

## When the Other Speaks: Ismāʿil Gasprinskii and the Concept of Islamic Reformation

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### Abstract

Through analysis of the Russian-language writings of the prominent Crimean Tatar Muslim educator Ismāʿil Gasprinskii, this article engages in unpacking the term ‘Islamic Reformation’. Gasprinskii’s membership of various, not necessarily overlapping social groups, including Russian conservative circles and international Muslim liberal networks, gave rise to the multitude of complex, often mutually exclusive meanings that the term enjoyed in his work. Despite clear references that Gasprinskii made to European and global Islamic discourses on civilisation and progress, his texts remained highly sensitive to Russia’s own insecure stance vis-à-vis Europe. Responding to the nation-building rhetoric of Russia’s elites, Gasprinskii conformed to and simultaneously challenged dominant cultural codes concerning Russia’s ethnic and religious minorities in many subtle ways. His case thus invites a reconsideration of the modes of conversation that existed between the coloniser and the colonised at the turn of the twentieth century, whereby we see them not as instances of uncontested domination by and imposition of European models, but as a complex and multidirectional process in which Muslim figures, like Gasprinskii, could exercise a significant degree of agency.

### Keywords

Islamic Reformation – Protestant Reformation – Ismāʿil Gasprinskii – Sayyid Aḥmad Khān – cultural hybridity

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN  
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### Introduction

The (re)interpretation of roots, manifestations and effects of the Muslim reformist movement in the Russian empire of the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries—the movement that has until recently been subsumed under the umbrella term Jadidism (from *uṣūl-i jadīd*, ‘new method’ of schooling)—continues to fuel discussions among scholars of Russia’s Islam.<sup>1</sup> Recent work on the topic, including certain widely-cited publications that have appeared in this journal, has challenged and deconstructed the previously dominant, dichotomous division of Muslim actors into reactionaries and modernisers, thereby urging a more critical engagement with a broad array of currents within the phenomenon of Muslim modernism.<sup>2</sup> This paper draws on the ongoing scholarly conversation in the field and seeks to further problematise the nature of changes in Russia’s Muslim communities of the time by scrutinising our understanding of the agency that prominent Muslim figures maintained and exercised in their interaction with Russian imperial institutions. Such an approach not only encourages a more sophisticated view of the Muslim reformist agenda but also enables the dismantling of an ingrained but misleading imagery of sharp boundaries between Muslim intellectuals and their Russian/Orthodox Christian counterparts.

Central to the perspective explored in this paper is Ismāʿil Gasprinskii (Gasprali, 1851–1914), a well-known Crimean Tatar reformer and educator. Drawing on the seminal work of Edward Lazzzerini, Hakan Kırımlı, James Meyer, and Mustafa Tuna, among others, who have written extensively on Gasprinskii’s ideas and his actions in promoting new-method schooling,<sup>3</sup> here

- 1 Among the latest events related to the topic is a round table hosted by the Kazan State University, cf. L. Aïmazova, “Nezatikhaiushchie spory vokrug fenomena tatarskogo dzhadidizma.” *Islamology* 10/2 (2020): 180–87.
- 2 To name just a few: M. Kemper, *Sufis und Gelehrte in Tatarien und Baskkirien, 1789–1889: Der islamische Diskurs unter russischer Herrschaft* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1998); A.J. Frank, *Bukhara and the Muslims of Russia: Sufism, Education, and the Paradox of Islamic Prestige* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); D. DeWeese, “It Was a Dark and Stagnant Night (‘til the Jadids Brought the Light): Clichés, Biases, and False Dichotomies in the Intellectual History of Central Asia.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59/1–2 (2016): 37–92; P. Sartori, “Ijtihād in Bukhara: Central Asian Jadidism and Local Genealogies of Cultural Change.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59/1–2 (2016): 193–236; D. Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan’s Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020).
- 3 Including but not limited to: E.J. Lazzzerini, “Ismail Bey Gasprinskii and Muslim Modernism in Russia: 1878–1914” (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1973); H. Kırımlı, *National Movements and National Identity among the Crimean Tatars (1905–1916)* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); J.H. Meyer, *Turks Across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman*