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The Islamic and Spiritual Resistance Movement of the Kazakh People against the Cultural Colonization of Tsarist Russia in the Early 20th Century

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Abstract

This study describes the policy of spiritual and cultural colonization of the Kazakh people by Tsarist Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It also comprehensively examines the historical, social, and ideological foundations of the Kazakh people's spiritual resistance to it. During this period, the Russian Empire used all its power to weaken the religious faith of the Kazakh people, which was intertwined with their culture. The research article examines the cultural resistance of Kazakh figures of that period. These individuals utilized Islamic morality, Turkic identity, and enlightenment ideals through education, literature, and the press to oppose spiritual colonization. The research in the article is based on archival sources, official documents and works of the time, as well as modern research. These works show the struggle for religious freedom and national identity in the Kazakh steppe. The research article makes a unique contribution to the literature of postcolonial historical studies by deeply examining the spiritual imperialism of Tsarist Russia and the resistance struggle of Muslim peoples in Central Asia.

Keywords: Islam, Islamic enlightenment movement, Kazakh Muslim people, madrasah, spiritual

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colonialism, tsarist Russia

Introduction

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the geography of the Turkic-Muslim peoples of Central Asia underwent many changes under the influence of the colonial policy of Tsarist Russia. During this period, the Russian government sought to establish political and economic dominance. Russia has actively implemented spiritual colonial¹ strategies aimed at changing the religious characteristics of the Turkic-Muslim peoples, which were synthesized with their culture. The cultural identity of the Kazakh people, based on the Islamic religion and traditional historical way of life, became one of the direct targets of these foreign policies.

The system of spiritual colonization that Russia carried out in the Kazakh steppes was implemented through the policy of renewal and enlightenment. Through this policy, it aimed to assimilate and spiritually control Muslim peoples. Imperial Russia strictly controlled madrasahs, mosques, and mullahs to weaken the influence of Islam on the Kazakh Muslim people, and create a new environment through the implementation of Russian language and Orthodox Christianity. In this direction, missionary schools and state-controlled educational institutions became a means of identifying Kazakh society with the cultural values of the empire.

This article examines the Kazakh people's struggle against the spiritual colonialism of Tsarist Russia at that time in the context of post-colonial historical theory, religious resistance, and enlightenment movements. This study aims to analyze the mechanisms of spiritual colonization by the Russian Empire, assess the responses of Kazakh intellectuals in their historical context, and uncover the role of this resistance in shaping contemporary Kazakh identity. This study offers an interdisciplinary approach based on archival documents, periodicals of the time, and contemporary academic sources.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was prepared using the method of historical analysis, and comprehensively examines the spiritual and cultural colonization policy of Tsarist Russia against the Kazakh people at the beginning of the 20th century. The main goal of this study is to examine the political landscape of the period, the structural logic of imperial politics, and the intellectual and religious responses of Kazakh society, by examining archival records, official protocols, and contemporary research.

The main sources of this research are documents from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Orenburg Central State Archive of the Russian Federation, the National Archive of the Republic of Bashkortostan, and the Central State Archive of the Republic of Tatarstan. The collections, catalogs, and case materials in these archives include official reports, correspondence from government officials, madrasah records, and administrative decisions of the time, particularly describing changes in Kazakh society in the areas of education, religion, and local government. For example, documents preserved in collections 53, 64, 295, and 369 of the Central State Archive of Kazakhstan demonstrate the tsarist administration's policy of control over Islamic religion and madrasah education in the Kazakh regions.

Methodologically, this study is based on qualitative historical analysis, comparative source

¹“Spiritual colonialism” was a systematic strategy of the Russian Empire in the 19th century to reshape the internal values, belief systems, and intellectual structures of the Kazakh people in accordance with its political interests. In contrast to cultural colonialism, which focuses on external lifestyles and languages, or religious colonialism, which seeks to convert only religion, spiritual colonialism is a broader analytical category. It includes institutional control of education (e.g., regulation of madrasahs) and the use of religious hierarchies as tools to enforce ideological loyalty.

investigation, and postcolonial theory perspectives. The qualitative analysis method made it possible to comparatively examine state reports, missionary correspondence, and texts by Kazakh intellectuals contained in archival documents. The postcolonial approach aims to analyze the ideological conflict between Tsarist Russia's "civilizing mission" discourse and the Kazakh intellectuals' concept of "spiritual freedom." Additionally, the period's press organs—especially *Kazak Gazeti* (1917) and *Bakit Gazetesi* (1906)—have enriched the empirical material of the study. The news articles, opinion pieces, and congress resolutions published in these newspapers provide an opportunity to observe the rising awareness of the people against spiritual colonialism and the political activities of Muslim representatives in the Duma.

Finally, all data used in the study were considered within their historical context, and the reliability and representativeness of the sources were taken into account during the qualitative analysis. Thus, this article aims to remain faithful to historical truth, and develops a new perspective in contemporary historiography through a postcolonial perspective.

