On Qur'anic Culture in Inner Russia between the Seventeenth and Twentieth Centuries

Bustanov, A.K.

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1 Introduction

Like their coreligionists elsewhere in the world, the Muslims of Russia have historically been engaged with the Qur’an – as text, metaphor and material object – in the course of their daily lives. Alluding to Qur’anic themes in everyday speech, explaining life events in the light of the Book, or using the calligraphic rendering of particular verses for the ornamentation of valued objects – all these and many other aspects of cultural engagement with the Qur’an merit their own detailed investigation.¹ I propose in this chapter to conceptualize the complex everyday treatment of the Qur’an by Russia’s Muslims as a historically distinct Qur’anic culture that developed over centuries in Inner Russia.² As we shall see, it is instructive to explore the dynamics of Qur’anic culture as practiced by generations of Muslims in imperial and Soviet contexts.

The present chapter is based on an extensive investigation of manuscript materials from state and private collections across the Russian Federation. In what follows, I will present a tentative overview of the cultural dynamics underlying

¹ To this end, a wealth of evidence has been gathered by Russia’s Muslims. For example, Guzel Saifullina’s groundbreaking research marked an important step towards our understanding of Qur’anic culture in Russia: Guzel Saifullina, Muzyka sviashchennogo slova. Chtenie Korana v traditsionnoi tataro-musul’manskoj kul’ture (Kazan: Tatpoligraf, 1999); Guzel Saifullina, Bagyshlaua bagyshlau: bagyshlau (posviashcheniia) v kontekste kul’tury narodnogo islama volzhskikh tatar (Kazan: Iman, 2005).
² “Inner Russia” refers here to the regions colonized by the Russians in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, i.e., the Volga-Ural region and Western Siberia, which have a significant Muslim population.

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Muslim engagement with the Qur’an in Russia over a long period spanning from the late seventeenth to the late twentieth century. My primary aim is to trace the shifting social function and significance of the Qur’an among Muslims in Inner Russia and to show, in particular, how the Qur’an became scriptualized: that is, how it moved from simply being part of a broader aesthetic culture to becoming the object of dedicated translation and commentary, as well as a literary model for new modes of life-writing. This evolution reflects the dynamic changes that occurred within Qur’anic culture in Inner Russia over an extended period of time. These changes took place independently of state politics and reflected changes in literary sensibilities and consumption. In particular, I hope to demonstrate that the evolution of Qur’anic culture can only be meaningfully explained by looking at the history of Islamic manuscript production.

I begin in section 2 with an analysis on the micro level, considering the paleographic features of the Qur’anic manuscripts produced in regions of Inner Russia. Beginning from the late seventeenth century, this analysis covers the spread of the printing style known as “Kazan printing” (Kazan basmast) in the course of the nineteenth century and the continuation of Qur’an copying throughout the Soviet era. Circulation of the Qur’an among Russia’s Muslims reflected changes in material culture, such as the switch from Dutch paper to paper of Russian provenance, as well as the transformation of approaches to the text from performative to more textually centered. I discuss the first known Tatar Qur’anic commentaries, produced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in the broader context of vernacularization. In this section, I try to demonstrate that the first Tatar translation of the Qur’an shared a great deal with other literary genres and relied on short stories to illustrate or contextualize the Qur’anic verses. This practice proved instrumental in making Qur’anic motifs and symbols part of upbringing and daily life. These early translations, many of which lack any indication of authorship, reveal a linguistic and conceptual dependency on Persianate models that shared with Central Asian peers.

In section 3, I discuss the implications of the intellectual turn toward the Qur’an in the twentieth century as part of the decline of Persianate culture in Russia and the rise of the Ottoman cultural models. This cultural turn resulted in

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a radical change in practices associated with the Qur’an: from then on, it became fashionable and prestigious to memorize the Qur’an in Mecca and Medina and to perform Qur’anic recitations back home. With the help of several examples, I demonstrate how the Qur’an turned into a key tool of self-fashioning and was placed at the center of new life-writing practices. The twentieth century truly became the age of the Qur’an in Soviet Russia: the sheer number of commentaries and translations that were produced exceeded everything that had been written previously. Based on the available evidence, we may suggest that these scholarly writings developed a discursive space and language in which the Qur’anic text and imagery were transformed into instruments of self-reflection, going beyond the description of one’s life towards the conceptualization of the ideal Muslim personality. Strikingly, Qur’anic culture in Russia reached its zenith amid the displacement, repression, destruction, and prohibition of the Muslim intellectual tradition in the Soviet Union. This seeming paradox of both rise and fall invites us to think further about how anti-religious spaces may serve as spheres for active intellectual work.

