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The origins of pan-Turkism



James Meyer's "Turks across Empires" is a very valuable and intriguing reassessment of the origins of pan-Turkism through an in-depth examination of some of its leading figures, most importantly Yusuf Akçura, Ahmet Ağaoğlu and Ismail Gasprinskii. Since this reviewer works on Soviet, Russian and Turkish politics with a focus on the politics of ethnicity and nationalism, it was a great pleasure to read this book, which sparked many comments and suggestions for further research. Meyer's book is "revisionist" in the sense that it successfully challenges many assumptions and arguments in the study of Russia's Muslims and pan-Turkism. What clearly emerges is that key figures such as Akçura and Gasprinskii did not aspire to an independent Turkic state but rather for most of their lives strived for cultural autonomy and equal citizenship for Russian Muslims within a pluralistic, constitutional order in Russia.

What enabled the existence of the “trans-imperial people,” as Meyer describes the future pan-Turkist activists in the title of the first chapter, was the widespread existence of “double subjecthood” under conditions of porous borders, whereby thousands of Russian Muslims could and did spend many years in the Ottoman Empire while retaining their Russian passports, simultaneously becoming Ottoman subjects and returning to Russia whenever it served their interests (p. 30-31). Thus, Akçura arrived in İstanbul as a seven-year-old with his widowed mother and yet 20 years later, he was able to go back and settle in Russia, since he never lost his status as a Russian subject (p. 42-3). The most extensively discussed figure in the book, Akçura has a biography that is somewhat typical of most other “trans-imperial” Muslims who became future pan-Turkists. Born to a notable provincial family in Ulyanovsk -- which was then known as Simbirsk -- and maternally related to the prominent Yunusov family of Kazan, Akçura grew up in İstanbul and was educated to become an officer in the Ottoman army, but was exiled to Libya for sedition. He fled to Paris via Marseille, where he studied law and politics at the Sorbonne for four years, whereon he returned to his homeland, Russia. Once back in Russia, he had an extraordinary cultural capital that was highly unusual for a Russian Muslim, being literate in multiple languages including French in addition to possessing a world-class education and experience in many foreign countries (p. 84). At that time, most Russian Muslims were not even literate in their native language and few of them knew Russian, the official language of the country they were living in. Gasprinskii and Aġaoġlu also have similar life stories that drove them far away from their provincial birthplaces in Crimea and the Caucasus to political and intellectual centers such as St. Petersburg, İstanbul, Cairo and Paris.

Following such a “trans-imperial” grand opening, beginning in Chapter 2 (“Insider Muslims”), the book narrows its focus to what Meyer labels “central Russia,” corresponding to a series of towns

with significant Muslim -- and in particular Volga Tatar -- populations such as Kazan (the capital of the present-day autonomous Republic of Tatarstan), Orenburg, Ufa (the capital of the present-day autonomous Republic of Bashkortostan), and Chistopol, although other cities of European Russia and Western Siberia such as Tyumen, Ulyanovsk and Penza also come up occasionally. Compared to the trans-imperial introduction and conclusion, which is also reflected in the title of the book (“across empires”), this narrower focus on local politics and minute details of provincial life in central Russia is, somewhat ironically, perhaps the most critical and insightful contribution of this book to our understanding of pan-Turkism. The struggle between proponents of the “new method” in Muslim learning, known as “Jadidism,” and their traditionalist opponents is well known at least since Adeb Khalid’s groundbreaking book on this struggle in Central Asia. Meyer’s book provides the socio-economic dimension to this struggle. “Jadids” were deeply unpopular but well-funded by wealthy merchants with Jadidist convictions (p. 128). In contrast, traditionalist teachers were underpaid or not paid at all, struggling to survive on charity or taking on additional jobs to make ends meet. Meyer’s attention to the financial troubles and marital status of luminaries such as Akçura (for example, “Where did Akçura get the money to support himself in Paris?” p. 44) provides a more complete, flesh-and-bone biographical reconstruction of these intellectuals and their milieu, which this reviewer found particularly useful.

One argument that emerges from Meyer’s narrative is that pan-Turkism has its origins in Russian domestic politics, especially among Volga Tatar elites, although Crimean Tatars and Azeris also play a role. In contrast, North Caucasian (Chechen, Kabardin, Adygey, Dagestani, etc.) and Central Asian (Uzbek, Kazakh and Kyrgyz) Muslims are conspicuous by their absence. The depiction of Kazan Tatars as “insider Muslims” (p. 51) of Tsarist Russia is simply brilliant. It brought to this reviewer’s mind the Phanariote

Greeks of the Ottoman Empire, who could probably be labeled as “insider Christians” in this context. Kazan Tatars, who were the oldest, most educated and wealthy Muslims under Russian rule, assumed a leadership role by speaking on behalf of all Muslims of Russia. An all-Russian Muslim political movement, “İttifak,” was the most concrete manifestation of this phenomenon (p. 88). The same wealthy Tatar merchants who funded Muslim modernism in the form of Jadidism also bankrolled İttifak as the political party of all Russian Muslims. An important detail to emphasize is that during their public political campaigns in Russia, both İttifak and Akçura appealed to “all Muslims of Russia” (p. 140) and not to Turks or Tatars or any other identity that could be construed as less than all Muslims. It is noteworthy in this context that what later became Akçura’s most famous pan-Turkist work, “Three Styles of Politics,” which he wrote in provincial central Russia and published in Cairo in 1904, was virtually unknown among Russian Muslims.

