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The Development of Islamic Religious Education in Russia over Centuries

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Abstract: Based on primary and secondary sources, this paper explores the historical and contemporary Islamic educational developments in the extensive territory that is now the Russian Federation, highlighting the critical shifts in the avenues and practices associated with Muslim religious instruction in line with the state policies. The initial parts of the paper focus on the advancement of Islamic education since the tenth century onward when Islam became the official religion in the Volga-Urals region. It subsequently delineates the challenges encountered in providing Islamic education throughout the Russian colonial era, encompassing the phases in which Islamic reform movements surfaced among the Muslim subjects of the empire. The subsequent part of the paper focuses on the current state of Islamic religious education in modern Russia and finds it as a well-structured and state-funded formal instruction system that provides education and certification to *imams* for mosques, as well as offers training programmes for professional Muslim officials and experts in the field of Islam.
Keywords: Islamic education in Russia, *jadidism*, Islam in Russia, *madrasas* in Russia, *maktabs*

Zusammenfassung: Auf der Grundlage von Primär- und Sekundärquellen werden in diesem Beitrag die historischen und gegenwärtigen Entwicklungen des islamischen Bildungswesens in dem ausgedehnten Gebiet der heutigen Russischen Föderation untersucht, wobei die kritischen Veränderungen in den mit dem muslimischen Religionsunterricht verbundenen Wegen und Praktiken im Einklang mit der staatlichen Politik hervorgehoben werden. In den ersten Teilen des Papiers geht es um die Entwicklung der islamischen Bildung seit dem zehnten Jahrhundert, als der Islam zur offiziellen Religion in der Wolga-Ural-Region wurde. Anschließend werden die Herausforderungen beschrieben, die sich bei der Bereitstellung islamischer Bildung während der russischen Kolonialzeit ergaben, einschließlich der Phasen, in denen islamische Reformbewegungen unter den muslimischen Untertanen des Reiches aufkamen. Der anschließende Teil der Arbeit befasst sich mit dem gegenwärtigen Stand des islamischen Religionsunterrichts im modernen Russland und stellt fest, dass es sich dabei um ein gut strukturiertes und staatlich finanziertes formales Ausbildungssystem handelt, das Imame für Moscheen ausbildet und zertifiziert sowie Ausbildungsprogramme für professionelle muslimische Beamte und Experten auf dem Gebiet des Islam anbietet.
Schlagwörter: islamischer Unterricht in Russland, *Dschadidismus*, Islam in Russland, *Madrasas* in Russland, *Maktabs*

1. Introduction

Any region or culture maintains its distinct historical background, attributes, and nuances related to providing religious education to the public, professional training for Muslim clerics, and cultivating Muslim individuals' character. This article explores the historical and contemporary advancements in Islamic education in the vast territory presently known as the Russian Federation. Hence, it accentuates the important shifts in the avenues and practices of Islamic education in Russia during a span of more than a millennium, starting from the Bulghar Kingdom's embrace of Islam in 922 CE.

Islamic education in Russia is a fascinating case study of the Muslim minority for two reasons. First, modern Russia is home to dozens of Muslim ethnic groups that are indigenous to their respective regions, including the Volga (Kazan) Tatars, Siberian Tatars, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingushes, Bashkorts, Dargins, Balkars, Avars, Karachays, Kabardins, Lezgins, and many others. The Muslim population is the majority in Bashkortostan (about 54.5%) and Tatarstan (approximately 54%) in the Volga-Urals region, as well as in Ingushetia (98%), Chechnya (96%), Dagestan (94%), Kabardino-Balkaria (70%), and Karachay-Cherkessia (63%) in the Northern Caucasus. These communities had well-established Islamic educational systems and pedagogical heritage for many centuries before their lands were conquered by the Russian Empire, which commenced earliest in the sixteenth century. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine the preservation of educational heritage in contemporary Russia.Second, the Muslim population in multireligious and multiethnic Russia is sizable, accounting for no less than 10% of the entire population (147,200,000 as per the 2021 census). In other words, there are at least 14.6 million indigenous Muslims in Russia, according to the Pew Research Center (2014). Then, how is the religious instruction for such a significant portion of the population organised in Russia, and does the state recognise the importance of providing religious education for this considerable segment of Russian society?

Consequently, this article examines the evolution of Islamic education in relation to state policies over the centuries, positioned within the intricate dynamics of state-religion relations in the diverse and multi-religious context of Russia. Henceforth, the article provides an overview of the extensive history of Islamic education in Russia and encompasses experiences in a vast geographical area. Its objective is not to offer an in-depth analysis. Instead, the article examines the progressive modifications and shifts in different historical realities and how they have influenced educational institutions, philosophy, methods, and procedures. The discussion starts from the tenth century, during which Islam held official recognition in the central parts of Russia, particularly in the Volga-Urals region with outstanding intellectual hubs. Then the discussion shifts to describe the obstacles in religious instruction among suppressed Muslim subjects of Russian colonial domination, spanning the periods when Islamic reform movements emerged among the Muslims of the empire close to the end of the nineteenth century. Next, the realities of Islamic education under the atheist and anti-religious Soviet times are touched upon, advancing to review the state-run Islamic religious educational structure in present-day Russia.

The research is qualitative by nature and relies on several primary sources, including historical manuscripts and Muslim periodicals produced in Russia. Additionally, secondary sources are used as data related to Islamic education in contemporary Russia.