2 Copying the Qur’an in Russia

Although a number of historians have produced fascinating work about both the development of Russian Orientalist interest in the Qur’an and the history of Muslim printing (which was also strongly bound with colonial initiatives and institutions), little is known about the circulation and manuscript production of Qur’anic texts in Russia. This can be explained by a number of factors. In particular, for much of the twentieth century, political considerations meant that studying the history of the Qur’an was highly sensitive and was possible only within the framework of atheist propaganda. As I hope to show, studying the circulation of Qur’anic manuscripts can yield invaluable information about the life of the Qur’an in Mus-

6 One parallel that comes to mind in this regard is a study devoted to the Gulag as a literary space: Andrea Gullotta, *Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923–1930: The Paris of the Northern Concentration Camps* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2018).


lim communities of the Volga-Urals, as well as its role in conceptualizing and performing the ideal Muslim personality. The Qur’an, as a text and material object, formed a key framework for introspection.

The oldest manuscript copy of the Qur’an produced by Muslims in Russia, to my knowledge, can be dated paleographically to the late seventeenth century. Similar to other manuscripts crafted before the second half of the eighteenth century, this Qur’anic manuscript was written on Dutch paper bearing the characteristic watermark of the arms of Amsterdam. The copyist seems to have been untroubled by the fact that this watermark featured images of creatures (lions, foolscap watermark) and Christian symbols (the cross). This indicates a Muslim perceptual culture that accommodated those visual elements as part of the everyday norm, integrating global commercial interactions into the world of engagement with the sacred.

This seventeenth-century example of Qur’anic manuscript production demonstrates that the Book was copied in an elegant manner used specifically for transcribing the words of the divine Revelation. The script employed for copying Qur’ans was also used for reproducing Qur’anic excerpts in other, non-Qur’anic writings, with the shift from one script to another serving as a form of visual code-switching to convey the distinctness of the words of God.

Among the features of this handwriting, typical of other local Qur’anic manuscripts of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, are the peculiar form of kāf in middle and final positions, the large form of the lām-ālif ligature, and the disproportionally tall letters dhāl and dāl. The letter sīn is always rendered in toothed form. Verses are divided from each other only by tajwīd symbols that aid recitation. This tells us something about the likely functions of such manuscripts: they were not meant for direct citation or for quickly consulting particular verses, but rather for oral performance; therefore, the rules of tajwīd were often indicated right there on the manuscript, including short notes in Tatar. Given the frequency with which we encounter these copies meant for performance, it is unsurprising that we also encounter a large number of texts on

11 On the relationships between written and oral texts: Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield, ed., Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015). In 1886, ‘Abd al-Qayyum al-Shirdānī observed that even specialists in Qur’an recitation were not able to tell the exact number of a particular verse. This prompted al-Shirdānī to compile a concordance in the same year. The manuscript was recently published in facsimile: Miftakh al’-Kur’an. Vol. 2. Nasry L. Miftakh al’-Kur’an, ed. Aidar Khairutdinov (Kazan: Izdatel’stvo Poznanie, 2015).
12 For example: KFU, MS 7158 Ar., fol. 32b.
the art of recitation copied in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Arabic, Persian and Turkic. Subsequently, local authors produced poems in the vernacular to explain the subtleties of the art of Qur’anic recitation.

The rules of copying Qur’anic texts remained stable for a long period of time. Even copies dating from the nineteenth century retained some of the paleographic features of the manuscripts produced in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Still, certain manuscripts demonstrate some visual innovation: for example, one copy produced on Russian paper in the second half of the eighteenth century has a distinctively angular style of writing.

By the early nineteenth century, the copying of the Qur’an became highly standardized. A wide network of madrasas started to produce a massive number of Qur’anic manuscripts, many of which were almost identical. Some variation in the script was always possible, but the particular form of Naskh script described above became more or less standard. This visual standardization laid the ground for the visual forms of Qur’anic printing that emerged in the 1800s. The intensive copying of the Qur’an resulted in the formation of a scriptural canon that was subsequently adopted in print. As such, the later successful dissemination of the printed Qur’an was largely based on the manuscript tradition that had developed over the two preceding centuries.

It is important to note that the mass printing of the Qur’an in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not interrupt the copying of the Book by hand, which continued in parallel. Moreover, the manuscript tradition also lived on through the Soviet era, when the printing and distribution of religious literature was officially forbidden. This is attested by the existence of multiple Qur’anic manuscripts produced locally in late Socialist Russia as well as copies of Tatar tafsirs. Further evidence regarding the production and circula-

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13 One Turkic-language work on tajwīd was copied in 1770: Qawā'id dar bayān-i qanūn-i qarīyyān, KFU, MS 7079 Ar., fols. 33a–37a. This copy was acquired by a manuscript expedition in 2000 from Vakhida Mukhtasimova, a resident of Samar village in the Perm region.

14 For example: Hibatullāh al-Qārghālī (1794–1867), Tuhfat al-awlād, KFU, MS 6143 Ar., fols. 98b–109a. This manuscript was acquired by a manuscript expedition from Āminā Arifjanova of Semenovka village in the Nizhnii Novgorod region in 1990.


16 KFU, MS 6479 Ar. This item was acquired by a manuscript expedition from Mahirā Khasan-shīna in the Tatar district of Kostroma in 1976. The manuscript bears no date, but can be dated paleographically to the late 1960s or early 1970s.

