

# The state-confessional policy in relation to the Muslims in the cross-border regions of Western Siberia

P K Dashkovskiy<sup>1\*</sup> and E A Shershneva<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Altai State University, 61 Lenina prospekt, Barnaul 656049 Russia

E-mail: dashkovskiy@fpn.asu.ru

**Abstract.** The article discusses the situation of the Muslim communities of the cross-border regions of Western Siberia in the context of the state-confessional policy of the Russian Empire in the second half of the XIX - early XX centuries. The authors, on the basis of archival sources and legal acts, come to the conclusion that the government did not manage to completely russify the Muslim population of the empire. It is noted that the policy of the state towards the Muslim population of both Western Siberia and the country as a whole was contradictory and inconsistent. Despite interference in all spheres of public life, the government failed to fully resolve a number of serious issues, including with regard to religious education, ensuring the presence of Muslim clerics in the army. In spite of the reform measures undertaken by the state at the beginning of the 20th century, the Muslim population of Western Siberia and the country as a whole increasingly demonstrated their readiness to defend their rights to freedom of religion. The research conducted by us provides highly valuable insights into the development of the Muslim communities living in the cross-border regions of Western Siberia. Our research results can be used for further research on sustainable and resilient communities (as well as social risks and identity issues) in Russia as a whole and Siberia in particular.

**Keywords:** state-confessional policy, population, Muslim population, religion

## 1. Introduction

In the history of Siberia, the Islamic factor began to play a prominent role already from the era of the developed Middle Ages, which to a certain extent formed the confessional specificity of this region. During the period of active development of Siberia by the Russian Orthodox population with the support of state power, a kind of religious policy began to take shape. In the 19th century, the Russian empire developed a special system of state-confessional relations, and the Muslim population of the country was an integral part. The system itself included four hierarchical levels. The Russian Orthodox Church occupied the highest level of confessional structure. The so-called “recognized tolerant” group included the Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, and Jews; they were located on the second stage. The “tolerant unrecognized” group was represented mainly by the Old Believers, constituted the following link. Finally, the “unrecognized intolerable” people were located at the lowest level. For example, such groups as *khlysty*, *skoptsy* belonged to them [12]. Based on the appropriate location of a religious organization or group in this hierarchy, special relations with it were built by the state authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time, it is quite obvious that, starting from the 19th century, due to the specificity of the historically established conditions for the development of

statehood, the Russian Empire approached a policy of certain support for Islam [8]. Not by chance, at the beginning of the 20th century, P. A. Stolypin singled out the development of the “Muslim issue” as one of the most important directions in the country's domestic and foreign policy. Such close attention to Muslims in the Russian Empire was due to the fact that by the end of the XIX century, their communities ranked second in number after the Orthodox [1].

## **2. Materials and Methods**

Archival materials and legal documents make it possible to most objectively examine the situation of the Muslim communities of Western Siberia in the context of the state-confessional policy of the Russian state in the second half of the XIX – early XX centuries. Archival sources are represented by circular orders, petitions of Muslims. Legislation to regulate the life of Muslim communities in the Russian state is of particular importance. First of all, when preparing the article, the materials of the Central State Historical Archive of the Republic of Bashkortostan, the State Archive of the Tomsk Region, and the State Archive of the Altai Region were used. The work is based on the methodological principles of historicism, which allow us to consider the process of regulating the position of Muslim communities in various spheres of society. Problem-chronological and retrospective methods were used in the research as well. The problem-chronological method allowed to consider the state policy in relation to Muslim peoples in the period under study, as well as to establish the peculiarities of legal regulation of the lifestyle of Muslim communities in the Russian Empire. The retrospective method made it possible to identify the causes of increased activity in the Muslim environment at the beginning of the 20th century.

## **3. Results**

The period of the second half of the XIX - beginning of the XX century is considered to be the “liberal century”, but with respect to the Muslims it is rather difficult for us to agree with this statement. The government sought to centralize control over confessions, which, at the beginning of the 19th century, was implemented in connection with the establishment in 1832 of the Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions, which became part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Tolerance policy was the responsibility of this body, as far as this policy was possible in the interests of the state [2]. “The Charter of the Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions” became a Document that should be guided by the Department, and also in which the legal status of religious communities operating in the territory of the Russian Empire was recorded. In 1896, this Document was published. A separate chapter of this Charter was devoted to the spiritual affairs of the Muslims.

The position of Siberian “foreigners” held a special place in the confessional policy of the Russian state. Issues governing the situation of this class were an integral part of the imperial politics in Siberia in general. Recognition of great political and socio-cultural significance of distribution of Orthodoxy among the “foreigners” is the basis of all activities of the autocracy in the ecclesiastical sphere in Asian Russia. Adoption of Orthodoxy by the Aborigines was seen as an integral part of the integration policy. At the same time, it was an important socio-cultural process. Thus, in the Russian colonization model of the eastern outskirts of the empire, political and sociocultural goals complemented each other [10].

