vo vtoroi polovine XIX v. (60–90-e gg.)” (Candidate’s diss., Kazanskii nauchnyi tsentr RAN, Institut iazyka, literatury i istorii im. G. Ibragimova, 1992). On the protests over the census of 1897, see Zagidullin, *Perepis’ 1897 goda i tatarskii Kazanskoi gubernii* (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 2000).

¹⁰ This, essentially, is Crews’s argument, if we leave to one side his understanding of Muslim views of state administration.

¹¹ This is where my conclusions differ from those of Crews.

¹² The distinctions made by relatively centralized Muslims in the Volga–Ural region between spiritual and civil administration has not, in my opinion, been made clear enough in either the older literature emphasizing “conflict” between Muslims and the state or in newer historiography that is revising these views.

¹³ Such as “Islam,” “Sharia,” “Muhammadan law,” and others. My discussion of Islamic invocations and discourses should be distinguished from Michael Kemper’s employment of the term “Islamic discourses,” which describes discourses emanating purely from within Muslim communities and Islamic civilization (*Sufis und Gelehrte in Tatarien und Baschkirien, 1789–1889: Der islamische Diskurs unter russischer Herrschaft* [Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1998]).

to administration come to be articulated—by tsarist officials and Muslim protesters alike—in terms of faith?¹⁴

Islamic Administration in Late Imperial Russia

Kazan Muslims, like other non-Russian populations of the empire, were governed through a system of spiritual administration that was religious in form but largely administrative in content.¹⁵ Formally subordinated to the Russian Ministry of the Interior, the empire's four Muslim spiritual assemblies performed a variety of tasks involving both the religious needs of their communities and the bureaucratic needs of the state.¹⁶ The spiritual assemblies were by no means the only institution through which Muslims were administered in Russia, but they did make up the largest and longest-lasting institutions of specifically Muslim administration in the empire.¹⁷ The

¹⁴ Crews cites numerous invocations of Islamic terminology by Muslim petitioners, viewing them as support for the argument that Muslims saw state authorities as protectors of Islam in “religious disputes” (*Prophet and Tsar*, 120–21, 125, 126–27, 131, 138, 173). He makes similar arguments in “Empire and the Confessional State,” esp. 73–78.

¹⁵ The Orenburg Spiritual Assembly, founded in 1788, was the first of the Russian Empire's four Muslim spiritual assemblies. The other three assemblies were located in Crimea (founded in 1794) and the Caucasus (in Tbilisi, where two spiritual assemblies—one for Shiites and one for Sunnis—were created in 1872). On the Orenburg Assembly, see Danil' D. Azamatov, *Orenburgskoe magometanskoe dukhovnoe sobranie v kontse XVIII–XIX vv.* (Ufa: Gilem, 1999); and D. Iu. Arapov, *Sistema gosudarstvennogo regulirovaniia Islama v Rossiiskoi imperii (posledniaia tret' XVIII–nachalo XX vv.)* (Moscow: Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, Istoricheskii fakul'tet, 2004). On the Crimean Assembly, see I. F. Aleksandrov, “K istorii uchrezhdeniia Tavricheskogo Magometanskogo dukhovnogo pravleniia,” *Izvestiia Tavricheskoi uchenoi arkhivnoi komissii*, no. 54 (Simferopol, 1918), 316–55; and Kelly Ann O'Neill, “Between Subversion and Submission: The Integration of the Crimean Khanate into the Russian Empire, 1783–1853” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2006), 63–77. For a discussion of all four assemblies, see Arapov, *Sistema gosudarstvennogo regulirovaniia Islama*.

¹⁶ The Orenburg Assembly came under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior in 1832. Previously it had been under the supervision of the Holy Synod (Danil D. Azamatov, “Russian Administration and Islam in Bashkiria (18th–19th Centuries),” in *Muslim Culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18th to the Early 20th Centuries*, ed. Michael Kemper, Anke von Kügelgen, and Dmitriy Yermakov [Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1998], 1:106).

¹⁷ Mehmedselim İsmuhammad oğlu Ümitbayev traces the history of state-sponsored Sharia courts in the Ufa region back to 1767, a full two decades prior to the founding of the Orenburg Assembly (*Din-i Muhammediyenin Orenburgskii dukhovnoi sobranie mahkemesinin yüz yulluk bayramı hem ol karnada bulgan amirlerinin kiska tuvarihi otchet yüzünden* [Ufa: n.p., 1897], 19). The Tatar *ratusha* (municipal board) of Kazan, meanwhile, had arbitrated matters in accordance with state-approved versions of Islamic jurisprudence since the 1780s. On the *ratusha*, see Ramil Khayrutdinov, “The Tatar *Ratusha* of Kazan: National Self-Administration in Autocratic Russia, 1781–1855,” in *Islam in Politics in Russia and Central Asia (Early Eighteenth to Late Twentieth Centuries)*, ed. Stéphane Dudoignon and Hisao Komatsu (London: Kegan Paul, 2004), 27–42; “Kazan shähäre Tatar bistäläre Ratushası,” *Tatar entsiklopediia süzlege* (Kazan: Tatar entsiklopediia institutu, 2002), 299.

Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, which governed the spiritual affairs of Muslims living in European Russia and Siberia, was the oldest and largest of the four assemblies.¹⁸

The responsibilities of Muslim spiritual personnel—state-licensed imams, akhunds, muezzins, and holders of other positions—included matters relating to both faith and administration. In addition to performing religious rites like giving the sermon at Friday prayer or officiating at weddings and funerals, spiritual personnel were also responsible for bureaucratic matters like the maintenance of registry books (*metricheskie knigi*),¹⁹ and, in some regions, the management of income-producing pious foundations (*evkaf*).²⁰ Working as arbiters in disputes pertaining to marriage, divorce, and the division of property,²¹ Muslim spiritual personnel in Russia were frequently involved in many of the most intimate—and contested—matters of an individual's life.²²

Although many Muslims had initially opposed the creation of the Orenburg Assembly, over time they came to see the assembly as vital to their administrative needs.²³ Once the assembly's institutional roots had been established, Muslims tended to work within the confessional system that had been set up for them, only rarely attempting to appeal the assembly's judgments to other state institutions.²⁴ Rather than fight or ignore the assembly's authority,

¹⁸ On the confessional administration of other religious groups in the Russian Empire, see Crews, "Empire and the Confessional State," 62–63.

