

## **Muslim Response to Russian Imperialism in Central Asia**

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### **Abstract:**

*From the very antiquity Central Asian region has been unique in its geographical landscape and its civilizational richness. It has been the fate of this region from the very ancient times that powerful empires had been attracted towards this region. During the medieval times Central Asia was conquered by Arabs and was made part of Muslim Caliphate, during these times Islamic civilization was at its zenith and Muslims were powerful both politically/militarily and intellectually/educationally. After the advent of Islam in Central, it became synonymous with Central Asian cultural and civilization history. Russian penetration in Central Asia in 19<sup>th</sup> Century not only destabilized political authority of Muslims in Central Asia but also challenged their religious and cultural identity and traditions. This paper aims to highlight the Muslim response to their first encounter with Imperialism and modernity vis-à-vis its integration and assimilation. The paper further discusses how Russian imperialism in Central Asia impacted religious traditions and educational developments of Central Asia.*

**Key Words:** Central Asia, Islamic Civilization, Tsarist Empire, Soviet Union, Jadidism

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**Introduction:**

From the earlier times of human history, Central Asian region been the center of great religious traditions and has been equally home to great empires and kingdoms. During the medieval times it were the Arabs who conquered this region and made it their cultural and educational center, since then the religious and cultural ethos and traditions has been connected to the Islamic culture and civilization. Central Asia proved to be main center of Islamic civilization along with Baghdad during medieval times. Central Asia was the main contributor in the development of Islamic Civilization during medieval times. It was during modern times (19<sup>th</sup> century) when Central Asia was occupied by Russia by its military might and was made part of their Tsarist kingdom. This Russian occupation was antagonistic to both the prevalent political set-up of Central Asia and their religious traditions. This Russian onslaught of Central Asia was responded by natives of Central Asia especially by their intelligentsia in multi-faceted but unique way. Though Central Asia failed to give any stiff resistance to Russian Imperialism but after Russian occupation, Muslim intelligentsia of Central Asia engaged in meaningful dialogue with Russian Imperialism vis-à-vis the new forms of sociability introduced by Russia. Muslim intelligentsia of Central Asia took this opportunity to reform their society culturally and educationally by using these new means of sociability like press, theater for their endeavors of reform. This first generation of modern Muslim intellectuals were called jadids (new/progressives) and their ideology as jadidism.

**Central Asia (Geographical location and Historical Importance):**

From the ancient times Central Asia has been a center for war and empire, art and culture, religion and commerce. The history of Central Asia is that of the cradle of mankind, “He who seeks to evolve it from the mass of nebulous traditions is brought into contact with the traces of widely diverse nationalities and religions, and must consult in turn the annals of the Iranians, Greeks, Scythians, Chinese, Turks, and Russians<sup>1</sup>.”The primary reason being the geographical location: its huge landmass lies at the heart of the Eurasian continent. In the ancient times it was considered the center of world, linking china with Europe by means of the famous silk route, through this route “the travelers transported more than silk or spices; they spreaded new technologies-such as papermaking, gunpowder and silk weaves along with the new ideas and new religious traditions.<sup>2</sup>”To the rich variety of peoples of Central Asia was thus added a multiplicity of external influences. For century after century, the region experienced the influx of foreign art and ideas, colliding and merging with the indigenous

patterns of Central Asia. Migrations and the recurrent shock of military invasion, mingling and displacing peoples and cultures, combined to maintain the vast region in flux.

The major features of geographical location vis-à-vis its history and importance has been summarized by Svatoš, who aptly remarks about the geographical features of Central Asia:

Inner Asia (Central Asia) is marked by three distinct features: (1) a belt of steppes and, to a lesser degree, deserts, which extend in a general latitudinal direction. This belt is delimited on the north by the Eurasian forest zone (the “taiga” of Siberia); on the south the limits are a variety of features, chiefly mountain chains but also transition to different climatic zones (notably in China) and bodies of water such as the Caspian and Black Seas; (2) several of these mostly latitudinal mountain chains that separate the steppe belt from South Asia, besides demarcating important segments within the area; and (3) a number of rivers, many of which drain into interior lakes or seas or disappear in the deserts through evaporation. All these features have affected the type and history of human presence, but some have in turn been modified by man’s intervention, since the dawn of sedentary civilization but especially in recent decades<sup>3</sup>.