A special role in the Christianization of the foreign population was assigned to the Altai and Kirghiz spiritual missions. The church in Russia, as part of the state organism, took upon itself the task of unifying the foreign population, and bringing it to a single state faith. However, despite all the attempts of the church to attract the Muslim population, the baptism of people professing Islam did not become widespread. It is important to note that the adoption of Christianity among foreigners was initially superficial [19]. In addition, Muslims were very jealous of respecting their traditions, and the missionaries were forced to protect the newly baptized from the influence of a foreign population [20]. In 1905, the “Ordinance on Tolerance” allowed the transition from Orthodoxy to other Christian denominations. The change of the Christian worldview to a different religion, as before, was prosecuted by the law [16]. In the second half of the XIX century, the transition of the baptized

population to the Muslim faith became one of the leading problems of the state. The Muslims began to write massively petitions for returning to their native religion. The ignorance of the newly baptized population in the rules of the Orthodox faith also contributed to the fact that they returned to the faith of their ancestors. At the same time, the government in every way sought to return the apostates to the bosom of the Orthodox Church [6]. However, the ongoing policy of the state towards the baptized Tatars returning to the faith of their ancestors did not stop the conversion to Islam, but only increased their number. This process was not restrained by the fact that the baptized Tatars who converted to Islam became the most non-full group in the Russian Empire. Over the years, this group of people was forced to fight for their right to practice Islam, as well as permission to be numbered among the Muslim Russian population of the state [22].

As the integration of the peoples of Siberia into the structure of Russia, their adaptation to the all-Russian economic, cultural, religious and other traditions, and other tax duties began to extend to them [10]. Based on the census of 1897, we can state that the majority of the Muslim population was employed in the agricultural sector of the country. Accordingly, in this area, the interests of the two cultures – Muslim and Orthodox – very sharply collided. As part of the reforms carried out in the second half of the nineteenth century, the aboriginal population had to obey the general peasant laws and institutions [15]. During this period, the abolition of non-native volosts occurs with the joining of the population living in them to the Russian villages. Restriction of the Muslim population in the use of agricultural land occurs [21]. Reforms carried out in this sector also received a confessional coloring.

The issue of bringing the Siberian “foreigners” to serving military service was one of the clearest manifestations of the imperial policy towards the peoples of Siberia in late XIX - early XX centuries [10]. Muslims experienced a number of inconveniences during their military service, so it was not by chance that the lack of Muslim clerics was one of the most significant problems facing Muslims in the Russian army. The question of the presence in the army of Muslim clergy stood before the state since the time of Peter I, when the professional army began to be completed. However, the government sought to solve it by encouraging servicemen who adopted the Orthodox faith [13]. In 1896, all full-time positions of Muslim clerics, except for the Crimean and Dagestan military formations, were abolished. It was offered to create separate regiments consisting of Muslims [18], but this proposal was considered as impossible and threatening the interests of the Russian state.

In the 19th century, the sphere of education became the object of disagreement between the government and the progressive sections of Muslim society. Muslim communities have always paid great attention to education. The government actively sought to eliminate national education through the introduction of the so-called Russian-foreign schools. The idea of creating such educational institutions was developed by missionary N. I. Ilminsky. The main goal of these schools was the introduction of the Russian language for the further Russification of the foreign population. In 1874, the decree was passed, according to which all Muslim schools, including *maktab* and *madrassa*, were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Education [5]. Unlike the Russian schools, *maktab* and *madrassa* were almost completely maintained at the expense of the Muslim population itself. The government in every way sought to limit the Muslim clergy in access to the education system. Thus, the Orenburg Mohammedan Spiritual Assembly stated that “education is not the direct responsibility of the clergy and there is nothing in the legislation about it” [17; 14]. Representatives of the progressive Muslim population saw the need to reform the system of denominational education, taking into account religious features.

#### 4. Discussion

The Muslim clergy was considered by the government as an instrument to involve the Muslim population in the Russian state. It was the Orenburg Mohammedan Assembly that had the role of stabilizing relations between the Muslim population and state authorities. The Mufti, who heads this body, was obliged to carry out audits of parishes subject to him, and to send reports on the audit to the Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions [11]. From the second half of the XIX century,

it was legally stipulated that the Minister of the Interior made the appointment of the mufti to Orenburg, followed by the “Highest approval” of the king. Thus, even the smallest elements of democratic traditions in the life of the OMSA were practically curtailed. Moreover, the need to pass tests by the clergy at their appointment was introduced in the Orenburg Mohammedan Spiritual Assembly, and only then approved by the provincial authorities. This system made it so difficult and demanding the appointment of a clergyman that it took months and sometimes years to get a clergyman [4].

Muslim progressive public saw the need to reform the school system. I. B. Gasprinsky, who in matters of reforming the public institutions, science, education, and technology was a supporter of the positivist doctrine with a parallel preservation of religious and moral Muslim norms and loyalty to the Russian state. He saw the need for knowledge of the Russian language for students of higher educational institutions. However, for elementary school, he found it more useful to use his native language. Instead of cramming the Russian words, students could “acquire general educational information and some applied knowledge, while being exposed to educational influence” [3].

## 5. Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that the government’s policy towards the Muslim population of the Russian Empire was contradictory and inconsistent. Despite interference in all spheres of public life, the government was never able to completely russify the Muslim population of the empire. During this period, there were no clear ideas on the system of confessional education in the Russian Empire. Having rejected the system of N. I. Ilminsky at the beginning of the 20th century, the government continued its active struggle with the new method schools. The state, seeking to control the Muslim population through the appointment of clerics, did not pay attention to their absence in the Russian army. The attempt to christianize the non-native population was also unsuccessful. Since the last decades in XIX century and especially after Decree 1905, the mass transfer processes of the foreigners to Islam showed this. At the beginning of the 20th century, the state-run confessional policy towards Muslim peoples led to the active defense of their rights and special position in the state.

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