

Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca

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Russia's tsars ruled over more Muslims than any other empire in the world. And as the recent wave of 'new imperial' history compels us, this fact can only be explained by focusing on imperial flexibility and accommodation as much as coercion or violence.⁽¹⁾ Eileen Kane's *Russian Hajj* lies firmly within this trajectory but breaks new ground by uncovering a rich, fascinating story of imperial governance and transnational mobility. Kane's eloquent and deceptively short book – 186 pages plus notes – spans the 1820s to the 1920s and traces the tsarist state's reluctant, frequently ambivalent, but ultimately robust efforts to 'harness and exploit' (p. 6) the Hajj. She portrays a world of harrowing railway and steamship journeys, exploitative Hajj brokers in Odessa and Istanbul, and the opening of Russian consulates throughout Ottoman Arabia. Yet the book's signal contribution is to uncover the complex debates in this rich vein of Russia's Islam policy, initially viewed as a dangerous inheritance of imperial conquest but, by the late 19th century, as a tool of empire as the state sought to extend its influence on the coattails of its Muslim subjects. In so doing, Kane elegantly demonstrates the interplay between domestic and foreign policy, between societal pressure and state opportunism, exemplified by pilgrims whose travels compelled the state to accommodate their needs and to extend its power by facilitating their mobility.

Among other contributions, the book affirms the vitality of mobility studies as a historical subfield, as exemplified in recent volumes edited by Lewis Siegelbaum and Leslie Page Moch, and John Randolph and Eugene Avrutin, whose *Russia in Motion* contains a shortened version of Kane's fourth chapter.⁽²⁾ Without this lens, Kane's transnational story would otherwise simply fall from view. And if the history of Russian mobility continues to grow then Kane has helped anoint a new pantheon of imperial lives. Along with ruthless generals like Skobelev, truculent opponents like Shamil, and intermediaries like Valikhanov, we must now add the colorful schemer and pilgrimage entrepreneur, Tashkent native Gani Saidazimbaev, who was appointed the Russian empire's Hajj director by Petr Stolypin in 1908. His efforts to funnel all Hajj traffic through his *Hajjikhane* in Odessa form the central episode of Chapter Four. That they ended in disgrace only accentuates the state's ambivalent embrace of the Hajj and the opportunities seized by Muslim businessmen as intermediaries between pilgrims and the state.

The combination of mobility and empire also provides opportunities too rarely employed by historians to transcend the 1917 divide. One of the joys of Kane's book is to follow the unexpected continuities in Hajj

management and forward foreign policy by the early Soviet state, until the contradictions became too much to bear between promoting religious pilgrimage to foreign subjects while persecuting religion at home and shutting its borders.

The first chapter uncovers the origins of Russia's tentative sponsorship of the Hajj, enabled by the conquest of the Caucasus and its Muslim populations and the concurrent instability on Ottoman-controlled pilgrimage routes. Kane shows how the origins of Russia's Hajj sponsorship was 'at first improvised and episodic' (p. 19). Alexander I had banned the Hajj for all Muslims from the Caucasus as recently as 1822 and the change in strategy was a result of rising demand from below as well as enterprising state officials who sensed a geopolitical opportunity in a region where France and Great Britain had already established footholds. Thanks to the entreaties of Russia's Muslim pilgrims to recoup lost positions and the initiative of its Beirut consul, the state began to provide legal assistance formerly provided by Islamic courts and asserted its right to 'protect' its Muslim subjects in Ottoman lands – the same language used for Orthodox pilgrims and later the pretext for the Crimean War. The state began to 'sponsor' small groups of Muslims for Hajj after being cleared in interviews, a process designed both to integrate and surveil, for they served to identify elites to recruit into Russian administration. By the 1840s new consulates had opened in Aleppo and Damascus in order to serve Russia's pilgrims in their efforts to recover lost property, handle estate cases, and thereby replacing Ottoman officials and institutions and reorienting Russia's Muslims towards their new state. Yet each decision to raise the numbers of passports or extend the consulate network was taken over the protests of conservative voices that sought not to offend the sensibilities of Christian subjects or cited concerns about security, sanitation, and profligacy of pilgrims.

