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THE SPREAD OF ISLAM IN THE KAZAKH STEPPE DESPITE RUSSIA'S COLONIAL POLICY

Abstract

This study examines the historical dynamics of Islam in the Kazakh steppe during Russian colonial rule, focusing on its social, educational, and cultural significance. Through a detailed analysis of archival documents, historical chronicles, travel accounts, and scholarly literature, the research highlights how Islam continued to play a central role in the intellectual, moral, and spiritual life of the Kazakhs despite the pressures of Russification and colonial interventions. The aim of the study is to identify the historical dynamics and specific features of the spread of Islam in the Kazakh steppe during the period of Russian colonial rule and to determine its social, educational, and cultural role in preserving the religious identity, intellectual potential, and cultural cohesion of Kazakh society under colonial influence and Russification policies. Particular attention is paid to the role of Islamic educational institutions, religious leaders, pilgrimage, and the Jadidist movement in the development and transformation of Islamic culture and education among the Kazakhs. Islamic institutions, including madrasas and rural mekteps, offered a comprehensive education encompassing religious instruction, classical Eastern languages, logic, philosophy, and history, thus fostering both spiritual and intellectual development. Prominent Khoja families and mullahs served as key agents in disseminating Islamic knowledge and moral values, while pilgrimage (hajj) strengthened religious identity and unity across diverse Kazakh communities. The study also explores the influence of the Jadid movement, which introduced modern European pedagogical approaches into Muslim education, signaling the beginnings of educational reform. Overall, this research demonstrates that Islam remained a resilient and unifying force, preserving cultural cohesion and intellectual growth among the Kazakhs even under colonial conditions.

Keywords: Kazakh steppe, Islam, Russian colonial policy, madrasas, Jadidism, religious education, pilgrimage.

Introduction

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Kazakh steppe experienced profound socio-political changes under the expanding influence of the Russian Empire. The Tsarist administration implemented a range of policies designed to exert control over the local population, including attempts to regulate religious practices, oversee the activities of religious elites, and introduce Russian-language instruction in educational institutions. Despite these pressures, Islam remained a central pillar of spiritual and cultural life among the Kazakhs.

Islamic institutions, including madrasas and rural mekteps, played a critical role in preserving religious knowledge while simultaneously cultivating intellectual and cultural competencies. These schools offered a broad curriculum encompassing the Qur'an, Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic and Persian languages, logic, philosophy, rhetoric, and history. Through such education, students acquired not only religious literacy but also a foundation for broader intellectual development. Religious elites, particularly Khoja families and mullahs, exerted significant influence on both nomadic and settled communities. They acted as educators, spiritual guides, and moral authorities, ensuring the continuity of Islamic traditions even in the face of political and cultural pressures.

Pilgrimage (hajj) emerged as another key institution that reinforced religious identity, enabling Muslims from different regions to maintain connections and strengthen communal cohesion. Furthermore, the Jadid reform movement introduced new pedagogical methods inspired by European education, which modernized Islamic instruction while retaining core religious principles. This study examines the mechanisms that facilitated the persistence and spread of Islam in the Kazakh steppe

under colonial rule, emphasizing the educational, social, and cultural strategies that allowed the Kazakhs to maintain their religious and intellectual heritage. To position this study within the broader academic discourse, it is essential to outline the current state of research and historiographical analysis surrounding this problem. The foundational literature reveals a complex evolution of perspective on Tsarist religious policies. Early Imperial observers and nineteenth-century researchers such as Levshin [1], Yevreinov [2], Basilev [3] and Miropiev [4] documented the initial institutional interactions between the state and local populations, often evaluating Islamic practices through a pragmatic administrative lens or as structural impediments to full imperial integration. This bureaucratic approach is deeply captured in the archival records of the Orenburg Central State Archive [5], [6], [7] and the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan [8], [9] which reflect the state's ongoing efforts to systematize and monitor Islamic education. Conversely, critical primary evaluations by internal Kazakh intellectuals such as Ualihanov [10] provided crucial, ground-level observations of the authentic religious and spiritual life of the steppe population during this era. Subsequent scholarship in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods moved toward institutional and socio-political cataloging. Zimanov [11] offered profound insights into the legal and social structures of the Bukeev Khanate, while Tajibaev [12] and Sabitov [13] systematically reconstructed the physical and historical networks of traditional schools, mekteps, and madrasas. The regional specificities of Tsarist educational management and local response have been further developed by Rysbekov [14] and Muhanbetjanov [15], focusing on the Inner (Bökey) Horde, and by Qoıgeldiev [16] for the Jetısu region. In modern historiography, the field has expanded to incorporate comparative structural dynamics.

