

**ISLAMIC AUTHORITY AND THE RUSSIAN
LANGUAGE:
STUDIES ON TEXTS FROM EUROPEAN
RUSSIA, THE NORTH CAUCASUS AND
WEST SIBERIA**

Edited by Alfrid K. Bustanov and Michael Kemper

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RUSSIAN MUSLIMS: A MISGUIDED SECT, OR THE VANGUARD OF THE RUSSIAN UMMA?

Renat Bekkin¹

On Terminology

In 1881 Ismail Gasprinskii (1851-1914) published his famous work "Russian Islam: Thoughts, Notes and Observations." In this essay the Crimean Tatar "father of Jadidism" called upon the authorities of the Russian Empire to work more towards the rapprochement between ethnic Russians and Russian Muslims. The best instrument for achieving this goal was, in his mind, the development of education among the faithful in their native language. "The Russian Muslim community [*musul'manstvo*] does not know, does not feel the interests of the Russian fatherland [*otechestvo*]", Gasprinskii wrote, "it is almost ignorant about the fatherland's pain and joy, it does not understand what the Russian state is generally striving for, its ideas. Their ignorance of the Russian spoken language keeps them in isolation from Russian thought and literature, not to mention that they find themselves in the highest degree of isolation from human civilization in general [*obshchechelovecheskaia kul'tura*]."²

What Ismail-Bey subsumed under "Russian Muslims" was the representatives of all Muslim peoples who were subjects of the Russian Empire. Here we have to remember that in his time the term "nationality" did not yet exist. The only population census that was ever carried out in the Russian Empire, in 1897, took

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² Ismail Gasprinskii, "Russkoe musul'manstvo. Mysli, zametki, nabliudeniia", in: I. Gasprinskii, *Rossii i Vostok* (Kazan, 1993), p. 21.

into consideration only the confessions and the native languages of the individual subjects. According to this census, Russia counted a population of 125,640,021 persons, of whom 13,906,972 were Muslims (which amounts to approximately 11 percent). The Muslim population of the Empire comprised representatives of various peoples: Azerbaijanis ("Transcaucasian Tatars"), Bashkirs, Kirgizs, Tatars (of the Volga, the Crimea and Siberia), Turkmens, Uzbeks and others.

The majority of the Muslim population was speaking Turkic languages. This allowed Gasprinskii to regard the Muslims of Russia as one ethno-cultural entity and to discuss the problems and the perspectives of the Russian Muslims as a whole, without differentiating them into individual peoples. He used the adjective "Russian" [*ruskii*] to denote their position as subjects to the Empire, and by using it he did not express any intention to see the "Russian Muslims" assimilated by the Russians. To the contrary, Gasprinskii was decidedly against any Russification: "But while the current doctrine ignores all sympathies [that Muslims feel towards the Russian Empire] in the political field, and refers only to issues of expediency and usefulness of the policy of Russification in our Fatherland, we do not see any justification for a policy that is supporting the absorption of one people [*narodnost*] by another, if the term 'Russification' [*rusifikatsiia*] has indeed to be understood as an absorption of the other peoples of the Empire by the Russians."³ Such a policy, according to Gasprinskii, will only push the Muslims away from the process of coming closer to the Russians, and will increase the lack of mutual understanding.

In our days, if we refer to a representative of one of Russia's peoples who traditionally confess Islam as a "Russian Muslim", then we at least risk to be misunderstood. "Not *ruskii* but *rossiiskii*" – "not a Russian but belonging to the Russian Federation" – will be what we get to hear in reply. Equally absurd would it be to speak of "a Russian Tatar" [*ruskii tatarin*], or "a Russian Kumyk". In the eyes of the representatives of ethnic minorities that have not yet lost their identity, the word "Russian" is associated with belonging to the Russian people.

³ Ibid., p. 31.

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That Gasprinskii's expression cannot be used for the Muslims who are citizens of contemporary Russia results also from the fact that even formally these Muslims do not appear any more as one united entity. The representatives of the Muslim peoples put their national interests above the idea of Islamic unity. The elites of the Turkic peoples would also not rally behind the concept of Panturkism. This can be demonstrated by the example of the Bashkirization of the Tatar population in contemporary Bashkortostan.

But, as happens so often, the old term is not left without an owner, and in our days it obtained a new meaning. Over the past ten years we observe a growing number of ethnic Russians accepting Islam. As the newly-converted are very active in society, the term "Russian Muslims" (*"russkie musul'mane"*) has made its entry into the mass media as a designation for the ethnic Russians who converted to Islam. At the same time it has become customary to designate the representatives of peoples who have traditionally been confessing Islam as ethnic Muslims.⁴

So who are those Russian Muslims? Only people of Russian nationality or also the Russophone representatives of other peoples? And what about persons of mixed family backgrounds (*polukrovki*)? In this contribution we adopt the position of the National Organization of Russian Muslims (*Natsional'naia assotsiatsiia russkikh musul'man*, NORM): Russian is who regards himself as such.⁵

When they energetically burst into the contemporary Muslim life in Russia, the Russian Muslims soon proved to be an independent, self-sufficient force. Many observers have pointed out that the isolation of this group is a response to the lack of recognition that they experienced from the side of the ethnic Muslims. This observation is partly true. But the attempt to create a Russian "Nation of Islam" led to a situation where some ethnic Muslims began to regard the Russian Muslims as a lost sect (*zabludshaia sekta*) that put nationality higher than religion. By contrast, the Russian Muslims themselves – at least those who united in

⁴ There is one more category, that of practicing Muslims, that is, those who at least perform the major Islamic rituals. This category would include ethnic Muslims as well as Russian Muslims. Worth noting is that among the Russian Muslims the percentage of practicing believers is significantly higher than among ethnic Muslims.

⁵ A closer discussion of NORM will follow below.

NORM – regard themselves as the elite of Russia's *umma*, its intellectual vanguard. As is often the case in such situations, the truth is somewhere in the middle. No matter how one would look at this question, one thing is obvious: the Russian Muslims represent a phenomenon that deserves a very diligent study.

What we have so far is above all the attempts of some Russian Muslims to look at themselves from the inside.⁶ For obvious reasons these evaluations cannot pretend to be objective. Outside observers of Russian Islam have either provided journalistic materials that include the biographies of converts (*neofity*),⁷ or they produced scientific studies from the field of sociology that analyze the reasons why Russians accept Islam.⁸

In this article we will look at the phenomenon of Russian Muslims from a historical perspective, with a focus on institutions, on the major forms in which the Russian Muslims consolidated – not only politically (in NORM) but also in the field of literature (in the journal *Chetki*, “Chain of Pearls”, “Rosary Beads”); we also attempt at identifying the factors that shape the place of the Russian Muslims within the contemporary *umma*.

The First Muslim: A Very Fierce Besermen...

According to the historian of Russia Dmitrii (Ahmad) Makarov, already for the period before the Golden Horde (the Mongol Empire's successor state that ruled over most of what is now European Russia) we see that representatives of the Slavic and Finno-Ugric peoples of Eastern Europe developed intensive contacts

⁶ See, for instance, A. Ezhova, “Russkii islam: sredy, motivy, tendentsii i perspektivy”, *Chetki*, 2011, 1-2 (11-12), 102-125 [translated in the present volume]; G. Babich, “Protivostoianie: ‘etnicheskie’ protiv ‘russkikh’”, *Chetki*, 2011, 1-2 (11-12), 126-135; I. Alekseev, “Russkii islam: mezhdru teologii i istoriei”, *Chetki*, 2011, 1-2 (11-12), 136-141; A. Pobedonostseva, “CHERCHEZ L'HOMME”, *Chetki* 2011, 1-2 (11-12), 142-146; and others.

⁷ See for example A. Soldatov, “Islam po-russki”, *Ogonek*, 2005, No. 48, 4 December, www.ogoniok.com/4922/2/; O. Karaabagi, “Novye russkie musul'many”, *Nezavisimaia gazeta: NG-Religii*, 2006, No. 6 (178), 5 April, at: http://religion.ng.ru/islam/2000-04-26/4_new_muslims.html; and others.

⁸ Iu.M. Kobishchanov, “Musul'mane Rossii, korennye musul'mane i russkie-musul'mane”, *Rossia i musul'manskii mir*, 2003, No. 10, 36-51; No. 11, 24-48; S.V. Kardinskaia, “Russkie musul'mane: interpassivnost' sovremennoi religioznosti”, *Vestnik Udmurtskogo universiteta, Seriya Filosofii – Psikhologiiia – Pedagogika*, 2010, fascicle 1, 66-69; and others.

with the population of Volga Bulgharia, the Muslim principality in the Volg region that is believed to have accepted Islam in the early 10th century. Some groups of the Eastern Slavs and of the Finno-Ugric peoples even settled in Volga Bulgharia's towns. Makarov also suggests that the Karolingian coins that have been found on the territory of Volga Bulgaria might have been brought there not only as war spoils but also by Scandinavians who served under the Bulghar rulers.⁹

The first documentary evidence of Russians (that is, Orthodox) who accepted Islam refers to the middle of the 13th century. The Chronicle of Iaroslav mentions the killing, in 1262, of a monk (*chernets*) by the name of Izosima (Zosima) who was following Islam: "being a monk, he turned away from the Christian faith to become a very fierce Muslim (*besermen zol vel'mi*)."¹⁰ Little is known about this person; perhaps he was even from the Finno-Ugric population or a Turk. What is important is that he was a Christian Orthodox monk who embraced Islam in the mid-thirteenth century. Makarov emphasizes that this was Izosima's conscious choice, and that it was not motivated by the quest for any benefits, since the Orthodox clergy enjoyed huge privileges in the Golden Horde.¹¹

Izosima served in Iaroslavl under the local governor of the Golden Horde. The famous Lavrentii Chronicle testifies that the former monk helped to collect the tribute from the local population, and that the envoy of the Khan had given him the necessary authority for this.¹² It was the increase of these taxes – and not that Izosima might have suppressed the Christian faith in the area – that led, in 1262, to the rebellion in Iaroslavl in the course of which the former monk was killed. Such rebellions were frequent in the 1260s, as already the Soviet historian A.N. Nasonov mentioned.¹³ The chronicler does not hide his hatred for Izosima: he

⁹ A. Makarov, "Russkie musul'mane v istorii Rossii", *Chetki*, 2011, 1-2 (11-12), 153. Makarov comes to a number of more bold conclusions that are not supported by factual evidence but that appear only as logical conclusions based on a good knowledge of the medieval history of Eurasia.

¹⁰ V.N. Tatishchev, *Istoriia Rossiiskaia* (Moscow; Leningrad, 1965), vol. 5, 44.