2. A Tradition of Islamic Education in Russia

Islam entered the lands presently called Russia from the era of the Righteous Caliphs (632-660 CE). In 654, the Muslim army successfully took control of Derbent, a significant city in Dagestan, and it subsequently functioned as a central point for the process of Islamisation in the north-eastern Caucasus (Yemelianova, 2003, 28). In central parts of modern Russia, the upper Volga region, Islam gradually gained a foothold through diplomatic and commercial relations with the Muslim world. The Bulghar kingdom, a dominant state in the region that existed from the eighth century until its conquest by the Mongols in 1236, willingly declared Islam as its official religion in 922 in the presence of a formal delegation from the Abbasid caliph, al-Muqtadir Billāh (r. 908-932) (Ibn Fadlan, 1996, 12). Islam subsequently proliferated throughout the territory presently referred to as Russia, reaching its pinnacle during the Golden Horde kingdom.[1]

[1] *Juchi Ulusı* in Mongol and *Altïn Urda* in Tatar, a western province of the Chenghizid Mongol Empire, formed in 1242/3.

The educational system during the Bulghar realm and afterward was similar to the practices in other Muslim territories of that era (Schamiloglu, 2018). In every town and metropolis of the kingdom, *maktabs*[2] (*mektebe* in Russian, *mäktäp* in Tatar) and *madrasas* (higher level of Islamic education) were founded with an all-encompassing curriculum, fostering the emergence of distinguished scholars in the fields of astronomy, chemistry, medicine, history, pharmacology, philosophy, and astronomy (Bariyev, 2005). Shihāb al-Dīn Marjanī (1818-1889), a nineteenth-century Tatar historian and theologian, documented robust scholastic and commercial ties between the Bulghars and Baghdad, Khorasan, Transoxiana (Mawarannahr), and Khorezm (Marjanī, 1989). He wrote: "This city of Bulghar, renowned for its cultural prosperity and prosperous merchants, was recognised globally for its well-constructed port and markets. It was frequented by merchants and scholars from different countries, as well as qadis, educators, and scholars from the Arab world" (Marjani, 1989, 50).

During the Golden Horde era, numerous renowned Muslim scientists and scholars visited Uzbeg (Öz Beg or Uzbek) Khan (r. 1313-1341), at his court in New Sarai (Marjani, 1989, 148). Ibn Batuta, a Muslim traveler from the fourteenth century, documented Kaffa, Qirim, Azaq, Majar, Sarai, and New Sarai as dynamic and intricate cosmopolitan hubs with a strong focus on education and commerce. During the winter of 1332-1333, he visited the court of Uzbeg Khan. He characterised the capital New Sarai as a prosperous metropolis, with fourteen mosques with *madrasas*, as well as thriving jewelry and ceramic-making sectors, stating it as "one of the finest cities, of boundless size, choked with the throng of its inhabitants, and possessing good bazaars and broad streets" (Schamiloglu, 2018, 23).

The prevalence of Islam and the thriving of Islamic education and knowledge remained strong in the region until the mid-sixteenth century, when the Orthodox Muscovite state started to subjugate the nearby Muslim territories, including Kazan (1552), Astrakhan (1556) and Siberia (1598), under Orthodox Russian control. The Russian expansion reached the North Caucasus region by the close of the seventeenth century. The colonial expansion completely changed the quasi-monolithic religious landscape in Russia. However, the state tried to maintain its Orthodox Christian and ethnically Slav nature by forceful Christianisation and Russification policies towards its subjects.

The Russian conquest and its systematic repression strategy against its Muslim subjects and their culture had a devastating effect on the Islamic educational system in the region. The Muslim state records, educational facilities, mosques, libraries, archives, and scholarly works were destroyed (Khudiakov, 1991, 154-155). The final tsar from the Rurik dynasty, Fyodor Ivanovich (r. 1584-1598), issued an order in 1593 to demolish all mosques and *madrasas* in colonised lands. This policy persisted for the next two centuries. Muslim charitable properties (*waqfs*), which were essential to support the Islamic educational structure, were also confiscated.

The empire's behaviour towards its Muslim subjects underwent a significant transformation in the course of the first Russo-Turkish War (1768–1774), and the Pugachev uprising (1773–1775). In 1773, Catherine II (r. 1762-1796) mandated the Holy Synod to issue a Toleration of All Faiths Edict, which explicitly forbade "all bishops and all priests" from "destroying mosques" and instructed them "not to interfere in Muslim questions or the building of their houses of worship" (Fisher, 1978, 71).

The Ufa (Orenburg) Spiritual Muhammadan Assembly (*Ufimskoe Dukhovnoe Magometanskogo Zakona Sobranie*) was established in 1789 as the first official Muslim institution in the empire to regulate Muslim affairs. *Madrasas* and new mosques were constructed in major metropolitan areas such as Kazan, Ufa, Troitsk, and Orenburg at the expenditure of wealthy local Muslims, as well as in sizeable Tatar villages

[2] From Arabic *kuttāb*, historically to denote institutions that provide an elementary level of Islamic education, often attached to mosques. In modern Tatar, the term means public primary schools.

like Ätnä,[3] Kïshkar, Mächkärä, and Tüntär to train *mullas*, *imams*, *muazzins*, and teachers. In 1844, four *madrasas* existed in Kazan alone. Ayaz Ishāqī (1878-1954), a Tatar scholar and educationalist of the early twentieth century reported that in 1860, 408 *maktabs* were serving the Tatar populace of the empire, which amounted to 442,349 people. Additionally, there were 1,859 Islamic primary and secondary schools (*maktab* and *madrasas*) across Russia under the authority of the Muslim Spiritual Assembly (Ishaqi, 1993, 32). According to data provided by Marjanī in 1886, the Muslim Spiritual Assembly oversaw 3750 mosques and 1569 *madrasas* serving 2074182 Muslims in the empire (Marjani, 1989, 210).