Despite this extensive historiographical development, a distinct research gap remains. Existing studies frequently separate these historical dimensions, leading to a polarized perspective: they either focus exclusively on top-down imperial administrative mechanisms or analyze local educational institutions as isolated regional phenomena. There is a clear lack of an integrated structural analysis that shows exactly how the everyday social functions of the religious elite, local school networks, and trans-regional institutions such as the pilgrimage [17] intersected to form a cohesive self-defense mechanism against cultural assimilation. Furthermore, the critical source base from the Orenburg Central State Archive [5.-10] [6.-267] [7.-4] and the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan [8.-18], [9.-4] has not been sufficiently synthesized with contemporary international frameworks to explain the specific survival strategies of Islamic institutions in the steppe. Therefore, the explicit objective of this article is to analyze the interconnected educational, social, and cultural mechanisms that enabled the active preservation and continuous expansion of Islam in the Kazakh steppe during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to demonstrate how these traditional networks successfully neutralized the structural pressures of the Russian colonial apparatus.

Materials and methods of research

This study utilizes a qualitative historical methodology, relying on a comprehensive framework of archival materials, contemporary historiography, and primary nineteenth-century accounts. Rather than treating these materials as mere chronological reports, this research subjects them to comparative source criticism and historical-systemic analysis to uncover the underlying dynamics of colonial-confessional interactions in the Kazakh steppe from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

The empirical foundation of this research rests on archival collections from the Orenburg Central State Archive [5.-10], [6.-267], [7.-4] and the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan [8.-18], [9.-4]. Documents from these repositories—specifically official correspondence, inspection reports, and administrative decrees—were systematically analyzed to contrast the top-down imperial directives regarding Muslim institutions, madrasas, and schools with the local administrative realities on the ground. This systematic approach allows for the deconstruction of tsarist bureaucratic mechanisms targeting Islamic education and personnel training.

To counter colonial biases and reconstruct the official imperial discourse, published primary literature from nineteenth-century Russian authors, including M.Miropiev [4.-54], A.Levshin [1.-315], and A.Evreinov [2.-49], was subjected to critical discourse analysis. These imperial viewpoints and their ideological contexts were rigorously cross-examined with the localized insights of Ch.Valikhanov [10.-182] served as a vital internal corrective for understanding the authentic processes of spiritual transformation within the Kazakh community. Furthermore, regional and institutional socio-political dynamics were evaluated by integrating the scholarly works of domestic and foreign historians. Studies by S.Rustemov [18], S.Zimanov [11.-141-192], A.Mukhanbetzhanov [15.-45], T.Rysbekov [14.-54] and M.Egemberdiev [19] were employed to analyze the internal progression of religious and educational processes. Finally, to interpret the complex social and cultural functions of Islam—including the interaction with pre-Islamic beliefs, the role of pilgrimage, and religious rituals—the study drew upon the theoretical frameworks provided by R.Abdullin [20], G.Mukhtarova [17.-3-6], V.Basilov [3.-163] and R.Mukhametshin [21] ensuring a holistic understanding of Islamic institutional resilience under colonial rule. Methodologically, the research applied historical-genetic, historical-comparative, and historical-systemic approaches. The historical-genetic method was used to trace the evolution of Islam in the Kazakh steppe and to identify changes that occurred under colonial rule. The historical-comparative method enabled a comparison of the Russian Empire's Muslim policies in different regions, thereby highlighting the specific features of the Kazakh case. The historical-systemic approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the interconnections among religious institutions, educational practices, and colonial administrative structures.

In addition, textual and discourse analysis was employed to examine the use of key concepts such as “Islam,” “Muslim education,” and “local population” in official documents and scholarly narratives. Sources in different languages (Kazakh, Russian, and Turkish) were compared to identify semantic variations and interpretive differences. Through this combination of materials and methods, the study sought to provide a nuanced and historically grounded analysis of the development of Islam in the Kazakh steppe, within the broader context of imperial-colonial policy.

Results and its discussion

The Spread of Islam Despite Colonial Rule. At the opening ceremony of the Muftiate in Ufa on 4 December 1789, the Chief Mufti Muhammedjan Hüseyin called on Muslims to remain loyal to the Russian Empress Catherine II. Catherine II assumed control over religious preaching and sought to keep it under strict supervision by sending only those individuals she trusted to mosques and schools in the Little Zhuz. These figures later came to be known in history as “appointed mullahs” [18.- 82].

By the end of 1841, Kazakh children had been educated exclusively in Islamic schools. In most cases, these schools possessed a distinctly Islamic character, and instruction was generally provided either at home or within the village setting [11.-141-192]. Indeed, students educated in Islamic institutions (madrasas) were not limited to reading the Qur'an and acquiring basic religious knowledge; they also learned classical Eastern languages such as Arabic and Persian. Within this educational framework, students received systematic, in-depth instruction across a range of disciplines, including logic ('ilm al-mantiq), philosophy (hikma), rhetoric (balāgha), and history. This demonstrates that these institutions did not merely provide religious formation but also served as centers for cultivating well-rounded intellectuals.

Consequently, the overall level of literacy attained by students educated in these schools surpassed that of the leading Tatar madrasas of the period, enabling the emergence of individuals with a higher degree of cultural and scholarly competence. In this context, the madrasas operating in the Kazakh steppe played a significant role not only in the religious sphere but also in the social and intellectual life of the population, fostering profound transformations in popular mentality alongside the process of Islamization [15.-45].