3. Jadīd-Turkic Movements

Russia's conquest of the Turkic-Muslim peoples in Central Asia began in 1552 with the capture of Kazan by Ivan the Terrible, continued with the conquest of the Siberian, Astrakhan, and Crimean Khanates, and ended with the conquest of the Kazakh Hordes, Khiva, Kokand, Bukhara, and Turkmen settlements. At the end of the 19th century, Russia began to actively pursue a policy of assimilation in Turkestan.² The Islamization of Kazakhstan, which became part of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was significantly influenced by Russia's attitude toward Islam.³

At this time, the Jadīdist and Turkic movements began in the Kazakh steppes. This assimilation also developed in the cultural and political spheres. The governorships of Siberia, the Steppe, and Turkestan were created, and the administration was taken from the hands of the Khans and transferred to administrators of Russian origin.

The Jadīdist reform movement, particularly that of the Crimean Tatars, had a significant influence on education. This movement contributed to the modernization of educational practices, the enhancement of religious instruction, and the revival of Muslim identity.⁴

The people of Turkestan were deprived of the right to make decisions regarding their land and people. However, by 1905, Russia began to boil. The Tsar's throne began to shake. The labor strikes and mass demonstrations that began in various regions of Russia were met with excitement among Russian Turks. Turks, whose freedom of religion was restricted, believed that this revolutionary movement would grant them more rights than ever before. Indeed, some national and political movements emerged under the leadership of the Kazan Turks. In this regard, Yusuf Akchura and Abdyrreshit Ibrahim, along with the Crimean Ismail Gasprinsky, made a great contribution.⁵ The

²Akdes Nimet Kurat, *Rusya Tarihi: Başlangıçtan 1917'ye Kadar* [History of Russia: From the Beginning to 1917] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1987), 390, <https://www.ttk.gov.tr/karekod/RUSYATARIHI.pdf>.

³Baktybay Kydyrbaevich Beisenbayev, Aliy Almukhametov, and Rafik Mukhametshin, "The Dynamics of Islam in Kazakhstan from an Educational Perspective," *Religions* 15, no. 10 (2024): 1243, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101243>.

⁴Ganizhamal Imankyzy Kushenova, Alima Musirovna Auanasova, and Roman Drozd, "Islamist Movement in the Kazakh Steppe: A Historical Analysis in Global Context," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 21, no. 2 (2025): 66, <https://www.ejst.tuiasi.ro/Files/111/2025-21-2-05-Kushenova.pdf>.

⁵Kurat, *Rusya Tarihi* [History of Russia: From the Beginning to 1917], 390.

Russian Turks who were politically active belonged to both the extreme right and the extreme leftist movements. The two main characteristics of these movements were the desire for independence and the defense of Islam. All considered Islam to be the basis and an integral element of their national identity. Even Marxists did not agree with the alienation of their people from Islam.⁶ The Tatars played an important role among the Turkic-Muslim peoples in the Russian colony. This is because the Tatars, who had lived under Russian rule for a long time, had distinguished themselves in the fields of trade and education through various struggles, thereby forming the Tatar bourgeoisie.⁷

The political and cultural consequences of Russian domination in Turkestan led to a national awakening. This awakening manifested itself in the *Jadid* movement. *Jadidism* was a social movement that emerged in Turkestan at the end of the 19th century, took shape at the beginning of the 20th century, quickly spread over a wide region, and retained its principles and direction even after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The development of this social movement was possible in the socio-political conditions of that period.⁸

Modernism had a great influence on the formation and development of the Muslim movement. Gasprinsky became an important intellectual figure in the Turkic world, especially as an advocate of modernization and cultural innovation in education. His concept of “Turkism” stimulated the cultural awakening not only of the Crimean Tatars, but of all Turkic peoples. Ismail Gasprinsky advocated, that Muslim educational institutions should teach not only religious subjects, but also secular subjects such as mathematics, geography, and history.

In this context, Gasprinsky proposed adapting the Arabic alphabet to the languages of the Turkic peoples, advocating the transition from antiquity to modernity, thus promoting modernization in education and other areas. These ideas paved the way for educational reforms in the Turkic world and marked the beginning of a significant cultural transformation. In 1883, Ismail Gasprinsky, with the aim of creating a common literary language for the Turkic peoples by creating a new alphabet, began publishing the newspaper “Terzhuman” with the slogan “Unity in language, thought, and action.” This effort sought to achieve cultural unity between the Turkic-Muslim peoples.⁹

The educational activities of the modernists took on a reformist character, directed against the feudal order in public life and the colonial policy of the tsarist government. The Volga Tatars played an active role in the creation of modern educational institutions among the Muslim peoples. As V. Barthold said, the Volga Tatars were the only opponents of the Russians in introducing European culture to the region. While the tsarist government believed that the Muslim peoples of the country could only become civilized through Russification, the Jadidists opposed this idea and tried to prove that it was possible to join the ranks of civilized countries while preserving their national and religious

⁶Seyfettin Erşahin, *Türkistan'da İslâm ve Müslümanlar: Sovyet Dönemi* [Islam and Muslims in Turkestan: The Soviet Period] (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2007), 68, <https://www.nadirkitap.com/turkistan-da-islam-ve-muslumanlar-sovyet-donemi-seyfettin-ersahin-kitap33405847>.

⁷Dinçer Koç, “1917 Şubatı Rus İnkılabı’ndan Sonraki II. Bütün Rusya Müslümanları Kongresi” [The Second All-Russian Muslim Congress after the Russian Revolution of February 1917], *Akademik Bakış*, no. 8 (2006): 2, https://isamveri.org/pdfdrg/G00012/2006_8/2006_8_KOCD.pdf.