Central Asia was once known as, “the land between the two rivers” for the two major rivers, the Amu Darya (Oxus) and the Syr Darya (Jaxartes), that bounded much of its territory before emptying into the Aral Sea. Arab Historians were calling this region as *Mahr-un-Nahr*, this region was called Turkistan by the Persians as the major population of the region are speaking different dialects of Turkish language. For the early European scholars, this whole region was called Transoxania (or Transoxiana). The scholars who coined this name did so because the area lies beyond the River Oxus as one approaches it from the classical world of Iran, more specifically from its north-eastern province of Khorasan. Denis Sinor in his *History of early inner Asia* (1990) has suggested that a more appropriate term for the region would be Central Eurasia. The region developed not on the so-called periphery but at the core intersections of civilizations that included Europe, the Middle East, India, Southeast and East Asia<sup>4</sup>. Central Asia currently comprises of five independent republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whose fiercely disputed boundaries were drawn by Stalin in 1920’s as part of his divide and rule campaign.

**Islam in Central Asia (origin, development and contribution):**

During ancient times Central Asia was marked by religious pluralism. There were followers of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity and all these religions had brought forth great cultural centres throughout the length and breadth of this region. Although the Arab conquerors had brought Islam to Central Asia within the first fifty years after the Prophet of Islam but complete conversion to Islam was a long and gradual process which was more missionary in nature than the political occupation. Indeed it were first the Arab conquerors who paved the way for the spread of Islam in Central Asia, while discussing the historical role of Qutab bin Muslim, the champion of Arab conquest of Central Asia, F.H. Skrine aptly remarks:

The arrival of Kutayba on the scene marks a new epoch in the history of Mohammedan conquests in Central Asia. Though the Arabs had been for many years masters of Khorasan, with an established capital Merv, their hold on the country beyond the Oxus was very slight. The expeditions which they had hitherto made into Bokhara and other parts of Transoxiana were mere raids, and their authority in those countries compelled the inhabitants of the tract lying between the Oxus and Jaxartes to acknowledge the Caliph's supremacy, and to plant the standard of Islam in lands where the creed of Zoroaster had retained its greatest vitality.<sup>5</sup>

After the advent of Islam, Central Asia was made part and parcel of wider Islamic Caliphate in the subsequent centuries. Central Asia became the second economic and cultural centre of the Islamic world, next to the political centre of the Caliphate in Iraq. Central Asia was no longer considered the periphery but rather a region that was equal to and sometimes superior to the Islamic West, a centre of Islamic intellectual development<sup>6</sup>. The arrival of Islam signalled the beginning of a new trans-nationalization of Central Asia, with its roots not in Europe, China, or South Asia but in the Middle East. The rapid Islamisation of Central Asia, beginning as early as the mid-seventh century and reaching Balkh (in Northern Afghanistan), across the Pamir's from Kashghar by 699 C.E led to the cultural, political, and social transformation of the entire region, superseding its earlier trans-nationalization but certainly not displacing it.<sup>7</sup> As the early medieval time is considered to be the golden age of Islamic civilization therefore its transformative impact on every region was very natural. Prof. K.A. Nizami an eminent modern historian of South Asia states about the impact of Islam on Asian countries, "Islam unfolded itself in the Asian environment first as a religion, then as a

body politic and subsequently as a civilization.<sup>8</sup>” The same reality has been accepted in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, “The civilizations of Central Asia did not, of course, develop in a vacuum. The impact of Islam was pervasive and fundamental. The great civilizations on the periphery of the Eurasian continent likewise exerted an important influence on these lands<sup>9</sup>”.

The incorporation of Central Asia into the Muslim Caliphate strengthened administrative and political links as well as cultural and commercial contacts with the Muslim world, which led to the spread of the new faith. By beginning of the ninth century the region had been integrated into the Muslim world to such an extent that Caliph Mamun of Abbasids made Merv his capital instead of Baghdad during 813-817 C.E. in the ninth century Ismail Ibn Ahmad (848-907) founded first indigenous Muslim Sultanate (Empire) of Central Asia (Samanid Empire) and made Bukhara his capital. He embellished Bukhara with many fine buildings, mosques, madrasa and palaces, as the city was celebrated for its learning and culture. Bukhara achieved an intellectual and cultural refinement in this period as a result of intense cultivation of Sunni theology with some admixture of the sciences such as astronomy, astrology, mathematics and medical art. The empire of the Samanids, with its centre in Bukhara became the leading region of the Islamic World around the turn of millennium. The economic basis for this cultural heyday was the trade in goods from the East. As a centre of theology, natural sciences, and philosophy, it was the home of great figures such as Traditionalist scholar Al-Bukhari (870 C.E), polymath Al-Biruni (1050 C.E), philosophers like Al-Farabi (950 C.E) and IbnSina (1037 C.E), at the same time. Language, literature and Sufism too experienced its high point in this region under Samanids<sup>10</sup>. Ahmad Rashid while discussing the contribution of Samanids states that:

With the well-organized bureaucracy and army the Samanids regulated and expanded the silk route, spreading the Persian language and making Bukhara a trade, transport and cultural center of the Islamic world. Physicians such as IbnSina, mathematicians like Al-Biruni, and poets such as Firdausi ensured that the Samanid court would leave an indelible mark on the development of the Persian language and culture, an importance that would not be eroded in Central Asia for centuries<sup>11</sup>.