Mullahs provided school education with state support. The curricula of these schools were relatively simple, based primarily on reading and writing in Tatar; students also memorized selected

passages from the Qur'an and prayer texts. Parents and the local community financed the schools. Before the administrative reform of 1868 in Tsarist Russia, the number of Islamic schools and madrasas is known to have exceeded that of Russian–Kazakh schools. Many subjects included in the curriculum were closely related to social life, the personal qualities of religious figures, and geographical and natural factors. However, under the influence of the Tsarist government's baptismal policy, the number of Islamic schools and madrasas gradually declined [15.-45].

On 26 March 1870, the government of Tsarist Russia issued a decree making the teaching of the Russian language compulsory in schools. The mullahs, however, approached this measure with suspicion. In an effort to persuade them, the Mufti of Orenburg circulated a directive encouraging mullahs to agree to the introduction of Russian-language instruction in their schools [20.-128].

By a decision of the Council of the Russian Empire dated 20 November 1874, all Islamic schools and madrasas were placed under the authority of the Ministry of Education [5-54]. Nevertheless, Tsarist Russia perceived Muslim schools in the region as a political force capable of uniting the Turkic peoples. According to K. Kaufmann, the first Governor-General of Turkestan, educating Kazakh children separately from Russian children would hinder the empire's future colonial policy. For this reason, it was deemed necessary to eliminate widespread Muslim schools and to struggle against them [19.-19]. Consequently, the Tsarist authorities sought to reduce the number of madrasas. From 1868 onward, measures aimed at promoting Russian-language literacy were implemented within the school system [15.-45]. The ultimate objective of this policy was to weaken the Islamic educational system and to exclude religion from public life. However, these efforts failed to prevent Muslims from fulfilling their religious obligations [5.-4].

Despite initiatives aimed at undermining religious consciousness in society, the population remained attached to its spiritual values. Under these circumstances, the pilgrimage (hajj), one of the five pillars of Islam, retained its significance. The hajj served as one of the most important institutions uniting Muslims, with the potential to ensure spiritual and ideological cohesion among diverse Muslim communities despite their geographical, political, economic, cultural, and even linguistic differences. Regardless of racial and ethnic distinctions, the hajj long served as one of the most effective means of fostering spiritual and intellectual rapprochement among Muslim societies. Owing to Catherine II's policy of religious tolerance between 1767 and 1773, Muslim pilgrimage through Russian territory was facilitated. In later periods, however, the hypocritical policies adopted by the Tsarist administration toward Islam significantly impeded the performance of this religious duty [17.-3-16].

In the nineteenth century, Muslims living under Russian rule used three main routes to perform the pilgrimage (hajj). The first route passed through the Caucasus and the Kermanshah region, leading to the Turkic city of Haneyaki, then toward Baghdad, following the sacred cities of Kazmain, Karbala, and Najaf, before crossing the Arabian desert and reaching Mecca and Medina. Geographically, this route extended from the southern frontiers of Turkestan through Ottoman lands and ultimately to the Hijaz region.

The second route began with a sea journey from one of the ports on the Black Sea coast; from there, pilgrims traveled via Istanbul and Alexandria, continuing overland to Suez. After Suez, sea transport was once again preferred, with pilgrims heading to the ports of Yanbu and Jeddah, and finally reaching the holy cities of Medina and Mecca. This route was advantageous for maritime transportation and also operated within the framework of relations between the Ottoman Empire and Russia.

The third route started from Bukhara or Samarkand. It proceeded through cities such as Mazar-i Sharif, Kabul, Peshawar, and Bombay, before crossing the Indian Ocean to reach Jeddah or Yanbu, and subsequently Mecca and Medina. Muslims particularly favored this route from regions close to India and the Persian Gulf [17.-252].

Most researchers argue that Islam grew stronger among the Kazakhs during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, V. Basilov cites G. Potanin as stating: "Kazakh youths began

to go to Bukhara. There, they studied Arabic, Persian, and Islamic law, and upon their return they became mullahs.” Although the Russians continued to pursue policies aimed at distancing the Kazakhs from Islam, during this period the population—especially the intellectuals—embraced Islam and endeavored, to the best of their abilities, to practice and sustain it [22].

Despite the religious policies implemented by Tsarist Russia, the influence of the *Khoja* families—lineages traditionally associated with the propagation of Islam—on the development of Islam in the Kazakh steppe did not diminish. This can be observed in the literary works produced during that period. *Khoja* groups held particular significance for the Kazakhs, as they were believed to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, thereby conferring on them a privileged and respected status within society. These families were predominantly concentrated in southern Kazakhstan. Although they did not wield political power comparable to that of similar groups among the Turkmens or other settled communities of Turkestan, they nonetheless constituted a distinct and privileged group among the Kazakhs, fulfilling roles analogous to those played by mullahs and *ishans* in sedentary societies. The *Khojas* were distributed throughout Kazakhstan, but were especially concentrated and active in the Syr Darya valley [23].

