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## Allegiance to Tsar and Allah: Crimean Tatars in the Russian Empire, 1783-1853

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This paper explores the question of whether or not a Muslim could be accepted as a loyal subject of the Russian Empire, particularly in the southern borderlands, where the Romanov and Ottoman empires struggled for dominance in the Black Sea region and the Caucasus. The central theme of the paper is the tension between religious and political

identity. Based on the nature of the sources, it focuses less on establishing whether the Crimeans were in fact loyal to the Russian sovereign — or to the tenets of Islam, for that matter — than on the way their actions and words were interpreted by Russian officials in Tavrida province (i.e., Crimea and adjoining territories).

Immediately after Empress Catherine II proclaimed the annexation of the Crimean Khanate on April 8, 1783, Grigorii Potemkin — the so-called “viceroy of the South” — began implementing his carefully devised plan for establishing Russian rule. One of the most critical challenges he and his lieutenants faced was to secure the allegiance of the Crimean population. Potemkin therefore insisted that the military commander of Tavrida province “ascertain who among the residents of the peninsula harbors ill intentions toward Russia and who receives us favorably. We must examine each individual, especially those who wield power and influence over the masses, rather than simply taking the sum of their opinions” (*Zapiski imperatorskago Odesskago obshchestva* 1881: 262). Meanwhile, Russian military officials administered a formal oath of allegiance to the entire population. “The oath should reflect the terms of the [annexation] manifesto,” Potemkin instructed. But just as important, it must reflect “the customs of the Muslims, such as the kissing of the Quran” (*Zapiski imperatorskago Odesskago obshchestva* 1881: 266).

The oath of allegiance, duly adapted for Muslims, was administered in early July. Beys (heads of elite clans), mirzas (members of the lesser, or service nobility), members of the ulama, and Tatar deputies were summoned to attend the ceremony (“Raporty” 1783a: 70). “I submit myself in eternal subjecthood and accept the blessing of being as one people before the empress,” each proclaimed. “I therefore swear in the name of the One Lord and All-powerful God, and the prophet Mugamet [Muhammad]... to try not only to fulfill Her [Catherine’s] sublime will, but also to sacrifice my soul and life for Her Highness.” As proof of the legitimacy of their oath, each Tatar kissed the Quran (“Raporty” 1784: 74).

Potemkin was pleased, and wasted no time announcing the oath-taking to Empress Catherine. However, the issue of Tatar loyalty to the Russian monarch had by no means been resolved. In time it became apparent that many mirzas had failed to attend the ceremony. Some excused their absence by citing outbreaks of plague in their villages, which prevented them from traveling (“Raporty” 1783b: 37). Others were not so diplomatic. In late July, military governor Igel’strom reported that members of the Mansur clan refused to take the oath because “it was against their law to succumb to [a Christian ruler] without an outpouring of blood” (“Raporty” 1783a: 118). Russian officials even questioned the loyalty of those who did swear the

oath, for they remained unconvinced that Muslims, whose right to look to the Caliph in Istanbul for spiritual guidance was acknowledged in the 1779 convention of Aynali Kavak, would stand by their pledge to the Empress.

#### *Rumors of Sheikh Mansur and the Perils of Religious Ritual*

In the spring of 1787, as relations between Russia and the Ottoman Empire deteriorated, rumors began to circulate in Crimea about — in the words of Governor Kakhovskii — “the false prophet Mansur” and his immanent arrival in Crimea, where he would deliver the former khanate from Russian rule (“Pis'my” 1877: 289). This “false prophet,” known as Sheikh Mansur, or Ushurma, had styled himself a holy warrior and the leader of a rebellion in Chechnya against the expansion of the Russian Empire into the Caucasus since 1785 (Bennigsen 1964; Aleksandrov 1919). Rumors of his appearance set local Russian officials on edge, particularly after the Ottoman Sublime Porte declared war on Russia in August. Throughout the autumn the governor’s staff nursed fears of a revolt.

In January 1788, the governor received reports that Tatars in several villages in Perekop and Evpatoria districts had been praying and fasting for three days and sacrificing black horses, oxen, and rams. Alarmed by what he saw as a display of Muslim fanaticism, Kakhovskii promptly announced that the Tatars had “disobeyed Muhammad’s law.” Moreover, in their supposed “deviation from the prescribed terms of prayer, fasting, and sacrifice,” Kakhovskii discerned a betrayal of the Russian state and a “violation of their oath of allegiance” (Krichinskii 1919: 4-5).

