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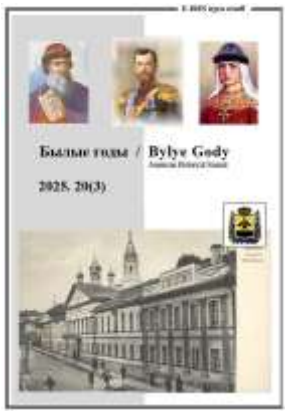

Evolution of Religious Policy of the Russian Empire in the Kazakh Steppe: the Nomads between Islam and Christianity

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Abstract

The article explores and analyzes the evolution of religious policy of Tsarist Russia in the Kazakh steppe at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Drawing upon the extensive historical sources and contemporary studies, the study focuses on identifying and discussing the character and peculiarities of each period of religious policy of the Russian Empire in the Kazakh steppe. The study employs the theory of a civilizing mission because Russian political elites and ideologists of Russian colonialism viewed the empire's religious policy as an integral part of a civilizing mission and a cultural project. Russian rulers considered religion as a powerful unifying and civilizing force that would bring various alien populations under the control of Russia and facilitate their rapprochement and merge with the Russian people. The relevance and significance of the topic are linked to the peculiarities of religious policy of tsarist Russia vis-à-vis the Kazakh nomads. Specifically, Catherine II and her successors through religious tolerance and patronage of Islam sought to pacify and civilize the Kazakhs. The bottom line of Catherine's policy of instrumentalizing Islam was that the unruly and warlike Kazakhs could be tamed and brought under Russian control through Islamization. Yet by the mid-19th century, Russian elites, intellectuals and clergy came to understand that the state sponsorship of Islam had failed to integrate the nomad Kazakhs into the general imperial space. Therefore, they ardently advocated a drastic policy change from the state-orchestrated Islamization of the nomads to Christianization policy. However, a critical analysis of historical sources and literature illustrates that despite Russian authorities in conjunction with Orthodox missions having placed a tremendous emphasis on reversing the Islamization process in the steppe and converting the Kazakhs to Christianity, the new policy failed to yield desired outcomes.

Keywords: Russian Empire, Kazakh steppe, Russians, Kazakhs, nomads, religion, Islam, Christianity, Orthodoxy, civilizing mission.

1. Introduction

Kazakhstan is a multicultural and multi-confessional state. Yet the multicultural and multireligious foundations of Kazakhstan were laid during the establishment and expansion of the colonial rule of the Russian Empire in the Kazakh steppe in the second half of the 18th and beginning of the 20th century. From this standpoint, to get a deeper and proper understanding of the current multireligious and multicultural Kazakh society, it is essential and relevant to study tsarist Russia's confessional policy and its civilizing mission in the Kazakh steppe. It is highly pertinent and timely to investigate the evolution of the religious policy of the Russian policy in the steppe in terms of the empire's attempts to spread Islam among the Kazakh nomads, and then its shift to Christianization policy by the end of the 1860s. For this reason, the study explores the main stages, evolution and transformation of confessional and civilizing policy of tsarist Russia's policy in the Kazakh steppe from the end of the 18th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Although the issues pertaining to Russian religious and civilizing policy vis-à-vis the Kazakh steppe in the pre-1917 period have received significant attention in

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scholarship, the underlying causes of changes and shifts in Russian policies towards Islam have not yet been examined in detail in literature. The submission of the Junior and Middle Hordes in the middle of the 18th century coincided with the gradual transition of aggressive Christianization policy to a more accommodative religious policy. It signaled the shift from aggressive proselytizing efforts among infidels to a more tolerant approach to followers of non-Orthodox faiths.

Although religious tolerance was not extended to all religions, Islam received a greater attention from Russian authorities and was recognized as a tolerated religious faith. Dashkovskiy and Shershneva highlight that with the expansion of the empire, as the second religious faith in terms of number of its followers in Russia, Islam received a growing attention and patronage by the Russian government (Dashkovskiy, Shershneva, 2015: 338). We argue that religious conversion of the Kazakhs to Christianity and their cultural assimilation were at the core of Russian policy towards the steppe. Drawing upon historical accounts and relevant literature, the study asserts that the ultimate goal of Catherine II's religious tolerance and patronage of Islam was to bring the Kazakhs to Russian Orthodoxy. Although Islam was chosen as a civilizing force of the nomad Kazakhs, their conversion to Islam was regarded as a transitional period to Christianity. Yet around the 1830–1840s the conventional policy of state patronage of Islam and civilizing the Kazakhs through Islam changed drastically due to mounting anti-Islam sentiment among Russian bureaucrats, clergy, intellectuals and orientalists who are defined as "imperial elite" by Hofmeister and as "ideologists of Russian colonialism" by Batunsky (Batunsky, 2003: 274; Hofmeister, 2016: 412). They ardently advocated dramatic policy change from the state sponsorship of Islam to its cancellation and focusing on the spread of Russian Orthodoxy in the steppe to achieve Russification of the nomads.

