Making Muslim Women Political: Imagining the Wartime Woman in the Russian Muslim Women's Journal Suyumbika

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Résumé

Français

This article uses the Kazan-based Muslim Women's journal Suyumbika to follow the transformation of Muslim reformers' views on the modern Muslim woman. While much of the scholarly literature on religion, culture, and education has focused on the change in views on women's roles to be a decades-long process, this article argues that in the brief period of the Great War, the ideal vision of the Volga-Ural Muslim woman underwent more profound changes than it had in the previous decades. Through news articles, historical fiction, and calls to community service, the male and female writers promoted an image of a politically and socially active woman, who would become advocates for wellbeing of their families (Kamp, 2006: 54).

Introduction

1 In April 1915, student-journalist Khudobin Bolshina reported for the Muslim press Quany on a recent literary-cultural evening held by the Orenburg [Muslim] Student Aid Society to collect money to aid wounded soldiers. The cultural evening brought together amateur performers from the city’s Tatar, Bashkir, and Kazakh ethnic communities, and they performed to a sold-out house. In addition to the usual audience of urban youth, the event attracted people from the surrounding villages and even ‘old’ women with scars on their heads and old men in winter hats, people the likes of which had never been seen in the Orenburg theater (Bolshina, 2019: 66). One of the highlights of the evening was a singing performance by two women...

2 In the years before the Great War, very few Muslim women appeared on stage. Those who did had faced harsh criticism (Makhmutova, 2012: 245-246). Even the Jadid reformers, who advocated for women’s education and better treatment for women in marriage and the family, and included in their ranks a small number of actresses, girls’ school teachers, and female writers, focused primarily on improving the conditions women faced in the home as wives and mothers. But, by 1915, the Muslim press had begun to promote new roles for Muslim women in Russia’s Volga-Ural region and Siberia. Newspapers and journals called upon Muslim women to support their soldiers and the empire by taking on new kinds of work, educating themselves and their neighbors on international affairs, and undertaking charity work such as the concert described above. In doing so, reformist writers sought to normalize activities that had been considered inappropriate for women before the war, and to construct a vision of women as possessing agency in imperial and international politics. This was a departure from the more household-oriented Jadid emphasis on Muslim women’s rights that had preceded the war, and it reflected new developments in the revolutionary and early Soviet periods. Similar, however, is a clear distinction between the changes in women’s roles and the actual changes in women’s lived experiences during the war...

3 Historians now recognize the Great War’s role in transforming views on women’s roles in many parts of the world. The war has received the greatest attention in studies of European and American women’s history, where the roles of wives and mother were re-configured to normalize women’s wartime activities as workers, breadwinners, and patriotic supporters of the war effort (Grayzel, 1995). A similar pattern emerges in studies of Russia’s women, who became factory workers or medical staff, led volunteer charity efforts on the home front, and spoke up for the rights of soldiers and their families (McDermid, 1998, Afoniia, 2014). In the Muslim world as well, the hardships caused by the war led women to become advocates for wellbeing of their families (Kamp, 2006: 54).

4 By contrast, in the studies of women’s history in Volga-Ural Muslim society, Russian and western historians have emphasized the Russian revolutionary period (1917-1921) as the key moment for the emergence of discussions on women’s rights and roles. During this period, Russian subjects across the empire gathered to discuss the futures of their ethnic-confessional communities and the empire as a whole. This sense of new possibility extended also to educated Muslim women, who met in a series of congresses to discuss what rights women should enjoy in a post-imperial Russia (Kamp, 2006). Some of these women went on to take part in the founding of schools, national theaters, and other cultural institutions in the new Soviet Muslim society (Makhmutova, 2012: 268-274). They did so against a backdrop of fierce debates across the USSR over how women would live in the new Soviet society (Kamp, 2006; Northrop, 2004; McDermid, 1998).

5 In comparison with the revolutions of February and October, the Great War receives little attention in relation to other changes in Volga-Ural Muslim women’s lives or the discussions of gender roles in Volga-Ural Muslim society. Makhmutova describes the various new activities Muslim women took up during the war. However, she also stresses the continuities from the pre-war period, including Muslim women’s ongoing dependence on men to take leadership of the women’s movement and the long-term shift from a religious society to a secular one, exemplified by the growing role of gymnasia-educated women in Muslim women’s movement (Makhmutova, 2012: 50-56). Gabdrakhkova, in her analysis of the effects of the war on Tatar culture, notes that the departure of Volga-Ural Muslim men to the front forced women to take on new duties and professions, and that these women were, thus, closer to emancipation than Muslim women in other parts of the empire by 1917 (Gabdrakhkova, 2014: 76-77). Makhmutova and Gabdrakhkova draw their data primarily from wartime periodicals in the Volga-Ural region, which present the actual changes in women’s roles and the change in women’s attitudes during the war. The same can be said of a recent study on Muslim philanthropic work during the war by Norihiro Naganawa, which highlights the war as moment of change in Muslim women’s roles and responsibilities (Naganawa, 2016: 83-84). Also, Makhmutova, Gabdrakhkova and Naganawa position the drive to mobilize women during the war as a continuation of pre-war efforts on the part of Jadid reformers to educate and liberate women; opposition to women’s education, work, and public action came from outside of Jadid circles rather than from within...