⁸Gülcennet Öztürk, “Türkistan’da Ceditçilik ve Basın Faaliyetleri” [Jadidism and Press Activities in Turkestan], *İletişim Çalışmaları Dergisi* 2, no. 1 (2016): 97, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/icd/article/580835>.

⁹Koshmuhammed Kemengerulu, *Buryngy Ezilgen Ul'ttar* [Former Oppressed Nations] (Moscow: Central Publishing House of the Peoples of the USSR, 1925), 24, <https://kazneb.kz/kk/bookView/view?brId=1171802>.

characteristics.¹⁰

The Russian government, viewing the situation of the modernists with fear and anxiety, issued the following instruction to the administrative offices of its colonial regions in December 1900: "Recently, Tatar literature has become so influential that it has changed the centuries-old way of life of more than 14 million Muslims in the Russian state. The events in Turkestan, especially the Andijan uprising, show that we must be extremely vigilant and cautious about any actions among Muslims."¹¹

Officials of the colonial administration in the Steppe regions wrote to the Ministry of Internal Affairs: "These days, the Tatars in Kazan and other regions are in a state of unrest! They are real enemies of Russian culture. They are pushing peaceful Kazakhs into debauchery with their harmful influence, religious sermons, and various publications." Tatar teachers who opened modernist schools among the Kazakhs were exiled on the pretext of educating rural youth against the tsarist regime, but the tsarist government's fight against the activities of the Jadīdists did not yield significant results.¹²

Along with the educational activities of the *Jadīd* representatives among Russian Muslims, anti-colonial propaganda efforts were also intensified. One of the prominent figures of the Tatar people, A. Ibragimov, who served as the *Mufti*¹³ of Orenburg, also showed activity. His book was the first émigré work to put the national and political issues of Muslim peoples on the agenda. Secretly distributed among Russian Muslims, beyond the attention of the tsarist authorities, "The Star of the Moon" contributed to the political awakening of Muslims.¹⁴

When A. Ibragimov was arrested in Istanbul in 1904 by order of the tsarist government, the news quickly spread among Russian Muslims, and he was later released at the request of the people. During his stay in Petropavlovsk, Ibragimov attended a meeting of representatives of the Kazakh and Tatar communities and organized the presentation of the religious demands of the local population to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, S. Witte.¹⁵

At the beginning of the First Russian Revolution, A. Ibragimov proposed convening a meeting with the participation of all Muslims in Russia to consider ways to protect the interests of Russian Muslims and reach a common decision.¹⁶ After these preparatory measures, telegrams were sent to the leading figures of the country's Muslim peoples inviting them to the All-Russian Muslim Congress. The news of this was also spread by delegations that had arrived in St. Petersburg to submit applications to higher authorities. Many representatives from Crimea, the Caucasus, and Turkestan

¹⁰Vasiliy V. Bartold, *Istoriya Kulturnoy Zhizni Turkestana* [The History of the Cultural Life of Turkestan] (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1927), 340, <https://kazneb.kz/ru/bookView/view?brId=1151322&simple=true>

¹¹Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Fond 53, List 1, File 9a, Item 42.

¹²Central State Archive of the Republic of Tatarstan, Fond 199, List 1, File 906, Item 8.

¹³Mufti (Persian: one who issues a fatwa) is a Sharia expert who has a comprehensive understanding of all the rules and regulations within Sharia.; Zharas Akhan, "Imperial Islam and Colonial Control: The Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly as a Mediator of Russian Rule in the Kazakh Frontier," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 46, no. 6 (June 2026): 117, <https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2229.2821>

¹⁴Djamaledin Validov, *Oçerk İstoriî Obrazovannosti i Literaturı Tatar* [An Essay on the History of Education and Literature of the Tatars], (Kazan: İzdatelstva İman, 1986), 100, https://vk.com/wall68636940_3894

¹⁵Central State Archive of the Russian Federation Orenburg, Fond 10, List 1, File 412, Item 513.

¹⁶Musa Bigiev, *İslahat Asaslari* [Fundamentals of reform], (Petrograd: M.A.Maksutova, 1915), 164.

met and consulted with A. Ibragimov. For example, Kazakh delegates from the Turgay and Ural regions, including B. Karatayev, met with A. Ibragimov, and said that they were considering transferring the management of Kazakh religious affairs to the Orenburg mufti and wanted to unite with Muslims.¹⁷

Therefore, it was proposed to include Kazakh representatives in the agricultural commission. This proposal was also supported by Sh. Syrtlanov, a representative of the Bashkir people in the *Duma*, elected from the Ufa province.¹⁸ Kazakh intellectuals with a Jadīdist perspective had been conducting in-depth research on national values and land issues since the beginning of the 20th century. At the heart of these initiatives lies an innovative intellectual approach. This approach, in turn, has become the basis for the development of the Kazakh nationalism process.