A special feature of the form of Islam popular in Central Asia was the prominence of Sufi mysticism, for much of the work of conversion among the Turkish tribes coming into the Islamic world had been accomplished by dervish missionaries. Adherence to

certain of the Sufi brotherhoods, such as the Yasawiyya and, at a later date, the Naqshbandiyya, became especially characteristic of Central Asian Islam. Samanid Empire was followed by other great empires, among them most influential were the Seljuqs. The Seljuqs, originally from the Turkmen steppes, ruled over the Central Asia in the eleventh and twelfth century. A tradition of Muslim higher education was established, these higher educational institutions played a very important role in Muslim civilization. The advent of Seljuq Turks ushers in a new and notable era in the history of not only Central Asia but of Islam at large. During this period momentous changes took place that mark it out from the period that preceded or followed it. Seljuq period proved age of great spiritual and intellectual advancement; new economic and social systems were evolving; thought and learning were entering a fresh stage. The world seemed full of great men, and the Seljuqs had a striking share of distinguished and able administrators, of inspired poets and profound Sufis, of thoughtful philosophers and probing scientists<sup>12</sup>.

Through the invasion of the Mongols and the establishment of their empire, the eastern Islamic world was separated from the western; Transoxiana, along with what is today Xinjiang in western China, formed the Chagatai Khanate. But under the Timurids in the fifteenth Century, Samarqand became a glittering centre piece once again. At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Uzbek tribes under Sheibani Khan (1500-1510 C.E), a decedent of Genghiz Khan, occupied Central Asia and founded the Sheibanid dynasty. Uzbeks regarded their lands as the property of the whole ruling family and divided them into smaller principalities, ruled by various princes of the royal house. This divide of the unified empire into small Khanates proved to be futile in the future course of history as on the other side of the border, Russian Tsarist Empire has started its colonial mission and the region of Central Asia was at the top. Apart from this divide of empire in 16<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of a worldwide shift in trade routes and the disintegration of the classic Silk Road, Central Asia fell into economic and cultural isolation and insignificance.

### **Russian Occupation of Central Asia and Muslim Response:**

After the 16<sup>th</sup> century, weakened by the decline of the Silk Route as sea routes opened linking Europe to Africa and India, the Shaybani Empire began to erode. In addition, the conservative ulema (Islamic scholars, who had enormous influence over daily life) banned innovations in education and science, further marginalizing Central Asia. The Shaybani Empire gradually degenerated into a collection of small, squabbling, city-

based fiefdoms. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these emerged as three separate but weak Khanates-Khiva, Kokand, and Bukhara. This was the internal situation of Central Asia on the eve of modern times, it was inevitable that the tsars, seeking to expand their Russian empire, should eventually look to Central Asia. The Russian expansion was fuelled by the empire's vast military-bureaucratic apparatus, which had subdued the Caucasus and was now without a role even as the tsars eyed the potential resources of Central Asia: minerals and cotton. In the brief period between 1865 and 1876, Russian armies captured Tashkent and much of modern-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. Though there was no centralised Muslim resistance to Russian occupation yet there emerged several local resistance movements against Russian occupation. One of the fierce resistance in the name of religion emerged in Caucasus in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The central figure in this resistance was Naqshbandiyya Sufi Imam Shamil (1797-1871 C.E), who drove his *murids* (disciples) into holy war against Russian occupation. Tsarist army could not succeed in putting down his rebellion for twenty five years. In Central Asia the Khokhand khanate was at first the centre of resistance; following its defeat, this shifted to East Turkestan (Xinjiang). In Kazan, which had already been incorporated into the Grand Duchy of Moscow in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the resistance was waged without weapons by means of boycotts of military service and refusal to pay taxes. Russians established the province of Turkestan, whose capital was Tashkent and which was ruled by a governor general appointed by Moscow. They left the khanates of Bukhara and Khiva as autonomous political units, dependent on Russia. The imperial policy of controlling Central Asia has been beautifully summarised by Ahmad Rashid:

As a way of controlling the region, the Russians began resettling Central Asia with ethnic Russians and Cossacks and turning the rest of the land over to cotton production; in 1891 alone more than a million Russian and Cossack farmers were settled on Kazakh lands adjoining Siberia. The Russians developed large cotton plantations by means of vast irrigation projects. New industries manned by Russian workers were also introduced, and Central Asia was linked with Russia through a railway network that for the first time brought the Russian Empire up to the borders of Afghanistan, Iran, China, and British India<sup>13</sup>.

