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Making Muslim Women Political: Imagining the Wartime Woman in the Russian Muslim Women’s Journal Suyumbika

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Abstract

This article uses the Kazan-based Muslim women’s journal Suyumbika to follow the transformation of Muslim reformers’ views on the modern Muslim woman. While much of the scholarly literature on religious, cultural, and educational reforms in the Russian empire focused on how change in women’s roles was to be a decades-long process, this article argues that the Great War was a period of transition between women’s cultures of the imperial and Soviet periods. This article is based, among others, on primary sources published in Suyumbika between 1914 and 1917 as well as Tatar-language books of the pre-1917 period.

Introduction

In April 1915, student-journalist Kaïnordgi Bolghanbai reported for the Muslim newspaper Quanay on a recent literary-cultural evening held by the Orenburg (Muslim) Student Aid Society to collect money to aid wounded soldiers. The cultural evening brought together amateur performers from the city’s Tatar, Bashkir, and Kazakh ethnic communities, and they performed in a sold-out house. In addition to the usual audience of urban youth, the event attracted people from the surrounding villages and even “elderly women with scurves on their heads and old men in winter hats, people the likes of which had never been seen in the Orenburg theater” (Bolghanbai, 2009 : 66). One of the highlights of the evening was a singing performance by two women:

After Argyn, the Qazaq women Gainizhamal Dulatova and Zhangyl Qaiyrbaeva came out on stage and sang “Oh, My Poor Country” and “Kanderghazi.” They received loud applause. The audience listened to the songs with particular attention and afterwards shouted “Bravo!” (Bolghanbai, 2009 : 66). These women both appeared on-stage in Kazan skirts, sizes thought to be modest and reserved for the home front, and spoke up for the rights of soldiers and their families (McDermid, 1998, Afoniia, 2014). In the Muslim world as well, the hardships caused by the war led women to become advocates for the welfare of their families (Kamp, 2006 : 54).

In the years before the Great War, very few Muslim women appeared on stage. Those who did face harsh criticism (Makhmutova, 2012 : 245-249). Even the Jadid reformers, who advocated for women’s education and better treatment for women in marriage and the family, and included in their ranks a small number of actresses, girl’s school teachers, and female writers, focused primarily on improving the conditions women faced in the home as wives and mothers. But, by 1915, the Muslim press had begun to promote new roles for Muslim women in Russia’s Volga-Ural region and Siberia. Newspapers and journals called upon Muslim women to support their soldiers and the empire by taking on new kinds of work, educating themselves and their neighbors on international affairs, and undertaking charity work such as the concert described above. In doing so, reformist writers sought to normalize activities that had been considered inappropriate for women before the war, and to construct a vision of women as possessing agency in imperial and international politics. This was a departure from the more home-focused and education-oriented Jadid views of Muslim women’s rights that had preceded the war, and it formed the basis of the revolution and early Soviet period. Still, however, women were on the whole more likely to participate in the war effort and support soldiers through appeals to community solidarity rather than individual action.

By contrast, in the study of women’s history in Volga-Ural Muslim society, Russian and western historians have emphasized the Russian revolutionary period (1917-1921) as the key moment for the transformation of discourses of women’s roles and rights. During this period, Russian subjects across the empire gathered to discuss the futures of their ethno-confessional communities and the empire as a whole. This sense of new possibility extended also to educated Muslim women, who met in a series of congresses to discuss what rights women should enjoy in a post-imperial Russia (Kamp, 2006). Some of these women went on to take part in the founding of schools, national theaters, and other cultural institutions in the new Soviet society (Makhmutova, 2012 : 248-274). They did so against a backdrop of fierce debates across the USSR over how women would live in the new Soviet society (Kamp, 2006 ; Northrop, 2004 ; McDermid, 1998).

However, a comparison of Jadid publications from before and during the war reveals significant transformations in the way that Jadid reformers themselves envisioned women’s role in society. Before the war, Jadid writers focused on women’s education and greater rights as means of strengthening the Muslim family. The roles they proposed for educated women were limited to that of homemaker and educator. With the start of the war, however, while they still presented women as wives and mothers, they widened the range of women’s activities and responsibilities. With the departure of husbands to the front, it was no longer adequate for a woman to keep her house in order and raise her children. Reformers called upon her to take over her husband’s work, donate her free time to support the war effort, and become conscious of the political consequences of her activities. These trends were present in the wartime articles of Suyumbika, the only Muslim women’s journal published in Russia during the Great War. The journal served an incipient in which male and female reformers crafted and promoted new images of the politically-active Muslim woman. 

Suyumbika and its Audience

Founded in Kazan in 1913, the monthly journal Suyumbika was the second Muslim women’s journal published in the Russian empire. The first women’s journal, Alemi Nisvan, had been founded in Crimea in 1907 by Shadiga Gaspirgulskaya, daughter of well-known reformer, publisher, and founder of the new phonetic method education (sadul-i Jadid) Ima’il Gaspirgulskii (1835-1916). However, Alemi Nisvan closed in 1910, making Suyumbika the only Muslim women’s journal published in Russia during the war (Bennigsen and

http://remmm.revues.org/9891
The Jadid Discourse on Women before 1914

Russian and Tatar-language studies of the Muslim women’s movement in the Volga-Ural region have focused primarily on the evolution of women’s education from the late 1800s to 1914. Their often hagiographic scholarship often marginalizes the role of women. Suyumbika was of the widow of Kazan Khan Safagarai, and was often portrayed in early twentieth-century Tatar literature as the heroic, but doomed last queen Kazan at the time of the Russian occupation in 1552. Suyumbika’s main editor, Yağub Khalif (1877-1936), was born in Izh-Bul village in Vikiya Province and graduated from Izh-Bul Madrasa, one of the most prominent and politically-radical madrasahs in the Volga region. Before founding the journal, he had published textbooks for young children (Rami and Dautov, 2001). Khalif was assisted by his wife, Anna, who worked as Suyumbika’s secretary in the first year of its publication (Makhmutova, 2006: 43-5). Suyumbika was published through Usild and Majgor publishing houses, the latter of which published most of the writings of popular Tatar poet Gabdulla Tukay (Rami and Dautov, 2001). Its regular contributors also wrote for the Tatar literary journal Ang, the youth satirical journal, Yild-yef, and the Kazan newspaper Yildize. These contributors fell into these categories: 1) men aged 20 to 35, who had graduated from the Volga Basin’s madrasas; 2) women in their teens and twenties, educated in the girls’ schools that had been founded in the early 1890s; and 3) women’s in their thirties, forties, and fifties who were home-educated or self-educated and had become involved in teaching, textbook writing, and Islamic law (Makmutova, 2006: 44-46). At the height of its popularity, Suyumbika was issued once a month with a print-run of 1,500 copies, making it the second largest of the Tatar journals published in Kazan (Makhmutova, 2006: 45). Its target audience included teachers, clergymen, writers, shopkeeper and merchant families, school children, students, and literate members of society, whom it encouraged to take the lead in promoting women’s rights to Muslim society. Like other Volga-Ural Muslim periodicals, Suyumbika was designed for pedagogical purposes as well as enjoyment and dissemination of information. Its articles were meant to instruct readers and provide didactic material for village teachers and reformist clergy to instruct their pupils and laypeople.

Mobilizing Muslim Women

The outreach of the new demands on women and challenged the Jadid’s vision of educated mothers and housewives. The departure of men to the front forced some women into the roles of sellers’ wives, mothers, and daughters. At the same time, wartime propaganda mobilized patriotism as the duty of all Russian subjects. This new propaganda campaign was carried out in the Muslim communities as “State of War,” a ballad written by a Kazan Muslim woman in 1914 called "Bibi-khadjina Sharefiddin-qin and published through Millat Press. “State of War” was modeled on the soldier’s ballad (soldat bate), a literary form traditionally produced by Muslim men serving in the Russian army (Ross, 2014: 91-92). However, Sharefiddin-qin used this form to describe the war’s impact on women and families:

One of them [the soldiers] cries “Mama!”

Another cries, “Bibi!”

Their voices cry even more.

“I’ve been left all alone!” they say.

It is said that one must humor Friday,

Everyone eats the food from the stove

When the news came at five o’clock.

Who will eat that good food now? (Sharefiddin-qin, 1914: 4)

The tone of the ballad quickly turns from shock and despair to resignation:

Whatever state a woman may be in,

There is no use in crying, […]

The women ask:

When their soldiers will return.

No matter where those poor men are, they say:

“Will it be good if it returns.”

Some [of the men] are without hope,

They say, “While we have food.”

Their wigs pack their skirts and trowsers.” (Sharefiddin-qin, 1914: 5-6)

By the end of the poem, resignation has turned to resolve:

I’ll give my wealth as alms!

And my soul as sacrifice for my master, one, the emperors (Sharefiddin-qin, 1914: 14).

“State of War” was one of the first in a series of Tatar-language propaganda pamphlets that Millat Press released in the course of the war. All of these pamphlets called upon Muslims to embrace hardship and resist opposition in their support of the Russian Empire. However, while most of these pamphlets addressed men’s experiences in the trenches or as prisoners of war, “State of War” focused on women coming to terms with the war and embracing new roles as soldiers’ wives and loyal subjects, and it depicted these processes part of women’s contributions to the war effort. While Millat Press published patriotic propaganda, the Temporary Muslim Committee for Aid to Soldiers and their Families published some texts (Makmutova, 2012: 14-15). These examples of individual middle and upper class women breaking gender barriers is equated with progress toward the achievement of equal status for men and women in general. By opposing child marriage, forced marriage, polygyny, opium consumption, veiling, confinement to the family (Khalid, 1998: 226). Their efforts to “save” Muslim women focused upon the strengthening of the family unit through the elimination of practices “harmful” to the physical health, intellectual development, and economic wellbeing of its members. By opposing child marriage, forced marriage, polygyny, opium consumption, veiling, confinement to the home, and the traditional basic education for both men and women, the Jadids aimed to create families capable of housing and raising healthy, productive members of the nation (Khalid, 1998: 235-236).}