Analogous advancements occurred in Muslim book publishing as well. The Qur'ān was printed in its original Arabic by the Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg in 1787 upon imperial directives. The lifting of imperial constraints on the publication of Islamic literature in 1800 led to a surge in the printing of diverse religious texts in the subsequent decades. Between 1853 and 1859, Kazan Imperial University printed 326,700 copies of the Qur'ān and other religious texts in Arabic and Türki-Tatar.[4] In just ten years, from 1854 to 1864, the number of volumes written by Tatars surpassed one million (Zenkovsky, 1967, 26). The anticipated print run of Türki-Tatar literature reached 2,000,000 copies during some years. The statistics for 1913 indicate that the number of Islamic titles published in the Türki-Tatar totaled 267, with a print run of 1,052,100 copies (Bukharayev, 2000, 311).

The number of educated Muslims increased in the empire tremendously. Karl Fuchs, a German medical scientist and historian, who extensively studied Tatar ethnography in Kazan, stated in 1844 that it is undoubtedly surprising for any visitor to Kazan to encounter Kazan Tatars who are more educated than Europeans. He said, "A Tatar, who does not know how to read and write is held in contempt by his fellows and is not respected as a citizen" (Bukharayev, 2000, 310).

3. Reforming *Madrasa* System

The earlier *madrasas* in the Russian empire had developed in line with the Bukhara tradition in terms of curriculum, teaching materials, and pedagogical philosophy. Most teaching faculty received their education in Bukhara and other Central Asian *madrasas*. Nonetheless, from the 1880s, educational discourse and activities in the Volga-Urals region gradually expanded comparatively autonomous from Central Asian tradition with its unique dynamics and drives. Muslims of Russia started increasing their travel to Middle Eastern educational institutions, mostly in Cairo, Damascus, and Istanbul. These cities were the focal points for educational reform debates, harshly critical of current *madrasa* systems and conventional pedagogical methods based on *taqlīd*, which entailed unquestioning adherence to previous verdicts. Islamic discourse and Muslim periodicals in Russia frequently echoed identical slogans and reform attempts, which were occurring in Cairo and Istanbul during the reforms of Muḥammad 'Alī Pasha (r. 1805-1848) and the Tanzimat era (1839–1876).

An original initiative by Ismail Gaspralı (1851-1914), a Crimean Tatar educator, reformer, and publicist, to establish *uṣūl al-jadīd* (new method) schools was the pinnacle of Islamic educational reforms in the Russian Empire during the nineteenth century. Gaspralı introduced the phonetic method of language instruction into Islamic elementary schools (*maktabs*), which he termed the "new method." In 1884 he founded the first such reformed schools in his native Bakhchisaray. By 1914, these educational institutions had multiplied rapidly across the empire, encompassing Chinese Turkestan and India, and numbered approximately five thousand in total (Akçuraoğlu, 1912; Kanlıdere, 1997). A discourse around these new method schools gradually spawned a new generation of dynamic and reformed

[3] For Tatar words, I follow the transliteration format used in *Nationalities of the Soviet East: Publications and Writing Systems* (1971) by Edward Allwort.

[4] The term 'Türki-Tatar' is used to define the language written in Arabic script, which was understandable among various Turkic peoples, from the Balkans to Central Asia, being the *lingua franca* of Turkic Muslims in imperial Russia.

minds who exerted great effort to reform various aspects of Muslim society in the empire to enhance their intellectual, economic, and technical competitiveness and overall quality of life. The term *jadidism* (*jäditchelek* in Tatar) was coined to refer to all subsequent discussions in the Muslim press, the *madrasa* reform movement, scholarly pursuits, and intellectual initiatives.

Indeed, the links with the centers of the Muslim world continued nourishing Islamic educational discourse within the empire. However, as *jadidism* gained prominence, the curriculum, textbooks, and instructional matters evolved autonomously in reaction to the era's challenges and the sociocultural conditions of the local Muslim population (Senyutkina, 2007, 213). From the 1880s onwards, reform-oriented Tatar intellectuals started to establish their *madrasas* in the empire's major cities and provincial centres. For instance, Alimjan Barudi (1857-1921) founded the Muhammadiia *madrasa* in Kazan in 1882, Zainulla Rasulev (1833-1917) established the Rasuliia *madrasa* in Troitsk in 1883 with financial support of a Kazakh merchant Altynsarin, and Husaenov brothers founded Usmaniia *madrasa* in Ufa in 1887, and Husainiia *madrasa* in Orenburg in 1891 (Ross, 2015, 57). By 1905, Kazan had 12 *madrasas* along with at least 1,380 registered students as counted by the Ministry of Education (Gorokhova, 2007, 124-130). Nevertheless, the most distinguished *madrasas* were located in the villages of local scholars who administered them. The Estärlebash *madrasa* in the *gubernia* (province) of Ufa, the Kïshkar, Qargalï, and Tüntär *madrasas* in the *gubernia* of Kazan, and the Ij-Bubi *madrasa* in the *gubernia* of Viatka are the finest examples of rural *madrasas* from the nineteenth century Russia.

At the outset of the twentieth century, there were 779 *madrasas* and 8,117 *maktabs* in the empire, which provided education to 267,476 students, both male and female (Amirkhanov, 1988, 82). For instance, in 1913, there were 766 Islamic schools in Dagestan, with 6,727 pupils, of whom girls comprised 10.6 percent (Nafikov, 2023, 30).