¹¹ Makarov, "Russkie musul'mane v istorii Rossii", 154.

¹² Tatishchev, *Istoriia Rossiiskaia*, vol. 5, 44.

¹³ A.N. Nasonov, *Mongoly i Rus': Istoriia tatarskoi politiki na Rusi* (Moscow; Leningrad, 1940), 17, 53.

calls him a “drinker” and a “blasphemous person”, and he displays his satisfaction about the fact that Izosima’s corpse “was eaten by dogs and ravens.”¹⁴

The Golden Horde’s religious policies towards the Orthodox Church did not even change in 1313, when, under Khan Uzbek, Islam became the Horde’s state religion. As before, the Horde did not set up any impediments to pagans who wanted to embrace Orthodox Christianity. In the same year of 1313, when the Great Prince of Vladimir, Mikhail Iaroslavich, and the Metropolitan Petr came to the Horde (in order to display their submission to the Khan) they obtained the confirmation that all previous rights of the Russian Orthodox Church remained in force, including that the servants of the Church did not have to pay taxes. It was confirmed that anybody who insulted the Church would receive capital punishment: “All ranks of the Orthodox Church, and all monks, are subjected only to the court of the Orthodox Metropolitan, and by no means to the officers of the Horde or to any court of the Russian princes. Whoever commits theft or robbery from a member of the clergy will have to pay the threefold in recompense. Whoever shows the audacity to mock the Orthodox faith, or to insult a church, a monastery, or a chapel, is subject to death, no matter whether he is a Russian or a Mongol. Let the Russian clergy feel that they are the free servants of God.”¹⁵

After 1313 Islam did not suddenly become the religion of most of the Golden Horde’s population; it was above all pagans that converted to Islam. The information that has come down to us does not allow us to make conclusions about how many Christian Orthodox persons converted to Islam; still, Dmitrii (Ahmad) Makarov maintains that “judging from the above-mentioned facts we can conclude that both before and during the Golden Horde period in the history of Russia, Eastern Slavs used to embrace Islam, individually or in groups, and that they merged with the Muslim, generally Turkic or Turkified population”.¹⁶

Historians lack any documents that would allow them to support these assumptions by concrete evidence (as in the case of Izosima). Probably there were more cases where Orthodox Christians converted to Islam (just like Muslims

¹⁴ *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, chief editor E.F. Karskii (Moscow, 1962), vol. 1, rubrique 476.

¹⁵ Quoted from: F. Asadullin, *Islam v Moskve* (Moscow, 2006), 18.

¹⁶ Makarov, “Russkie musul’mane v istorii Rossii”, 155.

converted to Orthodox Christianity), but this was not a mass phenomenon. The Orthodox who embraced Islam did not leave us with any documents about their change of faith. As the first document for a conversion of this kind some scholars regard the "Journey beyond Three Seas" by Afanasii Nikitin, a merchant from Tver' who travelled to India in the years 1468 to 1475.

God is Allah, God is Akbar (The "Journey beyond Three Seas" by Afanasii Nikitin)

In their analysis of Nikitin's text some scholars come to the conclusion that Nikitin accepted Islam.¹⁷ Gail D. Lenhoff and Janet L.B. Martin believe that Nikitin first pretended to be Muslim, in order to obtain benefits for his trading activity (less taxes and custom duties, among others), but that he then, against his own will, found himself embracing an Islamic worldview: "His initial intention, as he tells us, was to remain Orthodox while feigning a 'formal' conversion. In defining himself 'socially' as a Muslim, however, and fulfilling the minimal ritual obligations of social conversion (taking a Muslim name, praying as a Muslim, observing Muslim feasts and fasts), however, he gradually arrived at an Islamic worldview. By the end of his journey Afanasij Nikitin had crossed over into the camp of Islam".¹⁸

Others assume that Nikitin remained true to his Christian faith, even though in his views he parted from the Orthodox understanding of belief.¹⁹ In the view of these scholars, the Islamic rhetoric in Nikitin's text (including references to

¹⁷ Gail D. Lenhoff and Janet L.B. Martin, "The Commercial and Cultural Context of Afanasij Nikitin's Journey beyond Three Seas", *Jahrbücher für die Geschichte Osteuropas* 37.3 (1989), 322-344; Russian translation: G.D. Lekhoff, Dzh. B. Martin, "Torgovo-khoziaistvennyi i kul'turnyi kontekst 'Khozheniia za tri moria' Afanasii Nikitina", *Trudy Otdela Drevnerusskoi literatury*, 1993, vol. 47, 95-120. See also Z. Gadzhiev, "Afanasii Nikitin – musul'manin. Khozhenie za novoi veroi", at: <http://www.islamnews.ru/news-7037.html>

¹⁸ Lenhoff and Martin, "The Commercial and Cultural Context of Afanasij Nikitin's Journey beyond Three Seas", 343-344.

¹⁹ The Soviet historian Klibanov argued that Nikitin adhered to ideas of the "Judaizers" ("Zhidovstvuiushchie") who were popular in Novgorod, Tver' and other places at that time; see A.I. Klibanov, *Reformatsionnye dvizheniia v Rossii v XIV – pervoi polovine XVI vv.* (Moscow, 1960), 185.

“Ollo” as God, and Islamic prayers in “creole Arabic”) is a mimicry, the attempt to immerse himself into the environment, what is also reflected in the circumstance that he adopted the name Yusuf al-Khorasani.²⁰ What is important to note here is that both the supporters and the opponents of the view that Nikitin became a Muslim take as their starting point the analysis of Nikitin’s own text; but the text does not provide an unequivocal answer to this question.

This dualism was clearly noted by another student of the “Journey”, P.V. Alekseev, who wrote: “... not taking into account the depth and complexity of the problem, Lur’e and Lenhoff provided answers to two very different questions: the question as what Nikitin regarded himself, or the question what he actually was in terms of religion. [...] On the basis of the existing textual information we have to agree with the conclusions of Lur’e [who argued that Nikitin did not see himself as a Muslim]. But when we ask: through the categories of which semiotic system did Nikitin perceive God and the creation, or, to what faith did he actually belong?, then we have to acknowledge that the Muslim side is dominant. With all this it is necessary to keep in mind that when we talk about Nikitin as an author what we have before us is not a real biographical person but a category of the text – a narrator.”²¹

The main problem in the study of the “Journey’s” author is that what has come down to us is not the first-hand source, not Nikitin’s own notes or the original manuscript of the Chronicle that contains his “Journey”. What the researchers have at their disposal is several redactions of the text as they were later included into larger Church chronicles, including the L’vov Chronicle, the Archive copy from the Sophia Chronicle, and the Trinity Copy (*Troitskii izvod*).

²⁰ The most prominent defender of this perspective was the Soviet scholar Iakov S. Lur’e; see his “Russkii ‘chuzhezemets’ v Indii XV veka”, in Ia. S. Lur’e and L.S. Semenov (eds.), *Khozhenie za tri moria Afanasiia Nikitina* (Leningrad, 1986), 76–86. Lur’e argued that Nikitin was no Muslim because he did not undergo circumcision. This argument does not hold water since the marker for converting to Islam is not circumcision but the *shahada*, the pronouncement of the monotheistic formula, which, by the way, can be found in Nikitin’s “Journey”.

²¹ P.V. Alekseev, “Musul’anskii kod ‘Khozheniia za tri moria’ Afanasiia Nikitina”, *Mir nauki, kul’tury, obrazovaniia*, 2009, No. 3 (15), 71.

All scholars agree that the chronicler had subjected Nikitin's text to some kind of editorship; and from the example given above, the part of the Lavrentii Chronicle about the monk Izosima, we know that these editors used to introduce their own opinions into the texts. According to Alekseev, in the L'vov Chronicle (in the Etterov copy) the chronicler replaced the word "God" by "Christ", at his own discretion;²² the result was that the meaning of a whole fragment was distorted. What is characteristic for Nikitin is that he uses words that unite "not so much two languages than rather the established formulas of two mental systems."²³

It cannot be excluded that in the existing manuscript copies of the "Journey" also other places with relation to Islam have been censored. But the existing fragments allow us to agree with Alekseev, who concluded that the Muslim worldview (above all in the form of the idea of monotheism) permeates the whole text of the "Journey". By contrast to the overwhelming majority of his Christian contemporaries Nikitin thought that Islam is, just as the Christian faith, one of the paths that lead to God. At a time when Islam was widely seen as a Hagarian heresy this was a much more courageous step than the open acceptance of Islam by some Russians in our days.²⁴

From the Third Rome to the Intellectual Mecca

Had Nikitin lived longer, his "Journey" might have obtained a completely different content. He passed away in 1472, just a couple of decades before Metropolitan Zosima, in his book "Paschalion Explanation" (*Izlozhenie paskhalii*), formulated the concept that "Moscow is the Third Rome". This concept received its full confirmation in the middle of the 16th century. It became

²² P.V. Alekseev, "Musul'manskii kod", 70.

²³ P.V. Alekseev, "Musul'manskii kod", 72.

²⁴ Academician D.S. Likhachev discussed the issue of religious tolerance in the "Journey", with reference to Nikitin's remark: "But [only] God knows the right faith, and the right faith is to know God the One, to call his name in every place in the purest form". D.S. Likhachev, "Khozhenie za tri moria Afanasiia Nikitina", in: D.S. Likhachev, *Velikoe nasledie: Klassicheskie proizvedeniia literatury Drevnei Rusi; Zametki o russkom* (sec. ed. St. Petersburg, 2007).

the most direct source for the unfolding perception that the terms “Russian” and “Orthodox” are synonymous.

After Ivan the Terrible had conquered the Muslim Khanates of Kazan (1552) and Astrakhan (1556) and with the ensuing massive campaigns to Christianize the Muslim population of expanding Russia, it would have been suicide to announce that one had sympathies for Islam, let alone to convert. One also has to keep in mind that in those days there were not too many educated people among the Russians who could acquaint themselves with Islam by using Islamic books in the Arabic and other Oriental languages. There were no translations of Muslim religious texts into Church Slavonic, the high-status literary language of the Russians at that time.²⁵ Direct contacts with adherents of other faiths, which could have enabled Russians to get first-hand accounts about Islam, were, to put it mildly, not encouraged. Thus for objective reasons, the Russians were limited in their access to sources that could have allowed them to embrace Islam.