Islamic Educational Activities among the Kazakhs. Nomadic schools (*mekteps*) and madrasas first emerged during the period when Turkestan nomads began converting to Islam. For example, it is known that the Bashkirs maintained a madrasa at their summer encampments in the eighteenth century. Similarly, in the same century, some Kazakh khans were observed to have instructors and schools within their own territories. These early developments of the eighteenth century became more firmly established in the nineteenth century, during which opportunities to provide Islamic education to nomads in the steppe and to enhance the religious knowledge of the Kazakhs increased significantly.

Two developments in the steppe facilitated this process. First, Kazakhs—particularly those of greater wealth—were able, in response to demands from nomadic groups, to employ teachers to accompany them. Russian sources from this period often claim that Tatar mullahs guided and influenced the Kazakhs. Muslim sources, however, emphasize that the demand for these mullahs originated from the Kazakhs themselves and was not merely the result of Tatar manipulation. The second factor accelerating transformation in the Kazakh steppe was the growing number of scholars originating from the Volga–Ural region. These individuals were educated in madrasas in Kazakhstan and the Volga–Ural area; after completing their studies, they traveled to the steppe to teach the Kazakhs. Most of them came from regions adjacent to the steppe. For instance, in northeastern Kazakhstan, educational activities were predominantly conducted by scholars arriving from Siberia [23.-129].

Among nomadic Turkic peoples—namely the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz—the situation differed somewhat from that of the Uzbeks and Tajiks. Due to their nomadic lifestyle, establishing permanent schools was difficult. Not every *aul* had a school; some clans were accompanied by mullahs who migrated with them. Certain Kazakh beys employed private tutors who taught in the courtyards of their tents. Nevertheless, among steppe societies, the network of schools was not as widespread as in settled communities. In the Kazakh steppe, the school network was revitalized and strengthened from the 1780s onward, particularly as a result of Catherine II’s new Islamic policy and the redirection of Tatars to these regions. In some Kazakh schools, Volga–Ural Tatar mullahs served as teachers.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the spread of Islam in this region through Volga–Ural Tatars was supported by the Russian authorities. Tsarist Russia believed that if certain Kazakh clans—considered not fully Muslim—were first converted to Islam as a monotheistic religion, it would later be easier to convert them to Christianity. Acting as intermediaries between the Russian administration and the local population—through roles such as interpreters—the Volga–Ural Tatars formed a prominent class of Tatar merchants, intellectuals, and officials in the region. It exerted considerable influence, particularly over the nomadic populations of Turkestan [24].

Despite strict oversight by the Tsarist government, the number of students within the Muslim educational system in the steppe regions increased steadily from year to year. For instance, according to incomplete data collected by the military governor of the Semirechye (Yedisu) region in 1886, a total of 7,909 children (6,157 boys and 1,752 girls) received Muslim education in the region, served by 361 mullahs [16.-160].

From the sixteenth century onward, scientific disciplines had not yet been fully incorporated into madrasa curricula. By the early twentieth century, however, subjects such as poetry, geography, metaphysics, mathematics, and disputation (*munāẓara*) were being taught in madrasas, albeit not as comprehensively as in earlier periods. It is not easy to summarize the curricula of all madrasas in detail. Even in the work *Rumuz*, the authors of Islamic legal and philosophical thought—such as al-Farabi and Abu Ali ibn Sina—are mentioned several times, with emphasis on their significant role in the widespread dissemination of Islamic intellectual traditions [25].

Mullahs predominantly provided education in madrasas. The term *mullah* was used to denote a madrasa teacher, and students could also address the mullah as *taksir*. This term meant “an educated person” and served as a mark of respect within society. The local community convened to decide who would assume the role of mullah. In the *mekteps* of Turkestan, teaching duties were most often performed by the mosque imam. The position of mullah was initially offered to the imam; if he declined, it was offered to the muezzin, and if he, too, refused, the role was assigned to an external individual [24.-30].

Due to the mobility of rural schools, lessons were held in yurts during the summer and in earthen houses during the winter. The duration of education ranged from five to eight years, and children aged eight to seventeen attended these schools. As memorization of the Qur'an constituted the core of instruction, religious texts such as *Īman Şert and Şeriatü'l-Īman* were also taught. In addition, students were required to develop proficiency in writing, reading, and problem-solving skills. Rural schools differed from those in densely populated urban centers. In rural schools, the number of students was limited to ten to twelve, or even fewer, and instruction was provided by local mullahs. In contrast, urban schools typically enrolled approximately fifty to sixty children and were staffed by Tatar and Bashkir mullahs from Inner Russia.

Muslim schools constituted the initial stage of education. Children who completed primary instruction were able to continue their studies in madrasas. In madrasas, students were taught by instructors who came from major cities such as Bukhara, Istanbul, Kazan, Ufa, Orenburg, Troitsk, and Omsk. Alongside Arabic language studies, religious sciences, rhetoric, and Eastern literature, students were also instructed in subjects such as physics, chemistry, astronomy, botany, algebra, and geometry [4.-54].