Along with her brothers, Mukhlisa Bubi (1869-1937) established the first girls' *madrasa* in Ij-Bubi in 1897, which served as a paradigmatic indication of *jadidist* principles and agendas. It educated girls of all ages based on *uṣūl al-jadīd*, and provided training for female educators until its closure by the state in 1911, allegedly for propagating Pan-Turkist and Pan-Islamist ideologies (Garipova, 2017, 137). In 1910, there were four primary (*ibtidāiyya*) and four secondary (*rushdiyya*) levels. The curricula encompassed a range of subjects including Arabic, Türki-Tatar language and literature, Russian, geography, mathematics, drawing, *tajwīd*, calligraphy, natural sciences, history, household administration, and crafts (Garipova, 2017, 146).

During the early twentieth century, there was a rapid increase in the number of *madrasas* for girls within the empire. The preexisting traditional *abïstay*[5] education provided a conducive environment for the emergence of reformed girls' *madrasas* in the empire. Historically, boys would typically go to *maktab* or *madrasas* for their education, while girls would receive instruction from the wife of a local *mulla* at her residence, following a curriculum similar to that of a *maktab*. Garipova asserts that most of the girls' *madrasas* integrated "elements of the Jadīd education that unfolded at that time (including standardised school curricula, a modernised pedagogy especially in teaching reading and writing, and nonreligious subjects [which were] not taught at traditional schools)" (Garipova, 2017, 138).

The Russian Revolution of 1905 created a more liberal environment in the empire, significantly expanding new educational institutions with ambitious goals and the proliferation of Muslim periodicals and scholarship. In 1906, Mūsā Jārullāh Bīgī (1875-1949), one of the influential intellectuals of that time, highlighted three crucial objectives for the reformation of Islamic *madrasas* in Russia:

1. Evaluation of the professional competence of *madrasa* teachers;
2. Assessment of the appropriateness of course programmes for educational purposes; and

[5] A female teacher, typically the spouse of a local *mulla* (a religious authority).

3. Covering the expenses of madrasas without difficulty (Bigiyev, 1906, 26).

With the advent of Soviet rule in the 1920s, the Islamic educational system ceased to exist in Russia. Muslim children, along with all Soviet children, received education within the mandatory Soviet educational system, where atheistic communist indoctrination played a central role. Their education involved the instruction of a revised Soviet interpretation of their history, emphasising the importance of social class conflict and restraining the significance of national and religious identities. Close to the end of World War II, Mīr-i Arab *madrasa* was re-opened in Bukhara in 1945, which served as the sole institution that offered Islamic education to Soviet clerics until the 1980s. Soviet Muslims exhibited a keen interest in Islamic education during the final years of the Soviet Union, which led to the establishment of the first *madrasas* during the *perestroika* period in the mid-1980s.

4. Islamic Religious Education for Children in Modern Russia

All children, irrespective of ethnic or religious background, must commence an eleven-year free-of-charge general education programme at six in modern-day Russia. Curriculum uniformity exists throughout all regions of Russia. Consistency in the fundamental subjects, educational content, and objectives is observed nationwide.

In 1992, the Russian Federation enacted a new Federal Law on Education. Article 3.6 mandated the secular nature of education while permitting the formation of religious educational establishments as private (non-state) schools. Since then, several amendments to the education legislation have been proposed in an effort to encourage moral consciousness and strengthen the influence of traditional religions on the development of the personality. For instance, Federal Law No. 273, "On Education in the Russian Federation," and Article 5 of Federal Law No. 125, "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations," both address aspects of theological study and religious education.

The subject "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture" started being taught in Russian schools in the 1990s under the initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church. To accommodate the country's multireligious and multiethnic character, the subject "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics" (FRCSE) was added as a mandatory course in the fourth-grade curriculum (34 hours in total) of all Russian public schools in September 2012. The main purpose of the subject "Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics" is indicated as "Formation of motivation in the younger teenager to conscious moral behavior based on knowledge and respect for the cultural and religious traditions of the multinational people of the Russian Federation, as well as to dialogue with the representatives of other cultures and worldviews" (Nadyrshin, 2020, 286-287).

"The Fundamentals of Islamic Culture" is one of the available variation modules of FRCSE along with five other options: "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture," "Fundamentals of Judaic Culture," "Fundamentals of Buddhist Culture," "Fundamentals of World Religious Cultures," and "Fundamentals of Secular Ethics" (Blinkova & Vermeer, 2016, 200). The module of the "Fundamentals of Islamic Culture" acquaints pupils with Islam as one of the traditional cultures in Russia, highlighting Muslim architectural characteristics, customs, religious attires, and festivals. The coverage of Islamic rituals is minimal; instead, Islam is portrayed mostly through the lens of academic religious studies and in contrast to other religious beliefs.

The selection of a module for their children to attend is left to parents as they should choose one among the six available variations. "The Fundamentals of Secular Ethics" module is highly sought throughout the country, including in places with a Muslim majority such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Dagestan.

Region	**Muslim population**	**Choice of Fundamentals of Islamic Culture module**
Ingushetia	98%	99.51 %
Chechnya	96%	97.53 %
Dagestan	94%	39.02 %
Karachay-Cherkessia	63%	17.25 %
Kabardino-Balkaria	70%	28 students
Bashkortostan	54.5%	2.54 %
Tatarstan	54%	0

Table 1: Choice of Fundamentals of Islamic Culture in 2015/2016 in Muslim-Majority Regions (Nadyrshin, 2017; Almazova, 2017, p. 142-144).