In addition, in both the medieval and the imperial periods – since Peter the Great’s time – there were legal sanctions that punished the transition of Russian (Orthodox) subjects to Islam. Even harsher punishments awaited those who attempted to attract Orthodox persons to another belief, and particularly to Islam. Thus a legal code of 1649, the famous *Sobornoe Ulozhenie*, reads as follows: “And if any Muslim (*busurman*) forces a Russian person into his Muslim faith (*busurmanskaia vera*), by coercion or by deception, and if he circumcises him according to his Muslim faith, and if this is directly detected, then this Muslim has to be executed after investigation, to be burnt by fire without any mercy” (chapter 22, paragraph 24).²⁶ The state did everything to make contacts between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox impossible. It was forbidden to erect mosques in the vicinity of Orthodox churches, and baptized Tatars were not allowed to settle together with Muslim Tatars.²⁷

²⁵ The first Russian translation of the Quran appeared only in 1716.

²⁶ For the *Sobornoe Ulozhenie* of 1649 see: www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Text/1649/whole.htm#22

²⁷ V.Iu. Sofronov, “Gosudarstvennoe zakonodatel’sтво Rossii po konfessional’nym voprosam i pravoslavnoe missionerstvo v kontse XVII – nachale XX v.”, *Izvestiia Altaiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 2007, No. 4/2, 139.

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One cannot exclude that there were Russians who accepted Islam, but for obvious reasons there is no reliable information on such cases. We know that with the beginning of the Russian-Ottoman wars there were some Russian prisoners who converted to Islam, either because they were forced to do so or out of their free will. Being captured in a Muslim country, or living there for a significant time for other reasons, was in that period the major form of how people went over to Islam.²⁸ If we do not confine our overview to representatives of the Great Russian people, then we must also mention the migration to Turkey of several thousand Cossacks, after the Imperial forces destroyed the Zaporozhian Sech', one of the political entities of the Cossacks in what is now Ukraine, in 1775.²⁹

A certain number of new Muslims came from the Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia who often lived next to Muslims. Many of them were Christians only in name, and continued to adhere to paganism. But also here concrete data are missing, and all we can do is hypothesize.

The situation changed after Tsar Nikolai II's Manifest of 17 October 1905 that proclaimed civil rights and liberties. For the period of 1905 to 1917 there are well-known cases of conversion to Islam. Thus, some peasants turned to Islam under the influence of the Vaisov Movement. In a letter to the *zemstvo* department of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the governor of Tomsk pointed out that "whole families of Muslims as well as of Christians accepted Islam and became Vaisovtsy [i.e., adherents of Gainanuddin Vaisov, the leader of the Vaisov Movement at that time]. One of them was Petr Morozov who with his whole family accepted the ideology of Vaisov."³⁰

The followers of Vaisov that had been exiled to the *guberniia* of Tobol'sk were so active in turning Russians into Muslims that not only the local Orthodox

²⁸ Among the first Europeans who consciously and at mature age accepted Islam were several Englishmen who served in India and Afghanistan in the 19th century; see Karaabagi, "Novye russkie musul'many".

²⁹ Makarov, "Russkie musul'many v istorii Rossii", 157.

³⁰ K.R. Shakurov, "Deiatel'nost' v Tomskoi gubernii musul'manskoi sekty 'Vaisovskii bozhii polk'", *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 2007, No. 305, 100. See also Diliara Usmanova's comprehensive study, with original documents, *Musul'manskoe "sektanstvo" v Rossiiskoi Imperii: "Vaisovskii Bozhii Polk staroverov-musul'man", 1862-1916 gg.* (Kazan, 2009).

church servants rang the alarm bell but also representatives of the official Muslim clergy.³¹ What should be added is that in the early 20th century it was above all persons of low social estates (primarily peasants) who accepted Islam; this picture contrasts markedly from the situation one century later, when the Russians who become Muslims are from the most educated parts of society.

Some Muslim authors refer to Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi as an example for representatives of the Russian elite who converted to Islam. To support this claim they refer to Tolstoi's well-known statement that with regards to morality he would put Islam above Orthodox Christianity.³² Tolstoi had made this statement in his reply to the letter of a woman who informed him that her two sons, who were military students (cadets), had converted to Islam. On the basis of this and other statements that Tolstoi made in his correspondences with Muslims some authors (like Taras Chernienko and Iman Valeriia Porokhova)³³ conclude that he was himself a Muslim. But such conclusions lack any evidence.³⁴

After the October Revolution it became difficult to carry out missionary work among non-Muslims. Just like in the Russian Empire, so also in Soviet Russia the biggest group of those who came to Islam were prisoners of war. In 1979 the war in Afghanistan began. According to official statistics (which, as many researchers believe, were strongly manipulated), during the ten years of war 417 Soviet soldiers became captives to the mujahidin. A significant number of these captives became Muslims, since this was almost their only possibility to save their lives. Some remained in Afghanistan, even when they obtained the possibility to return

³¹ Shakurov, "Deiatel'nost' v Tomskoi gubernii musul'manskoi sekty", 100.

³² For Tolstoi's letter to E.E. Vekilova, in which he argued that "if a person is put before the choice: to keep the Church Orthodoxy or [to accept] Mohammadanism [*magometanstvo*], then any reasonable person cannot have any doubts about his choice and anyone would prefer Mohammadanism", see L.N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh*, vol. 79 (Moscow, 1955), 118.

³³ Rashid Saifutdinov, "Pochemu nekotorye russkie stanovitsia musul'manami?", at: <http://mosgues-3.narod.ru/statja.htm>; "Imam [sic!] Valeriia Porokhova: Vse bedy – ot neznaniiia. 'Vakhhkhabizm – otklonenie ot Korana', schitaet izvestnaia perevodchitsa Sviashchennoi knigi", at http://www.zonakz.net/blogs/user/izgi_ama/18210.html.

³⁴ For Tolstoi's relation to Islam see the special issue of *Chetki* on this question: *Chetki*, 2010, No. 3 (9).

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to their fatherland. Mostly young men of eighteen to twenty years of age whose world view was still fluid, they were cast into an unknown environment and became part of another society, accepted its culture and religion. Vladimir Khotinenko's film *Musul'manin* tells the story of one of these new Muslims, the young Russian Nikolai Ivanov; when he was released from captivity in Afghanistan and returned to his home village he became a stranger among his relatives and the village population.

To a significant degree Russian society – or at least its intelligentsia – became interested in Islam as a result of the activities of some intellectual circles who loved Oriental philosophy and mysticism. In these circles people studied the works of the mystic and occultist philosopher Georgii Gurdzhiev, of the (in Russia) very popular Sufi writer Idris-Shah, and others – works that had little in common with Sufism and with the Islamic teaching in general. Still, it was as a result of one of these intellectual circles that Islam in the Russian Federation, and also Russian Islam, obtained one of its most prominent personalities: Geidar Dzhemal'.

Since the late 1960s Dzhemal' belonged to those members of the intelligentsia who met for a glass of portwine and for a good discussion, in particular in Moscow's well-known Iuzhinskii pereulok, where an alternative group (*tusovka*) of Bohemians enjoyed discussing esotericism. Here Dzhemal' got acquainted with the writer and philosopher Iurii Mamleev, who, together with another philosopher and mystic, Evgenii Golovin, influenced the worldview of the failed student that Dzhemal' was at that time. There were many circles of this kind in the "two capitals" in those years. Moscow was, next to Leningrad, the intellectual Mecca; and while St. Petersburg was the more Western city, Moscow combined both West and East in its character.

In subsequent years Dzhemal' himself set up such a form of enlightening education, in the form of a scientific intellectual circle that met in private homes (*kruzhok-kvartirnik*), for his own students. This form of communication was the one that was closest to him, the independent autodidact-philosopher (Dzhemal' had been excluded from the institute in his very first year of studies, for "bourgeois nationalism"). No surprise then that a person like Dzhemal' was able

to raise interest in philosophy and Islam among people that were like him, intellectuals who had an independent manner of investigating the truths of life about which university textbooks use to be silent.

Anastasiia (Fatima) Ezhova, one of his most well-known disciples, described the secret of Dzhemal's success in the following manner: "Not only the openly non-conformist direction of his texts played an important role but also that while he is an Azerbaijani, he is above all a refined Moscow intellectual. (...) He addressed his audience in a language that was more understandable for the well-read young Russian from the radical environment, or for a Tatar from an educated family who grew up in the capital or in one of the big megapolises, than to representatives of the diasporas."³⁵ According to Ezhova there is a paradox around Dzhemal', namely that in spite of his judgmental relation to the Russian factor in Islam, it is precisely in the Russian scene that he obtained most popularity.

In fact, many Russian Muslims stepped out of the mantle of this "godfather" of Russian Islam: from the former nationalist Vadim Sidorov to the leftist intellectual Aleksei Tsvetkov. Yet even Viacheslav Polosin, in his book "Why Did I Become a Muslim?", acknowledges that his acceptance of Islam ("the return to Monotheism", in Polosin's own phrasing) was predetermined by Dzhemal's TV programs "Nyne" ("Today") and "Minaret" of the mid-1990s. Polosin's ensuing acquaintance with Dzhemal' only strengthened his intention to embrace Islam.

The secret of this eclecticism in the environment of Dzhemal's direct disciples and those who experienced his influence materializes in the personality of the maitre himself. Geidar Dzhemal' is a rather contradictory figure. In the end of the 1980s he was member of the nationalist organization *Pamiat'* ("Memory"). In the 1990s Dzhemal' appeared in public as one of the fathers and founders of the Islamic Renaissance Party (*Islamskaia Partiiia Vozrozhdeniia*), the first and only Muslim party in the history of the Soviet Union.

Strikingly, things that cannot be united come together in the person of Dzhemal': Shiism and Salafism, rightist and leftist ideologies. He is a fervent

³⁵ A. Ezhova, "Russkii islam: sredy, motivy, tendentsii i perspektivy", 114. See also the full translation of Ezhova's article in this volume.

representative of the postmodern age, a textbook example for this trend. Postmodern is, in essence, also the phenomenon of Russian Islam. At least this can legitimately be said about those Russian Muslims who emerged out of Geidar Dzhemal's intellectual circle in the mid-2000s.

The further fates of Dzhemal's disciples developed very differently. Some, like Vadim (Harun) Sidorov, gradually purified themselves from any traces of *Dzhemalizm* and subjected the conceptions of their former master to harshest critique, while others, like Anastasiia (Fatima) Ezhova, had some differences with their teacher but continued to maintain warm relations with him; and a third group, including Aleksei Tsvetkov, continue to regard Dzhemal' as the most important Muslim thinker and activist in Russia. While the intellectual scope of the people who came to Islam under the influence of Dzhemal' is thus extraordinarily broad, the people that are closest to him are the leftist intellectuals.

Islam as Protest: Leftist Intellectuals and Merely Intellectuals

Leftists found in Islam the powerful energy that opposes the injustice that rules in this world. This group of Russian Muslims is not very numerous, but some outstanding personalities gave this trend visibility even beyond the Muslim community.