¹⁹ On metrical books, see Paul Werth, "In the State's Embrace? Civil Acts in an Imperial Order," *Kritika* 7, 3 (2006): 433–58; and Avrutin, *Jews and the Imperial State*, 33–37, 56–60, 71–72, 79–80.

²⁰ Such was the case in Crimea and the southern Caucasus. Starting in the late 19th century, more *evkaf* were created in the territories of the Orenburg Assembly. See Danil' Azamatov, *Iz istorii musul'manskoï blagotvoritel'nosti: Vakufy na territorii evropeiskoi chasti Rossii i Sibiri v kontse XIX–nachale XX veke* (Ufa: Gilem, 2000).

²¹ Crews writes that of the approximately 1,200 cases that the Orenburg Assembly handled annually in the 1880s, the largest number (200–250 annually) involved inheritance disputes, followed by divorce cases (up to 150) ("Empire and the Confessional State," n. 94).

²² Mikhail Dolbilov distinguishes between "purely spiritual business" and "spiritual-administrative" work (*Russkii kraï, chuzhaia vera*, 137). Also see Avrutin, *Jews and the Imperial State*, 68–70; and Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 235–36.

²³ In the Volga region, ulema who were opposed to the creation of an official Islamic hierarchy attached to the Russian state were often known as part of the "Abyzlar movement." On the Abyz, see A. Khabutdinov, *Millet orenburgskogo sobraniia v kontse XVIII–XIX vekakh* (Kazan: Iman, 2000), 29–30; "Dvizhenie abyzov i nekotorye aspekty funktsionirovaniia Islama," in *Islam i musul'manskaia kul'tura v srednem Povolzh'e* (Kazan: Institut istorii Akademii nauk Tatarstana, 2002), 102–9; "Abyzlar kharakate," *Tatar entsiklopediia sùzlege*, 10; and Allen J. Frank, *Islamic Historiography and the "Bulghar" Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 37–38.

²⁴ Crews writes of the tendency of Volga Muslims to work to "overturn the rulings of local ulema," but by the late 19th century such cases were rare. Efforts to have the assembly's rulings

most Muslims sought to strengthen the assembly and make it more autonomous from the Ministry of the Interior. Time and again in the 19th century, both elite and nonelite Muslims petitioned state officials in efforts to establish regional branches of the assembly.²⁵ Muslim petitioners also frequently asked to be allowed to elect their müfti themselves, a matter that would be raised again by Muslims after the 1905 revolution.²⁶ When the position of müfti sat vacant—for example, when Orenburg Müfti Tevkelev died in 1885 and was not replaced until a full year later—Muslims wrote to state officials with suggestions for a successor or to request that, at the very least, the state fill the post quickly.²⁷

Whatever the shortcomings of the Orenburg Assembly, the administration of Muslim communities through the assembly represented, for many Muslims, a desirable alternative to the prospect of more direct forms of administration under civil authorities. For many Muslims, the Orenburg Assembly was their “own” institution, distinguished from civil administration in that it ruled according to “Sharia,” and because its business was conducted in the Tatar language.²⁸ The continued maintenance of the assembly’s administrative importance was an important issue to Muslims in the region, as they would demonstrate through the protests and petition campaigns taking place in the final decades of the 19th century.

Speaking Sharia

The lexicon of official Muslim–state communications in Russia was Sharia. Believing that the “entirety of a Muslim’s cultural life is regulated and directed as clear expressions of the rights and laws of Sharia,” state authorities in Russia spoke to Muslims through an Islamic discourse, frequently invoking Islam

overruled were unusual because they were generally unsuccessful, a fact borne out even in the cases cited by Crews (“Empire and the Confessional State,” 65, 73–84, esp. nn. 84, 85, 86, 88, 90, 92, 94, 100).

²⁵ Azamatov, “Russian Administration and Islam in Bashkiria (18th–19th Centuries),” 107–9.

²⁶ Danil D. Azamatov, “The Müftis of the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly in the 18th and 19th Centuries: The Struggle for Power in Russia’s Muslim Institution,” in *Muslim Culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18th to the Early 20th Centuries*, ed. Michael Kemper, Anke von Kügelgen, and Allen J. Frank (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1998), 2:373–74.

²⁷ For requests for replacement, see *ibid.*, 364–65, 368–69, 373–74. Also see Natsional’nyi arkhiv respublikii Tatarstan (NART) f. 1, op. 3, d. 4468, ll. 4–6, correspondence from the governor of Kazan to the interior minister. For suggestions for a successor, see *Materialy po istorii Tatarii vtoroi poloviny XIX veka: Agrarnyi vopros i krest’ianskoe dvizhenie 50–70-kh godov XIX v.* (Moscow–Leningrad: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1936), 166; Azamatov, *Orenburgskoe magometanskoe dukhovnoe sobranie*, 132–34.

²⁸ The importance of dealing with the administration in one’s own language must not be overlooked, as even elite Muslims rarely knew Russian in the late 19th century.

and Sharia.²⁹ Not only was the discourse Islamic but so was the medium of communication.

Communication came through the Muslim spiritual assemblies, a ready-made network of spiritual personnel working in villages and districts throughout a region. Government agents wishing to communicate with Muslims living in a particular region would contact the leader of the spiritual assembly. Invoking Islam and Sharia, the leaders of the spiritual assemblies would send a circular to local spiritual personnel, carrying the message that was to be passed on to the community.³⁰ Local spiritual personnel would then read the message to their communities, usually after the noontime prayer on Friday.

Throughout the 19th century and up to the empire's final days, the Russian government appealed in this way to convince Muslims to contribute food, medical supplies, and money to various causes. Muslims were called on, in the name of Sharia and Islam, to give assistance when their coreligionists in other regions of the empire were struck by natural disasters like earthquakes, epidemic, or famine.³¹ In 1905, the Tavridian Muslim Assembly in Crimea raised money for the Russian navy, likewise invoking Sharia and Islam.³² For the 300th anniversary of Romanov rule in 1913, Muslims were told to offer prayers of thanks in their mosques.³³

Islam and Sharia were constantly invoked in the process of telling Muslims what to do. In 1886, Müfti Gayipov of the Sunni Assembly of Trans-Caucasia warned in a circular to spiritual personnel that "some ignorant individuals" who did not understand Islam had been "making the argument that we are obliged by the Sharia to emigrate." Gayipov wrote that emigration from the "motherland" (*vatan*) was not required, and that the people who were trying

²⁹ NART f. 92, op. 2, d. 8777, l. 71, report by the director of public education in the province of Kazan, 1909.