4. Transformation of Muslim Consciousness

Jadīdism, which emerged within the Muslim community in the context of religious, political, social, and cultural-enlightenment renewal, had a significant impact on the transition of the Turkic peoples to a modern system of thought. As previously noted, *Jadīdism*, which became widespread among the Turkic-speaking Muslim peoples of the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was an innovative initiative of a "political, religious-reformist, and cultural-enlightenment" nature.¹⁹ Policies of assimilation and control over educational institutions provoked resistance from Muslim communities, with long-term consequences for Muslim education.²⁰

Although the *Jadīd* movement in the Kazakh Steppe was initially oriented towards enlightenment, it later transformed into a political movement in response to the colonial and Russification policies of the tsarist administration. Kazakh *Jadīd* representatives aimed to effectively utilize the social and political freedoms achieved through the first Russian Revolution to promote social progress and break free from the dominance of the patriarchal-tribal way of life. In order to achieve this goal, the new leaders, who believed that it was necessary to awaken the people from their slumber, took on the mission of arming Kazakh youth with knowledge, forming legal awareness to protect their rights, promoting the idea of national sovereignty, putting the land issue on the agenda for resolving it, and widely publicizing these issues.²¹

Representatives of the Russian government placed special emphasis on teaching the Russian language in the education of the Kazakh, Bashkir, and Tatar peoples who had converted to Islam, and considered four years of education sufficient for these groups. The Russian-Kazakh schools opened at that time were not a charitable act of the tsarist government, but a tool for the rapid integration of the economy and culture of nomadic peoples into the empire. Tsarist officials were categorically against the enrollment of Kazakh, Bashkir, and Tatar youth in secondary and higher education institutions. The Tsarist administration did not aim to nurture a national intellectual class

¹⁷Bigiev, *Fundamentals of reform*, 167.

¹⁸Larisa A. Yamaeva, *Musul'manskie Deputaty Gosudarstvennoy Dumi Rossii, 1906–1917 gg.: Sbornik Dokumentov i Materialov* [Muslim Deputies of the State Duma of Russia, 1906–1917: Collection of Documents and Materials] (Ufa: Kitap, 1998), 40.

¹⁹Nurlan Baygaraev, *Kazak Dalasındağı Aleumettik-Madeni jane Sayasi Damu Üderisine Jedidşildik İdeyasının İkpahı* [The Influence of Jadidist Ideas on the Socio-Cultural and Political Development of the Kazakh Steppe] (Almaty: Atamura, 2016), 116.

²⁰Beisenbayev, Almkhametov, and Mukhametshin, "The Dynamics of Islam in Kazakhstan from an Educational Perspective," 1243.

²¹Baygaraev, *Fundamentals of Reform*, 117.

but rather to use it as a political-ideological instrument.²² However, in time, these intellectuals proved to be the true children of their people and chose the path of *Jadīdism*—a cultural and educational movement—for a bright future for their nation.

Representatives of this movement did not seek to change the political paradigm of education, but rather advocated for translating and understanding the Qur'ān into the language of each people, without deviating from the essence of the Muslim faith, and proposed teaching this idea as a core subject in *Jadīd* schools.²³ According to Khalidi, the *Jadīd* representatives were part of the Muslim public consciousness. They exalted Islam, but this exaltation was not limited to superficial rituals; on the contrary, it was carried out with the aim of reaching and renewing the true Islam that had been obscured for centuries.²⁴

Reform movements among Muslims did not initially create a strong dynamic for ethnic and regional groups; rather, they were used as a tool in the fight against internal enemies of Islam. For example, groups labeled as traditionalists accused the reformers of being pan-Islamist and pan-Turkist, and tried to suppress them in collaboration with the royal administration. This shows the negative aspects of the relationship between the royal administration and local Muslim communities. As the imperial administration's interference in Muslim public life deepened, regional divisions among Muslims also intensified. This national movement, which was formed by imperial power, gradually matured and became a large-scale movement. Consequently, the emerging ethnic divisions paved the way for the formation of a new political geography. This political geography was later institutionalized, and gained permanence during the Soviet Union era. The new educational method proposed by the *Jadīdists* in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as an alternative to the traditional religious education system not only facilitated the literacy of Kazakh youth, but also paved the way for courses related to worldviews. This system made it possible to recognize the diverse events taking place in the world, to absorb the achievements of Eastern and Western culture and literature, and to learn from the history of art and state building, which are accepted as the common heritage of the peoples of the world. In this context, *Jadīdism* served not only as an educational innovation, but also as an enlightened movement that deepened the political, legal, and cultural horizons of the Kazakh people's thinking. This innovative aspect of *Jadīdism* led to the awakening of national consciousness, which motivated the Kazakh people to strive to free themselves from colonial domination, improve their social status, and create an independent, legal state.²⁵

The representatives of Kazakh *Jadīdism* and the Alash intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century were a conscious young generation of an era imbued with love for their nation. This intelligentsia hailed predominantly from aristocratic backgrounds, and their activities unfolded simultaneously and in parallel with the representatives of *Jadīdism*. However, there is insufficient information about the close ties between these two groups before the revolution of 1917. The *Jadīdists* aimed to revive the traditional foundations of Muslim culture in Turkestan and to bring about a cultural transformation in Islamic society. On the contrary, the intellectual community aimed to pioneer political change in the European-centered free thought. Nevertheless, on the eve of the

²²Marsil N. Farkhshatov, *Narodnoe Obrazovanie v Bashkirii v Poreformennyi Period, 60–90-e Gody XIX v.* [Public Education in Bashkiria in the Post-Reform Period, 1860s–1890s] (Moscow: Nauka, 1994), 41, <https://search.rsl.ru/ru/record/01001680020>.

²³Baygaraev, *Fundamentals of Reform*, 117.

²⁴Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 103, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520920897>.

<https://dokumen.pub/the-politics-of-muslim-cultural-reform-jadidism-in-central-asia-0520213556-9780520213555.html>

²⁵Baygaraev, *Fundamentals of Reform*, 117.

1917 revolution, the *Jadidists* and intellectuals united their forces into a single political movement.²⁶

5. The Religious Situation at the Beginning of the 20th Century

Several local, regional, and global factors can be identified as facilitating the spread of the Islamist movement in the Kazakh Steppe. Within the context of the regions examined in this research, Islamism possessed distinct objectives and characteristics, evolving under the influence of various political, social, and cultural dynamics.²⁷

At the beginning of the 20th century, one of the most important issues faced by the Russian Empire, which had a Muslim population of approximately 20 million, was the ultimate reorganization of the religious administrative structure. The Muslim population concentrated in the Russian Empire, especially in the Turkestan and Caucasus regions, was historically shaped by the religious policies of the Russian government.²⁸

During this period, the organization and institutional regulation of Muslim religious administrations became a major topic of discussion. The Ottoman Empire's model of religious administration also served as a model for Muslims in Russia. However, compared to the strong material and moral support provided by the Russian administration to Orthodox Christian institutions, Muslim religious governing bodies lacked a centralized structure and operated in a scattered manner.²⁹ This situation arose in response to the Russian government's attempts to control Muslim religious institutions and the efforts of the Muslim population to protect their religious identity.³⁰

The Orthodox Christian religious institution has received material and moral support from the state, which it uses to revitalize its missionary activities. While the Orthodox Church followed a centralized model of religious governance with state support, Muslim religious bodies operated in a decentralized and disorganized manner, facing significant administrative challenges. This situation became especially evident after the 1905 revolution, as certain relaxations in state religious policy brought the demands of various religious groups into public debate.³¹

At the beginning of the 20th century, prominent public figure Akhmed Tsalikov repeatedly criticized the poor state of Muslim religious administrations within the empire, especially in the Turkestan region. He even expressed his dissatisfaction with the lack of consideration for Muslim religious authorities at the bureaucratic institutional level.³²

Intellectuals of the period argued that giving religious institutions a strong and centralized structure was essential for raising the level of education of the population and preserving religious

²⁶Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*, 106–107.

²⁷Kushenova, Auanasova, and Drozd, "Islamist Movement in the Kazakh Steppe," 68. <https://www.ejst.tuiasi.ro/Files/111/2025-21-2-05-Kushenova.pdf>

²⁸Vladimir I. Mezhev, *Turkestanskiy Sbornik* [Turkestan Collection] (St. Petersburg: V. Bezobrazova, 1909), 180, https://rusneb.ru/catalog/000199_000009_003891429/.

²⁹David Brower, *The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Empire: From Missionary Work to State Support* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 45–50.

³⁰Mikhail Gorshkov, *State and Religion in the Russian Empire: A Historical Overview* (Russian Historical Review, 2012), 112–130.

³¹Brower, *The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Empire: From Missionary Work to State Support*, 112–130.

³²Akhmet Tsalikov, "K Sovremennomu Polozheniyu Magometanskikh Dukhovnykh Pravlenii" [On the Contemporary State of Muslim Spiritual Boards], *Slovo*, no. 828 (1909), reprinted in *Turkestanskii Sbornik*, vol. 508, 183, https://app.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/turkestan/volume/v501_594/v508.html.

values. This process paralleled similar reform efforts in the Ottoman Empire, reflecting a period when Muslim society in Russia faced internal and external pressures. Muslim religious authorities operating within the borders of the Russian Empire were divided into various regional categories based on their geographical and administrative structures. In this context, the highest religious body responsible for Muslim affairs in the Transcaucasian region was the Religious Council, headed by a sheikh al-Islam, who enjoyed privileged status. Crimea and the Western provinces were led by the Tavria Muslim Religious Administration. Within the Turkestan Governorate-General, religious affairs were managed by a religious department directly affiliated with the Governor-General. Locally organized religious structures were prominent in the Trans-Caspian region. Meanwhile, in regions such as Akmola, Semipalatinsk, Ural, and Turgay—which correspond to the Kazakh steppes—the religious organizations of Muslim communities mainly existed under the authority of administrative and civil government units.³³

In the early 20th century, the well-known public leader Ahmed Tsalikov repeatedly criticized the negative situation in which Muslim religious administrations within the empire—especially the Muslim religious administration in the Turkestan region—found themselves. The author expressed his discontent that, even at a bureaucratic institutional level, the Muslim religious administration was disregarded by official authorities.³⁴

The modernist movement, which had been growing rapidly since the late 19th century, had increased the political consciousness and activism of Muslim communities in Russia. This movement became a significant political force, especially during the first Russian Revolution of 1905-1907. During this period, under the influence of revolutionary processes and social changes, efforts to protect the national and cultural rights of Muslims intensified. In this process, important figures such as Abdurashit Ibragimov emerged. Ibragimov touched upon the hardships experienced by Turkic-speaking peoples as a result of colonialism before the revolution, emphasizing the need for a common struggle for the unification of these peoples, and their achievement of national, cultural, and religious autonomy.³⁵