Chapter two, 'Mapping the Hajj, integrating Muslims' expands Kane's argumentation about 'co-optation and control' by following state policy debates in the age when the Hajj went from a small, elite phenomenon of lengthy overland trips to a mass phenomenon approaching 25,000 Russian pilgrims a year, enabled by rail and steamship, and characterized by inter-imperial competition. Russian military studies (by Muslim officers) showed Russia's pilgrims used three routes: overland from the Caucasus to Mesopotamia; the 'secret routes' from Turkestan through Afghanistan and India to Bombay; and the most popular, via rail to the Black Sea ports and then via steamship to Constantinople and Jeddah. Kane shows how pilgrimages 'effectively reorganized Russian state structures' (p. 49), exemplified in the opening of new consulates in Baghdad, Jeddah, Karbala, Mashhad, Constantinople, Bombay by 1891. However, she is also keen to show that Russia's Hajj sponsorship made the pilgrimage more central to Muslim piety than it had ever before, an argument in the vein of Robert Crews's book, which is frequently cited as a model text. Far from being a state keen only on control, she demonstrates that the Russian state instrumentalized this 'mobility network' as a tool of colonial rule, much like the better known census and map. Although she is keen to argue for this conceptual breakthrough in statecraft – rule via mobility rather than immobility – the use of the term 'mapping mobility' in the chapter title should be understood primarily metaphorically, since there do not appear to be any extant maps.

Still, even in this high period of Hajj mobility, Kane demonstrates the fine line between 'sponsoring' and encouraging the Hajj. The ambivalent and distrustful attitude towards Muslim mobility never entirely left some corners of the tsarist state, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs which, in 1896, issued a report that stated: 'we must agree that the Hajj is harmful and undesirable, but it is also inevitable and a 'tolerated evil'; it must be limited and organized and the lawful state of affairs for our pilgrims must be addressed' (p. 83). And yet enough proponents remained that the pilgrimage continued almost continuously, including state servants who ruled over Muslim territories, such as Mikhail Loris-Melikov in Dagestan and the otherwise conservative K. P. Von Kaufman, governor-general of Turkestan.

Eventually the state sought to monetize this 'tolerated evil' by promoting its favored Hajj routes to buttress the fortunes of Russian railways, ports, and steamships. Chapter three introduces the initial 'decentralized, semisecret' (p. 88) efforts to create a monopoly for Russian Hajj infrastructure and the many organizational and cultural pitfalls they encountered. Kane tells of Turkestanis mocked in a Rostov railway station by local Russians for their turbans and prayers, and eventually locked in an empty room, incapable of

communicating. Foreign Muslims from Xinjiang, Afghanistan, and Persia – who also traveled by rail to Black Sea ports – were shocked by rail cars not segregated by gender and trains unequipped with water for drinking and ablutions, causing concern that their impressions of Russia were hardly sanguine. Meanwhile the state steamship companies struggled to provide sanitary conditions and attract enough business, despite the eye-catching newspapers advertisements that adorn the book's cover. Despite the relatively large numbers of pilgrims, steamship operators found that delays in quarantine ports, taxes at the Suez Canal, and the lack of other commerce in the Red Sea while they awaited the returning pilgrims made profit difficult. Still, Russia had entered the Hajj market, offered Hajjis free passports, and the 1907 pilgrimage was seen off in Sevastopol with full ceremonies, including a solemn prayer led by the navy akhund.

Gani Saidazimbaev takes center stage of chapter four, which links up nicely to the politics of the age. The 1905 Revolution, guarantees of religious toleration, and the creation of limited Muslim representation in the Duma changed the state's calculus and impelled Prime Minister Stolypin to appoint a Muslim Hajj director for the entire empire. Modeled after Thomas Cook's package tour, Saidazimbaev sought to channel all Hajj traffic through Odessa. He sold combined rail-steamship tickets and took advanced payments from all sides, promising 'Hajj railcars', a purpose-built waiting room in Tashkent, a string of rest facilities along the rail routes to Odessa, and multilingual guides to navigate Russian rails. The centerpiece of the plan was a vast facility, or *Hajjikhane*, in Odessa that would provide food, laundry, baths, and lodgings while pilgrims awaited departure. At the center of the collapse was Saidazimbaev's inability to deliver in Odessa, where pilgrims realized their steamship journeys were more expensive than with foreign carriers and expressed their dismay at being subject to curfews while Christians were not. The facility itself was poorly equipped, crowded, and its solitary entrance was locked each night, as if under guard.