³⁰ Crews describes circulars exhorting Muslims to send their children to university and work diligently in the fields ("Empire and the Confessional State," 69).

³¹ On collecting money for earthquake relief in Turkestan, see Otdel rukopisei i redkikh knig, Nauchnaia biblioteka im. N. I. Lobachevskogo, Kazanski gosudarstvennyi universitet (KGU) T-4742, "Akhun häm imamnarga khisabnamä." On famine relief, see KGU T-1235, "Orenburg dukhovnoe sobranieseneng khökümet tarafinnan birilmish ssudalarni mokhtadzkh imamnarga ulaship biru hakindaki tedbirleri. Ufa, 1909"; and T-1163, "Tsirkuliarlar. Diniia nazaräte tarafinnan mäkhällä rukhanilärgä zhibärelgän. Ufa, 1913–1917."

³² KGU T-1623, "Orenburg mäkhkämäi shärgüiası tarafinnan imamnarga iazilgan khatlar," 1913, ll. 4–4ob. Also see similar documents in which state authorities employ regional spiritual assemblies for fundraising in Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv v avtonomnoi respubliki Krym (GAARK) f. 27, op. 3, d. 445, ll. 4–4ob., 7–7ob., 9–11; and Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv respubliki Bashkortostan (TsGIA RB) f. I-295, op. 11, d. 230, ll. 48–49ob.

³³ On Russia's declaration of war against Japan, see KGU T-1206, "Müfti Soltanovdan mullalarga tsirkuliar," 1904. On the anniversary of Romanov rule, see KGUT-1623, "Orenburg mäkhkämäi shärgüiası tarafinnan imamnarga iazilgan khatlar," 1913, l. 9.

to convince others to emigrate were themselves acting contrary to Sharia because they were encouraging them to undertake hardships needlessly.³⁴ In 1894, Müfti Soltanov of the Orenburg Assembly was asked by local authorities to make a similar declaration. Soltanov's circular likewise invoked Islam, reminding Muslims how lucky they were to live under a government that "allows us to freely confess Islam, carry out our religious practices, and construct mosques openly and without constraint."³⁵

Even tsarist officials working outside of spiritual administration sought, at times, to administer Muslims in a manner they considered Islamic. In 1888, Russian authorities contacted the Ottoman Foreign Ministry with a request for advice regarding Islamic jurisprudence. The Russian Foreign Ministry wanted to learn the opinion of the Ottoman Sheyh ul-Islam on whether or not it was permissible "under the laws of Sharia" for the paternal grandfather to become the custodian of an underage girl and her estate after the death of her parents. The Ottoman Sheyh ul-Islam responded, through the Ottoman Foreign Ministry, by saying that such an arrangement was appropriate provided the grandfather was "known to be a man of good character."³⁶

In 1890, meanwhile, the governor of Kazan mandated the wearing of headscarves for Muslim women going outdoors in the city of Chistopol. This decision came in the wake of a petition sent by a group of 32 Muslim men who had written to Orenburg Müfti Soltanov criticizing what they described as the fast-growing number of Muslim "prostitutes" in the city. These prostitutes, alleged the petitioners, were "walking the streets with uncovered faces."³⁷ The petitioners asked the müfti to use his powers "according to both the Sharia and the civil code" to take these women off the streets.³⁸

Müfti Soltanov forwarded the petition to the governor, who contacted the Chistopol director of police, inquiring into the number of Muslim

³⁴ On Gayipov's announcement, see Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA) f. 821, op. 8, d. 599, ll. 292–95. Also see Selim Deringil, "The Ottoman Empire and Russian Muslims: Brothers or Rivals?" *Central Asian Survey* 13, 3 (1994): 409–16; Ottoman Prime Ministry Archives (BOA) YA HUS 203/20, s. 11–13; and James H. Meyer, "Immigration, Return, and the Politics of Citizenship: Russian Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914," *International Review of Middle East Studies* 39 (2007), 17–18.

³⁵ NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 9603, ll. 142, 208–9ob. A copy of this circulaire can also be found in *Sbornik tsirkuliarov i inykh rukovodiashchikh raspriazhenii po okrugu Orenburgskogo magometanskogo dukhovnogo sobraniia 1836–1903 g.* (Ufa: Gubernskaia tipografiia, 1905), 112. Also see Meyer, "Immigration, Return, and the Politics of Citizenship," 17–18.

³⁶ BOA HRH 572/64, s. 1.

³⁷ NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 7615, l. 7.

³⁸ Crews writes of this incident in the context of "Muslims solicit[ing] police intervention" ("Empire and the Confessional State," 73–74). Muslims did not, however, write this petition to the police but rather to the Orenburg müfti.

prostitutes in the city and asking if their presence was indeed creating a problem. The police chief responded by stating that there was only one Muslim listed among the 31 prostitutes currently registered in the city, and that there had never been more than 3 or 4 Muslim prostitutes working in the city at any given time. “Tatar women,” wrote the police chief, “have never been prohibited from working as public women, and there is no plan to take any sort of official action regarding this matter now.”³⁹ The governor, however, ignored this recommendation. In January 1890, he wrote the müfti to inform him that he had ordered the police chief “to forbid Muslim women in Chistopol from engaging in prostitution and from appearing on the streets with their faces uncovered.”⁴⁰

Just as state authorities sought to communicate with Muslims through their invocations of Islam and Sharia, so too did Muslims invoke Islam in their dealings with state officials.⁴¹ Muslims seeking favors or state intervention would frequently cite “Sharia,” “Islam,” and “Muhammadan law” in their petitions to state authorities, describing the state in precisely the same Islamic terms that state authorities would use when communicating with Muslims. This was the case when Muslims denounced rule breakers who had acted “in violation of the Muslim faith,” or when Muslims sought to resist measures they considered “contrary to our law.”⁴² Islam and spiritual administration were separate from civil administration, and Muslims often fought hard to have a case moved from one type of court to another.⁴³ Muslims likewise invoked Islam and Sharia when they sought to convince state officials of the worthiness of a proposal, such as when Muslim merchant families in Kazan requesting permission to open a printing press described their effort

³⁹ NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 7615, l. 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid., l. 14.

⁴¹ Most of these petitions were written by professional scribes, individuals in a position to know what kind of language would work best in persuading state authorities. They were usually written in Arabic-script Tatar, then (often imperfectly) translated into Russian by local officials.