With the establishment of the Governor-Generalship in the Turkestan region, teachers in schools and madrasas were placed under strict supervision. According to the regulations, each primary school student was required to pay 3 som 50 tiyin per academic year, while secondary-level students were obliged to pay 7 som. Through the administrative authorities established in the Kazakh steppe, the Russian government utilized tuition fees collected from madrasas to increase the number of local administrative employees. The salaries of schoolteachers were determined by the government [5.-10].

Each regional governor-general was tasked with closely monitoring specific religious institutions and Muslim schools. For example, in 1884, N. Rosenbach, Governor-General of Turkestan, established a special commission to determine the exact number of Muslim schools in the region [6.-267] and in 1887 he proposed to the Ministry the appointment of inspectors for Muslim schools [6.-269]. As a result, in 1890 a special inspector was appointed for Muslim schools in the Turkestan region. Educational inspectors regularly submitted reports on the condition of Muslim schools and madrasas under their authority to the regional governor and the Ministry of Public Education. In most Islamic schools, instruction focused on Islamic teachings rather than the Russian language [12.-83-84].

By the 1890s, the number of Muslim educational institutions began to increase. According to H. Sabitov, in the Yedisu volost in 1891 there were 64 schools and madrasas with 1,251 students; in 1895, 74 schools and madrasas with 9,086 students; and in 1897, 88 schools and madrasas with 12,835 students. In the Syr Darya region, in 1892 there were 1,497 schools and 35 madrasas serving 20,082 students, while in 1895 the number rose to 2,409 schools and madrasas with 28,898 students [13.-16-17].

Muslim schools constituted the first stage of education, after which children could continue their studies in madrasas. Admission to madrasas was open and did not require entrance examinations. The academic year in madrasas began in early September and continued until the end of May. Classes were held three to four days per week; during the remaining days, students were required to prepare independently through individual study. Educational activities were suspended during Ramadan. During the summer holidays, students returned to their home regions and continued educational activities by teaching children in their villages.

In village schools, instruction was generally delivered by literate individuals residing in the village. These instructors determined their own remuneration. Each student was obliged to pay a fee ranging from one to two rubles to the teacher before the end of the academic term. Children from impoverished families were also often compelled to attend these schools; however, they resorted to alternative arrangements such as borrowing money from teachers or compensating them through labor. In addition, parents donated livestock to madrasas to cover their children's educational expenses [5.-10].

Following the establishment of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship, teachers working in schools and madrasas in the region were placed under stricter supervision. According to the prevailing regulations, each primary-level student was required to pay 3 som 50 tiyin for the academic year. In comparison, secondary-level students were obliged to pay 7 som in tuition fees [5.-10].

Each regional governor-general was assigned to exercise strict oversight of specific religious institutions and Muslim schools. For example, in 1884 the Governor-General of Turkestan, N. Rosenbach, established a special commission to determine the exact number of Muslim schools in the region. As a result of these initiatives, a special inspector was appointed for Muslim schools in the Turkestan region in 1890. Educational inspectors regularly submitted reports to the regional governor and the Ministry of Public Education concerning the condition of Muslim schools and madrasas within their jurisdiction. At that time, instruction in most Islamic schools focused on religious knowledge rather than on the Russian language. This situation was confirmed in November 1887 by the inspector A. Alektorov, who observed it during his visit to Kazakh schools with fifty students in the Bökey Orda region [6.-269].

By the 1890s, there was a notable increase in the number of Muslim educational institutions in the Kazakh territories. According to data provided by the historian H. Sabitov, in 1891 there were 64 schools and madrasas in the Yedisu region with a total of 1,251 students; by 1895 this number had risen to 9,086 students in 74 schools and madrasas, and by 1897 to 12,835 students in 88 schools and madrasas. Similarly, in the Syr Darya region, 1,497 schools and 35 madrasas served 20,082 students in 1892, while in 1895 the number increased to 2,409 schools and madrasas serving 28,898 students [13.-16-17].

The Mufti of Orenburg directly supervised Muslim schools and madrasas. The Mufti submitted proposals to higher authorities to publish special textbooks and Muslim literature and to supply these materials to Muslim schools. He also organized various activities to attract Muslim children to these institutions.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Jadid movement among the Turkic peoples became increasingly active. Initially emerging among the Crimean and Volga Tatars, this movement later spread throughout Turkestan among all Turkic peoples. Jadidism criticized the spiritual stagnation in public life and directed its enlightenment-oriented struggle against the Tsarist government's colonial policies. The revival of the Jadid movement led to the introduction of a "new

method” (*usul-i jadid*) in Muslim madrasas and schools. In general, the Jadidists aimed to incorporate the fundamental principles of the European educational system into Muslim education.