17 One example is a two-volume copy of Sungatullāh Bikbulat’s commentary on the Qur’an preserved in the possession of Naqi Isanbet’s descendants in Kazan.
tion of manuscripts may be gleaned from documents as yet unknown to scholarship. Although Kazan Federal University Library contains the largest repository of Arab-script writings in Russia, the proportion of Qur’anic items preserved and cataloged in this collection is small. This can be attributed to the inclination of Soviet scholars to only collect books that would be informative for writing ethni-
cized national histories, which was the primary concern of Soviet Oriental stud-
ies.\textsuperscript{18} Another powerful factor here is that the physical manuscripts are strongly
associated with the divine blessing that they are believed to contain. Therefore,
not every owner of such sacred objects would be inclined to donate them to secu-
lar archives, where they could potentially be treated disrespectfully – for exam-
ple, that men might touch these books without having performed the necessary
ablutions, or that women might do so while in a state of ritual impurity. With a
decrease in Arabic-language literacy among the descendants of manuscript own-
ers, the sacred status of the physical Qur’an manuscript was extended to any
piece of paper with Arabic letters on it.\textsuperscript{19}

3 \textit{Tafsūr} as a Literary Genre

My observations on the large-scale production of manuscripts in the Volga-Urals
suggest that the Arabic text of the Qur’an circulated in the region according to a
pattern similar to that of other Arabic- and Persian-language literary classics. For
example, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Sa’dī’s \textit{Bustān} circulated
only in the original, albeit sometimes with partial interlinear translations.\textsuperscript{20} How-
ever, in the early nineteenth century, the book was fully rendered into Tatar with
a translation of every \textit{misrā’} (line).\textsuperscript{21} During this period, the works of Farīd al-Dīn

\textsuperscript{19} The sacredness of the Qur’anic manuscripts clearly had to do with occult practices that are
described in detail in more specialized treatises, such as the \textit{Durr al-Nazīm} by al-Yāfī (National
Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, MS B-21351, early nineteenth century, from an unknown
collection). This book was apparently popular in Inner Russia: I have recently consulted another
two manuscript copies of local provenance.
\textsuperscript{20} For example: KFU, MS 997F. This item was obtained from the mosque of Pel’dinka village in
the Penza region in 1993.
\textsuperscript{21} This anonymous translation exists in multiple copies, but remains completely unstudied:
KFU, MS 6346T. This item was acquired by Al’bert Fathi from Naqiya Sagitova of Olï Chaqmaq
village in the Mösülüm district of the Tatar ASSR in 1972, but remained uncataloged until recently.
‘Attār,22 Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī23 and Abū Ja‘far al-Tabarī24 were similarly translated into Türkī-Tatar.25 In the same vein, some Qur’ān copies produced in the region in the late eighteenth century bear sporadic interlinear translations in Persian;26 meanwhile Tatar-language translations of the Qur’ān began to be composed around the same time. As a result, we should analyze these Qur’ānic manuscripts as part of the broader process of translating and domesticating the Arabic and Persian literary canon in Muslim Russia. This literary evolution was broadly similar to a comparable process that took place in the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire, where there was overlap in the methods used to compose Qur’ān translations and literary works.27

The early nineteenth century saw the emergence of Turkic-language translations of the Qur’ān in Inner Russia. To this day, remarkably little is known about this program of Qur’ān translation or the multiple Turkic-language renditions of the Qur’ān that circulated among Muslims in the Russian Empire. Although many manuscript copies of such renditions are known to exist, they are frequently defective and difficult to attribute to a particular translator. Moreover, authorship as such was not considered very important: portions of texts, similar stories, and allusions traveled from one translated work to another. In this respect, the genre of Qur’ān translations is united with the broader field of literary texts translated into Turkic, most of which lack any indication of the translator. One such example is a fragment of an unattributed Qur’ān manuscript that was discovered by a manuscript expedition from Kazan University.28 This manuscript contains eighty-

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22 Pand nāma-yi ‘Attār, KFU, MS 6642T; 6690T.
23 Al-Ghazālī, Ayyuha-l-walad, KFU, MS 6882T, fols. 1a–25a.
24 KFU, MS 6662T, Al-jild al-khāmis min tawārīkh al-Tabarī. This item was acquired by a manuscript expedition from Ruzaliia Muhammatjanova of Alat village in the Biektau district of the Republic of Tatarstan in 2012.
26 A copy of the Qur’ān preserved in the private collection of Kamil Samigullin, the mufti of the Republic of Tatarstan. The book was written on Russian paper in 1194/1780–81.
28 KFU, MS 6741 T, [Tafsīr] (from Menglijihan Fakhrazieva of the village of Dāwek in the Tatar Autonomous Socialist Republic (TASSR)). The exact date of acquisition remains unknown. Manuscript expeditions were first launched by the university workers in 1963 and since then took place almost annually to collect old Islamic books from the Tatar villages in Soviet Russia. As a result, Kazan University doubled its holdings of Arabic-script manuscripts and now hosts the largest such collection in the country.
one folios, lacks the incipit and the end, and covers translations of and commentaries to sūras 36–41. The language of this work corresponds with the norms of the literary language used in the Volga-Urals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Paleographical features, including the use of white Russian paper, the script and the book’s format, support this dating. There is a clear visual differentiation between the Qur’anic text and the commentaries: all Qur’anic verses are marked by red lines and written in clear Naskh, while the commentaries are written in a simple cursive script that leans to the left. As noted above with regard to manuscripts from the seventeenth century, this visual differentiation is a form of code-switching from the language of humans to the language of God (kalām Allāh). The practice of visual differentiation between Arabic and Turkic can also be seen in a late eighteenth-century copy of a Persian commentary: the Qur’anic text is written in bold, clear Naskh, while the commentaries are smaller, simpler, and written in a strongly left-leaning hand. In addition, one can clearly see the difference in the forms of kāf between Qur’anic verses and commentaries.