One of the most characteristic features of the left-leaning Muslim intellectuals is that they do not pay attention to the ritual side of Islam, their focus being on the revolutionary ideas in Islamic theology. Formally we can count Anastasiia (Fatima) Ezhova to this group, but she is more an exception to the general rule because she holds that the fulfillment of the Islamic rituals cannot be separated from Islam's revolutionary ideas. Also, Ezhova first became a Muslim and only then a well-known journalist, while other leftist intellectuals joined Islam after they had already acquired a public reputation.

One of the most prominent representatives of this group is also Aleksei Tsvetkov, who, was already known as a leftist activist when he publicly declared to

have embraced Islam.³⁶ Tsvetkov emphasizes that Islam was his intellectual choice. Important to note is that his decision to become a Muslim resulted from his reading of Geidar Dzhemal's books; as Tsvetkov worked in the oppositional publishing house "Ul'tra.Kul'tura" he performed the editorial work for some of Dzhemal's publications.

Equally under Dzhemal's influence another leftist intellectual came to Islam, Il'ia Kormil'tsev, the director of "Ul'tra.Kul'tura". In the late 1980s and early 1990s Kormil'tsev had already become known to the public as a song writer for the popular Rock group "Nautilus Pompilius". In 2006, shortly after his death, information appeared in the press that Kormil'tsev had embraced Islam on his death bed. By far not everyone believed this to be true. While Kormil'tsev had always shown much interest in Islam, even in the months preceding his death Il'ia gave no indication that he now belonged to this religion. There would have been a number of occasions to "come out": Kormil'tsev acted as a member of the jury that awarded the literary award "Islamic Breakthrough" (about which we will speak below), and he also participated in the edition of books about the revolutionary role of Islam in the contemporary world, including Geidar Dzhemal's "Revolution of the Prophets" (*Revoliutsiia prorokov*), Dmitrii Akhtiamov's "Islamic Breakthrough" (*Islamskii proryv*) (on which more will be said below) and the volume "Allah Does Not Love America"³⁷ and others.

That Il'ia embraced Islam was announced by nobody else than Geidar Dzhemal'. He based his statement on the testimony of one Russian Muslim who was with Il'ia until his last days and who was a witness to the *shahada* that Kormil'tsev pronounced shortly before he passed away.³⁸

Curiously, this message found more credence among the Islamophobic audience than among the Muslims. In the internet people posted evil comments, of the type "Another enemy of Russia embraced Islam." Here the background is that the life of Kormil'tsev, who from head to toes hated the Putin regime, ended

³⁶ R.I. Bekkin, "Interv'iu s Alekseev Tsvetkovym", *Chetki*, 2007, No. 1, 6-8.

³⁷ *Allah ne lubit Ameriku*, ed. by Adam Parfei (Moscow: "Ul'tra.Kul'tura", 2003).

³⁸ Islamskii komitet, "Smert' Il'i Kormil'tseva kleimit filosemitskoe lobbi, riadiashcheesia v odezhdny russkikh 'natsional-patriotov", at: <http://i-r.ru/page/stream-document/index-11075.html>

in the same London hospital where a couple of months earlier the former FSB officer Aleksandr Litvinienko had died; the latter had made a series of exposing statements about Russia's leadership, and was therefore forced to apply for political asylum in Great Britain. People who were close to him (including above all his father and his wife) maintained that not long before his death Litvinienko embraced Islam and expressed the wish to be buried according to the Islamic ritual. However, this conversion occurred without Geidar Dzhemal'; rather, the former lieutenant colonel of the FSB acted under the influence of the Chechen political emigré Akhmed Zakaev.

After the Litvinienko episode it was no wonder that many in the conservative parts of Russian society began to associate Islam with Russia's "Orange" enemies. Leaving the demagogic debates about Russia's enemies aside, what we can agree on here is that both for Litvinienko and Kormil'tsev Islam became the only ideology that could oppose the authoritarian regime of the so-called *siloviki*, the government representatives who have their professional background in the military or the secret services.

There are also Russian Muslims in the oldest opposition party in Russia, the National Bolshevik Party (NBP) of Eduard Limonov. According to one of the *natsbols* (as the National Bolsheviks are called) who had come to Islam, Pavel (Ahmad) Zharebin, in the mid-2000s the party counted around 30 Muslim converts among its members. Zharebin claimed that many of these Muslims belong to those of whom the party has particular reason to be proud.³⁹

As far as I know, almost all of the leftist intellectuals who converted to Islam picked Sunnism. Yet for most of the leftists the adherence to this or that trend in Islam is not a question of principle. Aleksei Tsvetkov, for example, whom we referred to earlier, wrote a travel account ("The Second Rome in April, or: The Persistent Feeling of the Almighty") in which he celebrated the Alevis – one of the branches of Islam that some Sunni scholars regard as un-Islamic.⁴⁰

³⁹ "Akhmad Zharebin: Ia prinial islam, uzhe buduchi v rukovodstve NBP", at: <http://i-r-p.ru/page/stream-document/index-1319.html>

⁴⁰ A. Tsvetkov, "Vtoroi Rim v aprele ili Nastoichivoe chuvstvo Vsevyshnego", *Druzhba narodov* 2006, No. 6, at: <http://magazines.russ.ru/druzhba/2006/6/cve9.html>

As indicated above, the leftist intellectual Muslims pay little attention to the ritual side of Islam and concentrate on Islam's revolutionary ideology, which, they claim, this religion has in abundance. No wonder then that they do not care much about the duties of prayer and fasting; obviously, one cannot expect from an individualist rebel the discipline that Allah demands from His slaves.

Still, in our view the leftist Muslims are very important for Islam as a whole, and for Russian Islam in particular. Through their entry into Islam, the Islamic culture obtained new works of literature and arts. In addition, the intellectuals give Islam a positive image in the West, since they translate the Islamic principles and postulates into a language that is accessible to the average educated European. It must be added, however, that the leftist intellectuals who embraced Islam do not, as a rule, carry out missionary work for their religion. They hold that the acceptance of this or that religion is a matter of personal choice, and therefore they do not attempt to "save" their colleagues from the leftist movement by preaching them the truth that they discovered for themselves. This is a by far not typical behavior for newly-converted Muslims: usually new followers of a religion attempt to bring as many people as possible to their faith of choice. A clear example of this missionary trend is the former priest Viacheslav Polosin.

The "Straight Path" of Viacheslav (Ali) Polosin

Usually the year 1999 is taken as the starting point for the development of contemporary Russian Islam. It was in that year that a Russian Orthodox priest by the name of Viacheslav Polosin, whom not many people knew at that time, announced that he had accepted Islam. Already two years earlier Valeriia Porokhova, a Muslima, had published her Russian translation of the Quran. But that Porokhova had converted to Islam was not perceived as a sensation; people saw it as no surprise that a woman who married an Arab (the Syrian Muhammad Roshd) accepted the religion of her husband.⁴¹ But it was a completely different

⁴¹ The opinion that young women who marry a Muslim accept Islam in order to please their husband is widespread but erroneous. In fact, among the Muslim wives there are some who accept Islam as a formality. But one will also encounter many girls who marry as a Christian and then accept Islam at a later stage, after having studied Islam.

thing when it was not just a Russian but even an Orthodox priest who accepted Islam.

It should be added that according to Polosin's own words he pronounced the *shahada* already in 1998, in a small circle of witnesses, and it was only in spring 1999 that he decided to go public with what he calls his "return to Monotheism". Soon afterwards Polosin entered the Naqshbandiyya Sufi brotherhood and became a murid of Said-Afandi Chirkeevskii.⁴²

Also, that a former Archpriest (*protoierei*) accepted Islam would not have caused so much noise had it not been that soon after his conversion Polosin started to write books and articles that have as their guiding thread a dogmatic critique of Christianity. Inevitably, this caused a reaction from Orthodox circles who used all means to discredit Polosin.

It should also be mentioned that not all ethnic Muslims, including the leaders of the Spiritual Administrations, took a positive stance on the new activities of the former priest. While he enjoys high respect among the Muslims of Russia (and especially among the youth), Polosin did not emerge as the unchallenged spiritual and intellectual leader for those whom we use to call ethnic Muslims.

This restrained reaction from the representatives of Russia's traditional Muslim peoples inspired in Polosin the idea that the Russian Muslims must have their own path. Still, for several years he continued to argue consistently against the division of Muslims according to nationality. Thus in one of his interviews in the early 2000s he explained: "In Islam one must not create communities according to the national principle, therefore there are no special 'Russian' communities, just like there should not be any special Tatar or Arabic communities."⁴³

A slightly different opinion had Valeriia (Iman) Porokhova, who otherwise largely shared Polosin's views and who right from the beginning gave him all kind of moral support. I remember how Porokhova, in a conversation with me in 1999, gave expression to her enthusiasm about blue-eyed Anglo-Saxons who embraced Islam. One could feel in her words that she saw herself as standing in opposition

⁴² On Said-Afandi see chapter five in this volume.

⁴³ See: http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=press&type=list&press_id=33

to Asiatic Muslims, and that she identified more with the refined education of Muslims in Europe.⁴⁴

In 2000 Polosin and Porokhova announced the establishment of the community "Straight Path" (*Priamoi put'*). This was not an organization of Russian Muslims but one of newly converted Muslims. Until the mid-2000s Polosin continued to defend internationalist positions, which can be demonstrated by his strong critique for the semi-mythical project "Russian Islam" (*Russkii islam*) that was reportedly elaborated by some political technologists around the President's representative for the Volga Federal District, Sergei Kirienko. Polosin reacted to this initiative in his "Statement of Russian Muslims about the Project 'Russian Islam'", where he noted: "The title of this project is highly regrettable and evokes bewilderment among the believers: Islam can neither be Russian nor Tatar, Arabic, or belonging to some other national marker. Islam is one, and it was given to the whole of humanity. To divide Muslims according to some national markers is unacceptable. It is through his origins that the believer continues to belong to his nationality, but faith is something higher, and the believer has to act according to the religious canons which prescribe that all Muslims are brothers."⁴⁵

From these positions Polosin initially criticized the National Organization of Russian Muslims (NORM) that was set up in 2004.

Dzhemal's Unplanned Child: NORM

The establishment of the National Organization of Russian Muslims (NORM) was announced on its first constitutional conference, in June 2004 in Omsk. Its

⁴⁴ On the other side there are also cases where Russian Muslims integrated organically with the Muslim establishment. The life-long leader of the Islamic Cultural Center (*Islamskii kul'turnii tsentr*), Abdul'-Vakhed Niiazov, was called Vadim Valerianovich Medved'ev before he embraced Islam in 1990. By contrast to other Russian Muslims, Niiazov has continuously underlined (and continues to do so) that he belongs to the one and undivided *umma* of Russia; this is also reflected in the fact that he changed not only his first name but also chose a new last name that is characteristic for representatives of Turkic peoples.