Despite the difficulties imposed by the Tsarist government, graduates of Muslim madrasas traveled to the Kazakh steppe, established schools in villages, taught children, and continued to open Muslim educational institutions. Educational societies played a significant role in supporting the activities of Muslim schools and madrasas in Kazakhstan. These societies maintained direct contact with madrasas, purchased textbooks and clothing for impoverished children, and provided them with assistance. They also helped equip public libraries in urban centers with books and other essential materials. In 1900, the Society of Enlighteners was established in the city of Verny and operated with approximately 120 members. To promote education across all segments of the population, the society organized Sunday schools, designed specifically to enable working people to receive education during their free time [8.-18].

In January 1906, at the Second Muslim Congress convened in St. Petersburg, the Muslim Party—also known as the Union of Muslims of Russia—was established by a majority decision, and a statute consisting of twenty-three articles was adopted. The statute specified that branches of the Union would be opened in the cities of Orenburg, Astrakhan, Uralsk, Omsk, Kyzylorda, Verny, and Tashkent [21.-26].

In May 1907, meetings of Muslim teachers were held in the cities of Kazan, Petropavlovsk, Tashkent, and Bakhchisaray under the administration of Tsarist Russia. In August of the same year, the All-Russian Congress of Muslim Teachers convened in Kazan. As a result of this congress, various educational societies were established in urban centers. These societies not only founded madrasas but also engaged in cultural activities such as establishing libraries. Their membership included mullahs, teachers, merchants, and respected figures within society. These organizations played a pioneering role in achieving significant progress in education in Kazakh territories; they secured the financial resources necessary to modernize madrasas and mekteps and made substantial contributions to raising the overall educational level of Muslim society.

In addition to providing education, these societies offered material assistance to needy Muslims, including the poor, the elderly, orphans, widows, and persons with disabilities. The aims and objectives of these associations were officially approved in their statutes and specifically registered by the military governor of the Yedisu region. Representatives of Kazakh, Tatar, and other Muslim peoples were among the members of these communities. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, the establishment of Muslim schools, madrasas, and educational societies marked a significant advancement in the region's educational landscape. Some Kazakh students educated in these institutions went abroad to pursue higher education and advanced in scholarly fields. In contrast, others actively participated in the social life of Kazakh society by contributing to the publication of Kazakh newspapers, journals, and textbooks. Graduates of these educational institutions subsequently joined the ranks of the Kazakh intelligentsia and held various positions within the state administration [9.-4].

The Community that Spread Islam in the Kazakh Steppe: The Khojas. In the traditional Kazakh society of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, the second stratum of the nomadic aristocracy, known as Ak-Süyek (“White Bone”), was formed by social groups referred to as khojas (also rendered as koca or hoca; from the Persian *khâja*, meaning “master” or “lord”). The khojas were representatives of the noble Muslim elite in Turkestan and traced their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad (570–632), through his cousin and son-in-law, the fourth “Rightly Guided” caliph ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661), the husband of his daughter Fatima (d. 633) [26].

As in other Muslim societies of Turkestan, the khojas occupied a privileged and highly respected position within the social hierarchy of Kazakh society. Among Muslims during the period of the Kazakh Khanate, the Kazakhs were often regarded as *awliya* (saints). A particularly noteworthy point is that in the fourteenth century, members of the Chinggisid dynasties recognized the sayyid

khojas, and the khoja estate in general, as the highest social stratum at the time when Islam began to be officially adopted as the state religion in the Chagatai and Jochi uluses [27].

The khojas were known as the principal figures disseminating Islamic thought and values across the Turkestan region. They not only enjoyed great respect but also benefited from numerous privileges. In particular, the application of capital punishment and corporal punishment to khojas (religious leaders) was prohibited, and they were granted the right to speak on an equal footing with high-ranking state officials. Moreover, they dared to openly criticize and question the erroneous practices and misguided decisions of rulers [19.-182].

Describing the social and legal status of the khojas within Muslim communities of the region, Chokan Valikhanov wrote in the mid-nineteenth century: “The khojas enjoyed great respect among the people. Their disciples and students spoke of the miracles they performed, and everyone believed in them. The khojas opposed the rulers without any hesitation” [24.-181].

According to one view, the khojas, who played a central role in the spread of Islam in southern Kazakhstan and Turkestan from the eighth century onward, were descendants of Arabs of “authentic” lineage who arrived in the region during the early Islamic conquests [28]. Another interpretation maintains that they traced their origins to local Sufi “saints” (*awliya*) who maintained spiritual lineages connected to the sheikhs of the Naqshbandiyya and Yasaviyya orders in Bukhara, Khiva, southern Kazakhstan, Eastern Turkestan, and the Fergana Valley [3. -163]. A third perspective suggests that, in later periods, foreign Arabs belonging to this privileged group merged with local non-Muslim elites of Turkestan, and that these unions subsequently came to be regarded as the source of their genealogical legitimacy [29].