The governor dispatched two trusted Tatar members of the provincial government in early February to investigate the provenance of the rumors and rituals (Krichinskii 1919: 5). Meanwhile, Megmetsha bey Shirin (the highest ranking Tatar member of the provincial government) presented his own report. The prayers, fasting and sacrificial rites, Shirin bey explained, had been carried out according to the instruction of an influential local mullah and were meant to mark “the birth of the new [year]” (“Pis'my” 1877: 294). To be sure, the New Year was celebrated throughout the Islamic world on the first day of *Muharram* (*Ashir ay*), the first month of the Islamic calendar. Megmetsha bey Shirin failed to point out, however, that the services under investigation did not coincide with the Islamic New

Year, which had fallen in early October 1787. Nor did they coincide with the traditional Crimean celebration of the agricultural new year, which would not be held until the vernal equinox (Lindsay 2005: 255-256).

There is no evidence that Kakhovskii occupied himself with the intricacies of the Islamic calendar, and Shirin bey's testimony would likely have been accepted had it not been contradicted by several persuasive sources. First, under interrogation several mullahs admitted that they led the prayers at the bidding of a "strange dervish" who had revealed a prophesy about Sheikh Mansur. The reports of the two Tatar deputies confirmed the story of a Sufi of foreign origins. According to Megmet aga Balatukov, the dervish had attended the funeral service of a wealthy local Tatar. At the conclusion of the service, he proclaimed that "the conquering sword of Islam [i.e., Mansur]" would henceforth triumph over the infidels. Word of the prophesy spread quickly, Balatukov informed the governor, and similar ceremonies were being carried out by Muslims from the Caucasus to the Arabian peninsula in hopes that Allah would grant victory over Russia to Sultan Abdulhamid I (Aleksandrov 1919: 27; "Pis'my" 1877: 288).

The connection between Mansur and those who participated in the prayer services was clear to Kakhovskii. He accused 56 mullahs, sheikhs (leaders of Sufi orders), and qadis (judges) of Perekop and Evpatoriia of two distinct but related crimes: first, spreading the seeds of revolt through the Mansur rumors, and second, leading the Muslim people in the practice of what he saw as a fanatic, deviant brand of Islam. In other words, the mullahs were creating "bad" Muslims — the kind that made bad subjects. Some were sent to do hard labor in internal provinces for two years, before their permanent exile from Tavrida province. Others were exiled abroad immediately ("Pis'my" 1877: 292-294). Even those who were not involved in the Mansur rumors or the related religious rites were nevertheless summoned to Simferopol, where Russian officials evaluated their "political unreliability" (Krichinskii 1919: 9).

### *The Threat of Holy Water, 1823*

Twenty-five years later, nearly all of southern Russia was plagued with drought, and Crimea's misery was compounded by locusts. Food and fodder ran short, and in desperation Colonel Agmet bey Khunkalov, one of the most prominent members of the local elite, requested permission to send his brother,

Isliam bey, to their family estates near Istanbul. There he would obtain, according to a document in the provincial marshal's chancellery, "water" to help ease the suffering in Crimea. The provincial marshal and governor readily approved his petition in late summer and provided him with the necessary documentation ("Po proshenii" 1823: 1-6).

When Isliam bey returned a month later, he was accompanied not by barrels of fresh water, as Russian authorities may have anticipated, but by 11 Sufis clothed in white. Isliam bey had in fact traveled to the site of a holy well that, according to Crimean legend, yielded water capable of restoring lands laid waste by locusts and drought. Isliam bey and a servant, the sheikh of the Sufi lodge at the holy well, Ali Efendi, and ten dervishes therefore arrived at the port of Feodosiia bearing 13 copper vessels of holy water back to Crimea. The water, it was believed, when spread about the earth, would produce innumerable starlings. The starlings would hatch in springtime and eat the locust larvae buried in the soil before the latter could unleash a new wave of destruction (Aleksandrov 1918: 187).

