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 religions, cultural, and educational reformation in Volga-Ural Muslim society has focused on mid-twentieth century developments, this analysis of the effects of the war on Tatar culture, notes that the departure of Volga-Ural Muslim men to the front forced women to take on new duties and professions, and that those activities, but intermixes actual instance of women's activism with calls to action and debates in the press over women's roles (Naganawa, 2016: 63, 74-76). Also, Makhmutova, 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, girls' 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 household and education-oriented Jadid discourses on Muslim women's rights that had preceded the war, and it foreshadowed developments in the revolutionary and early Soviet periods. In 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 of the transformation of discourses on women's rights and roles. During this period, Russian subjects across the empire gathered to discuss the futures of their regions. By contrast, the Great War serves as a moment of the transformation of discourses on Muslim women's rights and roles. This article seeks to correct this historiography by providing a detailed examination of how Muslim women engaged with the war effort in the context of their everyday lives. It shows how Muslim women in the Russian empire, and particularly in the Volga-Ural region, took on new roles and responsibilities during the war, and how their actions in support of the war effort were viewed by both Muslim and non-Muslim observers.

Introduction

In April 1915, student-journalist Khairaddin Bolghanbai reported for the Muslim newspaper Quany 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, 2010: 66). One of the highlights of the evening was a singing performance by two women:

After Argen, 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 "Ju ! [encore]." These two women both appeared on-stage in Kazakh skirts sewn tightly about the waist and frilled at the front. These women, whose faces had never previously appeared in a large house before, performed with great excitement.

At previous literary and cultural evenings, Muslim women have never come out on stage and performed such lengthy songs. For this reason, on this occasion, our ladies carried the evening (Bolghanbai, 2010: 63).

1 In the years before the Great War, very few Muslim women appeared on stage. Those who did had faced harsh criticism (Makhmutova, 2012: 245-246). 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, girls' 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 household and education-oriented Jadid discourses on Muslim women's rights that had preceded the war, and it foreshadowed developments in the revolutionary and early Soviet periods. 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 incubator in which male and female reformers crafted and promoted new images of the politically-active Muslim woman. Calls in 1917 for women to march, vote, and support the revolution built upon a decade-long process of encouraging Muslim women to take on new roles in society (Kamp, 2006: 54). Also, Makhmutova, Gafurova, and Naganawa position the drive to mobilize women during the war as a continuation of pre-war efforts on the part of Jadid reformers to educate and liberate women; opposition to women's education, work, and public activism came from outside of Jadid circles rather than from within.

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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 1880s to 1920. These often emphasize the hagiographic and cultural “flotsam” of the Jadids’ movement works lamenting the plight of women or promoting female education as unambiguously progressive and feminist texts (Makhmutova, 2012: 14–15; Bitkintuvor, 25, 27, 32).

Jadid views on women have received fleeting attention in English-language studies of the Volga-Ural Jadids (Rofich 1986; Tuna, 2015). They have been addressed in greater detail in historical studies of the women’s movement in Central Asia. Suyumbika, the Jadid women’s magazine, published a series of Tatar-language brochures outlining the stipends and food allotments owed to the wives and minor children of mobilized soldiers and how those allotments could be obtained prior to 1917. Their often ambiguous and theocratic nature stand in contrast with the social and cultural reform in Central Asia, where both authors write of the Volga-Ural Jadids as the first to promote the idea of women’s education and independence (Rorlich, 1986: 213–214).

Kamp and Khalid both focus on the women’s movement in the Volga-Ural region during the war and the pro-war propaganda released in the course of the war. They contrast the Jadid views on women before 1914 with the views of women’s movement in Central Asia, where both authors write of the Volga-Ural Jadids as the first to promote the idea of women’s education and independence (Rorlich, 1986: 213–214).

Mobilizing Muslim Women

The outbreak of the war placed new demands on women and challenged the Jadids’ vision of educated mothers and housewives. The departure of men to the front forced some women into roles traditionally associated with men. Women’s involvement in the war effort was a result of their working within the limits of Islamic scriptural and legal law. However, younger socialist-leaning writers rejected the traditional role of women and called for a more active role in society. In the Galiasgar Kamal’s 1907 play “The Unfortunate Youth,” Gaisha, a seventeen-year-old gymnasium student converses with the twenty-year-old student Akhmat about the education of women. The play depicts the women’s movement in Central Asia as the first to promote the idea of women’s education and independence (Rorlich, 1986: 213–214).