The 1905 revolution deepened the dissatisfaction of the Kazakh people with the socio-political situation, which in turn led to a strengthening of political consciousness among the population and the strengthening of resistance tendencies.³⁶ In his work *The Awakening of Asia*, V. Lenin, assessing the rising revolutionary dynamism in Eastern societies, said: “World capitalism and the Russian movement of 1905 have awakened Asia forever. Hundreds of millions of oppressed peoples, trapped in medieval darkness, are now awakening; they are fighting for a new life, for the most basic human rights and democratic values.”³⁷ Lenin's assessment can be considered a typical example of the nature of the search for freedom and liberation that developed among the Kazakh people during this period.

The events of “Bloody Sunday” in St. Petersburg sparked revolutionary movements throughout the Russian Empire and led to massive social unrest. News of the events of “Bloody Sunday” reached foreign regions, including the Kazakh steppes, and the tsarist government's brutal attack on a peaceful march on January 9 was condemned as an unforgivable sin.³⁸ This decree also emerged as a document

³³Mezhov, *Turkestanskiy Sbornik*, 180.

³⁴Tsalikov, “K Sovremennomu Polozheniyu,” [On the Contemporary State of Muslim Governments], 183.

³⁵*National Archives of the Republic of Bashkortostan*, 295 funds, 6 list, file 2989, Item 1.

³⁶Bekezhan Suleymenov, *Revolyuonnogo Dvijenie v Kazaxstane a 1905-1907 Goda* [The Revolutionary Movement in Kazakhstan in 1905–1907], (Alma-Ata: Kazakhskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1955), 255, <https://kazneb.kz/en/bookView/view?brId=1654115>

³⁷Suleymenov, *The Revolutionary Movement in Kazakhstan in 1905–1907*, 256.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 256.

inviting individuals and communities to submit proposals to the central government to improve public services and public welfare. Later, on April 17, the Tsar's decree on religious freedom was issued. These documents, by raising the morale of the people, paved the way for their active participation in political life. The political situation in the Russian Empire in 1905 marked the beginning of a new stage in the liberation movement of peoples suffering from national oppression.³⁹

6. The 1905 Revolution and Spiritual and Political Movements Among the Kazakhs

The first congress organized with the broad participation of the Turkic-Muslim peoples of Russia took place in 1905 in the Bashkir-Muslim city of Ufa. Although the government understood the reason for convening the congress to be to address religious needs, the main goal was to demonstrate the first significant step towards political unity and common action among Russian Muslims. It was held under the name "Society of Scholars" from April 10 to 15, under the auspices of the government and religious representatives affiliated with the Ufa Muftiate. Representatives from Kazan and Moscow presented their demands to the Mufti of Orenburg, who was in St. Petersburg at the time. To convey these demands, the mufti met first with the emperor and then with Prime Minister Sergei Yulievich Witte. The government-controlled convening of the congress was advantageous to the prime minister, as it was filled with petitions sent by Russian Muslims from various regions. By organizing this gathering, he intended to undermine the demands of Russian Muslims.⁴⁰

Since February 1905, political activity among the Kazakhs had increased. This situation was explained in an article published in the Russian newspaper "Turkestan," on March 6, 1905: "Those who say that the local population of the Turkestan region is not interested in the revolutionary movement in Russia and cannot find a place in it are deeply mistaken. We noticed that the local population was interested in the revolutionary movement in Russia and its manifestations in Turkestan, set specific goals in this direction and strived to achieve them."⁴¹

During the first Russian Revolution, petitions sent to the central government on behalf of the Kazakh people from all over the country included religious issues, along with other pressing issues.⁴² According to archival documents, since the spring of 1905, various gatherings of Kazakhs were organized in the steppe regions. At these gatherings, documents were presented to the central authorities expressing their demands and objections. The Kazakhs attending the meetings requested permission from officials for religious matters to be transferred to the Orenburg Mufti, and declared that they would send a special delegation to deliver the application documents to the central authorities in St. Petersburg by May 16. They were also asked to inform the military governor of these activities.⁴³

During the first phase of the First Russian Revolution, which began in 1905, petitions were written by people in almost all regions of the Kazakh steppe expressing their dissatisfaction with colonial oppression. These petitions clearly outlined the fundamental needs of the Kazakh society under Tsarist Russian rule, including the social, cultural, and religious oppression it suffered, and its demands for justice. However, in this process, local governors at the provincial level systematically

³⁹Konstantin P. Pobedonostsev, "Iz Chernykh Bumag" [From the Rough Papers], *Krasnyi Arkhiv* 5, no. 18 (1926): 204–205.

⁴⁰Giray Saynur Bozkurt, *1905–1907 Yılları Rusya Müslümanlarının Siyasi Kimlik Arayışı* [The Quest for Political Identity of Russia's Muslims, 1905–1907] (İstanbul: Doğu Kütüphanesi, 2008), 128, <https://www.abebooks.co.uk/9789944397438/1905-1907-Yillari-Rusya-Muslumanlari-nin-Siyasi-9944397431/plp>.