The study provides an in-depth analysis of two periods of Russia's religious policy in the Kazakh steppe. First and foremost, we will discuss the era of religious tolerance and the state patronage of Islam under the rule of Catherine the Great and her successors. We will specifically discuss how the top-down state-inspired religious tolerance and patronage of Islam led to further penetration of Islam among the Kazakhs and the state implemented policies intended to bring Islam closer to the nomads. The last section of our discussion will highlight the attempts of Russian authorities, Russian clergy, orientalists and intellectuals to cancel the religious tolerance policy, the state patronage of Islam and civilizing the Kazakhs through Islam. We will focus on how they endeavored to undo and nullify the state patronage of Islam and its policy of Islamizing the Kazakhs by blocking Islamic influence in the steppe, removing the Tatar cultural influence and propagating Russian Orthodoxy. Besides stressing the efforts to expel Islam from the steppe and convert the Kazakhs to Christianity, we will look at the root causes of failure and setbacks in tsarist Russia's attempts to abolish Islam and evangelize the nomads.

2. Materials and methods

The study draws upon a variety of historical sources, namely policy documents, legislations, historical accounts and scholarly works in the pre-1917 revolution period (Arapov, 2001; Rossiya..., 1903; Zakonodatel'nye akty..., 2015). The study has conducted a critical analysis of historical documents produced by state bodies of tsarist Russia and historical accounts of prominent Russian officials, bureaucrats, Russian intellectuals, orientalists and clergy (Belyaev, 1900; Geins, 1897; Grigoriev, 1874; Levshin, 1832; Miropiev, 1901; Valikhanov, 1985). In addition to historical data, the study draws upon studies relevant to the topic. The study relies on pertinent works of the pre-1917 revolutionary era, the Soviet and contemporary periods (Campbell, 2017; Crews, 2009; Dashkovskiy, Zhanbosinova, 2020; Geraci, 1997; Khodarkovsky, 2004; Lysenko, 2008; Remnev, 2006; Sadvokassova et al., 2022; Taimasov, 2004; Uyama, 2007). The study employs a variety of methods of an analysis of historical documents accounts pertaining to the religious policy of tsarist Russia towards the Kazakhs. Moreover, the study uses a comparative historical analysis to identify and discuss the key features and characteristics of each period of the empire's religious policy in the Kazakhs steppe at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

The study employs the theory of a civilizing mission to gain a deep understanding of religious policy of tsarist Russia to integrate the Kazakh nomads into the general imperial space at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 20th century. The theory of civilization, developed by Nikolay Danilevsky, Arnold Toynbee and other prominent theoreticians of the concept of civilization, is pertinent to the study because in the 18th century after the adoption of the Enlightenment ideas the Russian Empire strongly associated itself with European and believed that Russia was destined to spread advanced European values and Christianity to backward populations of the East. The spread of Islam and then Russian Orthodoxy in the Kazakh steppe was in fact an integral part of this obligation to disseminate European civilization and Russian civilizing mission. In the last quarter of the 18th century, imperial Russia embarked upon the path of disseminating Islam in the Kazakh steppe was intended to facilitate the integration of nomadic Kazakh society into the general imperial space (*obshcheimperskoye prostranstvo*). This theory allows us to get fresh insights into the state-inspired policy of sponsorship of Islam, the use of Islam as a civilizing force to pacify the Kazakhs, as well as attempts to reverse the achievements of Islamization of the nomads and efforts to convert them to Christianity from the end of the 1860s.

3. Discussion

The issues pertaining to religious policy and civilizing mission of tsarist Russia in the Kazakh steppe in the 19th and beginning of the 20 centuries have extensively been examined in literature. The pre-1917 Russian historiography, Soviet era and contemporary scholarship have explored various aspects and periods of religious policy of Russia vis-à-vis the Kazakh steppe. Literature highlights the role of religion in determining ethno-confessional identity and political status of people in imperial Russia. Studies indicate that religion was a key identity marker in Russian history where Christianity came to be associated with the sedentary Russians, whereas Islam was identified with nomadic Turkic-Tatar populations of Inner Eurasia (Khodarkovsky, 2004: 185). In this regard, religious affiliation determined people's political status and Russian authorities judged subjects of the empire based on their religious identity. In this sense, adherents of the Orthodox faith were increasingly considered to be loyal and reliable subjects, whereas Muslims and other non-Orthodox Christians were perceived as untrustworthy, disloyal and unreliable (Khodarkovsky, 2004). Vulpius claims that since the 17th century anyone who did not follow Russian Orthodoxy was deemed a "foreigner" (inozemec) in Russia, and membership in the Russian people was predicated upon belonging to Russian Orthodoxy (Vulpius, 2017: 117).

A leading ideologue of Russian nationalism in the 19th century Mikhail Katkov pointed out that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) gave rise to Russian civilization and played a pivotal role in the emergence of Russia as a state (Katkov, 2009: 412). From this standpoint, no church other than the ROC could be considered a Russian national religious institution (Katkov, 2009: 414). As a result, whoever converted to Russian Orthodoxy would in turn be considered Russian (Vulpius, 2017: 117). Consequently, other religious faiths other than Russian Orthodoxy were regarded as the major source of "otherness" and "alienness" (Geraci, 1997: 139; Khodarkovsky, 1997: 10). Yet studies underline that conversion of non-Russians to Orthodoxy would terminate their "otherness" and an alien status as it would entail their inclusion and incorporation into the Russian nation (Khodarkovsky, 1997: 10). Taimasov draws attention to how during the imperial period religion acquired an ethno-confessional character, and the term "Muslim" came to be associated with "Tatars" (Taimasov, 2004: 88). Convinced of the superiority of the Russian way of life, imperial elites and ideologists of Russian colonialism believed that as soon as infidels were converted to Russian Orthodoxy, they would voluntarily become Russian (Dzalaeva, 2019: 39).