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

Whatever a 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 return.”
Some [of the men] are without hope,
They say, “While we get some food.”

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

“I will give my wealth as dower
And my soul as sacrifice for my father, the emperor” (Sharifaddin-qızı, 1914: 14).

“State of War” was modeled on the soldier’s ballad (soldat bâqet), a literary form traditionally produced by Muslim men serving in the Russian army (Ross, 2014: 92–93). However, Sharifaddin-qızı used this form to describe the war’s impact on women and families:

One of them [the soldiers] cries “Mama!”
Another cries, “Mama dear!”
Their wives cry even more.
“I’ve been left all alone!” they say.
It is said that one must honor Friday,
Everyone eats the food from the store
When the news came at five o’clock.
Who will eat that food now? (Sharifaddin-qızı, 1914: 4)

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

Whatever a 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 return.”
Some [of the men] are without hope,
They say, “While we get some food.”

Their wives pack their skirts and trousers. (Sharifaddin-qızı, 2014: 5–6)

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

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And my soul as sacrifice for my father, the emperor” (Sharifaddin-qızı, 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 endure hardship and remain steadfast in their support of the Russian Emperor. However, while most of these pamphlets addressed men’s experiences in the trenches or the war effort, one female contributor, writing in August 1914, argued that, in times of war, Turko-Tatar women of past centuries had taken over the running of their household and cared for the soldiers of the Volga-Bashkirs’ jadid madrasas, 2 women in their teens and twenties, educated in the girls’ schools that had been founded in the early 1880s, and 2 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 (Makhmutova, 2006: 44–45).
Among those promoting a new wartime vision of Muslim women was female educator Fakhre al-Basit Sulaymanya (b. 1857). Educated by her father in the same fields that he taught the male students in his madrasa, Sulaymanya was well-versed in the Quran, hadith, and fiqh (Rami and Dautov, 2001: 272). She used her knowledge to write tracts on girls’ education, family life, and the social harm wrought by alcohol. She educated young girls in Nizhnii Novgorod and, starting in 1915, served as the secretary for Suyumbika. 

Female characters in Tatar Jadid novels were rarely granted much independence. Often, they were portrayed as either helpless victims of a benighted, patriarchal order, or as political dupes of well-intentioned men. The historian Marwan's treatment of his fictional father, 'Abd al-Majid, is an example of this. Nasin, Marwan's narrator, repeatedly speaks of her father's protection and support, never questioning his actions or decisions. Marwan's positioning of women as passive recipients of male guidance and direction is typical of many Tatar Jadid novels. 

In the first months of the war, both male and female activists called upon Muslim women to take an active role in supporting the imperial war effort. This call differed from previous efforts at mobilizing and modernizing Muslim women in that it encouraged women to contribute socially and politically. Gender boundaries, and to some extent the Islamic traditions that had previously declared them closed to women. The new call on Muslim women to play a role in the war effort was a reflection of a rapidly changing political situation. By 1917, but the political context within which women were told to apply them changed. I m a g i n i n g W o m e n as R e v o l u t i o n a r y S u l a i m a n i y a's 1913 writings as well as with the marriages that served as happy endings to a number of pre-war Jadid novels. Marwan, 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' Caliph Abu Talib. In the center of a new war that is about to break out between the 'Umayya clan and other factions in Arab Muslim society.

Though A Daughter of the Quraysh was set in the distant past, the theme of war permeated the work. War had torn Ama's family apart. When she was two years old, her father was struck down by battle-fever and died. Marwan, married Yazid, a member of the powerful 'Umaysi clan. Ama's mother, Maryam, married Yazid. Ama first asks Marwan to send his servant to Medina to bring 'Ali. When neither Marwan nor the servant arrive, Ama dons men's clothing, mounts her horse and rides to Medina herself. The passers-by offer her a seat and in turn under the wing of Marwan, son of the late caliph Abu Bakr, who guides them through the policies of the caliphate to try to reach 'Ali.