When the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917, Central Asia was going through the massive famine and they were having no desire to become part of the new Soviet Union.

Central Asians resisted Sovietisation more fiercely than most other regions, with the Muslim Basmachis (bandits), as the Bolsheviks termed them, leading the struggle. By 1930's they were crushed and the map of Central Asia had been forcibly redrawn into five soviet republics.

### **Intellectual Response (Jadidi ideologues) to Russian Imperialism:**

In response to the threat to religious and cultural identity in the second half of nineteenth century as well as due to introduction of new Western ideas and sciences, a broad Muslim reform movement developed which was called jadid movement. Adeb Khalid, a renowned scholar and historian on modern Central Asia, while discussing the emergence of jadid movement in Central Asia vis-à-vis Russian Imperialism states;

The jadid formulation of the predicament of Central Asian society was as much a result of the profound transformation of Central Asia in the fifty years of imperial Russian rule as a response to it. When the Russian forces abruptly conquered the khanates of Central Asia between the 1860's and the 1880's, there existed no theatre, no printing press, and no benevolent. Between the establishment of the governorate-general of Turkestan in 1867 and the Russian revolutions of 1917, Central Asia became increasingly intertwined with imperial (and hence global) economic networks...New groups, such as the jadids, adopted and appropriated new forms of communication and sociability in their attempts to reform, creating, in the process, radically new understandings of tradition, religion, and the world<sup>14</sup>.

The movement was first initiated by Tatars later it spread to other parts of Central Asia. This movement addressed itself above all to the educational system on the basis of their new method of teaching called "*usul-i-jadid*". Among its prominent ideologues was the Ismail Gaspirali (1851-1914), who was also a pioneer of pan-Turanism, which aimed at the political unification of all the Turkic peoples. Adherents was this movement aimed at reforming the educational system in order to equip Muslims with modern knowledge and skills and enable them to catch up with Western progress. Subsequently, the followers of this movement were known as jadid and their ideology as jadidism<sup>15</sup>.

Jadidism, which took root in Bukhara in the first two decades of the present century, became a comprehensive movement for modernisation of Muslim societies in Central Asia. Jadid's were able to articulate a comprehensive argument for incorporating new cultural, technological and political practices in the language of Islamic tradition. Jadidteachers and scholars in Tashkent and Fergana valley founded new schools on the



basis of their new methods of teaching with modern curricula; math, the sciences, theatre, poetry, and Russian and Turkic literature, as well as traditional Islamic subjects. The jadids were successful in garnering considerable support for their project of reform, but their call change/reform also evoked vigorous opposition from established elites and traditional scholars (*qadimchi*) in their society. For all their success the jadids remained an intellectual rather than a mass movement, divided over ideology and politics. When the 1917 revolution came, some jadids backed the Bolsheviks because they sought to throw over the tsarist empire and saw in the Communist ideology a chance of greater freedom, the adoption of their lack of respect for Islam. The Soviets termed the jadids bourgeois reformers and banned their literature. When Stalin came to power he began a steady purge of jadids, the last onslaught of jadids took place in 1937 after that jadids were either exiled or eliminated by Soviet forces.

### **Conclusion:**

History is witness to the fact that the region of Central Asia has been unique in its geography, its political/cultural history and in its religious traditions. Arab (Muslim) conquest of Central Asia has laid a long-lasting impact on the cultural and religious developments in this region. Central Asia's blend with Islam has been deeply rooted in the political and cultural arena of this region. Russian conquest of Central Asia has been very challenging to the very existence of Muslims of this region. The challenge to the Muslims intellectuals of this region was to be faithful to their tradition but to be well acquainted with the modern education. On one hand they first time got introduced to modernity and modern ways of sociability, on the other they felt suspicious to the imperial power as it was interfering in the matters of their faith and belief. Due to political and intellectual challenges posed by Russian imperialism, a modern Muslim reform movement (jadidism) emerged in Central Asia in late 19<sup>th</sup> century which not only took practical steps for reformation of prevalent educational system but also created awareness among Central Asian masses of the positive aspects of modernity.

### **References:**

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