A better-preserved copy of the above-mentioned work was obtained by a manuscript expedition in 1971. This copy, written on late eighteenth-century Russian paper, is defective and includes only Q 39–53. The surviving parts of the tafsīr suggest that it must have originally been a commentary on the entire Qur’an. The remaining text may be contained in other manuscripts preserved at the Kazan University library. Visually, the commentaries are written in a right-leaning hand, while the Qur’anic text is rendered in straighter Naskh. Interestingly, the Turkic text bears vocalization for short vowels, which is rare for local manuscript production.

Beyond the visual aspects of these manuscript copies, the actual text of the tafsīr has its own distinct features. Unlike other Tatar commentaries, which adopt a rigorously philological approach in translating every word, the commentary in question instead contains detailed explanations of individual verses. What unites all known commentaries from the early nineteenth century is the inclusion of separate narratives (riwāyat, hikāyat, qasā‘is) into the main body of texts to explain the context of individual verses. Some of these stories reflect the intertex-

29 KFU, MS 994 F, [Tafsīr], fols. 1a–31a.
30 KFU, MS 6427 T, [Tafsīr] (from Kalimullah Khairullin in Bolïn Balïqchï village of the TASSR).
31 For example, there is another manuscript from the same era (KFU, MS 6735 Ar.) which contains commentaries on Q 61–67 and does not resemble any of the known Tatar tafsīrs. Given that all known copies of the work are defective, it remains unclear whether this can be considered another part of the same commentary, or if it is an entirely different work.
32 For example: KFU, MS 6741 T, fols. 12b–13b, 15a–16b, et al.
tual character of commentaries, which simply reproduced certain narratives almost word by word. For example, we can find such instances in the commentaries of Tāj al-Dīn al-Bulghārī, Abū Nasr al-Qūrsāwī and al-Nu’mānī, all writing at the turn of the nineteenth century. Needless to say, such literature could similarly exist separately from Qur’anic exegesis strictly defined. This aspect reminds us again of the need to view each tafsīr in the literary context of manuscript circulation at the time it was produced.

4 The Persianate Legacy: Tāj al-Dīn al-Bulghārī

Based on this selection of copies of Tatar translations and commentaries, it is clear that at the turn of the nineteenth century, Qur’anic exegesis in the vernacular formed an important part of Islamic knowledge production in the Volga-Urals. The commentaries of al-Qūrsāwī and his disciple al-Nu’mānī, for instance, became famous during this time. There were many texts in Turkic that provided readers with a range of possible approaches to the Qur’an. One anonymous commentary outlined the need for an explanation of God’s speech (kalām rabbānī) in a Turkic language (lisān türkī ilā tafsīr qīlmaqqā). This work contains a commentary on one-seventh of the Qur’anic text and reveals a significant dependence on Persianate tradition; indeed, it may even be a Tatar translation of a Persian tafsīr. For example, the heavenly Preserved Tablet (lawḥ al-mahfūz) is translated surprisingly as a “shining book” (ber rawshān ḍaftār), while the gardens of paradise (jannāt) are simply rendered as chahār bāgh, which denotes the quadrilateral Persian garden. In terms of ideological approach, it is interesting to see how the author claims that the right path can only be pursued by the spread of legal knowledge of Islam (ʿulūm sharʿīyya) and avoidance of philosophy and speculative theology (falsafa, kalām). This legalist rigor notwithstanding, the commentary is full of hagiographic narratives very similar to those associated with the Islamization of Bulghar, namely the story of a ruler and his helplessly sick daughter who is cured by holy individuals. A deeper investigation into the language use,

33 KFU, MS 6715 T, [Tafsīr] (provenance unknown); 6877 T (from Khazirā Jamaeldinova of Sūiqsu village in the Nizhnii Novgorod region in 1988). Both manuscripts were copied in the early nineteenth century. I am confident that further archival research will reveal additional copies of this anonymous work.
34 KFU, MS 6877 T, [Tafsīr], fol. 56a.
35 KFU, MS 6877 T, [Tafsīr], fol. 59a.
36 KFU, MS 6877 T, [Tafsīr], 56b–57b. On conversion narratives in the Bulghar region: Allen Frank, “The Development of Regional Islamic Identity in Imperial Russia: Two Commentaries on
sources, and ideological stance of the early Tatar commentaries and translations of the Qur'an will yield much useful information.