4. Results

Catherine II and Islam in the service of the empire

With the ascension of Catherine II to the throne in 1762, the Russian empire adopted distinctive and peculiar approaches to subdue and civilize the Kazakhs that virtually none of the post-Petrine enlightened governors and officials had envisioned. Having launched the policy of religious tolerance and the state patronage of Islam, Catherine II decided to put Islam and Muslims of the Volga-Ural region at the forefront of a civilizing mission in the Kazakh steppe. Catherine II's leveraging Islam as a political tool and as a powerful civilizing force was rather an anomaly and deviation from the conventional policy of Russian rulers since the time of Ivan the Terrible who had sought to civilize non-Russian subjects through converting them to Christianity. Catherine II recruited Tatar mullahs to spread the state-sanctioned Islam in the steppe and transform the Kazakhs into loyal and peaceful subjects, who would be expected to engage in farming, dwell in urban centers, and embrace Russian civilization, commerce and education (Crews, 2009: 193; Khodarkovsky, 2004: 175-176). Conceptualized as a disciplined monotheism with its institutions, norms, values and social organizations, Islam was expected to cultivate loyal subjects and eventually help extend Russian frontiers deep into the steppe (Crews, 2009: 193; Fisher, 1968: 543). Catherine II's choice of Islam as a civilizing force for subduing the Kazakhs and integrating the steppe into the empire may seem to be aberrant and unconventional, yet her Islamization policy of the Kazakhs was in fact envisioned as a transitional period from paganism to Christianity and Islam was expected to bring them to Russian Orthodoxy (Lysenko et al., 2014: 2010; Miropiev, 1901: 375). As a monotheistic religion, Islam was expected to encourage the Kazakhs to convert to Christianity as the final desired outcome of the empire's policy vis-à-vis the steppe (Miropiev, 1901: 376). Lysenko at al., point out that Islam was basically thought of as a transitional bridge from one monotheistic religion to another, namely Russian Orthodoxy Orthodoxy (Lysenko et al., 2014: 210).

According to the 1773 "Toleration of all Faiths" edict, the traditional state-orchestrated policy of persecution of Islam was substituted by religious tolerance, which meant in practice passive toleration of Islam and coexistence with the Muslim leaders across Russia, recruiting them, co-opting and putting into the state service (Fisher, 1968: 543). Despite strong opposition to the state policy of promoting Islam, empress Catherine II rejected the continuation of repressive practices and policies against Muslims, seeking to build a well-ordered and confessionally more inclusive empire. While the Tatar and Bashkir Muslims had long been subjects of the empire, the nomads in the Kazakhs steppe remained beyond the control of Russian frontier authorities. Besides having remained unruly, the Kazakhs of the Junior and Middle Hordes represented a great threat to the stability and security of the frontiers.

Russians struggled to subdue troublesome and rebellious subjects such as the Kalmyks, the Bashkirs and the Kazakhs of the Junior Horde, the culmination of which was the Pugachev uprising of 1773–1775, alien populations of inner areas were fiercely resisting Russian domination. As subduing the Kazakhs

through force was completely impractical and useless, a new generation of Russian elites under Catherine the Great designed a softer and more accommodating plan to subdue and pacify the nomad Kazakhs. In this regard, sedentarization or agrarianization of nomadic pastoralists of the steppe was placed at the core of Russian policy in the frontier areas. The eastward and southward movement of Russia since the mid-16th century led to its clash with numerous nomadic populations whose way of life, social organization and trajectories of development were incompatible with a highly organized settled Russian imperial society. Russian rulers sought to integrate nomadic subjects into the empire by erasing their traditional lifestyle and compelling them to shift to agriculture. The post-Petrine era Russian governors and officials had emphasized the inconsistency of nomadism with Russian policy and the need for sedentarization of the nomads of the steppe. Yet they failed to achieve their goal. To deal with the unruly and warlike nomads of the steppe, who continued to cause trouble for the empire in the frontier areas, Catherine the Great appointed Count Otto Heinrich Igelström (Iosif Andreyevich Igelstrom) of German-Swedish background from the Baltic region as the governor-general of Siberia and Ufa governorates in 1784. His paramount task was to protect the empire from nomadic raids and try to bring them under governance of Russia (Arkhiv grafa Igel'stroma..., 1886: 345-346).

To achieve the goal, Count Igelstrom sought to weaken, and if possible, abolish khan's authority in the Junior Horde, which was regarded as the main source of all trouble in Russian frontiers. To erode khan's power, Igelstrom sowed the discord between khan and sultans (noblemen). To pacify and civilize the Kazakh tribes along the frontier areas, empress Catherine II ordered to build mosques in Orenburg, Troitsk and other fortresses and attract the Kazakhs to these urban centers (Arkhiv grafa Igel'stroma..., 1886: 348). Catherine's tolerance and patronage of Islam led to the state-inspired institutionalization of Islam and Muslim clergy, in which both were embedded with the state policy of the empire. The establishment of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly (OMSA) or the Orenburg Muftiate by the order of empress Catherine in 1788 was the manifestation of the top-down state-orchestrated support and use of Islam as a necessary political tool to produce loyal and docile Muslim subjects across the empire (Lysenko et el., 2014: 209). Catherine II emphasized that the construction of mosques for Muslim subjects would also draw the Kazakh nomads living along Russian frontiers to Russian towns and fortresses (Arkhiv grafa Igel'stroma..., 1886: 348). In the empress's view, the use of softer methods to pacify the nomads, mitigate their wild customs and encourage them to shift to a sedentary lifestyle was better and preferable than any coercive strict measures (Arkhiv grafa Igel'stroma..., 1886: 348).

