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Jadidism in Central Asia: Islam and Modernity in the Russian Empire

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Central Asia
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Muslim modernism in Central Asia at the turn of the twentieth century remains virtually unknown to scholars of Muslim cultural history. What little we know comes through a thick prism of nationalist or Soviet historiography that loses the Islamic dimension of the movement. Yet, approaching Jadidism, as this movement is usually called, as a Muslim movement allows us to broaden our understanding of the Muslim world's encounter with modernity, and to reconsider many of the categories we habitually invoke in studying the Muslim world.

Jadidism arose in Central Asia in the 1890s, a generation after the Russian conquest. Its proponents, the Jadids, formulated a harsh critique of their society based on a fascination with modernity. The distinct flavour of Central Asian Jadidism is captured in the following exhortation penned by Munawwar Qari in 1906:

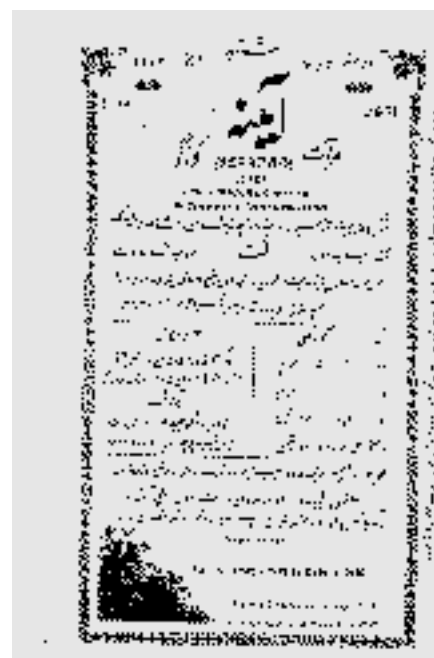
O Co-religionists, o compatriots! Let's be just and compare our situation with that of other, advanced nations. Let's secure the future of our coming generations and save them from becoming slaves and servants of others. The Europeans, taking advantage of our negligence and ignorance, took our government from our hands, and are gradually taking over our crafts and trades. If we do not quickly make an effort to reform our affairs in order to safeguard ourselves, our nation, and our children, our future will be extremely difficult. Reform begins with a rapid start in cultivating sciences conforming to our times. Becoming acquainted with the sciences of the present age depends upon the reform of our schools and our methods of teaching.¹

Behbudi's magazine *Ayina*, the most important Jadid publication in Central Asia.

The sense of decline and impending doom was widely shared by the Jadids. Reform was necessary to avoid extinction. Its advocacy rested on a harsh critique of the corrupt present. Judged by the needs of the age, much, if not all, in Central Asian society was deemed to be in need of urgent change. The solution lay in cultivating knowledge, which appeared as a panacea to the Jadids for the ills they diagnosed in their society. The very name 'Jadidism' is connected with education. It refers to the advocacy by the reformers of the phonetic, or new, method (*usul-i jadid*) of teaching the alphabet in the maktab. From the new method, Jadid reform went to the advocacy of the new-method school, a transformation of the syllabus, and ultimately a new conception of knowledge.

In common with other modernists of the period, the Jadids ascribed the 'decline' and 'degeneration' of their community to its departure from the true path of Islam. When Muslims followed true Islam, the Jadids argued, they were leaders of the world in knowledge, and Muslim empires were mighty. Corruption of the faith led them to ignorance and political and military weakness. The solution was a return to 'true Islam'. But 'true Islam' had come to mean something quite new to the Jadids. The idea of progress, a historical consciousness defined by constant change, and a modern conception of geography, all in different ways transformed the way in which Central Asians could imagine their world. New conceptions of time and space allowed a far-reaching historicization of the world that produced new, rationalist understandings of Islam and being Muslim. True understanding of Islam required not insertion in a chain of authoritative masters, but the mastery of the textual sources of Islam, now available in print. Knowledge alone could lead Muslims to the true faith.

Knowledge also explained the superiority of the 'more advanced' societies (Russia and Europe in general) over Muslims. Up until 1917,



the Jadids' view of Russia and Europe was quite positive: they were living examples of the links between knowledge, wealth, and military might that the Jadids constantly asserted. Such positive images were not simply the result of the Jadids' europhilia. They all had a didactic purpose: to exhort their own society to acquire all the aspects of Europe that they admired – knowledge, order, discipline, and power. This fascination with Europe coexisted with a fear that if Muslim societies did not 'catch up', their situation would become 'even more difficult'. The practically unchallenged encroachment of European powers over the rest of the planet sustained these fears. Ultimately, the hope of the Jadids was for Muslims to join the modern world as respected and equal partners. They wanted the modernity of Europe for themselves.