⁴⁵ Ali Viacheslav Polosin, Iman Valeriia Porokhova, "Zaiavlenie russkikh musul'man o proekte 'Russkii islam'", at: <http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&cid=9791&type=view>

organization was composed of Muslim organizations from the cities of Moscow (the *Banu Zul'karnain*), Omsk (the community *Dagvat al-Islami*), Ioshkar-Ola (*Tsarevokokshaikaia obshchina russkikh musul'man*) and Alma-Ata (the *Ikhlas* cultural center⁴⁶ of Russian Muslims). The founders of NORM saw the prime task of the organization in representing the interests of all Russian Muslims, independently of their religious and political views, and to lobby their interests within the Russian Federation's *umma* and beyond. In the eyes of the NORM leaders, the interests of the peoples who traditionally confessed Islam were already defended by the spiritual administrations, the *tariqats*, the *jama'ats*, and so forth.

Yet while many statements pronounced at the conference were rather concrete, the major question was still left without an answer: whom to regard as a Russian Muslim? Should one take as a principle the origin by blood or the belonging to Russian culture? In the latter case the Russian Muslims would also comprise a huge number of the so-called ethnic Muslims, Tatars in the first place, since among them we find not a few persons whose education was culturally fully Russian, and for whom the native language is Russian. NORM circumvented this problem by taking a preliminary position: if a person regards himself as Russian then also NORM will regard him or her as such. For this reason the organization had a lot of members with mixed blood, and even pure blood representatives of other Slavic (Ukrainians, White Russians), Turkic (Tatars) and Finno-Ugric (Mordvins, Mari and other) ethnic groups.

Geidar Dzhemal' was present at NORM's constitutional conference, and he gave a speech in which he wished the new organization luck. Among the leaders of NORM there were several of his disciples, especially Sidorov and Ezhova, who had participated in the maitre's circle in the early 2000s. Still, his influence was not big enough to prevent NORM's split into Sunnis and Shiis.

Already the following year the Shiis were excluded from the organization, including from its leadership. The attempt to unite all Russian Muslims in one organization suffered a failure. The persons of the Sunni wing of NORM fully

⁴⁶ Not to be confused with the *Ikhlas* movement in Western Siberia, analysed in chapter six of this book.

realized this failure, but blamed only the Shiis for the split: "All who knew the history of NORM were aware of the fact that this is one of the few Muslim organizations, if not the only one in the history of the Islamic world, in which Sunnis and Shiis openly united. Guided by a false understanding of 'all-Muslim unity' each side was supposed to contribute with its 'specific' values and interests, but, as could be seen in practice, the Shii wing of our organization exploited the noble terminology only to carry out its own line, and in fact it denied the Sunnis their equal rights, and even more, their right to represent the Russian Muslims. (...) As a matter of fact, the Shii wing of NORM ceased to work for the benefit of the authority of the organization as a whole, and it created its own separate functional sub-sections and began to act only for the interest of its own community [*soobschestvo*]. (...) Also other inner-Islamic sects, like pseudo-Tijanis, 'Euro-Muslims' and 'Ahl al-Qur'an' broke away from those who remained faithful to the ideas and tasks of NORM."⁴⁷

The Russian Shiis have a somehow different version as to why NORM split into camps.⁴⁸ At any event, one will have to agree with Ezhova who argued that it was Vadim (Harun) Sidorov who played, from the very beginning, the key role in NORM, and that the ideational evolution of NORM was just a reflection of the ideational evolution of Sidorov himself. As someone who came from a nationalist environment, he was not ready to make compromises with the internationalism that permeated the whole philosophy of his former master Geidar Dzhemal'. However, that Sidorov turned to Salafist ideas can only at first sight be regarded as a break with the teachings of the Shii Dzhemal'. Both Dzhemal's followers and his critics have repeatedly stated, with full right, that in Dzhemal's works and speeches, Salafism is organically combined with some postulates of Shii ideology. No surprise then that Sidorov was drinking Salafi milk when he consumed Dzhemal's philosophy.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Obrashchenie Malikitskogo tsentra Natsional'noi Organizatsii Russkikh Musul'man", at: <http://sunnizm.ru/others/13-others/138-obrashhenie-malikitskogo-czentra-naczionalnoj-organizaczii-russkix-musulman.html>

⁴⁸ For details see chapter eight in this volume.

⁴⁹ Critics of NORM from the organization "Dar ul-Fikr" call the ideology of Sidorov in those days "Shii-Wahhabism"; see: http://darulfikr.ru/NormMurabitun_politics.

When they detected “modernist innovations” and “internationalist views” in contemporary Salafism, Šidorov and the people who followed him in his thinking continued to search for a new ideology for NORM. In 2007 they officially announced that the Maliki school of law (*madhhab*) will henceforth be the fundament of NORM’s ideological conceptions. The choice for Malikism was determined by contacts between NORM’s leadership and the Murabitun World Movement, and their entry into the Shadhiliyya-Darqawiyya-Habibiyya Sufi brotherhood.⁵⁰

The fact that Šidorov and his companions joined the *tariqat* improved their relationship with ‘Ali Viacheslav Polosin, with whom Šidorov was previously not always on a good footing. Polosin, in turn, stopped to criticize NORM of creating factionalisms and of posing against the rest of the *umma*. Instead, one would hear from Polosin more and more criticism of the “turban wearers” (*chalmonostsy*), of the “pilav mullas” (*plovnye mully*), and so forth – the same terminology that had since long been used by the leaders of the young generation of Russian Muslims, the disciples of Dzhemal’ like Ezhova and Šidorov. In 2006 “Straight Path”, the organization that Polosin directed, joined NORM. Polosin became first deputy of the NORM chairman, and thus the only member of NORM’s leadership who did not adhere to the Maliki *madhhab*.

It was not by accident that the Russian Muslims chose the Maliki interpretation of Islam. The NORM people did not beat around the bush when they declared: “Which *madhhab* should the Russian Muslims select? We, the authors of this Appeal, maintain that the Maliki *madhhab* is the true one, and we are ready to explain this to everyone who would like to know why. But here we call upon our readers to look at it from a practical side, and to move away from the idea that in principle one could follow any of the four *madhhabs*. (...) If the Russian Muslims become Hanafis, then this will surely not make the bulk of the Hanafis in Russia happy, since the Tatars still fear Russification. And in this case one could hardly expect that the Russian Muslims will be of much use for the Hanafi segment of the *umma* in Russia, and there is good reason to assume that

⁵⁰ See chapter nine in this volume.

this would create new problems, which would multiply by the conflict between the mentalities of the Tatars and Russians. (...) The same would occur with the Shafi'i *madhhab*, yet this time with the Muslims who have their origin in the North Caucasus, where Shafi'ism has deep historical roots and where it represents a well-developed school. [If they accept the Shafi'i *madhhab*], then the Russian Muslims would be forced to take the North Caucasus school as their example, which would lead to their 'Caucasification' [*'kavkazizatsiia'*], or they would have to take another direction, which would provoke a *fitna* among the Shafi'is, among the people from the Caucasus. (...) The Hanbali *madhhab* is not very suitable to the conditions of a Northern country, but this is not the only problem. Rather, little has been preserved from the original *madhhab* of Hanbalism, and today it exists in other regions than those where it had its historical roots, in the form of the so-called '*bezmazhhabnost'*' [lit., "being without a *madhhab*"].⁵¹ Today the majority of the Russian Muslims are indeed people without a *madhhab* ("*bezmazhhabniki*"), and this is what explains our erosion and separation (*razmytost' i razobshchennost'*). An environment (*sreda*) without *madhhabs* is by nature unstructured (*bezstrukturna*), and this includes that it is without nation (*beznaatsional'na*)."⁵²

In result, when NORM found its concrete ideological platform it limited the numbers of its followers even more. While the Russian participants of the Murabitun Movement do not object against some NORM members who adhere to one of the other three Sunni *madhhabs*, in fact the whole ideological organization is now built on Malikism. They also founded a special Maliki Center of NORM that is busy propagandizing the Maliki school of law.

In the environment of the Russian Muslims, the Malikism of the NORM people is not always met with understanding. By far not all Russian Muslims have embraced Islam under the influence of Russian converts like themselves. More than a few came to Islam independently, while others followed the example of, or were influenced by, representatives of Muslim peoples, which entails that they

⁵¹ [Obviously the idea that Muslims of the Hanbali trend argue that the true revival of Islam should come about by overcoming the traditional legal schools.]

⁵² "Obrashchenie Malikitskogo tsentra Natsional'noi Organizatsii Russkikh Musul'man".

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also took over the ritual of the Hanafi or Shafi'i *madhhabs*. And finally, some new Muslim are convinced Salafis.

Nevertheless, the leaders of NORM continue to emphasize that their organization, together with its ideology of "a special way", is highly necessary for the Russian Muslims: "NORM is and will continue to be the only real organization of Russian Muslims, and it is the only team that works for the goal that the Russian Muslims participate in Islam as a nation, not as 'Ivans who do not remember their blood ties', not like Mankurts⁵³ who, when accepting Islam, cut their own roots, but as an integrated ethnic group (*tsel'naia etnicheskaia grupp*a) that has its own legitimate interests, and that preserves its identity (*samobytnost'*) that it had received from the Almighty."⁵⁴

One can partially agree with these words, but they are only one side of the coin. The coin's other side reveals in all clarity that the Russian Muslims indeed are no united whole. Just like other Muslims, they are divided into Sunnis and Shiis, into left and right, and even into practicing and non-practicing Muslims. By far not all Russian Muslims (in the definition of Sidorov and his followers) are sympathizers of NORM. I have met many Russian Muslims who never heard about NORM, even though they are active users of the internet.⁵⁵

Interestingly, the most consequential critics of NORM and of the Murabitun Movement are not the Russian Shiis, as one would have expected after the split from Geidar Dzhemal', but the representatives of a Sunni *jama'at* by the name of "Dar ul-Fikr" ["House of Thought"].⁵⁶

⁵³ The term Mankurt alludes to the novel *Burannyi polustanok (I dol'she dlitsia den')* published by Chingiz Aitmatov in 1980.

⁵⁴ "Obrashchenie Malikitskogo tsentra Natsional'noi Organizatsii Russkikh Musul'man".

⁵⁵ According to Sidorov, even those Russian Muslims who have no relation to NORM received a palpable benefit from the establishment of this organization, "because many Islamic mass media and organizations started a veritable race to attract Russian Muslims, in order to create a counterbalance to NORM, to incorporate the phenomenon of Russian Muslims, or to position themselves as their protectors". See Kh. Sidorov, "Russkie musul'many: fenomen, sostoianie, perspektivy", at: www.norm-info.ru/articles/128/

⁵⁶ In the Russian form spelled as Dar ul'-Fikr.