Sheikh Ali and the Sufis traveled to every town and many villages. Everywhere they were honored by large crowds that followed them to the local mosques, where they held special prayer services. Russian officials, and Governor-general Vorontsov in particular, regarded the unfolding situation with consternation. "Although the government must not hinder the Muslims in the practice of their customs and religion," Vorontsov wrote to Governor Naryshkin, "I believe it to be entirely judicious for local authorities to avoid facilitating [the Sufis' procession], and for the police to avoid any semblance of participation in the rites" (Krichinskii 1919: 12-13).

Despite Vorontsov's misgivings, all reports culled from the various district chiefs indicated that the Sufis had indeed come for purely religious purposes: neither they nor the Crimean Muslims were violating Russian law in any way. One official even reported that the visitors were having a positive effect on local morality: Tatar men were spending less time in cafes drinking and more time in mosques praying.

But in March 1824 Naryshkin sent a small contingent of police to Bahçesaray to secretly observe Sheikh Ali's movements. The men did everything short of "dressing in Tatar clothes" in order to maintain a low profile and collect information from the mosques and coffeehouses. But

they found no evidence to support the governor's suspicion that the Sufis were laying the groundwork for an anti-Russian uprising. Nevertheless, the police commander recommended removing the Sufis immediately: it was simply too risky to tolerate the continued presence of these influential men from abroad. Sheikh Ali Efendi had no choice but to comply with the subsequent Russian "request" that he and the ten Sufis leave for Odessa — and the ship to Anatolia — immediately (Aleksandrov 1918: 189-190; Krichinskii 1919: 13-14).<sup>1</sup>

Whereas the political threat of Sheikh Mansur had been quite real, it seems strange that Vorontsov and Naryshkin found credible the idea that 11 Sufis had come from Anatolia to organize a rebellion. In fact, the governors may have been as concerned with the nature of the ritual itself as with the provenance of the Anatolian sheikhs. After all, rain prayers and prayers to protect crops against rodents and locusts were not formally part of Islamic tradition: they were Muslim rituals in the sense that they were performed by Muslims and incorporated many Islamic elements. Such Islamicized rituals commonly took place among Muslim populations of the Volga-Ural region, Novouzensk, and Siberia. However, members of the ulama, particularly those who drew salaries from the Russian government, often denounced such rites as "innovations," or deviations from "orthodox" Islam (Frank 2001: 260-267).

The documents in the Simferopol archive do not mention the position of the Tavrida Mufti, but for their part, Russian officials determined that the brand of Islam practiced in this instance was decidedly unorthodox. And because it was in the best interests of the empire to insist on a brand of Islam uncontaminated by local "innovations," let alone by the prescriptions of Ottoman sheikhs, the governor called upon the police, as Robert Crews puts it, "to guarantee correct practice and belief" (2005: 9).

### *Dangerous Texts*

Under Nicholas I, Russian officials dedicated considerable effort to defining and enforcing "correct practice" among the empire's Muslims. In the late 1820s the central government issued numerous opinions and decrees on such topics as the inheritance of property under Muslim law, the appointment of qadis, and the procedures for proper burial of the dead. In each case, the ministers solicited the opinions of the Tavrida and/or Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Authorities. The Tavrida Mufti was particularly adept at grounding his opinions in the Quran and Sharia, and Russian officials found this approach very appealing.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, creating an orthodoxy based on the written word inevitably necessitated the elimination of rival, deviant texts. Mufti Seit Dzhemil Efendi (1829-1849) fulfilled this task with great aplomb. In early January 1833 the Mufti informed Governor A. I. Kaznacheev (1829-1837) that he had recently learned of numerous "dangerous" books and manuscripts in the possession of the Crimean Muslim population. Many of the books had been inherited by their present owners. "And now those who rightfully own these manuscripts interpret them incorrectly and pronounce these interpretations to the common people," warned the Mufti, who "have been greatly excited by what they heard... They discuss these things endlessly. Due to their ignorance and that of many mullahs, something unpleasant may come of this. Therefore the inherited texts and any others which came into their hands after annexation must be removed from the possession of all Muslims, mullah and common Tatar alike" ("O komandirovanii" 1833: 1).