Table 1 indicates that except for Ingushetia and Dagestan, the "Fundamentals of Islamic Culture" is not the first choice for Muslim parents. Only 28 pupils in Kabardino-Balkaria enrolled in the Fundamentals of Islamic Culture module during the 2015/2016 academic year, while Tatarstan's regional authorities decided not to include the module in its schools' curriculum. Overall, the proportion of students in Russia who took the module "Fundamentals of Islamic Culture" was 3.7% in the 2015/2016 academic year, compared to almost 4% in the 2013/2014 academic year (Nadyrshin, 2017; Almazova, 2017, 142-144).

It follows that Muslims in central parts of Russia do not show much interest in the subject of "Fundamentals of Islamic Culture." The course's lack of popularity can be attributed to various factors, including religious, ethnic, and administrative considerations. One significant factor is the opposition from Muslim leaders and organisations who resist the integration of a religious element into the Russian educational system, which they perceived as an endeavor by Orthodox Christianity to proselytise. Mufti Ravil Gainutdin, the Head of the Russia Council of Muftis (RCM), has suggested that it should be mandatory for all kids to enroll in a single course that simultaneously covers the fundamentals of all world religious cultures, without requiring them to select a specific faith, such as Islam or Orthodoxy, as he stated (Nadyrshin, 2020):

> Recent sociological studies have shown that our society is not ready to introduce lessons about the fundamentals of religious cultures, especially on the fundamentals of a particular faith. We believe that a single course is optimal for our multinational state, introducing students to the diversity of religions practiced by the people of the Russian Federation.

As an alternative to secular education at public schools, private Islamic kindergartens and schools, educational programmes such as Islamic courses at nearby mosques (weekend or evening classes), and summer and winter schools satisfy the Muslim public's desire to learn about Islam. Islamic kindergartens, mostly private, are available in some Russian cities with sizeable Muslim populations. Islamic kindergartens differ from conventional ones as they provide halal meals to kids, permit teachers to wear headscarves (*hijab*), and implement a distinct curriculum that includes the learning of the Arabic alphabet with accurate pronunciation, the memorisation of concise verses of the Qur'an, instruction on monotheism, narration of stories about the prophets instead of folktales, as well as education on basic Muslim rituals and the utilisation of educational games to foster comprehension of Islamic principles (Almazova, 2017, 150-151). [6]

Private Islamic primary and secondary schools are also available in some cities, particularly in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan. Since its establishment in 1995, the Islamic School Usmaniyia has offered an eleven-year school education in Kazan under the auspices of the Muftiate of Tatarstan. Apart

from the state-mandated curriculum, children receive instruction in Arabic and Islamic knowledge. After school, pupils usually continue their education at the nearby Nur Islam Mosque, where they can enroll in courses on Arabic, the history of prophets, the history of Islam, and reading and memorising the Qur'ān. In addition to offering halal meals, the school has facilities for Islamic prayer. Except for physical education classes, boys and girls attend classes together. Graduates from such Islamic schools are awarded a state school certificate and a diploma for religious education.

The Islamic School Tutoring Centre in Moscow operates under the auspices of the Risalat Muslim Community. Upon individual request, the programme provides optional courses in religious disciplines in addition to the mandatory curriculum imposed by the state. The main rationale behind labeling these schools as Islamic is that, apart from adhering to the mandatory state-regulated curriculum, they provide halal food, prayer facilities, the option to wear a headscarf, and the opportunity to acquire basic Islamic knowledge (https://islam-risalyat.ru/shkola-islam-risalyat).

Children and youth can gain more sophisticated Islamic knowledge through informal education schemes including vacation schools and Sunday school programmes organised by regional muftiates and local mosques. Sunday schools[6] were the earliest attempts of Muslims, particularly Tatars, in immediate post-Soviet Russia, to provide basic religious instruction. There were no age or gender restrictions, thus students could occasionally be seated in classes with both six-year-old children and sixty-year-old seniors. Traditionally, sessions were conducted once or twice a week, predominantly during the evenings of weekdays or on weekends (Almazova, 2017, 152). Moral instruction and the dissemination of essential Islamic knowledge, including Qur'anic reading techniques and Muslim prayer regulations, constituted the principal objectives of these courses.

Public Islamic education associated with mosques remains the most vital method of transmitting fundamental religious knowledge to the Muslim community in Russia. Under the initiative of Muslim leaders, mosques typically provide separate courses for men, women, and children during specific periods ranging from October to May. In contrast to larger cities where official authorisation is generally obtained for mosques to host such learning circles, smaller towns and villages generally organise lessons independently, with the sessions being conducted by the most knowledgeable individuals within the community. These courses do not impose a tuition fee for enrollment, and diplomas are not generally awarded to graduates.

In 2022 alone, a total of 25,000 pupils and 1,500 teachers participated in mosque-affiliated courses on the basics of Islam and religious education held in 700 mosques throughout Tatarstan. Instruction is conducted according to the unified programme approved by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan (*muftiate*), updated yearly to reflect new demands. This programme includes Arabic grammar, '*aqīda* (the tenets of Islam), al-Qur'ān, *fīqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *tajwīd*, and *ahlāq* (ethics). Lessons on *hadīth* studies, the history of Islam, *sīrah* (life of the Prophet of Islam), the Türki-Tatar language, and cultural rituals are conducted in some parishes (https://tatar-congress.org/ru/blog/v-tatarstane-startuyut-primechetskie-kursy-po-osnovam-islama-2).