Across much of the Kazakh steppe, until the February Revolution of 1917, the khoja estate consisted largely of disciples of spiritual leaders associated with various Sufi brotherhoods. These communities were concentrated in southern Kazakhstan—particularly in and around the city of Turkestan—as well as in Bukhara, Khiva, Fergana, Iran, Eastern Turkestan, the Caspian region (the Mangyshlak Peninsula), and the Middle Volga region [3. -22]. Among different Kazakh tribal groups, khojas lived as nomadic families or small kin groups in the northwestern, central, and eastern steppe zones. However, they did not belong genealogically to these tribes and remained outside the traditional lineage structure of the Three Zhuzes. The main permanent settlements of khoja communities were located in the city of Turkestan and its surrounding small towns and agricultural villages; from the 1820s onward, they also appeared around the city of Taraz, in the Aral steppes, and on the right bank of the southern Urals, within the territory of the Bökey (Inner) Horde. During this period, the village of Yaltakala within the Bökey Horde emerged as a new center of Naqshbandi Sufi communities. According to customary norms, ordinary Kazakhs were expected to show reverence toward this “sacred estate.” When encountering a khoja, they greeted him with the word “Aldiyar!”, a salutation otherwise reserved exclusively for khans and sultans [26. -25]. Distinctive features of the khojas’ outward appearance included “large white turbans and bright caftans,” particularly “Sufi-style caftans made of yellow fabric,” as well as a “dignified gait and posture” [2. -49].

The duties of the khojas included disseminating Islamic belief and moral values in the steppe, conducting collective *dhikr* (loud *dhikr*), organizing religious rites (marriage, circumcision, and funeral ceremonies), fortune-telling, predicting the future, distributing amulets to Muslims, healing the sick through prayers, and providing instruction to children. In return for these services, they received material gifts from nomadic Muslim communities. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the historian A. Levshin wrote: “The khojas roam the Kazakh hordes, perform prayers, practice divination from the Qur’an, make prophecies, and enrich themselves by selling talismans. These written prayers are sewn into bags and garments and, according to Kazakh superstitions, render their bearers invincible, protect them from wounds and attacks, keep them on the righteous path, prevent deviation, and ward off all kinds of evil” [3. -60].

An anonymous Tatar author of a satirical tale about the Kazakhs, written in 1841, described the activities of khojas in the villages of the Lesser and Middle Zhuz as follows: “When Nowruz arrives,

quarrels break out among the khojas. Each wishes to be the one to divine the new year and foretell the unseen. They tell fortunes, write amulets, and blow prayers over the sick. They deceitfully take livestock from the Kazakhs. They convince people that they can do everything: cure illnesses, know how the winter will pass, and predict what will happen in the coming year” [1. -315].

In the 1820s, the Russian colonial administration attached particular importance to studying the khoja estate, seeking both to strengthen its own spiritual and ideological influence in the Kazakh steppe and to recruit pragmatic and Russia-oriented figures from among the region's traditional Muslim elite into its service [30].

Numerous prominent intellectual figures emerged from khoja lineages within Kazakh society. During the period when northern Kazakh lands came under Russian rule, while the south fell within the dominions of the Khanates of Kokand, Bukhara, and Khiva, representatives of the khoja estate placed special emphasis on issues of spiritual education. For example, in the Arqa (Northern Kazakhstan) region, Maral Ishan became a spiritual supporter of the uprising led by Khan Kenesary. He later moved to the Syr Darya region, where he made sustained efforts to train religious figures capable of resisting Russia's religious and ideological policies. The poet Shortanbai engaged in moral education among the populace through his literary talent. In the Akköl–Zhayylma area, Isabek Ishan emerged as a guarantor of the people's spiritual cohesion. In southern Kazakhstan, figures such as Aykhoja Ishan and Appak Ishan rendered significant services in preserving the spiritual unity of the Kazakh people. The Baba Ata and Shayan madrasas served as centers for training religious scholars in accordance with the Kazakhs' traditional religious worldview. Medeli Khoja defended the interests of the Kazakh people through both his valor and his poetry. At the same time, the poet Maylykozha made an invaluable contribution to the spiritual world of the Kazakhs through his works. It would be inaccurate to regard the Khojas as a separate, independent ethnic group distinct from the Kazakh people. Rather, they should be understood as a social group within Kazakh history that was primarily engaged in spiritual and cultural activities [31].

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the remarkable resilience of Islam in the Kazakh steppe despite the systematic interventions of the Russian colonial administration. Islamic schools and madrasas served as vital centers of learning, providing comprehensive education encompassing religious, linguistic, and intellectual development. The efforts of mullahs and Khoja families were instrumental in sustaining Islamic knowledge, moral guidance, and social cohesion, ensuring that the spiritual and cultural values of the Kazakhs persisted across generations.

Pilgrimage (hajj) remained a key institution that reinforced religious identity and unity among Muslims from diverse regions. At the same time, the Jadid reform movement introduced innovative educational methods that strengthened Islamic institutions' capacity to respond to modern challenges. These developments fostered the emergence of a well-educated Muslim intelligentsia, which actively contributed to the social, cultural, and political life of Kazakh society.