⁴² Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 120–21, 130. Crews cites many other such invocations by Muslim petitioners, viewing them as support for the argument that Muslims saw state authorities as protectors of Islam. See, for example, *Prophet and Tsar*, 120–21, 125, 126–27, 128–29, 130, 131, 133–34, 135–36, 138–40, 170, 173, 174, 184, 185, 187, 188, 236–38, 329. He makes similar arguments in “Empire and the Confessional State,” esp. 73–78, 82.

⁴³ In 1887, a Muslim businessman in Tbilisi, Ali Aga Asker Ismail, sought to retrieve money he claimed was owed to him by the Shiite Assembly, whose officials unsuccessfully lobbied to have the case heard in their own Sharia courts, rather than in a tsarist civil court (Central State Archives of the Republic of Georgia [SSSA] f. 26, op. 2, d. 2375, ll. 1–7ob., 11 November 1887).

as an important step toward the dissemination of “truthful knowledge of the Muslim religion.”⁴⁴

In a multiconfessional state where Muslims were nominally ruled according to Islamic principles, Sharia and Islam were not only expressions of faith but also of law, administration, and state power. State authorities spoke to Muslims in an Islamic-bureaucratic vernacular that Muslim subjects likewise used when addressing state officials. “Speaking Sharia” was thus an essential component of Muslim–state communication in Russia and was employed in a wide variety of circumstances. When conditions in the region were relatively stable, the use of Islamic discourses occurred mostly in the form of mundane, quotidian interactions between state officials and Muslim subjects. During the final decades of the 19th century, however, Muslim protests against state policy making would likewise employ these discourses. The invocation of Islam during the course of protest would contribute to the emergence of an increasingly complicated relationship in the region between regional authorities and Muslim communities, particularly with regard to the place of Islam in their mutual interactions and communications.

Politicizing Confession

Tensions over the place of Sharia in the administration of Muslims played a critical role in a series of Muslim–state conflicts in the Volga region over the final three decades of the 19th century. This rise in tensions between state officials and local communities stemmed from a number of factors, including events like the Russian–Ottoman War of 1877–78 and the emergence of a severe economic crisis in the region.⁴⁵ At the same time, locally based tensions over the place of Islam in society were also developing during these years, as a series of battles took place over the administration of not only Muslim Tatars but also (nominally) Christian Tatars in the region.

One of the most important developments in the region during these years related to the efforts of local Christian Tatars to officially “convert” to Islam. In 1866, more than 10,000 Kräshens—Christian Tatars derived from Muslims who had been (often forcibly) baptized into Russian Orthodoxy Christianity in earlier centuries—petitioned state authorities for permission to be reclassified administratively as Muslims. Although Kräshens had

⁴⁴ NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 9126, l. 2.

⁴⁵ In his handwritten account of the 1878–79 protests and violence taking place with regard to the *instruksiia*, Mökhämmäd al-Mökhämmädshahi Äkhmääd uli (Mehmediev) wrote, “after the Russians won a big victory in the War of 1877 they began to feel emboldened and entertain various ideas,” including ones that were “harmful to Islam” (KGU T-1044, “Tanga zur dähshätle vaküiga,” 1878).

approached state authorities regarding this matter on numerous occasions throughout the 19th century—usually prior to the coronation of a new tsar or, in this case, seemingly in response to news relating to the emancipation of the serfs—the mass “apostasy” of 1866 was by far the largest such event to have occurred thus far.⁴⁶

As would be the case with protesting Muslims in later years, the Kräshen “apostasy” was not simply a battle over religious faith but also hinged on important administrative issues that affected people’s daily lives. Kräshen petitioners, who in many cases were already living as Muslims in their personal lives, were asking for *administrative* recognition that they were Muslim, rather than simply the right to practice their religion.⁴⁷ State recognition that they were Muslim would simplify the bureaucratic lives of Kräshens, particularly for those who had illegally married Muslim Tatars and produced children with them, as well as for Kräshens living illegally within Muslim villages.⁴⁸ With state recognition, marriages and children previously considered illegal or illegitimate would be sanctioned and legal, a development that would further simplify problems relating to the keeping of metrical records. Kräshens living illegally within Muslim domiciles, meanwhile, would no longer have to fear being uprooted and sent back to a Kräshen community. While the Islamic faith was invoked, the Kräshen “apostasy” was not simply a matter of faith. State recognition of an individual’s Muslim status would also bring with it important practical benefits, such as administration through the Orenburg Assembly rather than tsarist civil administration.

Officials working in the region’s local branch of the Ministry of the Interior, however, tended to view Kräshen demands in terms of religious extremism rather than administrative needs. As far as tsarist officials were concerned, the “apostasy” of 1866 only confirmed the degree to which Islam could turn even (officially) lapsed Muslims into “fanatics.”⁴⁹ Tsarist responses to Kräshen

⁴⁶ In 1905, more than 50,000 Kräshens would officially be recognized as Muslim by state authorities in the aftermath of the Russian government’s decision to allow its subjects to “convert” from Christianity to other recognized religions. On the “apostasy” of 1866, see Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy*, 147–76. I put “apostasy” in quotation marks because Kräshen protesters did not present themselves as apostates but rather as Muslims who simply wanted their official religious status to mirror their actual sense of faith. It was tsarist officials who saw these individuals as apostates.

⁴⁷ Indeed, if anything, Kräshen petitions requesting permission to be officially recognized as Muslim reflected the degree to which Kräshen Tatars were able to live as Muslims and practice Islam without state recognition.

⁴⁸ On cohabitation between Muslim and Kräshen Tatars, see Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy*, 162–63.

⁴⁹ On the tendency of state officials to view Kräshen demands in terms of Islamic fanaticism, see *ibid.*, 137, 161, 178, 180–84, 190–91.

petitions therefore focused primarily on limiting what state officials viewed as the pernicious influence of Islam in the region. Local officials sought to separate Kräshens from Muslim Tatars,⁵⁰ in addition to reinforcing the position of the Orthodox Church within Kräshen communities through the activities of individuals like the Orientalist Nikolai Il'minskii, who opened a new Christian mission in Kazan to replace one which had been shuttered since 1859.⁵¹

Another factor contributing to the escalation of tensions in the region related to state efforts to administratively integrate Muslim communities living in the territories of the Orenburg Assembly. As was the case in other regions of the empire, most usually in the western provinces, tsarist officials were attempting to bring Muslims living in the territories of the Orenburg Assembly into civil, as opposed to spiritual, administration,⁵² while a second goal was to better establish Russian as a language of state administration.⁵³

Of particular importance was a series of new laws and regulations adopted by state authorities in the latter half of the 19th century that brought Muslims living in the Orenburg territories under much more direct forms of state administration than had been the case previously.⁵⁴ In 1870, the Ministry of Education decreed that Russification (*obrusenie*) and assimilation (*sliianie*) would now constitute two goals for the education of non-Russian communities in the empire and mandated that Muslim *medreses* opening

⁵⁰ On state efforts to separate Kräshen Tatars from Muslims, see *ibid.*, 148–50. State officials feared the ability of Kräshens to “pick up Mohammedanism” (*ibid.*, 163).