Besides constructing mosques in fortresses along Russian frontiers, the empress ordered to build Tatar schools modeled after the Kazan Tatar schools, and without delay, establish caravanserais or state-owned guest houses for the benefit of trading Muslims (Arkhiv grafa Igel'stroma..., 1886: 348). Thus, Catherine the Great opted for soft power resources rather than coercion and a military approach to bring the nomads of the steppe to their knees. Catherine's soft power policy vis-à-vis the Kazakh nomads was reflected in her order to supply various Kazakh tribes with Tatar mullahs not only to the benefit of the nomads, but also in the interest of Russia (Arkhiv grafa Igel'stroma..., 1886: 349). Hence, Catherine II instructed Count Igelstrom to recruit among the Kazan Tatars the most reliable, trusted and educated clergy to serve the interests of Russia in frontiers and among the nomad Kazakhs. Besides teaching Islamic law to the Kazakhs and educate them to become devout Muslims, these Tatar mullahs were obliged to instill loyalty to Russia in them, refrain them from raiding Russian territories and encourage them to cease predation within Russian borders (Arkhiv grafa Igel'stroma..., 1886: 349).

The jurisdiction of the Orenburg Muftiat initially extended to all Muslims in Russia, including the Kazakh steppe, which along with the state-instigated construction of mosques, Islamic religious schools (madrasas) and other establishments along Russian frontiers testified to the state patronage and the administrative spread of Islam in the steppe in order to facilitate the integration of the nomad Kazakhs into the empire (Lysenko at al., 2014: 209). Lysenko at al., attribute the top-down state-orchestrated spread of Islam in the steppe under Catherine II and her successors to the three key objectives: first, integration of the nomads with Russia; second, the alleviation of interethnic tensions between the Kazakhs of the Junior Horde and Muslim populations of the Volga-Ural region; third, Islamization of the nomads was conceived as a large-scale kulturträger (cultural) project (Lysenko at al., 2014: 209-210). According to this civilizing project, the state-inspired spread of Islam and construction of Islamic institutions in fortresses were intended to draw the Kazakhs to urban centers more often and eventually encourage them to shift to farming (Lysenko at al., 2014: 210).

Dashkovskiy and Zhanbosinova view Islam spread by imperial Russia as 'Russified Islam' through which Russian authorities laid the foundation for a religious educational system in the steppe (Dashkovskiy, Zhanbosinova, 2020: 59). The state-orchestrated spread of Islam among the nomadic population in the steppe induced the transition of the Kazakhs from the shamanistic-Tengrian stage to the Muslim-Russian stage (Dashkovskiy, Zhanbosinova, 2020: 59). Catherine's Islamization policy in the steppe had ultimately produced little outcome, which had neither put an end to the Kazakh belligerency nor made them abandon nomadism in favor of sedentarism and agriculture. Beneficiaries of the spread of Islam in the steppe were supposed to be both the nomad Kazakhs and the empire. According to the policy

of Catherine's spread of Islam among the Kazakhs, Islamization of the Kazakhs were expected to produce obedient and submissive subjects.

Christianization policy in the steppe and its failure (1867 – beginning of the 20th century)

Despite the efforts of Catherine II and her successors to pacify and integrate the nomad Kazakhs into the empire, such endeavors failed to generate the desired outcomes. Hence, by the mid-19th century, Russian political elites, intellectuals and Orthodox clergy had become deeply disillusioned with the official religious tolerance policy and the state patronage of Islam. Leading Russian figures came to see Islam and the Tatar presence in the steppe as the culprit behind the empire's failure to civilize the Kazakhs and bring them under its control. As a result, the 1860s was the turning point for the steppe and Turkestan as they both were eventually entirely conquered and subjugated by the Russian empire. Russia applied two different policy approaches to newly conquered territories in Central Asia. On the one hand, with respect to Turkestan, considering its cultural specificities, settled and semi-nomadic populations with strong adherence to Islam, the Russian administration in Turkestan led by the first governor-general Konstantin von Kaufman designed and applied the policy of benign non-intervention (Carrère d'Encausse, 2007: 93-94).

On the other hand, in relation to the Kazakh steppe, the empire applied a different policy approach, aimed at eliminating Islam and the Tatar influence, separating the steppe from the Orenburg Muftiate and seeking conversion of the nomads to Christianity. Yet to design a more appropriate strategy towards the steppe, in 1865 the Steppe Commission was instituted, which functioned until 1868 when the "Provisional Statute for the Administration of Uralsk, Turgai, Akmolinsk and Semipalatinsk Oblasts" came into effect. Uyama (2007: 27) calls attention to how voices of support for proselytizing the nomads, diluting the influence of Islam and the Tatars and strengthening the Russian political and cultural domination in the steppe prevailed within the Steppe Commission. Drawing upon authoritative accounts penned by Levshin, Valikhanov and other influential figures, the Commission denounced the state patronage of Islam and the policy of Islamization of the nomads undertaken by the Catherine II and highlighted the need for limiting and banning the activities of Tatar mullahs (Levshin, 1832, 52-54; Lysenko, 2014: 222; Uyama, 2007: 27; Valikhanov, 1985: 71). With respect to Christian proselytization in the steppe, although it was argued that it was still premature and risky to spread the gospel among the Kazakhs, the Commission decided that the time was ripe for propagating Orthodoxy (Uyama, 2007: 27).