The Jadid Discourse on Women before 1914

The author urged Muslim women to follow the course of their nomadic ancestors and their Russian neighbors. Wives of deployed shopkeepers and clerks were told to take on their husband’s work, including managing the family’s small store. Retail shops often were managed by women, the latter of which published most of the writings of popular Tatar poet Gabdulla Tukay (Rami and Dautov, 2001). Its regular contributors also wrote for the Tatar literary journal Ang, the youth satirical journal, Yild-yef, and the Kazan newspaper Yildize. These contributors fell into these categories: 1) men aged 20 to 35, who had graduated from the Volga Basin’s madrasas; 2) women in their teens and twenties, educated in the girls’ schools that had been founded in the early 1890s; and 3) women in their thirties, forties, and fifties who were home-educated or self-educated and had become involved in teaching, textbook writing, and Islamic law (Makmutova, 2006: 44-46). At the height of its popularity, Suyumbika was issued once a month with a print-run of 1,500 copies, making it the second largest of the Tatar journals published in Kazan (Makhmutova, 2006: 45). Its target audience included teachers, clergyman, writers, shopkeeper and merchant families, school children, students, and literate members of society, whom it encouraged to take the lead in promoting women’s rights to Muslim society. Like other Volga-Ural Muslim periodicals, Suyumbika was designed for pedagogical purposes as well as enjoyment and dissemination of information. Its articles were meant to instruct readers and provide didactic material for village teachers and reformist clergy to instruct their pupils and laypeople.

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men lacked job skills, Muslim women were often more ignorant and incapable of supporting themselves and their children. Urban women could use their wealth and education to aid their less fortunate sisters, who were, after all, the “sisters of Russia’s heroines”.

Yet another article informed readers that Kazan Muslims had begun to open hospitals for wounded soldiers. The anonymous author pointed out that these hospitals provided an opportunity for girls and women to show their patriotism and that the+A daughter of the Quraysh+ female readers had already expressed their desire to nurse wounded soldiers in their homes.

In making Muslim women political, +A Daughter of the Quraysh+ called on women to become aware of the events unfolding outside of their homes and to take on roles in the professional and public spheres to support the Russian war effort. To normalize the idea of Muslim women as active in public and mixed-gender spaces, the authors repeatedly raised themes of immediate relevance to women living day-to-day on Russia’s home front. The theme of duty runs through the work. Duty to family motivates Asma to put her Hajj plans to rest and to come to Medina to save her younger sister from what threatens to be a ruined life. Duty to Masumah allows her to eschew her intended marriage and to take initiative in what she considers to be her family’s concern.

Despite its historical premise, A Daughter of the Quraysh repeatedly raises themes of immediate relevance to women living day-to-day on Russia’s home front. The theme of duty runs through the work. Duty to family motivates Asma to put her Hajj plans to rest and to come to Medina to save her younger sister from what threatens to be a ruined life. Duty to Masumah allows her to eschew her intended marriage and to take initiative in what she considers to be her family’s concern.

Asma, however, has other plans, and intends to use the journey not only to save her daughter from the marriage, but to deliver a message of vital importance to the ‘Umayyads’ in Medina. As a result of his recent defeat, a suitor named Marwan has become a clear candidate to lead the family, but Asma is determined that no man will control her daughter’s life. This, however, will not be easy. The political climate is volatile, and the young girl is not without her share of suitors who wish to advance their own agendas.

Asma is but one example of the women who contributed to mobilization efforts during World War I. As a woman, Asma has been a faithful follower of her faith and her family, and her actions are inspired by these ideals. However, she is also a woman of action, and her story is a testament to the power of women to change the course of history.

Asma’s actions, however, were not without consequence. Her actions brought her into contact with enemies of the state, and she was eventually captured and taken to a prison camp. Despite this, she remained steadfast in her convictions, and her story serves as a reminder of the power of women to change the course of history.

In early March, the Muslim women of Moscow convened a general meeting, which coincided with a gathering of Russia’s Society for Equal Rights for Women. The women of the latter group called on women to become aware of the events unfolding outside of their homes and to take on roles in the professional and public spheres to support the Russian war effort. To normalize the idea of Muslim women as active in public and mixed-gender spaces, the authors repeatedly raised themes of immediate relevance to women living day-to-day on Russia’s home front. The theme of duty runs through the work. Duty to family motivates Asma to put her Hajj plans to rest and to come to Medina to save her younger sister from what threatens to be a ruined life. Duty to Masumah allows her to eschew her intended marriage and to take initiative in what she considers to be her family’s concern.

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Conclusion

Though pre-war reformers called for women's education and better treatment of wires and daughters, they did not envision women as political or economic actors on the international political stage. The war led Jadid writers to revise their views. With women facing the mobilization of their husbands and with propaganda calling upon all citizens, regardless of gender, to support the war, reformers' pre-war vision of the modern Muslim woman no longer corresponded with their society's realities. Rather than either remaining stable throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century or shifting suddenly in 1917, Jadid views on women's roles and rights evolved and adapted over time. During the war years, they went through a period of particularly rapid change. In this way, the Great War served as an intermediate stage between the Jadid discourses of the early 1900s and those of the revolutionary period.

Bibliography


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