⁵¹ Just one year after the “apostasy,” Il'minskii received permission to begin the clerical training of non-Russians, and in 1870 the Ministry of Education endorsed Il'minskii's principle of establishing Tatar-language Christian schools in the region. See *ibid.*, 224; and Geraci, *Window on the East*, 47–85.

⁵² Andreas Kappeler distinguishes between “cultural russification” and “administrative integration,” both of which he sees taking place in the western borderlands in the late 19th century (*The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History* [Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2001], 254). The latter, at least, was taking place with respect to Muslims in the Orenburg territories. Other scholars, such as Rorlich, see these events more in terms of “Russification” (*The Volga Tatars*, 44–47).

⁵³ Paul Werth has argued that the period from the late 1820s until the 1860s “initiated a transition—never completed under the old regime—from an imperial model featuring tolerance of ethnic and religious diversity ... to one of a unitary national state” (*At the Margins of Orthodoxy*, 7). Also see Charles Steinwedel, *Invisible Threads of Empire: State, Religion, and Ethnicity in Tsarist Bashkiria, 1773–1917* (New York: Columbia University Press), 6. Nicholas Breyfogle has observed in his important study on colonization in the southern Caucasus a similar restriction in “flexibility,” starting in the late 19th century (*Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005], 306–8).

⁵⁴ On similar developments taking place among the empire's Jewish communities, see Dolbilov, *Russkii krai, chuzhaia vera*, 137–38.

in the territories of the Orenburg Assembly henceforth begin teaching the Russian language.⁵⁵ In 1874, meanwhile, Muslim schools in the territories of the Orenburg Assembly were put under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education.⁵⁶ In 1888, it became necessary for Muslims wishing to become spiritual personnel in the Orenburg Assembly to pass an exam in Russian.⁵⁷ None of these provisions was undertaken in Muslim-inhabited regions of the empire outside the territories of the Orenburg Assembly, even though other non-Russian populations in the western borderlands of the empire were often exposed to similar policies.⁵⁸

The late 19th century brought a number of administrative changes to the Volga region that placed Muslims in Kazan and elsewhere in a much more face-to-face relationship with the tsarist administration than had been the case earlier. As was the case with Kräshen petitions for state recognition that they were Muslim, the Muslim protests of the century's final decades would rely heavily on a vernacular of Islamic discourses.

An Era of Protest

Over the course of the 19th century's final decades, Muslim communities in the Volga region repeatedly expressed their opposition to these and other state undertakings in a number of ways. The production of mass petitions, sent to a variety of state officials by dozens—sometimes even hundreds—of villages constituted one of the most common modes of registering protest. On other occasions, groups of Muslims publicly confronted public officials, in some cases beating up (Muslim) representatives of tsarist administration working at the village or district level. Throughout, these events demonstrated the complex sets of relations that existed during these years among Muslim communities, state officials, and the leaders of the Orenburg Assembly.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ On the goals associated with these policies, see Steinwedel, *Invisible Threads of Empire*, 112. On teaching in Russian, see *Sbornik zakonov o musul'manskom dukhovenstve v Tavricheskom i Orenburgskom okrugakh i o magometanskikh uchebnykh zavedeniiaxh* (Kazan: n.p., 1899), 29.

⁵⁶ Steinwedel describes similar policies adopted in Ufa, which was also in the territories of the Orenburg Assembly (*Invisible Threads of Empire*, 144–221).

⁵⁷ See Dolbilov's discussion of these years in the Volga region (*Russkii kraj, chuzhaia vera*, 146–47).

⁵⁸ In this respect, the Russification of Kazan Tatars in some ways can be attributed to the expansion of the tsarist state during the postreform years.

⁵⁹ The protests and petition campaigns discussed in this article are mentioned by Crews in the context of a single petition campaign, taking place in 1888 (*For Prophet and Tsar*, 313–14). For critical discussions of Crews's use of Muslim petitions, see Adeeb Khalid, "Tolerating Islam," *London Review of Books* 29, 10 (24 May 2007); and Michael Khodarkovsky, review of *For Prophet and Tsar*, *American Historical Review* 112, 5 (2007), 1491–92.

As was the case with subjects across the empire, communities of all faiths in the Volga region had at times shown resistance to tsarist policy making.⁶⁰ There were, however, three important differences between earlier protests and those that occurred among the region's Muslims in the late 19th century. First, the protests of the late 1870s on were big, involving at times hundreds of villages from across the region. Second, the frequency and duration of these events were also striking, with protests taking place for more than two decades and frequently occurring on an annual basis. Third, unlike earlier protests involving the region's Muslims—but similar to the Kräshen protests of the late 1860s—the Muslim protests of the late 19th century frequently invoked “Islam,” “Sharia,” and other Islamic terminology in pleading their cases to tsarist authorities.

The first of the major Muslim protests occurring during this era took place in 1877–78, in response to new regulations (*instruktsii*) adopted by the zemstvo of Kazan province.⁶¹ These regulations mandated, at community expense, the construction and maintenance of various types of public buildings (such as firehouses and water depots), as well as the purchase of insurance to protect against fire damage.⁶² Over the course of two years, more than 100 Muslim villages from districts across the province submitted petitions, often nearly identical to one another, calling for the repeal of the new regulations. These petitions were sent to a variety of civil and spiritual representatives of provincial administration, including the Orenburg müfti, the governor of Kazan province, and local police officials. A number of petitions were also sent to the interior minister and the emperor.⁶³

Muslims were not the only ones to oppose the regulations, as Russian and Chuvash villages likewise argued that the new rules were costly and unnecessary.⁶⁴ Muslim petitions differed, however, from those of Christians in that they contained the additional argument that the purchase of insurance

⁶⁰ See, for example, tsarist reports on Muslim and Christian resistance to recruitment in the 1860s in NART f. 1, op. 3, dd. 58–59. In these reports, no mention is made of Muslim resistance to recruitment differing in any way from Christian resistance.