6 However, a comparison of Jadid publications from before and during the war reveals significant transformations in the way that Jadid reformers themselves envisioned women’s role in society. Before the war, Jadid writers focused on women’s education and greater rights as means of strengthening the Muslim family. The roles they proposed for educated women were limited to that of homemaker and educator. With the start of the war, however, while they still presented women as wives and mothers, they widened the range of women’s activities and responsibilities. With the departure of husbands to the front, it was no longer adequate for a woman to keep her house in order and raise her children. Reformers called upon her to take over her husband’s work, donate her free time to support the war effort, and become conscious of the political consequences of her activities. These trends were present in the wartime articles of Suyumbika, the only Muslim women’s journal published in Russia during the Great War. The journal served an insubordinate in which male and female reformers crafted and promoted new images of the politically-active Muslim woman. Calls in 1917 for women to march, vote, and support the revolution built upon a home-front mobilization of women that had begun in July, 1914. Wartime efforts to inform and mobilize women also served as training for the some of the Muslim men and women who went on to take part in the construction of early Soviet culture.

Suyumbika and its Audience

7 Founded in Kazan in 1913, the monthly journal Suyumbika was the second Muslim women’s journal published in the Russian empire. The first women’s journal, Al’em-i Nisva, had been founded in Crimea in 1906 by Shadiga Gasprinskaya, daughter of well-known reformer, publicist, and founder of new phonetic method education (and-a Jadid) Juma-il Gaspinskii (1832-1914). However, Al’em-i Nisva closed in 1910, making Suyumbika the only Muslim women’s journal published in Russia during the war (Bennigsen and...
"ignorance." By implication, the fate of the new war hinged upon Muslim women taking an active role on the home front and claiming the rights that their society had denied them.

The mobilization, the pro-war propaganda, and the new responsibilities thrust upon women pushed to embrace a new view of women as active participants in the war effort. One of their number, the youth satirical journal, was issued once a month with a print-run of 1,300 copies, making it the second largest of the Tatar journals published in Kazan (Makmutova, 2012 : 45-55). Its regular contributors also wrote for the Tatar literary journal Ang, the youth satirical journal, Yil-yil, and the Kazan newspaper Tofiq. These contributed fell into three categories: 1) men aged 20 to 35, who had graduated from the Volga Muslim's madrasas; 2) women in their teens and twenties, educated in the girls' schools that had been founded in the early 1900s; and 3) women in their thirties, forties, and fifties who were home-educated or self-educated and had become involved in teaching, textbook writing, and Islamic law (Makmutova, 2006 : 44-46).

At the height of its popularity, Suyumbika was issued once a month with a print-run of 1,500 copies, making it the second largest of the Tatar journals published in Kazan (Makmutova, 2012 : 45-55). Its regular contributors included teachers, clergymen, writers, shopkeeper and merchant families, school children, students, and literate members of society, whom it encouraged to take the lead in promoting women's rights to Muslim society. Like other Volga-Ural Muslim periodicals, Suyumbika was designed for pedagogical purposes as well as enjoyment and dissemination of information. Its articles were meant to instruct and provide didactic material for village teachers and reformist clergy to instruct their pupils and laypeople.

The Jadid Discourse on Women before 1914

Russian and Tatar-language studies of the Muslim women's movement in the Volga-Ural region have focused primarily on the evolution of women's education from the late 1800s to 1927. They have often neglected the domestic and cultural 'fronts' on which the Jadids sought to educate Muslims.波斯ian and Makmutova interpret Jadid women's work as lamenting the plight of women or promoting female education as unambiguously progressive and feminist texts (Makmutova, 2012 : 45-55; Biktimirova, 26, 27, 32).