The governor immediately approved Seit Dzhemil's plan to destroy all books and manuscripts that "went against both law and reason" and inspired (in his words) "absurd interpretations that threatened to harm the honor of Russian Tatars." The Tatars were, after all, "*loyal subjects of the tsar*," whose

<sup>1</sup> In February 1836 Tsar Nicholas I confirmed the Committee of Ministers's decision to prohibit the admission of dervishes (specifically from Astrakhan and western Siberia) into Russian subjecthood. See *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov [PSZ] II* tom 11, otd. 1, 133-134 (No. 8881, "O vospreshchenii prinimat' dervishei v poddanstvo Rossii").

<sup>2</sup> *PSZ II* vol.1, No. 386 (2 June 1826, "O dopushchenii razdela imenii, ostavshikhsia posle Magometan, po ikh zakonu"); *PSZ II* vol.1, No. 690 (23 November 1826, "O poriadke opredeleniia Kadiev v Krymu"); *PSZ II* vol. 5, otd.1, No. 3559 (March 27, 1830, "O predostavlenii rassmotreniia i resheniia del mezhdou Magometanami, o nepovinovenii detei ikh roditeliam, Magometansko dukhovnoi vlasti, po obriadam i zakonam sego dukhovenstva"); *PSZ II* vol. 5, otd. 1, No. 3659 (May 13, 1830, "O neotstuplenii ot obshchikh pravil pri pogrebenii Magometan").

allegiance must not be compromised by the same brand of treacherous mullahs who led them to believe the prophesies regarding Sheikh Mansur ("O komandirovani" 1833: 2).

By December, the Mufti and Qadiasker, together with the Muslim Spiritual Authority, had succeeded on their own initiative and with the full approval of the Tavrida Governor and the Minister of Internal Affairs in confiscating all "dangerous" manuscripts from the Muslim clergy and Tatar population. Once word arrived that they were destroyed — burnt in a spectacular ceremony — the Minister of Internal Affairs awarded the Mufti a gold medal complete with a portrait of the Emperor and an inscription reading "for zealous loyalty" (Krichinskii 1919: 34-35). The state had found its champion of Orthodox Islam and, perhaps, its guarantor of good and loyal Muslim subjects.

### Conclusions

What preliminary conclusions can we draw from this study of the Russian perceptions of Islam in Crimea? First, the integration of the Crimean Khanate into the Russian Empire clearly did not end in 1783 — it was, in fact, an ongoing, complex process that extended well into the nineteenth century. Second, while Russian officials were more concerned with political loyalty than religious homogeneity, in their perception, the Crimean Tatars' Muslim identity compromised their ability to act as loyal subjects. Muslim leaders — be they Crimean mullahs, Chechen sheikhs, or Anatolian Sufis — were perceived as threats to the political stability of the province. Finally, Russian officials nevertheless found a way to resolve the apparent contradiction between allegiance to tsar and Allah: by sponsoring Muslim institutions that in essence both created and enforced "orthodoxy," they were able to neutralize — or at least mitigate — the perceived political threat of Islam. Crimean Muslims willing to practice what Russian officials considered orthodox Islam could in fact be accepted as loyal subjects of the empire.

On a broader level, this paper contributes to our understanding of a Russian Empire remarkable as much for its flexibility as for its repressive tendencies. It was a work in progress, constantly shaped by encounters with the borderlands and the identities of those who inhabited them. The history of Islamic peoples within this empire is of direct and continuing relevance to our knowledge of Central Eurasia in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Perhaps most important, further study of the political and cultural role of Islam in Crimea, the Caucasus and Central Asia has the potential to provide scholars with a useful analytical tool for recovering the voice and power of subject peoples.

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## Sleeping With the Enemy: Exogamous Marriage in the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi<sup>1</sup>

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The<sup>1</sup> *Shahnameh* has been viewed as an epic paean to the Persian state from the time of its conception. The Persian nationalism derived from this text largely springs from the conflict between Iran, Turan, and Tus in what is referred to as the mythical period. Dick Davis writes that "as with most epics, the celebrated are defined as being in conflict with

their neighbors with whom they do not share ethnicity" (1992: xv). However, in this paper I explore how Iran and her neighbors do share bloodlines throughout the mythical section of the epic and how marriage ties with the enemy affect relations at home in Iran. In contrast to the stories in prominent newspapers about Central Asian men stealing brides, at the heart of the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi are stories of brides kidnapping husbands.

<sup>1</sup> The author thanks Paul Losensky and Nancy Glick.