As an authoritative indigenous and imperial expert, Shokan Valikhanov suggested that all the obstacles to the penetration and entrenchment of the empire's benevolent measures, initiatives and new institutions in the steppe ought to be eliminated to make room for the introduction of the Kazakhs to Russian education and civilization (Valikhanov, 1985: 71-72). Dismissing the feasibility of a reformation of a religion that predicated upon "the savage and wild customs of the sixth century nomadic Arabs", Valikhanov called for the removal of Islam, prohibition of the activities of Tatar clergy, dwindling and nullifying the role of Islamic institutions and law, and emphasizing the primacy of the customary law (adat) over the sharia law (Crews, 2009: 218-219). Taking into account Valikhanov's claims, the 1865–1868 Steppe Commission and the Legislation of October 1868 paved the legal way for the top-down state-orchestrated political integration of the steppe into the empire (Crews, 2009: 221).

Unlike Turkestan where the governor-general Konstantin von Kaufman applied the policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of Muslim communities, Russian bureaucrats in the steppe, in particular Nikolai Kryzhanovsky, the Governor-General of the Orenburg region, held a tough stance on Islam and was committed to waging a resolute and irreconcilable war against Islam and the Tatar cultural influence in the steppe. Irked by the ethnic and religious diversity of the empire, Kryzhanovsky exhibited his eagerness to translate anti-Islamic and anti-Tatar discourses into practice. In his report pertaining to the period between February 1865 and March 1866, Kryzhanovsky indicated such diversity as the key source and root of all evil and highlighted the need for reducing religious diversity to root out that evil (Dyakin, 1998: 809). Underlying the impossibility of compelling Muslims and pagans to convert to Orthodoxy, Kryzhanovsky suggested that "We must not allow the propaganda of Islam and schism to the detriment of the dominant church" (Dyakin, 1998: 809). To disrupt and eliminate the Muslim-Tatar influence in the steppe, Kryzhanovsky recommended appointing at the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly a Russian official whose duty would be to oversee civil and religious activities of that body, introducing writing and reading exams in Russian for prospective mullahs and parish registers in Russian, reducing the number of mosques and Muslim clergy, disseminating Russian education through Tatar schools, and denying the requests of Muslims for pilgrimage to Mecca (Dyakin, 1998: 810).

Kryzhanovsky portrayed Islam and its followers as evil enemies of Russia (Dyakin, 1998: 810). In his report to the Minister of Internal Affairs Pyotr Valuyev "On measures to combat the spread of Islam in the eastern part of Russia", on January 31, 1867, Kryzhanovsky underlined the absence of fanaticism among the Kazakhs and their receptiveness to Russian enlightenment (Materialy po istorii SSSR..., 1936: 202). To shield the Kazakhs from religious fanaticism and its harmful effects, Kryzhanovsky forwarded several underlying proposals: merging schools for Kazakh children in fortresses with schools for Russian children where the teaching ought to be entrusted to Russian priests, with the exception of Tatar literacy and writing, all subjects ought to be taught in Russian; instead of the Koran, Kazakh instructors ought to be obliged to teach only certain prayers, and Orthodox education should be introduced so that Kazakh children could learn the dogmas of Orthodoxy; proscribing Tatar and Bashkir mullahs to educate Kazakhs; forbidding the residence

of religious fanatics from Turkestan and Tatarstan in the steppe; banning Tatar and Bashkir clerks at Kazakhs officials (Dyakin, 1998: 813; Materialy po istorii SSSR..., 1936: 203-205).

With the full incorporation of the Kazakh steppe in the 1860s, Russian authorities sought to remove all barriers to Russian civilizing mission. Islam and the Tatar presence in the steppe came to be seen as the main threat and impediment to Christianization and Russification of the Kazakhs. Considering Islam as the most fanatical religion in Russia, Vasily Grigoriev, the head of the Orenburg Border Commission and a prominent Russian orientalist, portrayed Islam as evil and a grave danger to the empire and its civilizing mission in the Kazakh steppe (Sartori and Shabley, 2024: 129). As a result, the fight against Islam and the Tatar cultural influence remained key issues in the policy of Russia towards the Kazakh steppe up to the empire's twilight and demise. According to the 1868 "Provisional Statute for the Administration of Uralsk, Turgai, Akmolinsk and Semipalatinsk Oblasts", the Kazakh steppe was removed from the jurisdiction of the Orenburg Muftiate, only one mullah was permitted for a volost, who ought to be an ethnic Kazakh with adequate competences in the Russian language, and mullahs would be appointed and dismissed by the oblast governor (Zakonodatel'nye akty..., 2015: 143-144). It should be noted that the 1891 "Regulations on the management of Akmola, Semipalatinsk, Semirechye, Ural and Turgai regions" replicated the terms of the 1868 Provisional Statute, which stipulated that the nomads were allowed to have mullahs, one per volost; mullahs ought to be Kazakhs who were appointed and removed from the office by military governors; the construction of mosques would be permitted by governors-general and the Minister of Internal Affairs (Arapov, 2001: 184).