In this era Hajj mobility plays the unexpected role of tutor for Muslim citizens' political rights. Kane shows that the scandalous conditions were uncovered in the Turkic language periodical presses and argues that the episode caused Muslims to view the pilgrimage as a right guaranteed to Russian citizens. Although it is not clear whether this collapse could have been avoided, the tale of Saidazimbaev demonstrates, however, the state's precarious reliance on only a handful of Muslim intermediaries for such pivotal positions. And thus on the eve of the Bolshevik revolution, we are left in an unsettled position with the Hajj an integral part of Russia's Islam policy and the life of its Muslim subjects, but with complaints on all sides.

The final chapter uncovers the cross-border politics and migration of early-Soviet Central Asia and allows a novel lens into the continuities and ruptures of 1917. Like the tsarist empire, the nominally atheist USSR found itself the reluctant inheritor of Hajj networks that criss-crossed its territory. At first it was too difficult – and politically inexpedient – to eliminate the pilgrimage and therefore the state sought to instrumentalize it for both economic gain and political gain, putting the transit of foreign Muslims from Xinjiang, Afghanistan, and Persia to the service of global revolution and hoping to attract foreign sympathy especially for its nationalities policy. In fact, we learn it was due to the petitions of foreign Muslims that the Soviets reopened routes and rail infrastructures to Odessa! That this period of religious-inspired mobility lasted until 1930 is itself testament to the Hajj's strategic importance, but it should be noted that this flexibility towards Central Asian Islamic culture was not entirely without parallel, and Kane could have placed the Hajj in context of the regime's broadly tolerant attitude towards Islamic practice and institutions in the mid-1920s.

The short conclusion, 'Russian Hajj in the twenty-first century', is the book's only soft spot, jumping abruptly to Putin's second term in 2007, thus missing an opportunity to engage with the Soviet Union's rediscovery of limited Hajj sponsorship in the 1950s, which lasted until the end of the Cold War. The first decade of independence and Putin's first term are similarly unexamined, which would have also offered useful if brief moments of assessment and comparison with other periods of Russian empire-building.

Kane's book invites productive questions, even if it does not always provide answers. For instance, although her source base does not reveal it, she inquires: 'how did this momentous journey reshape [Russia's Muslims'] ideas not only about Islam, but also about Russia?' (pp. 152–3). Given the projection of power involved in opening consulates throughout the Ottoman lands, one wonders how these developments were

greeted in Constantinople, but also London and Paris. And her argument – deceptively simple but elaborately laid out – offers a sustained rumination on what we mean by imperial ‘integration.’ The larger argument is that the tsarist state integrated Muslim subjects by ‘co-opting’ and facilitating their pre-existing networks of mobility. Thus she is especially attentive to the Hajjis’ use of Russian state services, such as appeals for health care, repatriation, etc. Yet she also replicates the state’s own zero-sum language in its efforts to forge profitable transit monopolies and dominate land routes or in the infamous episode of the Odessa *Hajjikhane* – all facets that, according to Kane, were perceived as plain failures. For instance, she remarks that ‘much to the frustration of tsarist officials ... Russia’s Muslims used the services of the state selectively and sporadically ... only showing up at Russian consulates when they were in trouble or needed money’ (p. 153). And she notes that Black Sea routes ‘continued to disappoint pilgrims in many ways’ (p. 154). One is left to wonder about the upper limits of an integration perceived by its own architects to be marked by failure.

But these are questions for other historians. This little volume has immense scope and is constructed on archival collections not only in St. Petersburg and Moscow, but in Tbilisi, Odessa, and Istanbul. Kane has forged a path on terrain that, I suspect, will inspire others to follow. Her book paints a rich and novel picture of an empire with many different faces looking upon its Muslim subjects who, in this setting especially, were always viewed with one eye focused abroad.

Notes

1. Robert Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, 2006); Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin, ‘The imperial turn,’ *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 7, 4 (2006), 705–12. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Russia in Motion: Cultures of Human Mobility Since 1850*, ed. Eugene Avrutin and John Randolph (Urbana, IL, 2012); *Broad Is My Native Land: Repertoires and Regimes of Migration in Russia’s Twentieth Century*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum and Leslie Page Moch (Ithaca, NY, 2014). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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