Dar ul-Fikr is no organization that pretends to unify the Russian Muslims, but it also comprises Russians who adopted Islam. In the eyes of the people from Dar ul-Fikr, NORM is nothing else but a sect astray (*zabludshaia sekta*) that propagates views which are alien to Islam: "Their error is built on two clear diseases of the nafs [soul]: nationalism and the love for Western culture. They consciously employ the European discourse and preach a Western lifestyle."⁵⁷ For the representatives of Dar ul-Fikr, Western culture is fully antagonistic to Islam, and this is why they are sceptical with regards to intellectuals who convert to Islam, claiming that with their baggage of Western culture it is difficult for them to achieve Islam, and to fully embrace it.

Thus while they do not reject the coming to Islam of Europeans, including Russians, the Dar ul-Fikr people (*"darul'fikrovtsy"*) hold that their conversion requires that they perform a whole lot of work on themselves. The people of NORM, so the representatives of Dar ul-Fikr, proceed by the way of least opposition. One of the ideologists of Dar ul-Fikr is Ahmad ar-Rusi, who criticizes NORM from the positions of medieval theology and finds several forbidden innovations (Russ. *novovvedeniia*, Arabic, *bid' a*, pl. *bida'*) in NORM: the permission to listen to music and to smoke, the rejection of the legal obligation for women to wear a *niqab*, the ban on the use of paper money while at the same time insisting that *zakat* needs to be paid from their pay checks, and so forth.⁵⁸ In the eyes of Dar ul-Fikr, the image of an *'alim* who wears an expensive suit and a Swiss watch, and who smokes cigars while listening to Wagner, is not compatible with the behavior of a decent Muslim.

Dar ul-Fikr criticizes NORM for its politicization, maintaining – not without reason – that NORM is primarily a political organization, not a religious one. Reviewing the Murabitun/NORM doctrine from the position of pure Shariat, Ahmad ar-Rusi comes to the conclusion that NORM and Murabitun are not representatives of the Maliki school but that they in fact attempt to establish a fifth, "Medinan" *madhhab*. Here Ahmad ar-Rusi quotes Harun ar-Rusi (Sidorov)

⁵⁷ "Russkie musul'mane protiv 'NORM'", at: http://darulfikr.ru/russian_muslims_against_NORM

⁵⁸ Akhmad ar-Rusi, "O Mankhadzhe i politike 'NORM-Murabitun'", at: http://darulfikr.ru/NormMurabitun_politics

with the following words: "This is a *madhhab* that stands above the four *madhhab*s. A person who is formally a Maliki but who does not acknowledge this superiority cannot belong to it. To the contrary, the Shafi'i al-Ghazali, *rahimahu Allah*, belonged precisely to this [Medinan] *madhhab*. And even Ibn Taymiyya, a Hanbali, defended the Medinan path, the Medinan *madhhab*. (...) The '*amal* Ahl al-Madina [i.e., the continued Islamic practice of the population of Medina], the method of this '*amal* – this is the teaching of our shaykh, *hafizahu Allah*, and the most important fundament of the 'Murabitun'".⁵⁹ Ahmad ar-Rusi objects that the Murabitun are no consistent followers of the Maliki school, but that they only follow those resolutions of the Malikis that suit their own passions.⁶⁰

NORM and Dar ul-Fikr thus represent two opposite poles within the spectrum of contemporary Russian Islam: the first is through and through Europeanized and not always orthodox in the following of Shariat requirements (at least not in the interpretation of conservative observers), while the second is more scrupulous in relation to the Shariat but extremely archaic.⁶¹

But life is always more complex, and the majority of Russian Muslims finds itself between these two poles. A huge part of the Russian Muslims leads their lives imperceptibly in the big megapolises and in towns and villages. They do not join any organizations. They are not active in the public space, and hold that their faith is their private affair. One way to learn about them is by looking at their literary works.

⁵⁹ Quoted from: Akhmad ar-Rusi, "O Mankhadzhe i politike".

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Probably few educated Muslims from Russia would subscribe to the following statement from the Dar ul-Fikr people: "If a Muslim demonstrates steadfastness in the study of Islam and in service [to Allah] then he will have no time left for Dostoevskii and other pastimes".

See: http://darulfikr.ru/russian_muslims_against_NORM

White-Skinned Beasts in Green Trousers (The Literary Work of Russian Muslims)

The literary production of Russian Muslims is a topic that has so far received very little scientific attention.⁶² Yet the study of this aspect of the life of Russian Muslims has, in our view, significant importance, since in their prose, poetry and journalistic work we can find not only information about their path to Islam but also how they perceive the world around them. And a closer look shows that Lev Danil'kin, one of the leading Russian literary critics, is completely right when he says that in the Muslim community of Russia, art literature has a much higher degree of influence on people's minds than any specialized Islamic TV program.⁶³

In this context we will only look at contemporary Russian Islamic literature, since from the past not much literature from Russian Muslims has come down to us – except for Afanasii Nikitin's aforementioned "Journey beyond Three Seas". And while the question about Nikitin's "Islamicity" is still open, we can safely assume that had he lived in our times he would legitimately be a candidate for the Muslim literary competition "Islamic Breakthrough", which was for the first time opened for competition in the fall of 2005.

This award was named after Muslim Dmitrii Akhtiamov's novel, "The Islamic Breakthrough" (*Islamskii proryv*), which had been published earlier in 2005 in the oppositional publishing house "Ul'tra.Kul'tura".⁶⁴ This novel was important as the first significant literary work of an author who characterized himself as a Russian Muslim. A Russian Muslim is also the major hero of this novel, as already noted in the annotation to the book: "As we are living in the epoch of technocracy, today's companions of the last prophet Muhammad are represented by a new type of mujahidin from the party of Allah, those who have a computer and the Quran in their portfolio. This is the narrative about a simple Russian man

⁶² We do not know of any special study on this problem. The creative work of some Russian Muslims is discussed in: R.I. Bekkin, "Islamskii proryv: musul'manskaia literatura v poiskakh ideologii", *Kavkaz i globalizatsiia*, 2007, vol. 1 (2), 92-101; Iu. Prudnikova, "Islam ot protivnogo", *Druzhba narodov*, 2006, No. 8, 204-209.

⁶³ L. Danil'kin, "Mir budushchego. Pervyi islamskii", at: <http://www.afisha.ru/article/8454/>

⁶⁴ Muslim Dmitrii Akhtiamov, *Islamskii proryv* (Ekaterinburg, 2005).

who stopped to be a slave of the contemporary social environment [*sotsium*], the latter in fact being a masked global slave-holding system. After torturing spiritual searches the main hero finds the meaning of life and directs his glance at the absolute form of Monotheism – at Islam.” Interestingly, Akhtiamov – who has a Tatar family name and patronymic – does not regard the ethnic Muslims as real Muslims; he regards them, not without disdain, as sheep, as slaves of the system who do not object to being “sheared”.

Here we immediately need to add that “The Islamic Breakthrough” is in fact not quite a novel and not even a tale. The absence of a clearly outlined subject, the monstrous Russian language, the stereotyped personalities – all of these elements have already been sharply ridiculed by Iuliia Prudnikova in her review on the book.⁶⁵ When reading the novel it becomes clear directly and from the start that this book is a parody: what are Muslims worth who saunter in green jackets and in trousers of the same color. And their names: Levsha, Zakhar, Emelia... They are all as one, Akhtiamov’s Muslims: tall white-skinned and blue-eyed beauties, as if they had just come down from one of Leni Riefenstahl’s movies.

But no, the author is not even thinking about joking. His book is a pamphlet against “the system” that suppresses and enslaves the human being, turning him into a robot without a soul, in order to serve the interests of “the system”.

So who is the author of the “Islamic Breakthrough”? Unfortunately, there is only very little information about him. Akhtiamov was born in Ioshkar-Ola, the capital of the Republic Mari-El. Judging from his name, Akhtiamov is a half-blood: half Tatar (as is his family name and his patronymic, Giniiatovich) and half Russian or Mari (as reflected in his first name, Dmitrii). In the early 2000s he embraced Islam and took on another name: Muslim.

How did he come to enter Islam? Most probably, Akhtiamov is, like Harun Sidorov, coming from the environment of right-wing radicalism: it is well-known that in the epoch of postmodernism, persons with mixed ancestries often stand up to defend slogans in favor of pure blood. It is even possible that Akhtiamov’s conversion took place because of his acquaintance with Sidorov. What can be said

⁶⁵ Prudnikova, “Islam ot protivnogo”, 204-209.

at the least is that in a conversation with me Sidorov affirmed that he knows the author of the “Islamic Breakthrough” very well.

The text of Akhtiamov’s book gives some indirect indications that allow us to assume that he belonged to the right-wing radical scene before he embraced Islam. One would have to agree with Iuliia Prudnikova that the new Muslim Akhtiamov demonstrates by his whole oeuvre that he is more at home in *Mein Kampf*, and in Nazi ideology in general, than in the basics of Islamic theology.⁶⁶ No coincidence then that one of the favorite expressions of the characters of his novel is Cicero’s expression “To everyone what he deserves” (“Kazhdomu – svoe”/ “Jedem das Seine”), which is also the text on the arch of the Buchenwald gate.

From one of the popular sites that also contain an electronic version of the “Islamic Breakthrough” we learn that Akhtiamov loved literary work since his early childhood, and that in 2005 he created the literature forum *halifat.ru* where works of Muslim authors were published. Also known is that next to the “Islamic Breakthrough” Akhtiamov also wrote another novel called “The Russian Caliphate” (*Russkii khalifat*); the latter work belongs to the genre of “alternative history writing” and describes the conversion of the Rus’ to Islam under Prince Vladimir. This text was suggested for the “Islamic Breakthrough” literature award but did not make it onto the longlist.

Reportedly, after the American attack on Iraq Akhtiamov went to Iraq and died there; this is what his comrades from NORM maintain. This is everything we know about this author. Did this person really exist, or is “Muslim Dmitrii Akhtiamov” merely a literary pseudonym chosen by one of the well-known Russian Muslims? We do not have a final answer to this question.