Female characters in Tatar Jadid novels were never marked as dynamic. Often, they were portrayed as weak, helpless virgins of a backward, patriarchal order, or as simpletons to male characters trying to change society. The concerns of these female characters revolved around marriage, primary education, and family. A Daughter of the Quraysh begins in this vein, but as soon as Ama dons male clothing, the focus shifts. Her mission to 'Ali is not simply about avoiding an unwanted marriage, but averting a crisis in the Islamic community. In 1915, Sulaimaniyya began to publish a novella called A Daughter of the Quraysh. Appearing in serialized form from late 1915 to summer of 1917, it related the events of the First World War. In the early imperial era, it was banned and considered a threat to the unity of the empire. It included a call for the appointment of female commissars of justice, a call that was also made in Russia.

'Umrayya's power over other Muslims, German and Turkish support for colonized Muslims was nothing more than a tool to manipulate Muslim and German colonial forces. In this way, Sulaimaniyya's historical fiction resonated the messages conveyed in Sulaimaniyya's current events articles. It also re-echoed the point that Muslim women should be aware of the political situation unfolding around them.

By the latter chapters of A Daughter of the Quraysh, Ama refuses to marry either Muhammad or Marwan, despite being pressured by all around her to choose a husband. Her promise to her late mother remains unbroken. In this way, Ama starkly contrast with the submissive housewives of Sulaimaniyya's 1913 writings as well as with the marriages that served as happy endings to a number of pre-war Jadid novels. 

Imagining Women as Revolutionary

From August 1914 to January 1917, the writers of Suyumbika called on women to become aware of the events unfolding outside of their homes and take on roles in the professional and public spheres to aid the war effort. To normalize the idea of Muslim women as active in public and mixed-gender spaces, Suyumbika's writers presented a range of real and fictional women from the Turkish and Arab past who had done the same, and argued that such action was a laudable practice with a long historical precedent.

The February Revolution was announced in the March issue of Suyumbika and the journal's writers positioned Suyumbika as a pro-serve of educating women on Russia's rapidly changing political situation. In the wake of February, the contributors to Suyumbika focused on the upcoming election to the Constituent Assembly. The Provisional Government's granting of universal suffrage altered the political landscape of Volga-Caucasus Muslim communities by conferring upon men and women the same political rights. If the journal viewed the elections as back-up workforce and support networks that didn't present a wartime threat, it now courted women as potential voters.

For Suyumbika's writers, the idea of Russian Muslim women gaining the vote was both intoxicating and slightly frightening. During the war, Suyumbika's authors had looked to women's movements in Western Europe for inspiration, but in 1917, the tables had turned and Muslim women had ousted their sisters in Britain and France. Thus, they were not necessarily discouraged by the actions of their sisters abroad. The position of the empire's Muslim women was fraught with even greater significance, for it represented the first time that Muslim women would be on the same footing as men. 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 two events would go down in history as the Women's March of March 8.

The Frauenbund and other liberal women's organizations encouraged women to support the war effort. They pointed to the work of women in other countries, such as France and Britain, where women had been mobilized to aid the wounded and assist in the war effort. The idea of women's mobilization extended to the Ottoman Empire as well. In October 1914, the Ottoman government issued a proclamation encouraging women to take an active role in wartime trade, farming, and charitable work not only acceptable, but appropriate for a Muslim and Turkic society.

The Russian government had given rise to new styles of clothing, which would allow Muslim women to remain faithful to their empire and save money that could be put to use to aid the war effort. 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 two events would go down in history as the Women's March of March 8. However, most Muslim women, especially those in rural areas, were not fully committed to the cause. The February Revolution called upon Muslim women to support the war effort, but it was not clear what the future held for Muslim women in Russia. The war had given rise to new styles of clothing, which would allow Muslim women to remain faithful to their empire and save money that could be put to use to aid the war effort.

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37 With calls such as this, revolutionary-era reformers overturned many aspects of the pre-war views on the ideal modern Muslim woman. If, before the war, the new Muslim woman was to use her modern education to create a healthy, progressive home and guide her husband toward virtue, by 1917, she was to take up the banner of revolution herself and labor side-by-side with men in the public sphere. The starkness of this change, however, was muted by the fact that over the course of the war, Muslim writers, such as those who contributed to Suyumbika, had created a new model of the socially-active, politically-informed, yet devout Muslim woman.

Conclusion

38 Though pre-war reformers called for women’s education and better treatment of wives 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’ pro-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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