While implementing a new policy in the steppe, Russians positioned themselves as the defenders and guardians of the pure ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identities of the Kazakh from dangers and threats posed by the Tatars, Bashkirs, Bukharans, Khivans, and other Muslim groups. A prominent Russian scholar Remnev considers Russians attitudes towards the Kazakhs as condescending and paternalistic (Remnev, 2006: 26). Remnev points out that on the one hand, Russians put greater efforts to salvage the Kazakhs from the "alien" reactionary influence of Islam and Tatars, and on the other, Russian concern for the welfare of the Kazakhs was conceived as a transitional period to full Russification of the Kazakhs (Remnev, 2006: 26). By displacing Islam and the Tatar culture from the steppe as powerful competing forces, Russians sought to remove all barriers and clear the way for the unrestricted, unhindered, persistent and sustained cultural and religious assimilation of the Kazakhs. The bottom line of this intent and policy was to put an end to all trouble emanating from the steppe by subjecting the Kazakhs to Christianization, sedentarization and Russification. In the end the Kazakh culture, language and way of life were expected to succumb to a higher civilization, being curtailed, limited and marginalized in its scope, use and space. Thus, the end of goal of Russian paternalism and patronage of the Kazakhs was to eliminate the existing hurdles between them, marginalize the Kazakh culture and replace it with Russian culture through education, religious conversion and cultural assimilation (Geins, 1897: 212; Remnev, 2006).

Russian officials claimed that an extent of Russian success in the steppe depended upon the level of religious fanaticism and Tatarization of the nomads (Materialy po istorii SSSR..., 1936: 337). In this case, Russian authorities emphasized the susceptibility of the Kazakhs to Russian influence. Yet at the same time, they noted that due to the government's policy since Catherine II, the nomads of the steppe had substantially been Islamized and Tatarized (Carrère d'Encausse, 2007: 102-103). In his report of October 1876 to the tsar Alexander II, Count Dmitry Tolstoy, the Minister of Public Education, stressed the need to take necessary measures to put an end to further Islamization and Tatarization of the Kazakhs and prevent them from merging with the Tatars (Materialy po istorii SSSR..., 1936: 338). Highlighting the ineffectiveness of missionary activities of the Orthodox clergy, Count Tolstoy suggested that the only viable and effective way to bring the nomads closer to the Russian people was to spread Russian education (Materialy po istorii SSSR..., 1936: 338-339). Arguing that the main task of Russian authorities was to safeguard the Kazakhs from Tatarization, Count Tolstoy suggested exploiting the lack of writing system in the steppe for the interests of Russia. Specifically, as in Tolstoy's view the Kazakhs lacked their own writing system, he advocated introducing the Russian alphabet into the Kazakh language and cultivating a distinct Kazakh writing system premised upon the Cyrillic script in order to dismantle all connections between the Kazakhs and the Tatars (Materialy po istorii SSSR..., 1936: 338-339).

To translate his ideas into actions, Count Tolstoy engaged leading Russian orientalists and pedagogue missionaries such as Nikolay Ilminsky in spreading Russian education among the Kazakhs. Besides sharing Tolstoy's views, Nikolay Ilminsky harbored deep anti-Islamic and anti-Tatar sentiment, fearing that the Tatars may weaponize Muslim institutions, such as the Orenburg Muftiate, to unify all Muslims of the empire against Russia (Crews, 2009: 226-227). Therefore, Ilminsky advocated the removal of the Kazakh steppe from the Orenburg Muftiate yet kept complaining that the hearts of the Kazakhs were still drawn to the muftiate by an old habit (Crews, 2009: 227). Moreover, Ilminsky's pedagogical approach entailed not a secular education, but rather a religious education (Campbell, 2017: 79; Uyama, 2007: 30-31). Uyama highlights that the governor-general of Turkestan von Kaufman rejected Ilminsky's education approach on the grounds that there was too much emphasis upon Orthodox education, which would be resented by Muslim populations of Turkestan (Uyama, 2007: 30-31). Although von Kaufman objected to Christianization policy in Turkestan, he seems to have been in favor of Orthodox proselytism in the steppe (Uyama, 2007: 31).

Ilminsky, Grigoriev and other leading orientalists, missionaries and bureaucrats sought to increasingly cultivate and forge a separate distinct national Kazakh identity and consciousness (Campbell, 2017: 72; Grigoriev, 1874: 16-17). Vasily Grigoriev insisted that the Kazakhs ought to be divorced from Islam and the Tatar cultural influence. In this case, he warned the Russian authorities that if the Russian government failed to weaken the Tatar influence in the steppe, Islam would establish its dominance among the Kazakhs (Sartori and Shabley, 2024: 130). Besides Russian high-ranking officials such as Count Tolstoy, and Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the Over-Procurator of the Holy Synod, the Orthodox clergy were deeply committed to the empire's policy of Christianization and Russification of all non-Russian alien populations (Geraci, 2001: 286; McCarthy, 1973: 316). Graduates of the Kazan Theological Academy and the Kazan Teachers Seminary founded by Nikolay Ilminsky were engaged in the missionary activities in the Kazakh steppe between 1881 and 1917 (Geraci, 2001: 286). Although Count Tolstoy, Pobedonostsev, Ilminsky and their proponents advocated the use of languages of alien peoples in missionary activities and in conducting Orthodox religious services, as fervent nationalists, they claimed that conversion of an alien to Orthodoxy would straight away make him a Russian (McCarthy, 1973: 316-317). Moreover, they asserted that in the long run indigenous languages and cultures would disappear and be replaced by dominant Russian culture (McCarthy, 1973: 317).