The first proponents of reform often had traditional Muslim education, but they had also experienced the modern world through travel and reading newspapers. The father of Mahmud Khoja Behbudi, the most respected figure in Central Asia, was *qazi* in a village on the outskirts of Samarkand, and Behbudi was taught the standard madrasa texts of the time at home by his father and uncles. The family was prosperous enough for Behbudi to travel abroad. A trip in 1900 to Istanbul and Cairo, en route to the hajj, was a turning point in Behbudi's intellectual trajectory. First-hand experience of modernist reforms in those places convinced him to propagate similar ideas in his own land. Abdurrafit Fitrat, the leading Bukharan Jadid, had studied at a madrasa before he travelled to Istanbul for further education. By about 1910, the Jadid profile begins to change: the younger Jadids still came from traditionally learned families, but their madrasa credentials were scantier.

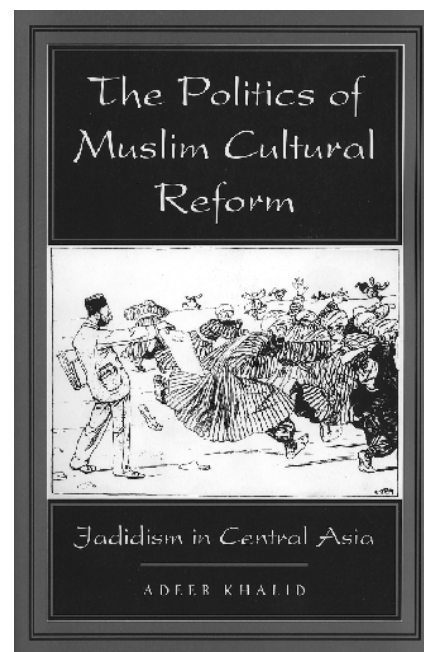
What the Jadids had in common was a commitment to change and a possession of what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'cultural capital'. This disposed them to conceive of reform in cultural terms, and the modicum of comfort that most enjoyed in their lives allowed them

to devote their energies to it. In the end, the Jadids were constituted as a group by their own critical discourse. Their sense of cohesion came from their shared vision of the future as well as their participation in common activities and enterprises. The basic institutions of Jadid reform were the press and the new-method school.

The Jadids avidly read the Turkic-language press of both the Russian and Ottoman empires, as well as newspapers in Persian and even Arabic, published in the Middle East, India, and Europe. This made them part of a transnational public of Muslim newspaper readers, open to ideas developed far away. But in a more fundamental sense, print made Jadidism possible. Jadidism was articulated in a print-based public space which disadvantaged the traditional cultural elite to the benefit of the Jadids. The authority of the ulama, for instance, had been based on their cultural capital acquired in years of study in the madrasa. Such cultural markers also served to limit the field of debate over questions of culture and religious authority. Entry into the new public space, by contrast, required only functional literacy. Debates in this public space in turn served to discredit the very assumptions on which the authority of the ulama had rested. Madrasas came to be criticized for not meeting the needs of the age; for producing corrupted versions of Islam; and even for being hotbeds of laziness and docility.

The new-method schools were the site of the struggle for the hearts and minds of the next generation. Through them the Jadids disseminated a cognitive style quite different from that of the maktab and thus created a group in society that was receptive to their ideas. These schools were also crucially important in the social reproduction of the movement. If the first new-method schools had been founded single-handedly by a few dedicated individuals, by 1917 new-method schools were often staffed by their own graduates. The Jadids also enthusiastically adopted such new forms of sociability as benevolent societies.

This very brief exposition of Jadidism allows us to pose a few basic questions about the relation of 'Islam' and 'the West'. The paradigm of 'Westernization' seeks to interpret change in the non-Western world as simply a case of imitation, or the transplantation of ideas or institutions fully developed in a monolithic and homogeneous 'West'. It also assumes clear boundaries between 'cultures', so that influences from 'outside' may clearly be delineated from 'authentic' developments taking place 'inside' a culture. But were the Jadids 'insiders' or 'outsiders'? Does fascination with European might (and wanting it for themselves) make them 'Westernizers'? What is the 'West' in this case anyway, given that the relationship between Russia (the colonizing power here) and 'the West' remains a matter of debate, not least for Russians themselves? Perhaps these categories are not very useful. Rather, it is much more fruitful to see Jadidism as an example of the open-ended transformation of culture at a time of intense social and economic change – a time when new groups in society arise and bring new means of communication and organization to bear on their struggles. A more useful conceptualization would pose the same questions to Muslim modernism that are posed to the transformation of Europe in the early modern period, questions that, instead of emphasizing cultural absolutes, deal with the impact of modern means of order and discipline on society and culture. ♦



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Notes

1. Munawwar Qari Abdurrahman Khan oghli, 'Islah ne demakdatur', *Khurshid* (Tashkent), 28 September 1906.