While the commentaries of al-Qūrṣāwī and al-Nu'mānī have been the focus of earlier work, I would like here to focus instead on a Qur'ānic commentary that has been almost entirely disregarded by previous scholars. The *Sidrat al-muntahā* was composed by the Naqshbandī shaykh Tāj al-Dīn al-Bulghārī (1768–1838) in 1244/1829. It is a commentary on one-seventh of the Qur'an without the symbolic separation of individual verses. Moreover, in the manuscript we can see that the Qur'ānic text is written in the same manner as the commentary, unlike the *tafsīrs* of the previous era. Al-Bulghārī's commentary is of particular interest not only due to his observations concerning medicine, the occult, and regional identities in Bulghar, but also due to the linguistic features of the text. Unlike many of his contemporaries, al-Bulghārī did not study in Central Asia but spent a few years in the Ottoman Empire. His experiences there left a clear mark on his subsequent writings, the language of which is full of forms characteristic of Anatolian Turkish, as well as numerous Persian loanwords.

The *Sidrat al-muntahā* has a remarkable story. The author's son Jalāl al-Dīn made a copy of the autograph dated July 15, 1846, about a decade after al-Bulghārī's death. Jalāl al-Dīn's intent was to publish the book, and indeed the manuscript contains numerous editorial emendations by both the copyist and the Russian imperial censor Joseph Gottwald (1813–1897), a professor at Kazan University. Gottwald took care to ensure that the commentary contained no hints of disrespect or criticism of Christianity. In a few instances, al-Bulghārī made certain observations that Gottwald found suspicious, and as a result, those portions

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39 Gottwald's suspicion was not baseless, as throughout the nineteenth century the Tatar 'ulamā' developed an entire tradition of debate and refutation of Orthodox Christianity in response to the politics of forced Christianization in the region. For an introduction to the topic: Dinara Mardanova, “Khasan-Gata Gabashi protiv missionera Evfimiia Malova: Primer musul'mano-khristianskoi polemiki kontsa XIX v.,” *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov’ v Rossii i za rubezhom* 38, no. 4 (2020): 343–72.
of the text did not make it to publication. The book was submitted for censorship in 1864 but was not published until 1876, when it appeared under a different title, *Kitāb sharaf māāb*. The poet Ā‘lī al-Chuqrī (1826–1889) had access to some items from al-Bulghārī’s library and was interested in his written oeuvre. At one point, he expressed his puzzlement at the multiple titles of al-Bulghārī’s work:

He [Tāj al-Dīn al-Bulghārī] commented in the Turkic language [*türkî telenchâ tafsîr itmesh*] on the Qur‘an. It contains a commentary on [the sūra] Baqara. I have seen the author’s original in Yanga Kisher village. The size [of this book] is similar to *Jāmi‘ al-rumūz*. Maybe it is the *tafsîr* called *Sidrat al-muntahā*. His *tafsîr* on one-seventh of the Qur‘an [haft-i yāk] must be a different [work]. His *haft-i yāk* has been accepted and praised [by the authorities?] and was printed in Kazan for the use of common folk. This book became famous in other places.41

Al-Chuqrī does not mention, however, that both the printed and manuscript versions of al-Bulghārī’s commentary contain the title *Sidrat al-muntahā* on the first pages. Although the printed edition of this work circulated widely, the failure to identify its author on the title page, together with the absence of identifiable manuscript copies, meant that the *Sidrat al-muntahā* remained entirely unstudied until recently.42

Al-Bulghārī described his primary audience thus: “this translation (*tarjama*) has been carried out for boys and girls, old men and women of Bulghar.”43 Several points can be made here. First, al-Bulghārī always refers to his work as a translation44 and never calls it a commentary or *tafsîr*. In the eighty-five instances where al-Bulghārī uses the term *tafsîr*, he does so to denote either the science of Qur‘anic commentary in general or somebody else’s individual opinion. For example: “such is the commentary [*tafsîr*] of ‘Atā b. Rubā‘, but the commentary of Hasan [al-]Basrī

40 I used the following edition: *Kitāb sharaf māāb haft-i yāk tafsîre türkî telendâ* (St Petersburg, 1883). Michael Kemper wrote that the book was published in 1859, but this is impossible due to the known date of censorship. Michael Kemper, *Sufis und Gelehrte in Tatarien und Baschkirien, 1789–1889: der islamische Diskurs unter russischer Herrschaft* (Berlin: Schwarz, 1998), 101.

41 KFU, MS 6870 T [Majmū‘a], fols. 11ab. The book contains several works, including the biography of Tāj al-Dīn al-Bulghārī, copied by his son Sharaf al-Dīn in 1834. At some point the item was in the possession of Ā‘lī al-Chuqrī, who left extensive notes and commentaries. This manuscript was acquired by Masgud Gainetdinov from Ashrafulla Sharifullin of Igānābash village in the Sarman district of the TASSR in July 1975.