Three major insights that one can derive from this book are particularly significant and worth emphasizing for reassessing the origins of pan-Turkism. First, what both Gasprinskii and Akçura -- and also certainly the İttifak movement -- were seeking was equal citizenship for Muslims combined with some form of communal autonomy and a larger political stake within the Tsarist Russian Empire rather than secession from the Russian Empire, let alone establishing an Ottoman Turkish-led Turkic Empire. In other words, at least during their formative years and at the height of their political careers, most of them were not at all “pan-Turkist” in the conventional sense that pan-Turkism is understood in the late-Ottoman Empire or in present-day Turkey. What they were engaged in was simply a kind of “Muslim civil rights movement” within the limits of Tsarist Russian constitutional order. Even the kind of Turkism that Akçura espoused in “Three Styles of Politics” was very context-specific, fixed in time and space, written for Ottoman policy-makers as of 1904, based on calculating costs and

benefits for the Ottoman state, and hence state-centric (p. 136-8).

Second, and perhaps more iconoclastically for adherents of pan-Turkism, Meyer argues that the practical goals and policy recommendations of pan-Turkists such as Gasprinskii, Akçura and even the İttifak movement as a whole overlapped with the Russian state's goals and policies in reforming the Muslim minority. Gasprinskii, trying to reconcile the demands of the Orthodox Christian Russian Empire and his Muslim faith, was simply seeking a Russo-Islamic world or a "Russian Islam" (p. 41). For example, a key objective of the Russian state was to teach Russian to its Muslim subjects and, very significantly, spreading literacy in Russian was one of the most prominent goals of Gasprinskii, Akçura and many adherents of Jadidism and the İttifak movement as well. "Gasprinskii's public embrace of government-supported views reflected a broader alignment between the [Muslim] activists and tsarist officials that tends not to be recognized in most of the studies examining Muslim politics in late imperial Russia" (p. 91). This is an important corrective to the literature on this subject.

Third, in the case of pan-Turkism, what starts out undoubtedly as a religious reform movement, a form of Muslim modernism also known as Jadidism, evolves into a Muslim civil rights movement and later into "Muslim nationalism," and once it fails in Tsarist Russia and is thoroughly crushed in the Soviet Union, with its leaders in exile in Turkey, it finally evolves into a more avowedly secular-nationalist pan-Turkism. In this reviewer's own work on the Islamic origins of and secular nation-building in Algeria, Pakistan and Turkey, he also observed a similar pattern of evolution from "Muslim nationalism" to something much more closely resembling classical European secular ethno-nationalism, which is a curious and theoretically significant similarity. Meyer's book discusses in detail the emergence of Muslim reformism and its politicization in the İttifak movement as well as İttifak's decline, which is mostly due to endogenous ideological

and organizational causes, but then jumps right into the exile of these leaders in Turkey in the last chapter (“Istanbul and the Pan-Turkic Scene”), finishing off with a reminder of their relative absence in Turkish public memory and official history (“Epilogue”). In a different sense, the narrative becomes genuinely trans-imperial and intercontinental once again at the end.

Despite its major merits as outlined above, there are also a few factual and stylistic problems in this book. On page 127, it is stated that “İttifak was able to increase its seats in parliament to thirty-five in the elections of December 1906” but on the next page, it is stated that “[i]n the elections to the third Duma in December 1906, a total of ten Muslims were voted in to parliament” (p. 128). The reader is left perplexed: Did İttifak score 35 or 10 seats in the Duma in the elections of December 1906? These election results are indeed very important, since there were very few such multiparty elections held in the extremely short period Russia experienced constitutional parliamentary government, and moreover December 1906 is supposed to be the peak of İttifak’s popularity. On the same topic, why did Meyer translate İttifak as “solidarity” when a better translation could be “alliance,” which might also more accurately reflect the contextual meaning of this political movement. Charles Steinwedel’s dissertation, “Invisible Threads of Empire,” is mentioned at least twice in the text (p. 67 and p. 82) but does not appear in the bibliography.

Overall, Meyer’s “Turks across Empires” is an insightful and thought-provoking book that is highly recommended to anybody interested in Russia’s Muslims and pan-Turkism and it is appropriate for advanced undergraduate and graduate seminar courses on Russia’s Muslims, Eurasian history or Turkic studies.

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Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Sener Akturk, "Religion and Nationalism: Contradictions of Islamic Origins and Secular Nation-Building in Turkey, Algeria, and Pakistan," *Social Science Quarterly* 96, no.3 (2015): 778-806.