⁴¹*Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, Fond 369, List 1, File 871, Item 143.

⁴²Mambet Hoygeldiev, *Alaş Kozğalı* [The Alash Movement], (Almatı, 1995), 95.

⁴³*Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, Fond 44, List 2, File 5094, Item 70.

pursued a policy of obstructing the people's attempts to organize and express their demands through institutional means. The administrative authorities had banned or restricted the ability of Kazakhs to come together to prepare petitions, propose solutions to common problems, and exchange views in this area. Local officials aimed to limit the political participation of the Kazakh people by breaking up these gatherings and intimidating or discouraging those who filed complaints. This approach not only limited freedom of speech, but also undermined the development of the people's political consciousness and mechanisms for seeking justice.⁴⁴ There was a general consensus in the Fourth Russian Duma that the demands and views of Russian Muslims needed to be better understood; thus, the controls in areas with a high Muslim population were positively assessed. But concerns that these contacts were insufficient to understand the issues at hand led to the decision to convene a Muslim congress. The Russian government restricted the scope of the congress and banned journalists from attending the meeting.⁴⁵ In general, despite the decree of 1905 that granted religious freedom to the peoples of the empire, tsarist officials continued to regard Muslims with hostility or suspicion. There was even surveillance over individuals subscribing to or purchasing Muslim newspapers. Among these publications were the Orenburg-based *Vaqyt* (Time) and *Yoldyz* (Star), Bakhchisaray's *Tardzhiman* (The Translator), as well as *Bayan ul-Haq* (Explanation of the Truth), Qazan Mukhbiri (The Herald of Kazan), *Idel* (Volga), and *Kaspiy* (Caspian), among others.⁴⁶

Due to restrictions imposed by the Russian government, political issues could not be discussed at the congress. The decisions covered issues such as freedom of religion, education, and the right to send Kazakh-Kyrgyz representatives to the State Duma. Therefore, the Kazakh society's familiarity with modern political movements and its attempts to express its rights-based demands in an organized manner gained significant momentum during the first Russian Revolution, but this development was limited by the oppressive views of the tsarist administration. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Tsarist Russia was deeply concerned about the awakening of national consciousness and strengthening mutual solidarity among Muslim peoples within the empire, and began to produce various pretexts to legitimize political pressures on Turk-Muslim intellectuals, sending direct instructions to relevant security organizations, district police departments, and Provincial Gendarmerie Headquarters: "In recent years, open unrest caused by the idea called Pan-Islamism has emerged among the Muslim population of the empire and abroad. Such a fanatical movement is fully supported by Russian youth committees. The main goal of the Pan-Islamic movement was to unite the entire Muslim world politically and economically under the umbrella of Turkey, ultimately establishing a pan-Turkic republic. Recently, reports from the security departments of Tsarist Russia have been reporting that Turkish and Russian Muslim intellectuals were operating in the same intellectual direction, and even presenting them as one person. These stories reflect concerns about the growing sense of national unity and solidarity among the Muslim community, especially through official Russian authorities, and the actions of these intellectuals have been distorted in such a way that they are intended to incite Muslims against Russia and incite hatred."⁴⁷ By sending these letters, they wanted to monitor the activities of teachers in Muslim educational institutions and Muslim religious authorities. They also suggested that effective measures be taken to collect information

⁴⁴National Archives of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Fond 295, List 5, File 3300, Item 4.

⁴⁵Nadir Devlet, *Millet ile Sovyet Arasında: 1917 Ekim Devriminde Rusya Türklerinin Varoluş Mücadelesi* [Between the Nation and the Soviet: The Existential Struggle of Russia's Turks in the October Revolution of 1917] (Istanbul: Başlık Yayın Grubu, 2011), 220.

⁴⁶Kushenova, Auanasova, and Drozd, "Islamist Movement in the Kazakh Steppe," 71. <https://www.ejst.tuiasi.ro/Files/111/2025-21-2-05-Kushenova.pdf>

⁴⁷National Archives of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Fond 295, List 5, File 3300, Item 4.

through spies in order to prevent the spread of pan-Islamic publications.⁴⁸

The All-Russian Congress of Muslims was formed at an important meeting held in Orenburg on April 7-10, 1917.⁴⁹ The Orenburg Muslim Bureau organized the meeting in accordance with the instructions of the Provisional Central Bureau of Muslims of Russia. The meeting was attended by more than 100 representatives from Turkestan, Kazakh regions, and internal provinces. Among the participants were prominent figures of the time, including Munavar Qari Abdurashidkhanov from the “*Shuro-i-Islam*” organization of the Turkestan region, Fatih Kerimov from the Orenburg Muslim Bureau, Najib Khalfin from the Kazan Muslim Committee, and Abdрахman Rakhmetdinov from the Ufa Muslim Committee. This congress was not only a religious organization, but also an important step towards increasing the political and cultural representation of Muslim peoples in Russia. The participants played an important role in defending the national identity of the Kazakh people and expressing their demands, discussing the rights and future of Russian Muslims. The agenda of the meeting, which was designed to determine the actions and opinions of Muslim peoples in the new political situation, was to discuss the views of Muslims on the future state-building, preparations for the All-Russian Congress of Muslims, constitutional elections, land, education, and religion.⁵⁰ Specifically, among these leaders were A. Bokeikhanov (chairman of the Alash Autonomy from 1917 to 1920) and M. Tynishpaev (the first chairman of the Turkestan Autonomy in November–December 1917), alongside Serali (Sherali) Lapin, who contributed to the organization of the faction and served as the leader of the sociopolitical organization “*Shuro-i Ulema*” (“Council of the Clergy”), established in June 1917 in the Turkestan region.⁵¹ Despite the secularist takes, Bukeikhanov was by no means an anti-Islamic figure.⁵²