Besides nurturing a distinct Kazakh ethnic identity and establishing a network of Kazakh-Russian schools across the steppe, Russian authorities and Orthodox clergy long advocated the need to initiate missionary activities in the steppe (Lysenko, 2009: 150). In 1881, the Holy Synod established the Kazakh (Kirghiz) Spiritual Mission with the purpose of spreading the gospel in the steppe and converting its nomadic population to Christianity. Nikolay Ilminsky and his pupils contributed greatly to the Kazakh missions (Campbelle, 2017: 70). Vladimir Senkovsky, one of the founders and the head of the Kirghiz Spiritual Mission in 1882-1891, outlined the main task of the Kirghiz Spiritual Mission: "to raise the banner of Christ in the Kirghiz steppe and propagate Orthodoxy there" (Belyaev, 1900: 294). Senkovsky, noted that the traditional foundations of the Kazakh way of life were subjected to significant disruption under the influence of the 1868 Provisional Statute and were rendered inapplicable to a modern life (Belyaev, 1900: 290-291). As one of the fervent proponents of evangelizing the nomads, Senkovsky passionately advocated active dissemination of Orthodoxy in the steppe to achieve spiritual affinity between the Russians and the Kazakhs, which would facilitate assimilation of aliens with the empire (Belyaev, 1900: 292). The Kirghiz mission was fully supported by Russian authorities, in particular by Gerasim Kolpakovsky, the first governor-general of the Steppe, who waged war against Islam and the Tatar presence in the steppe, and at the same time, implemented Christianization policy of the Kazakhs (Uyama, 2007: 32).

Yet the concerted efforts of Russian authorities and Orthodox missionaries to alienate the Kazakhs from Islam and to bring them closer to Christianity through conversion and faith-based education produced little outcomes (Alpyspaeva et al., 2019; Lysenko et al., 2014: 231-232). Sadvokassova et al., ascribe the failure and setbacks for missionary efforts to the vastness of the steppe and the nomadic way of life of the Kazakhs, which created serious impediments to the spread of Christianity (Sadvokassova et al., 2022: 135-136). McCarthy (McCarthy, 1973: 320) points out that despite the top-down state-orchestrated measures and policies to displace and eradicate Islam and the Tatar cultural influence, Islam's impact upon lives of the Kazakhs grew considerably and Russian missionaries were unable to compete with Tatar and Bukharan mullahs (Crews, 2009: 227; Lysenko, 2008: 151). McCarthy attributes the success of Muslim missionaries in the steppe to their cultural flexibility and ability to go native (McCarthy, 1973: 320). Yet Russians missionaries lacked such indigenous cultural capital and explicitly tended to exhibit racial prejudices against the Kazakhs, even against those who converted to Orthodoxy (McCarthy, 1973: 323-324).

Besides failing to convert the Kazakhs to Orthodoxy en masse, Russian missionaries were forced to struggle to safeguard Christians from the influence of Muslim Kazakhs (Lysenko, 2008: 153; Lysenko, 2016: 50). Russian missionaries documented numerous cases of conversion to Islam by Russians (Crews, 2009: 227; Lysenko, 2016: 50). Literature draws attention to the fact that Orthodox missions in the steppe were relatively successful in baptizing mostly those Kazakhs who became impoverished (known as 'jataks', 'baigush' and 'eginshi') and unable to continue their traditional nomadic lifestyle (Belyaev, 1900: 293-294; Rossiya..., 1903: 222). Yet even such limited accomplishments of Orthodox missions in the steppe turned out to be untenable due to the fact that those destitute Kazakhs who came to embrace Orthodoxy, in most cases, tended to do so for financial and material incentives (Rossiya, 1903: 222). In this regard, Orthodox missionaries documented a multitude of cases of their reversion to Islam (Rossiya..., 1903: 222). The governor-general of the Steppe Gerasim Kolpakovsky put a greater emphasis on this category of the nomads, whose conversion to Orthodoxy in his view "will make them wealthier and more civilized... over time they will form such a force that their compatriots will bow down to them" (Belyaev, 1900: 295-296). In Kolpakovsky's vision, the conversion of one category of the nomads to Orthodoxy would trigger the mass shift of all Kazakhs to Christianity. This was in turn a deeply flawed conviction. After the release of the 1905 Law on Religious Freedom (Arapov, 2001: 175), the number of neophyte Kazakhs who wanted to revert to Islam soared.

To extinguish Islam and the sharia in Kazakh society, Russian authorities removed the Kazakhs from the Orenburg Muftiate, prohibited the activities of Tatar and other Muslim mullahs in the steppe, and endeavored to replace the Islamic law with the Kazakh customary law of adat. Yet all these measures failed to

produce the expected results. Although the dominant role of Islam and Tatar missionaries had been shattered by anti-Islam and anti-Tatar policies, it was reported that the Kazakhs insisted that Russian authorities ought to respect their religious liberty by stressing the need to appeal to Islamic scholars and invoke the Islamic law (Crews, 2009: 226). Moreover, the Kazakhs demanded that Russian authorities ought to allow them to either have their own Muslim spiritual body or join the Orenburg Muftiate (Dyakin, 1998: 955-959). Although the Kazakhs of the Bukey Horde had remained under the jurisdiction of the Orenburg Muftiate, their religious freedom was considerably limited. In 1906, in their petition to the State Duma, the Kazakhs of the Bukey Horde requested that they be permitted to remain under the jurisdiction of the Orenburg Muftiate; a lack of knowledge of Russian should not be an impediment to the appointment of mullahs; the Orenburg Muftiate ought to be the supreme body on religious affairs without interference of the Russian authorities; the establishment of mosques and madrasas ought to be sanctioned only by the Muftiate; no compulsion to study Russian as it would hinder the meticulous study of religious dogmas and for those who wish to learn Russian there were other public institutions; those Kazakhs who received secondary and tertiary education, ought to be equated with Russians in their rights to public positions; mosques and madrasas ought to be legally equal to those of Orthodox churches and temples; banning the import of alcohol beverages to the Horde; Muslim soldiers must not to be fed pork, wine and other forbidden items (Dyakin, 1998: 822).