⁶¹ That it was the zemstvo—itsself the product of the reforms—which created the laws setting off the first reforms underscores the degree to which the postreform expansion of the state itself played a role in developing Russification as it was understood by non-Russians in the empire.

⁶² For a discussion of the protests over the *instruktsii*, see Zagidullin, “Tatarskie krest’iane,” 134–56.

⁶³ NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 4345, ll. 22, 40.

⁶⁴ Zagidullin lists more than 100 “Tatar” villages as having been involved in the protests, as well as another 14 villages of “other nationalities,” including Chuvash and Russian. How mixed villages were counted in this survey is unclear (“Tatarskie krest’iane,” 154–55). For samples of these petitions, see NART f. 1, op. 3, dd. 4345 and 4627.

contravened Islamic law.⁶⁵ The petitions of Muslim communities also objected to a provision mandating the construction of bell towers, which Muslim petitioners argued were “strictly prohibited by the Holy Sharia.”⁶⁶ The petitioners further emphasized the degree to which the regulations deviated from the principle of separate confessional administration, arguing that the very fact that the regulations were the same for Christians and Muslims indicated that it had been issued in error. “For us [the regulations] are not necessary,” argued a group of petitioners from the village of Staryi Tatarskii, “as we are Muslim” (*a dlia nas, kak magometan, ne obiazatel'nye*).⁶⁷

Muslim protests against the new regulations were not limited to the distribution of petitions but also involved public demonstrations, the beatings of local Muslim officials, and altercations with tsarist security personnel. Such was the case in the village Malye Azy, where a group of several dozen protesters descended upon the seat of local administration, beating up the clerk and the canton (*volost'*) chairman.⁶⁸ In a separate incident, the district police inspector for Kazan reported that up to 1,000 Muslims had gathered in the village of Karmish-Kazanbash, where they had likewise attacked the clerk and village elder until soldiers were called in to disperse the crowds.⁶⁹ Soldiers also fought with approximately 500 protesters outside the town of Menger. According to an account written by one Mökhämmäd al-Mökhämmädshahi Äkhmädi uli, “most” of the Muslims in Menger viewed the events in terms of the Russian government attacking Islam. Fights taking place between

⁶⁵ An Islamic version of insurance is called *takaful*. For petitions arguing that state policies were un-Islamic, see NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 4345, l. 1; d. 4466, ll. 33–34ob; d. 4627, ll. 41–43, 144, 175. Numerous examples of this type of language can also be found in petitions stored in TsGIA RB f. I-295, op. 11, d. 397.

⁶⁶ This line was used in literally dozens of petitions, as most of them were copied word for word from one of a few different models. This particular example was taken from TsGIA RB f. I-295, op. 11, d. 397, l. 47ob. Also see, e.g., NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 4345, l. 45; d. 4627, l. 175.

⁶⁷ NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 4345, l. 1. A similar attitude can be found in the efforts in 1886 of Muslim villagers outside Chistopol, who were wary of issuing a resolution banning the sale of alcohol in their village, despite their right to do so. The villagers had expressed concern that issuing a state-backed ordinance might somehow be used by authorities to limit the autonomy of Sharia, so they instead asked local authorities to use their own laws to ban alcohol sales. See *ibid.*, d. 6847.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, d. 4345, 53. On the notion of collective “rights” and responsibilities in late imperial Russia, see Jane Burbank, “An Imperial Rights Regime: Law and Citizenship in the Russian Empire,” *Kritika* 7, 3 (2006): 397–431.

⁶⁹ Government officials working in the local branch of the Ministry of the Interior estimated that more than 1,000 Muslims were involved in the protest meeting (NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 4627, l. 68).

protesters and soldiers were accompanied, wrote Äkhmääd uli, by “much shedding of blood.”⁷⁰

These events marked the beginning of series of protests, petition campaigns, and mass rumors that would continue among Muslim communities in the region in the 1880s and 1890s.⁷¹ Between 1882 and 1884, more than 200 petitions were sent to state officials in response to the announcement of regulations placing Muslim schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.⁷² Then, from the late 1880s to the early 1890s, the intensity of petition writing picked up again after the 1888 regulations mandating the study of Russian in Muslim schools. Hundreds more petitions were delivered to tsarist officials during these years, with one report indicating that 190 petitions had arrived at the governor’s office alone.⁷³

As had been the case with Muslim communications regarding the *instruktssii*, the most common argument made by Muslims in the petitions from the 1880s and 1890s was that the government’s proposals were unacceptable because they violated “Sharia,” or “Muhammadan law.”⁷⁴ Moreover, the petition campaigns taking place during these years were accompanied by the emergence of rumors alleging a variety of government plots against Islam and Muslims.⁷⁵ Many of the allegations related to actual developments that were taking place at the time.⁷⁶ Rumors predicted, for example, that Muslim *medreses* would be closed and that Muslims would have to study in Il’minskii’s schools, allegations that reflected Muslim anxieties over state undertakings regarding Muslim education and the opening of

⁷⁰ “Ianga zur dähshätle väkiiğa,” l. 1ob.

⁷¹ The protests over the regulations would end with the modification of the regulations in mid-1879 (Zagidullin, “Tatarskie krest’iane,” 156).

⁷² For the petitions from this campaign, see NART f. 92, op. 2, d. 15539, ll. 23–146.

⁷³ Most petitions were near-verbatim copies of one of several variants that were generally in circulation at a given time (NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 8137, ll. 19–27).

⁷⁴ Muslims resisting the mandatory study of Russian, for example, wrote a petition to the emperor stating that “Sharia forbids us from studying foreign subjects” (ibid., d. 8137, l. 8, petition to the emperor from the Muslim population of the village of Almenev, in the canton of Bogorod, 22 January 1890). Also see identical petitions later in this *delo*, including ll. 45–49. Others argued that studying Russian meant that Muslim students could not learn Sharia correctly (petition to governor, ibid., d. 5883, l. 3ob., 20 January 1883).

⁷⁵ Scholars have long treated rumors not simply as incorrect versions of the truth but rather as forms of “public communication” that “reflect private hypotheses about how the world works” in the absence of more reliable information. See Ralph L. Rosnow, “Rumor as Communication: A Contextualist Approach,” *Journal of Communication* 38, 1 (1988): 12–28. Also see Glen A. Perice, “Rumors and Politics in Haiti,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 70, 1 (1997): 1–10, esp. 2–3.