42 The only other manuscript copy of this *tafsîr* known to me was produced in the late nineteenth century and remains in a private collection. For the publication of the book: Tadhz ad-Dīn b. Ialchygul al-Bulgari. *Sidrat al-muntakha (Lotos krainego predela)*, 2 vols., ed. Alfrid Bustanov and Iusuf Kuriaev (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 2022).

43 This sentence appears twice: al-Bulghārī, *Sidrat al-muntahā*, fols. 5b and 189a.

Some commentators writing long after al-Bulghārī explicitly claimed that any translation of the Qur’ān is impossible and limited themselves to interpretations of its meaning. Other authors distinguished clearly between translation and commentary as two separate methods of working with the Qur’ānic text, and were engaged in both. For example, in his unfinished work, the Muslim reformist Muhammad Tāhir al-Taysūgānī (1877–1962) accompanied each Qur’ānic verse with a translation (tarjama) and an extensive explanation (idāh, maḥfūm).

Secondly, what can be inferred from al-Bulghārī’s short note is the binary character of the potential readership: the book could be read differently by youth and adults. This can be seen in the light of Mana Kia’s observation on different readings of Gulistān by children (ṣabīy) and adults (qart): for beginners, this work should be read as a collection of entertaining stories (hence the abundance of stories in tafsīr); meanwhile, adults were expected to recognize the important messages that could be comprehended by educated Muslims (in the Sidrat al-muntahā, these are the subtleties of legal and inter-faith debates). In a similar vein, al-Bulghārī also authored a commentary on Thabāt al-ʿājīzīn by Sūfī Allāhyār and devoted that book to his daughter ʿAzīzā. The Sidrat al-muntahā, doubtless like other Qur’ān commentaries of the era, thus lent itself to being read and heard in different ways by different audiences.

In addition to the above-mentioned features of the text that unite it with broader trends in integrating the Persianate literary legacy in the Volga-Urals, the Sidrat al-muntahā contains numerous linguistic and symbolic references that openly reflect various cultural trends. For example, the vocabulary of the tafsīr features a great number of Persian loanwords, which is particularly striking

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45 al-Bulghārī, Sidrat al-muntahā, fol. 144b.
47 Muhammad Tāhir was a hereditary imam of the village of Taysūgan located in the vicinity of present-day Al’met’evsk in the eastern part of Tatarstan. In 1929, he was forced to leave the village and settle in Zlatoust. There he embarked upon the grand project of translating and commenting upon the Qur’ānic text. The only extant manuscript of this work remains in the possession of al-Taysūganī’s descendants in Chelyabinsk and was recently published: Mukhammadtakhir bin mella Äkhmädzäki Baitukali Taisugani, Kor’ānī Kārīm. Tārdzhemā va izakh, ed. Il’fat Söleimanov (Kazan, Konya: Tasarim, 2022). A smaller part of his manuscripts, containing moral prescriptions for true believers, has been edited: Mukhammad Takhir b. Ahmad Zaki Baitukali Taisugani, Māsā’il vaqaz, ed. Il’fat Söleimanov (Kazan: Idel-Press, 2021).
49 Ialchigol, Risalāi Gazizā, 38.
given that these could have easily been replaced by Tatar equivalents: hūsh-rūy for “handsome,” bāче for “boys,” bā-dürstä for “truly,” and so forth. The Persianate influence is best illustrated by the abundance of references to gardens as the central symbol of salvation in the afterlife as well as the main space for the cultivation of a pious Muslim persona in this world.\textsuperscript{50} Strikingly, for instance, the term baqcha (a Turkic form for Persian bāgh) appears in the partial commentary of the Qur’an no fewer than 117 times and bāgh itself features five times. This is no surprise since Muslim culture in Russia for much of the nineteenth century remained in the orbit of the Persianate world;\textsuperscript{51} thus even original Tatar-language works such as al-Bulghārī’s commentary reveal this cultural orientation.

\section*{5 The Qur’an as a Life Practice}

So far, we have looked at multiple ways of engaging with the Qur’an through the production of manuscripts as well as the composition of commentaries and translations in the vernacular. Additional practices made the Qur’an part of individual consciousness. The twentieth century was the era of reciters of the Qur’an: the practices of Qur’an memorization and giving public and private recitations became very popular. Individuals investing in their professionalization as Qur’an reciters fashioned themselves in terms of bearers of the Holy Book and described their life accordingly as a narrative befitting the verses of the Qur’an. In his memoirs, ’Abd al-Majīd al-Qādirī (1881–1962) wrote of the difficulties on his path to becoming a Qur’an reciter in the following fashion:

[I] prayed, crying: “Oh God, may I safely go to Medina the Radiant, memorize the entire Qur’an and return to perform recitation at this mosque.” And it turned out as I envisaged. People say rightly that if you cry, tears drop even from a blind eye. As God says in the Book:

> And when My servants question thee concerning Me – I am near to answer the call of the caller, when he calls to Me; so let them respond to Me, and let them believe in Me; haply so they will go aright.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{50} Alfrid Bustanov, “A Space for the Subject: Tracing Garden Culture in Muslim Russia,” \textit{Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient} 65, no. 1–2 (2022): 74–125.