The 1905 Law on Religious Freedom reaffirmed that Russia pursued politically motivated objectives by removing the Kazakhs from the jurisdiction of the Orenburg Muftiate in accordance with the 1868 Provisional Statute, specifically diluting the role of Islam in the steppe and dismantling the spiritual connection of Muslim populations with the Kazakh nomads were indicated as the primary goals (Arapov, 2001: 180). The 1868 Provisional Statute and other legislations were intended to reverse Catherine's policy, placing severe restrictions on Islam, Muslim missionaries and violating the Kazakhs' religious liberties (Bortnikova et al., 2016: 18-19). Despite the methodical and systematic anti-Islam and anti-Tatar campaign of Russian authorities and placing severe legal restrictions and constraints on the religious liberty of the Kazakhs and other Muslim populations across the empire, all attempts of both the Russian government and Orthodox missionaries to eradicate Islam and evangelize the Kazakhs ended in failure (Arapov, 2001: 290-293). At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Islam became an integral part of ethnic identity of the Kazakhs, who came to view Russian assaults on Islam as an attack on their identity, culture and way of life. In this regard, religion became a key identity marker in the steppe and an ethnically divisive barrier between the Russians and the Kazakhs, hindering the process of cultural rapprochement and acculturation (Lysenko, 2008: 154). As a result, the Kazakhs came to perceive Christianity and missionary activities of Orthodox clergy as the manifestation of Russian colonialism and imperial policy, and Islam became a defensive reaction of Kazakh society to the process of colonization (Lysenko, 2008: 154). Thus, although Russia was able to incorporate the Kazakh steppe into the empire, all attempts of cultural and religious integration of the nomads into the general imperial space were less effective.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study have indicated that religion played a central role in Russian history throughout the 18th and beginning of the 20th centuries. After the adoption of the Enlightenment ideas under Peter I, Russia positioned itself as a European nation and part of European Christian civilization, who was destined to spread European values, civilization and Christianity to various alien populations of Asia. Russian political elites, intellectuals and Orthodox clergy were convinced that "brutality and savagery" of non-Russian alien populations could be tamed through their conversion to Christianity. Russian imperial elites and ideologists of Russian colonialism pursued cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious unification and homogenization of the empire. According to their conviction, sooner or later conquered and subdued alien peoples would embrace a superior Russian culture, way of life and Christianity, while abandoning their native cultures and religious faiths. An analysis of historical data and relevant literature has shown that civilization, Christianity and Russification constituted the core of Russian policy vis-à-vis alien populations.

Yet the study has demonstrated that various alien populations under Russian rule, including the Kazakhs, were not willing to give up their native cultures, ethnic identities and religious faiths in favor of a superior Russian civilization. Although tsarist Russia was able to conquer and colonize multiple non-Russian alien populations, the Kazakhs stood apart owing to their mobile nomadic lifestyle and belligerence which caused great trouble to Russia's security and stability in frontier areas for a long time. Russian rulers came to perceive nomadism as a key source of trouble and thereby sedentarization of the Kazakhs occupied a prominent place in Russian civilizing mission up to the demise of the empire. As the submission of the Junior and Middle Hordes to Russian rule in the 1730s was symbolic and the Kazakhs remained beyond Russian control, Russian political elites were deeply preoccupied with pacifying and civilizing these nomads. As a result, Catherine II initiated the policy of religious tolerance and state patronage of Islam. In this regard, from the end of the 18th century and up to the 1860s, Russia instrumentalized Islam to bring the Kazakhs under its control. Yet as the results of the study have shown, Catherine II's policy of pacifying and civilizing the Kazakh through Islam was conceived as a transitional period to Christianity. According to Catherine's vision, Islam was expected to lead the Kazakhs to Russian Orthodoxy.

However, Catherine's policy backfired. Russian political elites, intellectuals and clergy raised the alarm in the 1820–1830s that the efforts to civilize the Kazakhs through Islam were to the detriment of Russia. Leading Russian figures at that time lamented that Catherine's policy failed to bring the Kazakhs under Russian rule, and at the same time, it led to Islamization and Tatarization of the nomads. This in turn resulted in a drastic policy change in the 1860s from Islamization of the Kazakhs to Christianization policy. Pursuing the goal of eradicating Islam and the Tatar cultural influence in the steppe, Russian authorities focused on civilizing the Kazakhs through Russian education and proselytization. In the 1880s, the Holy Synod established the Kirghiz missions with the intent to spread the gospel among the Kazakhs and bring them to Christianity. Yet missionary activities of Orthodox clergy in the steppe generated little outcome. The failure of proselytizing efforts could be ascribed to the shortcomings of Russian missionaries, who lacked indigenous cultural capital and linguistic competences. At the same time, the Kazakhs themselves resisted proselytizing attempts of Orthodox clergy, viewing them as agents of Russian colonialism. Moreover, Russian assaults on Islam were perceived by the Kazakhs as an attack upon their identity, culture and religious faith. Since Islam had long been embedded within Kazakh culture and society, Christianization policy yielded negligible results.

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