The outbreak of the war placed new demands on women and challenged the Jadids' vision of educated mothers and housewives. The departure of men to the front forced some women into the roles of soldiers' wives, mothers, and daughters. At the same time, wartime propaganda promoted patriotism as the duty of all Russian subjects. This new propaganda emphasis on family, marriage, and the authority of men over women was a result of their working within the limits of Islamic scripture and law. However, younger socialist-leaning writers of the early 1900s, some of whom attended the newly-established Jadid madrasas, exhibited a similarly limited view of women's roles and prerogatives in a modern Muslim society. In the Galiazar Kamal's 1917 play "The Unfortunate Youth," Gaisha, a seventeen-year-old gymnasium student converses with the twenty-year-old student Akhmat about women's education. Akhmat's answer to her is decisive: "In your opinion, if there is to be true equality, then women should trade at the bazaar while men stay home to cook and look after the children."

Khalili argues that the basic unit of the future modern society promoted by the Jadids was the nuclear family (Khalili, 1998 : 226). Their efforts to "save" Muslim women focused upon the strengthening of the family unit through the elimination of practices "harmful" to the physical health, intellectual development, and economic wellbeing of its members. By opposing child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy, opium consumption, veiling, confinement to the home, and male-dominated theoretical education for both men and women, the Jadids aimed to create families capable of bearing and raising healthy, productive members of the nation (Khalili, 1998 : 226-228). Kamp, in her analysis of the writings of Fakhreddinov and Suyumbika, emphasizes their focus on improving relations and conditions within the family. The ideology of the "free will" of both spouses and to be based on affection and mutual respect. However, marriage remained the ideal, if not the only, path for women, even if a woman had become a widow or mother, she became subordinate to her husband (Kamp, 2010 : 46).

Mobilizing Muslim Women

No matter where those poor men are, they say:

I've been left all alone! they say.

It is said that one must honor Friday,

Everyone eats the food from the stove

When the news came at five o'clock.

Who will eat that food now? (Sharifaddin-qızı, 1914 : 45)

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

Whatever state a woman may be in,

There is no use in crying, [...] and the woman asks,

When their soldiers will return.

No matter where these poor men are, they say:

It will be good if I do return." Some of the men are without hope,

They say, "While we have food."

Their wives pack their skirts and trowsers." (Sharifaddin-qızı, 1914 : 4-6)

By the end of the poem, resignation has turned to resolve: 1) "I'll give my wealth as alms."

And my soul as sacrifice for my mother's one, the empress (Sharifaddin-qızı, 1914 : 14).

"State of War" was modeled on the soldier's ballad (soldat bacute), a literary form traditionally produced by Muslim men serving in the Russian army (Ross, 2014 : 94-95). However, Sharifaddin-qızı used this form to describe the war's impact on women and families:

One of them [the soldiers] cries "Mama!"

Another cries, "My child!"

Their voices cry even more.

I've been left all alone! they say.

It is said that one must honor Friday,

Everyone eats the food from the stove

When the news came at five o'clock.

Who will eat that food now? (Sharifaddin-qızı, 1914 : 45)
A Woman at War: A Daughter of the Quraysh

Among these promoting a new wartime vision of Muslim women were female educator Fakhre al-ba‘atit Sulaimaniyya (b. 1857). Educated by her father in the same fields that taught the male students in his madrasa, Sulaimaniyya was well-versed in the Qur’an, hadith, and fiqh. She used her knowledge to write tracts on girls’ education, family life, and the social harm wrought by alcohol. She educated young girls in Nižnjj Nogrood and, starting in 1915, served as the secretary for Sulaimaniyya (Muhimutunte, 1915: 43–45). As discussed above, while she had advocated female education before the war, she had also said that Islam dictated that women should be married and not defer to their husbands.

In 1915, Sulaimaniyya began to publish a novella called A Daughter of the Quraysh. Appearing in serialized form from late 1915 to summer of 1917, it related the events of the First, a civil war in the early Islamic community that began after the assassination of Caliph al-Uthman. The events of the novella are viewed through the eyes of Ama, a beautiful, clever, brave young woman, whose family is one of the most tragic conflicts in the history of Islam.

Though A Daughter of the Quraysh was set in the past, the theme of war permeated the war. War had torn Ama’s family apart. When she was two years old, her father was killed, her brother was imprisoned, her mother, Maryam, married Yazid, a member of the powerful ‘Umayya clan and kinsman of Caliph al-Uthman. Yazid wishes to marry Ama to another ‘Umayyad, Marwan, but Maryam consents to the marriage only on the condition that the family first make a journey to Medina. Maryam, however, has other plans, and intends to use the journey not only to save her daughter from the marriage, but to deliver a message of vital importance to the ‘Umayyads’ rival, Ali ibn abu Talib.