The study demonstrates that, despite the pressures of Russification and attempts to limit Islamic influence, the Kazakhs retained a strong religious and cultural identity. The educational and social strategies employed by Islamic institutions, combined with the moral authority of religious elites, ensured that Islam continued to play a central role in shaping collective consciousness, guiding moral behavior, and fostering intellectual growth. Ultimately, this research underscores the enduring significance of Islamic education and religious networks in sustaining cultural resilience and intellectual vitality under conditions of colonial domination.

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РЕСЕЙДІҢ ОТАРЛЫҚ САЯСАТЫНА ҚАРАМАСТАН ҚАЗАҚ ДАЛАСЫНДА ИСЛАМНЫҢ ТАРАЛУЫ

Андатпа

Зерттеу қазақ даласында, әсіресе XIX ғасырдағы патшалық Ресейдің отаршылдық саясаты кезінде Ислам дінінің таралуы мен орнықтылығын талдайды. Архивтік құжаттар, тарихи жазбалар, саяхатшылардың еңбектері мен ғылыми әдебиеттерді зерттеу арқылы, діннің қазақтардың рухани, моральдық және интеллектуалдық өміріндегі маңызды рөлін сақтап қалғаны көрсетіледі. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Ресейдің отарлық билігі кезеңінде қазақ даласында исламның таралуының тарихи динамикасы мен ерекшеліктерін анықтау, сондай-ақ отарлық ықпал мен орыстандыру саясаты жағдайында оның қазақ қоғамының діни бірегейлігін, зияткерлік әлеуетін және мәдени тұтастығын сақтаудағы әлеуметтік, білім беру және мәдени рөлін айқындау. Ерекше назар исламдық білім беру институттарының, діни қайраткерлердің, қажылықтың және жәдидшілдік қозғалысының қазақтардың ислам мәдениеті мен білімінің дамуы мен трансформациясындағы рөліне аударылады. Медреселер мен ауыл мектептері діни біліммен қатар шығыс тілдері, логика, философия және тарих пәндерін қамти отырып, кешенді білім беру жүйесін қамтамасыз етті. Белгілі қожа әулеттері мен молдалар Ислам білімін тарату мен моральдық тәрбиенің негізгі қозғаушы күші болды, ал қажылық әртүрлі қауымдастықтар арасында діни бірлік пен ұлттық

сана қалыптастырды. Сонымен қатар, Жәдидтік қозғалыстың ықпалы да қарастырылып, оның Еуропалық педагогикалық әдістерді мұсылман білім беру жүйесіне енгізгені, білім реформасының алғашқы қадамдары ретінде бағаланады. Жалпы, бұл зерттеу колониялық қысымға қарамастан, Исламның қазақ қоғамында мәдени және интеллектуалдық тұрақтылықты сақтауда негізгі күш болғанын дәлелдейді.

Негізгі сөздер: Қазақ даласы, Ислам, Ресейдің отаршылдық саясаты, медресе, жәдидшілдік, діни білім, қажылық.

РАСПРОСТРАНЕНИЕ ИСЛАМА В КАЗАХСКОЙ СТЕПИ НЕСМОТРЯ НА КОЛОНИАЛЬНУЮ ПОЛИТИКУ РОССИИ

Аннотация

Данное исследование рассматривает историческую динамику распространения ислама в казахской степи в период российского колониального правления, с акцентом на его социальное, образовательное и культурное значение. На основе анализа архивных документов, исторических хроник, путевых заметок и научной литературы показано, что ислам сохранял центральную роль в интеллектуальной, духовной и моральной жизни казахов, несмотря на политику русификации и колониальное воздействие. Цель исследования – выявить историческую динамику и особенности распространения ислама в казахской степи в период российского колониального правления, а также определить его социальную, образовательную и культурную роль в сохранении религиозной идентичности, интеллектуального потенциала и культурной сплоченности казахского общества в условиях колониального воздействия и русификационной политики. Особое внимание уделяется роли исламских образовательных институтов, духовных лидеров, паломничества и движения джадидизма в развитии и трансформации исламской культуры и образования казахов. Исламские учебные заведения, включая медресе и сельские школы (мектебы), обеспечивали комплексное образование, включающее религиозное обучение, изучение классических восточных языков, логику, философию и историю, способствуя духовному и интеллектуальному развитию. Известные семьи хожа и муллы выступали ключевыми агентами распространения исламских знаний и моральных ценностей, а паломничество (хадж) укрепляло религиозную идентичность и единство среди различных казахских сообществ. Исследование также анализирует влияние движения джадидизма, которое внедрило современные европейские методы обучения в мусульманское образование, что ознаменовало начало образовательной реформы. В статье демонстрируется, что ислам оставался устойчивой и объединяющей силой, способствующей сохранению культурной сплоченности и интеллектуальному развитию казахов даже в условиях колониального давления.

Ключевые слова: казахская степь, ислам, российская колониальная политика, медресе, джадидизм, религиозное образование, хадж.

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