Furthermore, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan launched the first online *madrasa* platform, known as *Tatar mädräsäse* (*Татар мәдрәсәсе*, https://medrese.tatar), in 2022. This platform caters to individuals who are unable to attend lessons in person or reside at a considerable distance from mosques. In addition, numerous mosques in Bashkortostan accommodate Sunday schools. In 2023, mosque-affiliated courses on Islam were attended by 2,256 individuals in

[6] Often referred to as the 'Qur'ān courses' (In Russian: *курсы чтения Корана* or *примечетские курсы*).

Bashkortostan, of which 410 were minors, 1,046 were women, and 800 were men (Khabibullina, 2024, 110).

Summer (Winter) camps and daycare centers arranged by Muslim organisations at mosques during the school break offer an alternative method of acquainting children with Islamic religious education. These initiatives are specifically designed for children who attend conventional secular public schools. In 2017, the Moscow-based Russian Council of Muftis (RCM) organised an All-Russian Muslim Summer School programme for low-income families from 18 July to 7 August at the base camp Zerkal'niy. The event garnered the attendance of more than 200 Muslim boys hailing from various regions of Russia. The girls' programme commenced at the same location on 9 August and garnered more than 170 participants (http://dumrf.ru/common/regnews/12716). The Mahinur *madrasa* in Nizhny Novgorod organises around 15 summer schools annually during the summer vacation for school children. These schools include a combination of fun activities and educational courses on the Arabic language, the Qur'ān, Islamic ethics, *fiqh*, and *sīrah*. In 2010, Tatarstan had over 5,600 children enrolled in Muslim summer school programmes provided by at least 13 mosques in Kazan, the regional capital, as well as additional mosques in towns and villages.

Overall, the "Fundamentals of Islamic Culture" course, provided by the state in public schools, has a limited impact on the religious instruction of Muslim children in Russia. Instead, Muslim organisations' informal public education initiatives, such as summer camps and mosque-affiliated courses provide Muslim children with the foundational knowledge of Islam.

5. An Advanced Level of Islamic Education

In the immediate post-Soviet era, maintaining a balance of interests between the two dominant confessions—Islam and Orthodoxy—while ensuring the legal equality of all religious organisations, has become a critical political principle for regulating state-religion and interreligious relations (Nafikov, 2023, 51). Legasova identifies two phases in the evolution of Islamic education in Russia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union: the initial phase of development and institutionalisation of Islam from 1991 to 1998, and the subsequent phase of the structuring of Islamic education beginning in 1999 (Legasova, 2009, 14).

At present, Russia possesses a well-structured professional and higher-level Islamic education system administered by national and provincial muftiate institutions. The country witnessed the rapid expansion of numerous state-funded and private educational institutions during the immediate post-Soviet times (1990-2000). In 1989, there was just one Islamic higher educational institution called the Rizaeddin Fahruddin *madrasa* in Ufa. Ten years later, on the eve of the twenty-first century, Russia became home to approximately one hundred officially registered Islamic educational institutions. These included seven Islamic universities, around 20 *madrasas*, and 70 higher educational institutes (Murtazin, 2015).

The establishment of new Islamic educational institutions in Russia was often chaotic, and frequently lacked administration and coherence. Their management primarily prioritised the training of *imams* for Muslim communities, equipping them with the necessary understanding of Islamic customs to meet a tremendous demand. There were barely 179 operational mosques across the entire Soviet Union territory during the 1980s. According to Yemelianova (2003, 54-55), the number of registered mosques in Russia had surpassed 5,500 by 1998. Among these, 2,000 were situated in Chechnya, 1,670 in Dagestan, approximately 1000 in Tatarstan, and 400 in Ingushetia. The need to prepare *imams* and religious leaders to serve in these newly constructed mosques and Muslim communities became an urgent priority for Muslims in Russia. As a result, *ad hoc* Islamic educational facilities were established to address this demand at the initiative of the spiritual administrations of Muslims (*muftiates*), operating

independently without any assistance from methodological and professional academic coordination centers (Khabibullina, 2020, 131). These impromptu educational establishments were incapable of imparting comprehensive and in-depth knowledge across a wide range of disciplines. Learning processes were initiated in the absence of standardised curricula and programmes.

Besides, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s led to a decade of unhindered religious freedom, which facilitated the infiltration of diverse Islamic ideologies and influences into the country. After years of anti-religious indoctrination, the Muslim community was eager for any information about Islam. This enthusiastic rebirth of Islam in Russia attracted financing from the Middle East and Asia for new mosques, religious schools, and educational and cultural initiatives. A considerable proportion of these institutions ceased their activities immediately following the tragic events of 11 September 2001. A new law enacted by the Russian government in 2002, "On Fighting Extremist Activity" introduced additional complexities into the registration procedure for educational institutions. Numerous foreign educators and activists emigrated from the country. Islamic educational initiatives that receive international funding have been condemned for promoting Wahhabism and religious extremism backed by Saudi Arabia. Hence, in the context of the Global War on Terror, the need for locally educated Muslim experts became critical.

Consequently, the cooperative paradigm of state-religious relations was embraced at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the state's role in religious policy was substantially expanded. By preserving religious freedom, the state has the authority to regulate the legal status of religious organisations, according to this model. Likewise, the significance of Islamic education was acknowledged as a strategic domain in Russian domestic and foreign policies (Khabibullina, 2020, 135). Thus, from the 2000s to the 2010s, Russia underwent a phase of structural reorganisation of Islamic education (Legasova, 2009, 14), which involved opening several Islamic universities in major metropolitan areas including Moscow, Kazan, Ufa, Makhachkala, and Grozny. The primary goal of these universities was to produce Islamic experts and professional Muslim clerics within the country. The initiatives received support in terms of organisation and funding from two state projects: the Fund for the Support of Islamic Culture, Science, and Education, and the Comprehensive Programm for Training Specialists with Advanced Knowledge of the History and Culture of Islam, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Science (Murtazin, 2015).