Research analysts in Taraz Jalid novels were mostly devoted much independence. Often, they were portrayed as educated enslaved virtuous of a enlightened, patriarchal order, or helpmates to male characters trying to change society. The concerns of these female characters revolved around marriage, primary education, and family. A Daughter of the Quraysh begins in this vein, but as soon as Ama dons male clothing, the focus shifts. Her mission to ‘Ali is not simply about avoiding an unwanted marriage, but averting a crisis in Islamic community. In Ama, ‘Umayyads would seek out independence in which she and her family can survive.

Despite its historical premise, A Daughter of the Quraysh repeatedly raises themes of immediate relevance to women living day-to-day on Russia’s home front. The theme of duty runs through the work. Duty to family motivates Ama to put herself at risk by pretending to be a man. Later, in the novel, after Ama’s mother has died, she must choose between marrying the kind and handsome Marwan or staying single. Despite rallying her stepfather, she chooses the latter course, out of consideration of her obligation to him and in hopes of serving as a positive influence on his troublesome ‘Umayyad suitor, Marwan, who is rapidly emerging as an influential leader of the caliphate. Ama was not alone in seeing herself as serving a larger purpose. There is also Nicë, the wife of Caliph al-Uthman, who disputes Marwan’s political advice and tries to convince him to change his ways. She believes the caliphate to be teetering on the brink of civil war, and repeatedly warns Marwan that he may have to bear personal responsibility for it.

In A Daughter of the Quraysh, Ama is a woman at war. She is a real and fictional women from the Turkic and Islamic past who had done the same, and argued that such action was a laudable practice with a long historical pedigree. Moreover, the journal for political literacy as an aspect of women’s transformation from introverts to politically-muslim so-called citizens. These women were socially and politically aware of the world around them.

The February Revolution was announced in the March 15 issue of Sulaimaniyya as a press organ for educating women on Russia’s rapid changing political situation. In the wake of February, the contributors to Sulaimaniyya focused on the upcoming election to the Constituent Assembly. The Provisional Government’s granting of universal suffrage altered the political landscape of Volga-Ural Muslim communities by conferring upon men and women the same political rights. If the journal argued for the country as a back-up workforce and support network for victory in the war, it isn’t surprising that it now courted women as potential voters.

For Sulaimaniyya’s writers, the idea of Russia’s Muslim women gaining the vote was both intoxicating and slightly frightening. During the war, Sulaimaniyya’s authors had looked to women’s movements in Western Europe for inspiration, but in 1917, the tables had turned and Russia’s women had outstripped their sisters in Britain and France. Thus, they were not merely reactive participants in a larger conflict, but were central to the political context within which women were told to apply them changed.

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

Conclusion

Though pre-war reformers called for women's education and better treatment of wives and daughters, they did not envision women as political or economic actors on the international political stage. The war led Jadid writers to revise their views. With women facing the mobilization of their husbands and with propaganda calling upon all citizens, regardless of gender, to support the war, reformers' pre-war vision of the modern Muslim woman no longer corresponded with their society's realities. Rather than either remaining stable throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century or shifting suddenly in 1917, Jadid views on women's roles and rights evolved and adapted over time. During the war years, they went through a period of particularly rapid change. In this way, the Great War served as an intermediate stage between the Jadid discourses of the early 1910s and those of the revolutionary period.

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2. Ibid., 17-18.
3. Most Volga-Ural Muslims were peasants and women had worked in the fields beside their husbands before the war (Makhmutova, 2006: 9). However, the exhortation in the article was meant to signify the role taking over her husband's duties while he was away.

Notes

1 Golpisar, “Bugak ham turko-tatar khutmunar,” Suyumbika, 20 (1914): 15.
2 Ibid., 17-18.
3 Most Volga-Ural Muslims were peasants and women had worked in the fields beside their husbands before the war (Makhmutova, 2006: 9). However, the exhortation in the article was meant to signify the role taking over her husband's duties while he was away.
4 Golpisar, “Bugak ham,” 15.
5 Bilişimal TASHOHSYANG, “Bugak va Tatar khutmunar,” Suyumbika, 20 (1914): 16-17.
6 “Bugak munaadul,” Suyumbika, 23 (1915): 16.
7 “Qalb ardon lib,” Suyumbika, 24 (1915): 16.
8 Bashirov, “Bugak ham moda,” Suyumbika, 24 (1915): 8.
9 Ibid., 5.
10 Ibid., 10-12.
11 One sphere not heavily discussed in Suyumbika was the factory. Though there was much manufacturing in the Volga-Ural region, Tatar women made up only 2.6% of the industrial workforce (just over 600 workers) in the 1913-1918 period (Rumianstev, 1989: 106-107).

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