What however is beyond doubt is that the author of the “Islamic Breakthrough” demonstrated the zeal of a new convert to expose that Islam is the only alternative for our humanity that has become a slave to the “system”. Yet as we know, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, and what Akhtiamov achieved with his book is the opposite effect. Even a reader who has sympathy with Islam, or who at least is interested in this religion, will be abhorred by the

⁶⁶ Prudnikova, “Islam ot protivnogo”, 207.

novel's many aggressive white-skinned beasts who are day and night busy with theft, extortion, and killing, bearing the name of the Almighty on their lips. Not without reason Prudnikova puts Akhtiamov's "Breakthrough" into the same line as Elena Chudinova's Islamophobic novel "The Mosque of the Paris Mother of God" – they both produce the same effect with the reader.⁶⁷

Written with a very different goal was Renat Bekkin's novel "Islam from the Monk Bagira" (*Islam ot monakha Bagira*), which came out before Akhtiamov's "Islamic Breakthrough".⁶⁸ As the author wrote in his preface, his intention was to explain, in a popular form, some postulates of Islam and in particular of Islamic law, so that his book was not meant to be of propagandistic or of aesthetic value, but informing and enlightening.⁶⁹ That the story was designed as a detective story was just a kind of umbrella, to entice the reader.

The main hero of "Islam from the Monk Bagira" is a Russian Muslim by the name of Abdullah Petrovich Mukhin, who serves as a judge at a Shariat court of St. Petersburg's N-skii district. He is busy with an investigation into the theft of an ancient Quran manuscript from the Russian National Library, the Publichka in St. Petersburg. Abdullah Petrovich, just like any Russian person, is characterized by extremes. First, he does not pray five times a day, as is demanded, but six times; and second, he lives together with his three legal wives in one apartment (whereas according to Islam each wife is supposed to have her own apartment).

What is interesting in these kinds of works is how the hero comes to Islam. In Akhtiamov's "Islamic Breakthrough" the hero's conversion takes place within just a few minutes, namely when he makes the acquaintance of a man in a green jacket

⁶⁷ E. Chudinova, *Mechet' Parizhskoi Bogomateri* (Moscow, 2005).

⁶⁸ The first edition of "Islam from the Monk Bagira" was published by the author under the pseudonym Abu Ihsan, and on his own expenses, in 2002. A second edition, improved and expanded, was supposed to appear in "Ul'tra.Kul'tura" in 2006, and was already prepared for publication when director Il'ia Kormil'tsev passed away and his publishing house collapsed; this prevented the publication. The second edition did eventually materialize in 2007, with the private youth publishing house "Kislod" that sees itself as continuing the tradition of "Ul'tra.Kul'tura".

⁶⁹ R.I. Bekkin, *Islam ot monakha Bagira* (Moscow, 2007), 3.

and in trousers of the same color; our hero is tired of going to work each day, and from this stranger in green he learns about the advantages of Islam.

By contrast, in Bekkin's "Islam from the Monk Bagira" the hero (when he was still called Petr Petrovich Mukhin) embraced Islam not so much as a result of a spiritual quest but by coincidence. In his university years he was an average student. After graduating from the Faculty of Jurisprudence he becomes assistant to the chairman of the court of St. Petersburg's K-skii district. At that time (according to the novel, of course) Shariat jurisdiction had not yet been introduced in Russia, and cases that touched upon the interests of Muslims were dealt with in special sections or, as they were called Western-style, in "chambers of general courts". Yesterday's student Mukhin was assigned one of these cases for inspection. In his despair Mukhin went to his former university teacher Eino Iukovich Viralainen, who taught courses in Islamic law – a person behind whom the reader can easily detect Russia's leading specialist of Islamic law, Leonid Rudol'fovich Siukiainen.

For Mukhin, the conversation with his teacher opens up a previously unknown world; Mukhin, a rationalist to the bones, gets full of enthusiasm for the logical character and justice of Shariat. Thanks to his former professor's advice Mukhin ends his first court case with a brilliant decision. But this is only the beginning, the first step on his way to Islam. The perfectionist starts to develop the complex of an A-student: "After the 'case of the second wife' Abdullah enjoyed enormous popularity. People turned to him in all kinds of questions – sometimes even bypassing the Shariat qadis of the peace. This fame cost the young judge dear. Instead of enjoying the company of his (at that time) only wife Ania, after work Abdullah would sit for hours behind books to study the endless ocean of Islamic law. His eyes were getting tired, his hand was not able to write any more, but Abdullah would not get up from the table before he fulfilled the norm that he had set form himself. (...) After not too much time, in Abdullah's head the seemingly 'senseless heap of archaic norms' (...) looked like perfect harmony. It was no longer the natural and logical character of the Shariat that fascinated Abdullah. This he now simply took for granted. But what is more, he could not imagine himself outside of Shariat. (...) Finally Abdullah found that very Law,

those Divine commandments, full of harmony and justice, that he had many years unconsciously been searching for. And the more Abdullah studied them, the clearer he saw the difference between such fluid and borderless concepts as: right and wrong, good and bad, love and hatred.”⁷⁰

To enlighten his readers was not the only goal that the author of “Islam from the Monk Bagira” pursued when writing this book. He also wanted to conduct an experiment: to make known to the public that there is such a genre as Muslim art literature. In order to push this idea Aslambek Ezhaev, the director of the publishing house “Umma”, and Renat Bekkin developed the idea of the literary award “Islamic Breakthrough”, which was for the first time organized in 2005.

The “Islamic Breakthrough” in Russian Literature

Right from the start the Award received high public interest – and this not only among people who love literature. The name of the Award itself, and also the titles of some of the works that had been forwarded for the competition, provided lots of opportunities for journalists to demonstrate their wit.⁷¹

The jury comprised such personalities as the oppositionist politician and writer Eduard Limonov, the former “Nautilus Pompilius” textwriter Il’ia Kormil’tsev, the young writer Sergei Shargunov, and the Russian Muslima Valeriia Porokhova who had produced a Russian translation of the Quran. The jury was chaired by Aleksandr Ebanoidze, chief editor of the journal “Friendship of Peoples” (*Druzhba narodov*).

If, in the Russia of our days, well-known people who are themselves not Muslims publicly acknowledge that they have sympathies for Islam, then this alone has the potential to cause a sensation. One can imagine the outcry if such an acknowledgment comes from an odious figure like Limonov, whose each and every public appearance is meant as a provocation for society. The Organizational

⁷⁰ Bekkin, *Islam ot monakha Bagira*, 106-7.

⁷¹ L. Novikova, “Gde Vostok, tam i rvetisia (Ob”iavlenny nominaty na ‘Islamskii proryv’”, *Kommersant* No. 46 (3377), 17 March 2006, p. 22; L. Novikova, “Shakhidku uteshili. (V Moskvu nazvali laureatov ‘Islamskogo proryva’”, *Kommersant* No. 84 (3415), 13 May 2006, p. 8.

Committee of the Award decided to invite Limonov after an interview that he had given soon after he was released from prison, where he was detained following the accusation that he was in illegal possession of weapons. In that interview Limonov said that in prison he got acquainted with Muslims, and that he was amazed by the solidity of their belief in God: "In Islam things are easy for man. I saw how in prison the Muslims had it easier than the common inmates. They prayed in union with their whole community, with the whole wide Islamic world. And this provides man with great power, it allows him to feel that he is not just a grain of sand. (...). The common inmates were isolated, and nervous like leaves in the wind; and this difference was clearly palpable. I met Chechens as well as Muslims of other nationalities, not only in Lefortovo but also in other prisons. As a rule, they were more joyful (as joyful as that is possible in a prison), more cheerful, and more powerful. I think this they obtained from their religion, from their belonging to a huge community."⁷²

As usual, Geidar Dzhemal' was involved also here. According to Limonov, his interest in Islam resulted from a conversation with the "Godfather" of Russian Islam: "In 1998 we were getting closer to each other, travelled together to Kazan, went to the mosque and had a public event in front of a very curious crowd – half of them were National Bolsheviks and people who sympathized with them, while the other half were Muslims who were attracted by Dzhemal'. This all made a big impression on me. (...) Back then Dzhemal' opened my eyes for many truths, sure, things that might have been pretty simple for those who were closer acquainted with Islam. Since that time this religion has been making a growing impression on me. (...) And then, I already passed my sixty-third year, and, in spite of everything, you get wiser, one simply has to become wiser. And this is why Islam as a wise religion is getting closer to me."⁷³

Another member of the jury, the director of the "Ul'tra.Kul'tura" publishing house Il'ia Kormil'tsev, belonged to those intellectuals for whom Islam was not so much a religion but a protest ideology against the forces of injustice. As

⁷² E. Limonov, "S kazhdym godom islam mne vse blizhe", at: <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1132090080>

⁷³ Ibid.

mentioned above, not long before his death in 2006 Kormil'tsev embraced Islam. It cannot be excluded that Kormil'tsev's interest in Islam came up under the influence of one of his colleagues in the publishing house, Aleksei Tsvetkov. And it should be mentioned that Tsvetkov's essay "The Second Rome in April, or: The Persistent Feeling of the Almighty", which had been nominated for the "Islamic Breakthrough" award, did indeed obtain the first place in the section "socio-political journalism" (which is how we can best translate the Russian term *publitsistika*).

Many of the authors who submitted their works came from the scene of Russian Muslims. This is not surprising, since the representatives of the ethnic Muslims are not always active in creative art work – even if many of them know the Russian language better than ethnic Russians do. Still, the jury found that the highest quality was to be found in works that were written by non-Muslims.

Thus from the nine finalists for the award only three were Muslims. Next to Aleksei Tsvetkov this group included the ethnic Muslim journalist Al'finor Gafurova, who obtained the third place in the competition for "publitsistika", for a biography in book form about the outstanding Muslim scholar and Jadidi intellectual Ata'llah Bayazitov. Also in this Muslim group of nominations was a former Catholic monk, the poet Sergei Isaev, who occupied the first place in the competition for "poetry". Jury member Il'ia Kormil'tsev emphasized that Isaev's *vers-libres*⁷⁴ deserved the first rank in the poetry nomination because of their freshness, and because they did not give in to the temptation of Orientalism.

Most works of Russian Muslims were submitted in the field of *publitsistika*. The majority of these works narrated about how either the author or some of his acquaintances came to Islam. As a rule, these texts lack clear literary merits, but they are of high interest for a student of Russian Islam. An analysis of these works shows that most authors embraced Islam after a spiritual search, and after having compared the teachings of various religions, also beyond Russian Orthodoxy and Islam. For example, the above-mentioned Sergei Isaev (who belonged to two Catholic orders, that of St. John and the Franciscans) was once responsible for the

⁷⁴ Unrhymed verse without a consistent metrical pattern.

religious dialog with other religions, one of his duties being the study of other faith communities. After a study of the Quran Isaev understood that Islam responds more to his spiritual demands than Christianity.