⁷⁶ For more on state views that these rumors were simply the product of “fanaticism” or “falsehoods” rather than expressions of genuine concern among Muslims over real events taking place in their lives, see NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 3539, l. 1; d. 4627, l. 179; d. 7798, l. 95; and d. 9606, ll. 4–6.

missionary academies.⁷⁷ Other rumors alleged that state authorities would soon do away with the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly altogether, an idea that state authorities were in fact debating among themselves at that time.⁷⁸ In many of the rumors, moreover, the closing of the Orenburg Assembly would presage the forced conversion of Muslims to Orthodox Christianity.⁷⁹ The same idea is reflected in Mökhämmäd uli's account from 1878, which reports that the goal of the "Russians" was to wipe out Islam and transform Muslims into "apostates" (*muretid*).⁸⁰

Even more ominously for local officials, many of these rumors also implicated the leaders of the Orenburg Assembly itself.⁸¹ Rumors reported that Muslim spiritual personnel would soon be ordained as Orthodox priests and would be made responsible for baptizing Muslims or enrolling them in Il'minskii's missionary schools.⁸² On one occasion, Müfti Soltanov wrote to the governor to complain about rumors contending that, "with my approval," Muslim affairs regarding "marriage, separation, and divorce will soon be subordinated to the authority of the Orthodox Christian spiritual authorities." These rumors had, the müfti wrote, accompanied Russian Muslims during a recent pilgrimage to Mecca, prompting a group of outraged pilgrims to send a letter, whose signatories included the müfti of Mecca, to Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II denouncing Russia's actions.⁸³

Tsarist officials were indignant at the protests. As had been the case during the "apostasy" of 1866, officials in the region dismissed the rumors as the product of crazed fanaticism. "As is well known," began a report written for the governor of Kazan in 1894, "the Tatars of Kazan, especially the mullahs

⁷⁷ On rumors regarding Il'minskii's schools in the region, see NART f. 1, op. 1, d. 4466, l. 33ob., correspondence between the governor of Kazan and the directors of the province's districts.

⁷⁸ On rumors alleging the imminent closure of the assembly, see NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 4627, l. 144, petition to the governor of Kazan. For state discussions regarding the wisdom of such a closure, see Azamatov, "Russian Administration and Islam in Bashkiria," 110. Similar discussions were undertaken in the late 1860s and early 1870s regarding the scaling back of the Tavridian Assembly's authority (RGIA f. 821, op. 8, d. 605, ll. 34–49).

⁷⁹ NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 4466, l. 33. Ultimately, the regulations were modified to accommodate some of the complaints of the region's Muslim communities, particularly with respect to the construction of bell towers (Zagidullin, "Tatarskie krest'iane," 156).

⁸⁰ "Tanga zur dähshätle vakiiga," l. 2ob.

⁸¹ NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 10165, ll. 17–18, 1896 report from the district inspector of Mamadysh to the governor of the province of Kazan; Zagidullin, *Perepis' 1897 goda*, 136.

⁸² NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 9603, ll. 7–9, 17–20, 23, 64, 130, 209, 229–32, correspondence among the governor of Kazan, Orenburg Müfti Soltanov, and regional district inspectors.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, d. 8601, ll. 1–3, correspondence from Orenburg müfti to governor of Kazan, 1891. A letter of protest regarding the condition of Muslims in Russia was sent from pilgrims in Mecca to Sultan Abdülhamid in 1890 (BOA Y.MTV 57/50, s. 1–3).

and the merchants, stand out for their extreme fanaticism.”⁸⁴ Common to many reports from the 1890s is the notion that the “rich Muslim fanatics and mullahs” were the source of trouble because they wanted to create their own Muslim government.⁸⁵ This view of Muslim demands was common to official commentary on the protests of the late 19th century and would similarly encourage state officials after 1905 to classify Muslim political activity as simply an expression of “pan-Islamism” or “pan-Turkism.”⁸⁶

From the late 1870s and deep into the 1890s, relations between regional officials and Muslim communities grew steadily worse. Meanwhile, state officials continued to rely mainly on the leaders of the Muslim spiritual assemblies to mediate between the state and Muslim communities. In 1897, this strategy of state officials would conclude in mayhem, with the violence and confusion surrounding one of the biggest government projects taking place in the empire at century’s end: the 1897 “all-Russian” census.

Census Fiasco: 1897

The “all-Russian” census of 1897 was the first of its kind in Russia, and government officials working in the region wanted to make sure it went off without a hitch. Mindful of the unrest that had beset the region since the late 1870s, officials working on the census took early steps to avoid a recurrence of violent protest. In June 1896, a full six months before the count was to begin, Orenburg Müfti Soltanov was asked to write a directive to imams in the assembly informing them that the census would only count people and would not convert them. Spiritual personnel were instructed by Soltanov to pass on the message to their communities that “no harm will come from the census either with regard to the Muslim religion or with regard to Muslim schools.”⁸⁷ As the count approached, moreover, the governor of Kazan insisted that a “respected mullah” be brought in to attend the meetings of the commission and take part in its planning. Census takers were subsequently informed to be extra-careful while working in Muslim villages, where “Muslim customs regarding women” predicated that outsiders should not speak with female residents.⁸⁸ When

⁸⁴ NART f. 1, op. 3, d. 9606, l. 4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, d. 7798, l. 95, report on rumors of mandatory education in Russian, 1890. For more on fear of fanatics, see *ibid.*, d. 3539, l. 1, in which Muslim fears of being baptized are likewise seen as evidence of fanaticism; and d. 4627, l. 179.

⁸⁶ On Muslim modernist figures like Ismail Gasprinskii and his followers as “fanatics” and “pan-Islamists,” see, e.g., NART f. 486, op. 1, d. 4, l. 29, Ministry of the Interior letter discussing supporters of constitutionalism and new methods of education.

⁸⁷ NART f. 2, op. 2, d. 12627, ll. 246–48. Also see KGU T-1658, “Vakiät. Perepis’: Kazan, 1897.”

⁸⁸ NART f. 105, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 13, 27.

the actual count began, many of the census takers were themselves spiritual personnel from the Orenburg Assembly.⁸⁹

The decision to employ the Orenburg Assembly as a means of mediating the census project with Muslim communities resulted in disaster. Even as the government's official strategy for engaging Muslim concerns rested primarily on the Orenburg Assembly, local Muslims now trusted assembly officials less than ever before. Partly as a consequence of this development, Muslim resistance to the census featured more violence than any of the earlier protests, with spiritual personnel assisting in the collection of census data receiving particularly hostile receptions. Such was the case in the village of Bol'shye Nyrmıy, where Mullah Khairullah Abdulgaleev, who had signed up to help with the count, was chased from his own village amid accusations that he had converted to Orthodox Christianity.⁹⁰ In the village of Karatai, meanwhile, Mullah Zainullah Valgullin reported that a "Chuvash came into the village, entered the mosque, and convinced the peasants not to listen to their mullah's advice to participate in the census."⁹¹ Matters would only get worse.