The most common types of higher Islamic institutions in contemporary Russia are *madrasas* (or sometimes called Islamic colleges), Islamic institutes, and universities. A *madrasa* is a tertiary religious institution that usually follows secondary school education and provides instruction to students between the ages of 18 and 23 although the age limit is not always an issue in Russia to join *madrasas*. *Madrasa* graduates can enroll in some advanced professional education institutions, such as regional Islamic institutes and universities. The lack of a unified state-accredited Islamic secondary education system in Russia renders it nearly impossible for *madrasa* graduates to get admission to higher educational institutions that adhere to federal state educational standards.

Madrasas usually have small class sizes, typically with no more than fifteen students, with boys and girls receiving separate instruction. The study of the Qur'ān and its interpretation (*tafsīr*), the sciences of hadīth, Islamic history, *fiqh*, *ʾaqīdah*, and Arabic are among the primary subjects taught in *madrasas*. There are more than twenty licensed madrasas in the European part of contemporary Russia (Nafikov, 2023, 94). The most popular among them include Moscow Islamic College (*Moskovskii Islamskii Kolledj*) in Moscow, Muhammadiia Madrasa (*Muhammadiia Mädräsäse*) and the Kazan Islamic College in Kazan, Mahinur Madrasa (*Medrese Mahinur*) in Nizhny Novgorod, Mar'yam Sultanova Madrasa (*Medrese Imeni Mar'yam Sultanovoi*) in Ufa, and Nur al-Iman Madrasa (*Medrese Nurul'-Iman*) in Sterlitamak. The quantity of *madrasas* in the North Caucasus region is substantial. Currently, there are about one hundred

madrasas operating only in Dagestan (Nafikov, 2023, 94-95). More advanced Islamic education establishments, such as Islamic universities and institutes, train prospective professional Muslim clerics and Islamic specialists. There are seven officially recognised Islamic universities in the country:

- Moscow Islamic Institute (*Moskovskii Islamskii Institut*) in Moscow
- Russian Islamic Institute (*Rossiyskii Islamskii Institut*) in Kazan, Tatarstan
- Bolgar Islamic Academy (*Bolgarskaia Islamskaia Akademiia*) in Tatarstan
- Russian Islamic University (*Rossiyskii Islamskii Universitet*) in Ufa, Bashkortostan
- Kunt-Hadji Russian Islamic University (*Rossiyskii Islamskii Universitet imeni Kunta-Hadji*) in Chechnya
- Kurchalovskii Islamic Institute (*Kurchalovskii Islamskii Institut*) in Chechnya
  Theological Institute named after Said Efendi (*Dagestanskii Theologicheskii Institut imeni Said Afandi*) in Dagestan

Islamic universities in Russia educate *imams* and experts in theology, pedagogy, journalism, linguistics, and other disciplines following the Islamic worldview. Regularly, Islamic universities in Russia provide a comprehensive curriculum that encompasses various disciplines, including Islamic studies, history, philosophy, computer sciences, economics, history of religion, culture, and languages. Knowledge in humanities and social sciences is deemed essential for the education and preparation of prospective clergymen. Khabibullina (2020, 127) asserted that by 2010, Islamic institutes and universities had successfully developed their own teaching faculty, and curricula suited to their particular circumstances, and created instructional resources for training and teaching purposes. For instance, over a span of two decades, Russian Islamic University in Ufa successfully educated over 500 graduates who attained qualifications as *imam*s, instructors of Islamic disciplines, and experts in diverse branches of Islamic theology (Khabibullina, 2020).

The establishment of the Bolgar Islamic Academy in Tatarstan, which provides advanced education in Islamic studies at the postgraduate level (including master's and doctoral degrees), is the culmination of efforts to create an autonomous Islamic higher education system in Russia. The academy was established in 2017 and rapidly became a hub of scholarly and educational endeavors for higher religious studies, granting master's and doctoral degrees, and conducting scientific research in numerous branches of Islamic theology. Currently, the academy runs two departments: the Department of Religious Studies and Humanities, and the Department of Theology. The programme is accredited in the field of study 48.04.01 Theology (master's level). It has educated 141 postgraduate students (mostly at master's level) to date, hailing from 29 regions of the Russian Federation and 5 countries both nearby and far away (https://bolgar.academy/about).

While studying current developments in Orthodox and Islamic educational spheres in modern Russia, Legasova observed that the issue of state licensing and accreditation of theological educational institutions remains being central (Legasova, 2009, 7). In fact, the field of Islamic theology is acknowledged as a scholarly discipline at the state level in contemporary Russia, with dedicated departments of Islamic theology established within religious universities. For example, the Moscow Islamic Institute has been engaged in educational endeavours aligned with the federal state educational standard in theology since 2001. A year later, in 2002, the Russian Islamic Institute commenced its Bachelor of Theology programme, marking the establishment of its theological faculty. Currently, both educational institutions possess state accreditation in the field of teaching 48.03.01 "Theology" (bachelor's degree) and 48.04.01 "Theology" (master's degree). Since 2022, the Moscow Islamic Institute has been granted a license to engage in educational endeavours pertaining to PhD programmes aimed at cultivating scientific and pedagogical expertise.