The genre of life writing among Russia’s Muslims, therefore, proves to be crucial for our understanding of the performance of Qur’anic culture on the individual level. What did it actually mean to live a life according to the word of God’s Revelation?

Let us consider the evidence documented in Muslim photography. In one such example (Figure 18), participants in the annual festival, including imam ʿAbd al-Bārī Isaev (1907–1983) in white clothes in the middle, are depicted reciting certain formulas. Strictly speaking, this was a religious innovation of the Soviet era, because no similar practices were known in the Leningrad region in previous times. This suggests that in the new circumstances after World War II, when official Islamic institutions were allowed to operate, educated individuals raised under the influence of the reformist agenda tried to introduce new public practices that reinforced communal Muslim identity through the sacredness of the Qur’an; these

Figure 18: Carrying out the printed version of the ʿUthmān copy of the Qur’ān at the celebration of ʿĪd al-ʿAḍḥā. The Leningrad mosque, 1956.53

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53 This item forms part of a photo album highlighting the life of the Muslim community at the Leningrad mosque in the 1950s. Preserved in the private archive of ʿAbd al-Bārī Isaev, inherited by his son ʿĀlī.
included the veneration of objects and the creation of new ceremonies associated with them, as well as the demonstration of such practices to foreign delegations or to the public during festivals.

Another example comes from the only mosque in Kazan that remained open after Stalin’s repression so of the 1930s (Figure 19). Qur’an recitations took place during the month of Ramadan and were performed by members of the congregation who had received a madrasa education in their youth, many of whom may have been village imams forced to resettle in the city after they were stripped of their rights in the 1920s and 1930s. In contrast to the Leningrad scene depicted above, this rite took place inside the building without the presence of large crowds. The necessity of collective oral recitation of the Book gave a new impulse to the usage of Qur’ans that had the thirty subsections (juz’) printed separately

**Figure 19:** A recitation gathering (*khātm mājlese*) at the Marjani mosque in Kazan, September 1967.\(^{54}\)

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\(^{54}\) This photograph is preserved in the private archive of ʿAbd al-Khābir Iarullin (1907–1994), inherited by his grandson Nail. Iarullin performed the role of mosque imam from 1967 up to his death.
(parä). The particular space, objects, dress, sitting arrangement, and soundscape all played a part in this very special event centered on the Qur’ān. Adding yet another layer to this, the production of photographs was key in memorializing the performance of a new aesthetics of Soviet Islam and legitimizing it in the eyes of new generations.

Many of those who were now present at such gatherings had memorized the Qur’ān in their youth, while others did so during sojourns in the holy enclaves of Mecca or Medina. Among the latter was the above-mentioned ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Qādirī, a remarkable figure who was the son of a school teacher in Ištārlībāsh in the South Urals. He first studied in his local region and then went to Medina to memorize the Qur’ān between 1904 and 1908. Upon his return to Russia, al-Qādirī busied himself with entrepreneurship and continued to recite the Qur’ān during the Ramadan night prayers. He was repeatedly imprisoned in Soviet labor camps (1928–1935, 1942–1952); once set free, he compiled a detailed autobiographical account of his experiences.55

Throughout this autobiographical narrative, al-Qādirī presents himself as a qārī. In al-Qādirī’s usage, this term is intended to imply not only a professional reciter of the Qur’ān, but also someone who has made a conscious effort to memorize the Qur’ānic text. This combined meaning is a feature of the particular context—one would not normally expect that reciters are necessarily memorizers of the Qur’ānic text (ḥāfiz kalām Allāh). Al-Qādirī’s early life up until his first imprisonment in 1928 was marked by his devotion to the Qur’ān as well as to the authority of the Prophet as an embodiment of ideal personhood (al-insān al-kāmil). As al-Qādirī claimed, in voicing support for the highly contested celebration of the Prophet’s birthday: 56 “especially today, in this time of weakness of religion, there is a dire need to tell the younger generation in their mother tongue in general terms about the personality (nindi keshe bulgan) of the Prophet and how he spread Islamic religion all over the world.”57 It was this conviction that led al-Qādirī to devote himself so wholeheartedly to mastering the Arabic language, studying the hadīth, and engaging in social activism.

In his memoirs, al-Qādirī identified himself by a variety of different names, demonstrating his mastery of both Russian and Islamic cultural rubrics and situ-

55 The only copy of this work remains in the private archive of al-Qadiri’s granddaughter, Zuhra Valiullova, in Ufa.
56 Some believers disagreed on the religious legitimacy of this festival; see Annemarie Schimmel, And Muhammad is His Messenger. The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 144–58.
57 ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Qādirī, [Memoirs], fol. 152a. The original manuscript does not contain a title.
ating himself within both traditions. He refers to himself twice in the colophons as “ʿAbd al-Majīd b. Shaykh al-Islām Qadirov known as [al-mashhūr] Majīd qārī of Istārlibash” and “ʿAbd al-Majīd qārī b. Shaykh al-Islām Qadirov.” When inserting his reminiscences in the chronological register (fols. 52a–70a) that precedes the main narrative, al-Qādirī refers to himself in various ways, including the slightly Russified Arabic form ‘ʿAbd al-Majīd Qadirov, the more traditionally Muslim ʿAbd al-Majīd b. Shaykh al-Islām Qādirī, or simply Qādirī. 58