By mid-January, numerous census takers had appealed to the gendarmes for protection, stating that their participation in the count had placed their lives in danger.⁹² According to a manuscript history of the 1897 events, 500 soldiers were dispatched to the village of Karmish-Kazanbash—a site of violence in earlier decades—to combat rioting peasants.⁹³ In the village of Bakırchı, meanwhile, soldiers clashed with more than 300 Muslim peasants who demanded that the census takers end their activities.⁹⁴ Dozens of mullahs refused outright to work as census takers, leading to their being stripped of their status as licensed mullahs and ejected from the Orenburg Assembly.⁹⁵ In all, active resistance to the collection of census data—ranging from simple harassment of census takers to mass demonstrations—took place in more than 400 villages spanning ten districts of the province.⁹⁶

Conclusions

Eight years after the last of the big Muslim protests from the late 19th century, the revolution of 1905 broke out. Within Muslim communities, there was

⁸⁹ NART f. 199, op. 1, d. 46, l. 34.

⁹⁰ Zagidullin, *Perepis' 1897 goda*, 156–57; NART f. 199, op. 1, d. 46, ll. 69–70ob.

⁹¹ NART f. 2, op. 2, d. 12627, l. 1.

⁹² NART f. 199, op. 1, d. 46, l. 34.

⁹³ "Vakıiat Perepis': Kazan, 1897," 1.

⁹⁴ Zagidullin, *Perepis' 1897 goda*, 183, and 166–90 for information on Muslim resistance to the census more generally.

⁹⁵ NART f. 2, op. 2, d. 12627, especially ll. 58–150ob.

⁹⁶ Zagidullin, *Perepis' 1897 goda*, 185.

considerable disagreement—and not just among “elites”—over the question of who, if anyone, should be responsible for articulating Muslim community interests in communications with tsarist authorities. In particular, in Kazan there was considerable suspicion about the wisdom of leaving the question of post-1905 administrative reform in the hands of the spiritual leadership.⁹⁷

On the one hand, it is important to note that the protesting Muslims discussed in this article were seeking to defend the institutional authority of a state institution, the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly.⁹⁸ These efforts to defend the assembly were revived after the revolution of 1905, when many Muslims—even supposedly radical “pan-Islamists” and “pan-Turkists”—similarly endeavored to strengthen the Orenburg Assembly while pursuing political platforms focusing on the evolving relationship between Muslim communities and tsarist institutions. Not all Muslims in Russia were single-mindedly dedicated to resisting all branches of the state, and many Muslims did indeed look to the Orenburg Assembly as a source of administrative authority.⁹⁹

At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that Muslims were seeking to defend the Orenburg Assembly primarily as a means to resist their further incorporation into the empire’s growing body of civil administration. In their efforts to avoid falling under the supervision of civil administrative institutions, protesting Muslims were far removed from seeing tsarist officials as “agents of Sharia.” Instead, these protesters viewed state efforts to bring Muslims under civil control as a hostile move and described these efforts as antithetical to Islam. In rallying to defend the Orenburg Assembly, Volga Muslims were not so much looking to the state to protect their faith as they were seeking to establish a bulwark for keeping civil administration at bay.

The tsarist system of confessional administration helped create an Islamic lexicon through which state officials and Muslim communities communicated with one another. State officials obliged Muslims to live according to laws that were presented as Islamic, and Muslims responded by presenting their cases

⁹⁷ In April 1905, Chairman of the Council of Ministers Sergei Witte had instructed Müfti Soltanov to “assemble a number of suitable men from the ulema and write a petition regarding your needs” (Musa Carullah Bigi, *Islabat Esasları* [Petrograd: Maksutov, 1915], 8–9).

⁹⁸ One of Crews’s important contributions lies in making this very point.

⁹⁹ In a petition sent to Sergei Witte from the “Muslim Society of Kazan,” 28 January 1905, signatories Yusuf Akçura, Said Girey-Alkin, Abdullah Apanaev, and Ahmetzhan Saidashev focus almost exclusively on issues pertaining to Muslims and state institutions. Their first request is that Muslims be allowed to choose their own müfti and *kadis*. Other priorities pertain to control over Muslim schools, keeping all matters pertaining to marriage, divorce, and the division of property out of civil courts, placing Muslim pious foundations under the control of the Orenburg Assembly, and giving Kräshens the right to be administratively classified as Muslim (RGIA f. 821, op. 8, d. 631, ll. 11–16ob.).

in Islamic terms when communicating with state officials. While the Islamic discourses employed in these communications were originally taken from Islamic civilization, their incorporation into the daily administrative lives of Muslim communities was a state-sponsored undertaking. The employment by Muslims of Islamic discourses was therefore not exclusively or even primarily an expression of faith but also a means of communicating with state officials through a lexicon of confessional administration that was backed up by state authority. In a system that valorized something it called “Islamic” administration and ruled according to a state-sponsored “Sharia,” Muslim petitioners spoke Sharia and Islam back to the state. They were speaking the state’s own Islamic discourse.

Tsarist officials, nevertheless, read the Islamic discourses of Muslim protest at face value. While no one had thought it alarming when Muslims used Islamic lexicon in praising state authorities, the employment of such terminology in protests against state policy making was seen as an expression of religious fanaticism.¹⁰⁰ Before and after the revolution of 1905, Muslims in Russia made specific demands and suggestions in their communications with tsarist officials, while frequently invoking Islamic terminology as part of a mutually supported discourse. The specifics of Muslim complaints, however, tended to be overshadowed by the Islamic terminology they employed. State authorities dismissed the specifics of Muslim protests and instead viewed the protests as expressions of religiously fanatic “faith.” While protesters had employed, in their communications with state officials, Islamic discourses that were already well established within the context of Muslim–state interactions, the specifics and recommendations surrounding the complaints were usually ignored. Even if Muslims were complaining mostly about administrative matters, the state officials with whom they were dealing heard nothing but Islam.

Dept. of History
Montana State University
Bozeman, MT 59717 USA
james.meyer7@montana.edu

¹⁰⁰ After 1905, Muslim political activity would similarly be dismissed as an expression of “pan-Islamism” or “pan-Turkism.”