New works were already submitted for the award competition before the second “Islamic Breakthrough” season was publicly announced. This time the jury included: the politician and publicist Shamil’ Sultanov (as chairman), the writers Anatolii Pristavkin and Il’dar Abuziarov, the journalist and literary critic Nikolai Aleksandrov, the journalist Maksim Shevchenko and the member of the “Friendship of Peoples” redaction committee Vladimir Medvedev. This second season promised to yield an even greater harvest than the first one: the award was now known not only in Russia but also abroad. Yet in the heat of the review process the two “fathers” of the “Islamic Breakthrough” competition, Aslambek Ezhaev and Renat Bekkin, came into a creative conflict. In the first season the sponsor (Ezhaev) did not interfere with the decisions that were taken by the reader (Bekkin) and the jury members, but this time he categorically objected against works that, in his eyes, stood in contradiction to Islam. As a result all texts in which Muslim personages do not behave correctly (by drinking alcohol, having illegitimate sexual relations and so forth) were dismissed.

In other words, idealistic literature (so to say, Islamic *lubok* – popular romantic literature) defeated realistic texts. Bekkin could not agree with Ezhaev’s position, which had only been announced after the jury had already made its decisions, and ended his involvement in the award process; in Bekkin’s eyes, Ezhaev’s interference was unethical not only towards the jury but also vis-à-vis the authors. The award ceremony for the winners was cancelled, the results were just announced without the competitors being present.

Ezhaev then announced in a press-release that in the third season he planned to organize work differently: “The Organizational Committee of the Award will not only form a jury but also a pre-selection committee. The pre-selection committee will be formed according to professional criteria: from among poets, writers, critics, scholars of literature, journalists and publishers. The pre-selection committee will produce a long-list as well as a short-list, both comprising the works that will be considered for the Award. The jury will be formed according to

a confessional principle: from among the representatives of the Muslim intelligentsia – public personalities, representatives of science, arts, culture and education, who all belong to Islam.”⁷⁵ But a third season did not materialize.

Still, the one-and-a-half seasons of the “Islamic Breakthrough” Award demonstrated that Muslim art literature is not just an experiment that only throws some weird isolated writers onto the superficiality of Russia’s contemporary literature; rather, it is an expanding trend in Russian literature. Renat Bekkin, in his article “The ‘Islamic Breakthrough’: Muslim Literature in Search of Ideology” describes the credo of Muslim art literature in the following manner: “(...) a more reasonable (and functional) approach allows us to classify as Muslim literature only those works that have as their guiding thread the burning problems of Islam and of Muslims, for example the question how to preserve Muslim values in the family of today. (...) The task that Muslim writers are confronted with is to look at the vices of the environment through the eyes of a Muslim – without sanctimoniousness and without hypocrisy. (...) Also topical are works and biographies of outstanding figures of Muslim history. Such works also have direct relation to Muslim art literature. (...) That spiritual poetry should also be included goes without saying. (...) With other words: Muslim literature is not literature ‘about Islam’ but a pro-Islamic literature. Muslim literature comprises, in its fullest sense, high-quality poems, verses, novels, stories, narrations and other genres, but not one-sided moralistic parables with idealized positive heroes and simplified negative characters whose features are poorly worked out”.⁷⁶

Originally it was planned to publish an annual almanac after each award competition, which was to include not only the finalists but also texts of other competitors whom the organizational committee found worthy of publishing. Yet this idea was given up by the sponsor, for financial reasons.

At the same time the amount of authors whose works fall under the category of Muslim art literature continued to rise since the announcement of the first

⁷⁵ “Literaturnogo ‘Islamskogo proryva’ ne sluchilos’. Premiia meniaet format”, at: www.islamrf.ru/news/russia/rusnews/117/

⁷⁶ R.I. Bekkin, “‘Islamskii proryv’: musul’manskaia literature v poiskakh ideologii”, *Kavkaz i globalizatsiia*, 2007, vol. 1 (2), 94,

“Islamic Breakthrough” season. One year after the extinction of the award program an opportunity opened up to publish such an almanac. And not merely in annual form but four times a year: in the form of the Muslim literary and philosophical journal *Chetki* (“Chain of Pearls”, “Rosary Beads”).

The first issue of *Chetki* appeared in 2007, with the philanthropic foundation Mardjani as its founder. The chief editor of the journal and the major ideologue of the project was Renat Bekkin, who followed the concept he had outlined in the article quoted above. Yet as Bekkin himself acknowledged, this concept is very difficult to follow consistently.⁷⁷ To give an example, one of the numbers discussed the Cinema Festival “Golden Minbar”, which had such a wishy-washy conception that it included films that had no relation at all to Islam or to Muslims.⁷⁸

The first issues of *Chetki* offered many texts that had previously been submitted to the “Islamic Breakthrough”. But approximately one half of what *Chetki* published was fresh material, written in the Russian language and often on the journal’s direct request; the other half consisted of translations of texts by writers from Muslim countries.

Just like in the “Islamic Breakthrough” competition, also among the contributors to the journal there were many Russian Muslims. For instance, Anastasiia Ezhova became a regular writer in the *publitsistika* section. Among the Russian Muslim authors who wrote for *Chetki* one can also find Irina Tavaratsian, Anzhelika Pobedonostseva, Anton Savin (Ali Reza), Dmitrii (Ahmad) Makarov, plus many others. Some readers erroneously held *Chetki* for a Shii journal, since there were more than a few Shiis among its contributors, including Iranians as well as Russian Muslims. Interesting to note is also that *Chetki*’s readership comprised not only Muslims but also, and perhaps even more so, representatives of the intelligentsia who have a passion for the Orient. Probably not all texts that *Chetki* published were to the liking of orthodox believers.

⁷⁷ “Renat Bekkin: dialog cherez tvorchestvo”, *Musul'manka*, 2011, No. 10, 26.

⁷⁸ R.I. Bekkin, “Ot redaktsii”, *Chetki*, 2009, No. 3 (5), 4.

Since 2010 *Chetki* produced thematic issues. One of the numbers that attracted most attention was an issue devoted to Russian Muslims. *Chetki* published articles from the whole breadth of the spectrum, from Twelver Shiis like Ezhova to secular intellectuals like Igor' Alekseev. Their different political and also religious views notwithstanding, all authors agreed on one: the Russian Muslims are a special group. All texts underlined, consciously or unconsciously, the "special character", the "being different" of the Russians who embraced Islam, their difference from the rest of the believers, especially those whom we are used to call "ethnic Muslims" or "Muslims by birth". Galina (Aisha) Babich shed light upon some details about this often artificial juxtaposition, in her emotional essay "Opposition: 'Ethnics against Russians'", and so did Anastasiia (Fatima) Ezhova and Anzhelika Pobedonostseva. The editors promised to return to the topic of Russian Muslims in one of the next issues, but in 2012 the journal was discontinued.

But even the rather small amount of literature by Russian Muslims that was published in *Chetki* and elsewhere is still waiting for its researcher.

Some Preliminary Conclusions

On the one hand, the analysis of the political and religious activities of Russian Muslims allows us to conclude that in spite of their intentions they did not become the vanguard of the Russian *umma*, and this for objective and for subjective reasons. This raises the question: is there a united *umma* in the Russian Federation, one that is not split up into its national entities, like Tatar, Chechen, and so forth?

On the other hand, also the Russian Muslims themselves never represented one whole, which would have been a precondition for appearing as a force of their own. The National Organization of Russian Muslims (NORM) has been claiming to represent the interests of all Russian Muslims but did not live up to this task, and turned from a relatively pluralist structure into a closed association that has limited outreach because of its radical right-wing ideology. As a response to the "ethnic Muslim" establishment's rejection of NORM, the latter chose an

ideological framework (including the choice of a legal school that has no other followers in Russia, and the primacy of the national factor above the religious one) that turned Russian Muslims into an isolated, marginal group that in fact occupies only a modest niche in the public life of Russian Muslims. The ambition of some of the Russian Muslims to follow the example of “other Russians” – Old Believers and Christian sects of medieval Russia like the Subbotniks, Molokane, Dukhobory and so forth⁷⁹ – stands in open contradiction to their intention to be recognized as the leading elite of Russia’s Muslim community.

In this situation – whether they like it or not – the only way for Russian Muslims to become part of Russia’s contemporary Muslim society is to integrate into it, like Abdul’ Vakhed Niiazov (the former Vadim Medved’ev) did, who not only changed his name and family name but even turned into someone who can no longer be distinguished from a representative of the educated elite of the Turkic peoples of Russia. From the position of many Russian Muslims such a change is not acceptable because it leads to the loss of their identity.

Yet to regard the Russian Muslims as a “lost sect” would also be completely inappropriate, and if only for the reason that there is no ideological unity in their ranks; there are Russian Sunnis, Shiis and also non-practicing Muslims.

Equally problematic is the vagueness of the term “Russian Muslim” itself. One can regard this term as an umbrella not only for ethnic Russians (including people of mixed family background) but also for representatives of the autochthonous Muslim peoples who traditionally belong to Islam: the Tatars, Bashkirs, and others, in as far as many of them regard Russian as their native language. Their children, as Iu.M. Kobishchanov has rightfully observed, are already Russian in culture and Muslim in confession.⁸⁰ Perhaps the mutual intellectual interrelations of an internationalist-minded part of the Russian Muslims with representatives of the Turkic peoples who find themselves in the Russian cultural area will one day

⁷⁹ Kh. Sidorov, “Russkie musul’many: fenomen, sostoianie, perspektivy”, at: www.norm-info.ru/articles/128/

⁸⁰ Iu.M. Kobishchanov, “Musul’mane Rossii, korennye rossiiskie musul’mane i russkie musul’mane”, *Musul’mane izmeniaiushcheisia Rossii* (Moscow, 2002), at: <http://www.tatar-history.narod.ru/musulmane-rossii.htm>

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produce a real intellectual vanguard of the *umma* of the Russian Federation that is able to speak in the name of all Muslims of Russia.

There are attempts to frighten the public by arguing that the social activity of the Russian Muslims poses a threat to the unity of Russia; but these are just propagandistic exercises. There is no doubt that the number of Russian converts to Islam – at present several thousand at most – will rise, but their share in the overall population will hardly ever be higher than a few percent. There are good reasons for this. The Russian Muslims are indeed an elite, but not of the Russian Federation's *umma* but of Russian society as a whole. They are an intellectual elite that is reflecting about the meaning of life, that is searching for itself, that does not want to walk the well-trodden path and to simply follow the religion of their ancestors. Of such people there are always but a few, and there is no reason to instil fear and to believe in the myth that Russia's Islamization is imminent. At least not from the numbers of Russians who embrace Islam. At any event this question has little scientific to it. Time will tell...

Translated from the Russian by Michael Kemper.⁸¹

⁸¹ This article was produced for our volume; it has not been published before.