Furthermore, Islamic theology programmes are currently being integrated into the frameworks of traditional public universities, including the Moscow State Linguistic University, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Ufa University of Science and Technology, Ural State Mining University, and Pyatigorsk State University (Khabibullina, 2024, 110). The systematic development of theology as a recognised academic discipline resulted in the emergence of doctoral research in Islamic theology. The doctorate dissertation of Damir Mukhetdinov titled "Islamic Renewal Movement of the Late 19th - Early 21st Centuries: Ideas and Prospects" is the first work of such nature within this development.

Accordingly, an educational initiative in Russia that significantly advances domestic Islamic scholarship, and education aims to integrate secular and religious education in the Muslim-majority regions of the country through a partnership between Islamic and secular universities. The earlier instances of such cooperations between Islamic universities and secular partner universities were financed mostly by the Fund for the Support of Islamic Culture, Science, and Education (Nafikov, 2023, 105). The primary objective of this partnership between the secular and religious sectors is to educate professionals with an in-depth understanding of the history and culture of Islam who are capable of preventing and countering the spread of radical movements within the Muslim community and are qualified for employment in religious organisations (Khabibullina, 2020, 135).

In Bashkortostan, this initiative is executed through a collaboration between the Akmulla BSPU (Bashkort State Pedagogical University) and the Russian Islamic University in Ufa, affiliated with the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Europe and Russia and European Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Akmulla BSPU offers financial assistance for specialised courses in Islamic jurisprudence, which entail an in-depth study of Islam's historical and cultural aspects. It also established a research center for Spiritual Development and Reinforcing Clergy in 2017 that provides religious and secular academic institutions with textbooks and anthologies (Khabibullina, 2020, 135-136).

The improvement of the credentials of *imams*, Muslim clerics, and educators is one of the most crucial objectives of Islamic university pursuits in contemporary Russia. For working Muslim clerics seeking to expand their knowledge, Muslim higher education institutions, universities, and institutes arrange short-term refresher courses and training. Even though these courses typically have shorter training programmes, they are more comparable to those utilised in full-time education. Upon successful fulfillment of the training programme, participants are assessed and subsequently awarded a certificate attesting to their acquired level of knowledge. Under this institution-issued certificate, the trainees are authorised to instruct in *madrasas* and *maktabs*.

6. Conclusion

The article examined the developments in Russia's Islamic religious education, beginning with the Bulghar Kingdom and encompassing its changing structure, approaches, and priorities across the religious policies of different regimes. Ultimately, after considering the issue, it presents several concluding statements.

First, in present-day Russia, dozens of Muslim ethnic groups are indigenous and live in their native lands, and Islamic education has been deeply ingrained in the cultures of these nations for centuries. During the Muslim rule in the region from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries, early *madrasas* adhered to a curriculum, structure, and set of objectives that were largely consistent with those observed in other Muslim territories.

Second, Russian colonialism severely disturbed the Islamic educational structure of local Muslim communities. Intellectual activity in the Muslim community of the empire stalled significantly until the late eighteenth century. With the emergence of more or less favorable conditions for advancements from

the 1770s, they succeeded in re-establishing a robust Islamic educational system throughout the empire with funds from wealthy local Muslims. During the empire, Islamic educational institutions received abundant financial support from affluent Muslims, which limited state intervention in the *madrasa* curriculum.

Third, the proliferation of Islamic educational institutions and centers in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union can be attributed to a heightened awareness of ethnic identity. When religious prohibitions were lifted in the 1990s, individuals from ethnic groups with a historical affiliation to Islam turned to religion as a means of safeguarding their ethnic identity and culture, which differs from that of the Russian (Orthodox and Slavic) one. These individuals with increasing Muslim identity expressed a desire to acquire an elementary knowledge of Islam, which contributed to the exponential expansion of Islamic educational establishments in Russia.

Fourth, the Islamic education system in modern Russia is characterised by a diverse structure, encompassing different categories such as family, preschool, school, university, and postgraduate education. These educational opportunities are provided by *maktabs* and *madrasas*, Islamic kindergartens, Islamic colleges, Islamic universities, mosque-affiliated evening and Sunday schools, as well as various training programmes and courses. Simultaneously, the majority of Muslim parents choose to provide their children with secular education provided by the state. Most Muslim children acquire fundamental Islamic information through supplementary classes held during school holidays or evenings.

Nevertheless, the issue of the absence of a centralised educational programme and single coordinating center for the entire Muslim population continues being pertinent in modern Russia in relation to Islamic education, as it impedes the full formation of a system with specific levels and stages within the framework of models and traditions that have been preserved in specific regions of the country. This, in turn, reduces the quality of education (Nafikov, 2023, 98; Legasova, 2009, 17). At present, each region structures its Islamic education systems and programmes according to its unique local specifications, priorities, and cultural requirements.

Furthermore, in the past three to four decades, state policies regarding Islamic religious education have transitioned from merely permitting the establishment of religious educational institutions in the immediate post-Soviet era to the licensing and accreditation of specific Islamic educational programmes. The Russian state acknowledges the significant impact and potential of Muslims in Russian society and therefore oversees the complete system of Islamic education, as well as allocates funds for training Muslim clerics and professionals who support the state's interests. State policies are instrumental in shaping the regional characteristics of Islam and the perspectives of local Muslims via educational initiates.

Hence, in contemporary Russia, the term "Islamic religious education" refers to a structured and state-funded formal instruction system. Its primary objective is to provide education and certification to *imams* for mosques, as well as to offer training programmes for professional Muslim officials and experts in the field of Islam. The interpretation of Islamic religious education in Russia should consider the country's diverse ethnic and multinational composition, while also aligning with the priorities and interests of the state.

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