More than 20 representatives from the Akmola, Semipalatinsk, Turgay, Ural, Yedisu, Sirdarya, and Fergana regions and Bokey Orda participated in the first congress of all Kazakhs. The agenda of the First All-Kazakh Congress included issues such as the form of government, land, religion, courts, women, education, appointment of delegates to the Constituent Assembly, and the election of “*Shuro-i-Islam*,” representatives to be held in Kiev. The following decisions were made at the First All-Kazakh Congress: “Russia should be a federal republic, Kazakhs should gain autonomy, Kazakh lands should not be given to anyone until the Kazakh people settle on their historical lands, lands acquired unlawfully should be returned, people’s militias should be formed, Kazakh religious affairs should be included in the Orenburg Mufti, and education should be conducted in the Kazakh language.”⁵³ The call for awakening and collective action might reflect Islamic teachings of unity (*ummah*) and collective responsibility.⁵⁴

By the end of the 19th century, it was impossible to prevent the invasion of Turkestan by Tsarist

⁴⁸National Archives of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Fond 295, List 5 liste, File 13298, Item 7.

⁴⁹Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 87, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780295802473>.

⁵⁰Daniel D. Azamatov, *Orenburgskoe Magometanskoe Dukhovnoe Sobranie v Kontse XVIII–XIX vv.* [The Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly at the End of the Eighteenth–Nineteenth Centuries] (Ufa: Gilem, 1999), 82–90, http://tataroved.ru/publicat/new/Sbornik_OMDS.pdf.

⁵¹Kushenova, Auanasova, and Drozd, “Islamist Movement in the Kazakh Steppe,” 71. <https://www.ejst.tuiasi.ro/Files/111/2025-21-2-05-Kushenova.pdf>

⁵²Yerik Tungatarov, and Rustem Zholdybalin, “From Valikhanov to Tokayev: Islam in the Kazakh Nation-Building Agenda,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 15, no. 2 (2025): 19–35, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.152.02>.

⁵³National Archives of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Fond 295, List 6, File 13435, Item 1-8.

⁵⁴Tungatarov, and Zholdybalin, “From Valikhanov to Tokayev,” 28.

Russia, despite numerous military resistances and attempted uprisings by its people. The Russian Turks, who were unable to form a unity during the Russian invasion of Turkestan and paid a heavy price as a result, tried to unite through these congresses, but their efforts were unsuccessful and their fate remained the same. Russia's "divide, conquer," policy saw the Tatars of the north, the Turkic people of the Caucasus, and the Turkestan peoples as a different nation.⁵⁵

7 Conclusion

This study examines the Kazakh people's resistance to the spiritual and cultural colonial policies of Tsarist Russia in the early 20th century from a historical and intellectual perspective. These findings indicate that the tsarist regime aimed to transform the Kazakh society through the rhetoric of "civilizing" by weakening Islam, spreading the Russian language, and imposing Orthodox values. However, this process did not simply lead to passive acceptance; instead, it provided the basis for the emergence of a powerful intellectual, religious, and cultural counter-movement.

Historical data shows that the failure of Tsarist Russia's policy of "spiritual colonization" was primarily due to the unique traditional institutions of Kazakh society, specifically its strong social cohesion, customary legal systems, and localized community networks, rather than a total absence of religious infrastructure. While traditional social structures formed a robust line of defense against cultural assimilation pressures from the imperial center, this resistance was not a fully organized or centralized movement. Instead, it manifested organically in various forms across local, regional, and intellectual circles.

Future research could contribute to a comparative analysis of modernization and colonial experiences in the Islamic world by examining the spiritual resistance of the Kazakh people not only in the context of the Russian Empire, but also in the context of transregional contacts with Muslim intellectuals in the Ottoman, Iranian, and Indian contexts. Such comparative approaches would clarify the place of Kazakh intellectual movements in global Muslim reformism and bring new theoretical developments to postcolonial identity debates in Central Asia.

Author Contribution

Zharas Akhan: conceptualization, writing - original draft, project administration. **Kanat Uskembayev:** formal analysis, validation. **Samat Yeskaliyev:** funding acquisition, data curation. **Zhanerke Nyshanbay:** resources, software. **Askar Makipov:** Investigation, methodology. **Aizhan Tuyakova:** supervision, visualization. **Nurdanbek Bekbolat:** writing – review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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⁵⁵Ahmet Karaca, "Çarlık ve Bolşevik Rusya Döneminde Türk-Müslüman Kurultayları'nın Bolşevik Devrimine Etkisi" [The Effect of Turkish-Muslim Congresses on the Bolshevik Revolution in Tsarist and Bolshevik Russia Period], *Avrasya İncelemeleri Dergisi*, no 11 (2022): 86. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2355587>

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