The epigraphic traditions of his native Istārlibash in Bashkiria, to which al-Qādirī felt a strong personal attachment—in his narrative, he regularly refers to the inscriptions on gravestones in Istārlibash, and notes that he produced a number of such inscriptions himself—prescribed the traditional formula hājj al-haramayn (“a pilgrim to the two Sacred Places”). 59 Hence ʿAbd al-Majīd qārī envisaged that his own future epitaph would mention his Meccan pilgrimage and that it would read, in Arabic script: “ʿAbd al-Majīd b. Shaykh al-Islām al-Qādirī al-Istārlibāshī, a pilgrim to the Sacred Places and a bearer of the Qurʾān, is buried here.” In fact, this epitaph was never produced, even after the reburial of his ashes in Istārlibash in 1990. 60 Occasionally, one can encounter the same title of hājj al-haramayn in colophons of Tatar manuscripts dating from the nineteenth century, 61 but it is only in the twentieth century that this title becomes a standard found on gravestones and in commemorative photographs.

Strikingly, before the turn of the twentieth century, we do not hear of individuals describing themselves explicitly as reciters of the Qurʾān, because knowledge of the Book was considered part of the standard training of ʿulamā’. For example, the merchant Niyāz Aytikin (d. 1847) went to Cairo to learn the skills that would


59 Until the 1960s, traditions of Arabic-script epigraphy were practiced in Istārlibash by ʿAbd al-Rahīm Aydabulov (1867–1966), a great calligrapher (munaqqash) and close friend of ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Qādirī, and a figure who is mentioned regularly throughout al-Qādirī’s memoirs. Vener Usmamonov, Tarikhi yadkärlär, vol. 1 (Ufa: DizainPoligrafServis, 2005), 56–57, 105–106, 128.

60 ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Qādirī, Memoirs, fol. 207b. Only one gravestone in a neighboring village, Yasheorgan, dated 1339/1920 bears the title ḥāfiz kalām Allāh: Usmamonov, Tarikhi yadkärlär, 135–36.

61 Epigraphic materials of the era show that al-hājj was preferred as a stable formula. For example: Alfrid Bustanov, “Rukopis’ v kontekste sibirskogo islama,” Aleksandr Seleznev, Irina Selezneva, Igor Belich, Kul’t sviatykh v sibirskom islame: spetsifika universal’nogo (Moscow: Mardjani Publishing House, 2009), 190.

62 Usmamonov, Tarikhi yadkärlär, 18 (hājj al-harāmayn, dated 1915), 71 (al-hājj bi-l-harāmayn, 1337/1918).
enable him to excel in Qur’an recitation, but neither his grave inscription in Sábālāk village in the Omsk region nor the biographical dictionaries refer to him as a qārt. When advances in long-distance transportation made it accessible for more people to journey to Medina to memorize the Holy Book at the Mosque of the Prophet, some individuals started to fashion themselves as bearers of the Qur’an and took pride in the chains of transmission that they shared with famous scholars. Al-Qādirī states that he received his first ijāza, a document stating his qualifications in Qur’an recitation, from his teacher Muhammad Shukrī in Medina in 1908. In the 1920s, he asked for additional certificates from ʿĀlimjān al-Bārūdi. Another person known to collect similar documents certifying mastery of Qur’anic sciences was Abū Bakr al-Shāhmirzāwī (d. 1904). Al-Shāhmirzāwī had also studied in Cairo and possessed at least two ijāzas for recitation. It seems that only documents from abroad were deemed prestigious. From the turn of the twentieth century onwards, we regularly encounter individuals who invested in learning the Qur’an, even in their later years in the Gulag setting.

Being a qārt became al-Qādirī’s main identity, reflecting a dream that only partly came true: due to his long imprisonment (five years in Solovki and ten years near Tashkent), al-Qādirī ceased reciting the Qur’an regularly. This evidently caused him much sorrow: “having performed the Qur’an recitation ten times, after 1927, I could not continue because following the Great Russian Revolution, I stopped performing the recitation. Many troubles befell me, as I have written above.”

The rise of qārt as a self-designation coincided with the paradigmatic shift towards translation and commentary of the Qur’an in the Tatar language: a whole series of works in this genre were composed between the 1880s and 1970s. These developments are representative of the formation of a new Qur’anic culture in which memorization and recitation were distinctly valuable practices and, therefore, crucial for individual consciousness. Al-Qādirī was part of this emerging culture, and the Qur’anic text played a pivotal role in the formation of his core self.

64 al-Qādirī, [Memoirs], fol. 92a.
65 Note that even though ʿAbd al-Bārī Isaev was very proud of his qārt status, I have been unable to find a formal ijāza from his teachers to confirm this status.
66 al-Qādirī, [Memoirs], fol. 165b.
6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the cultural dynamics of engagement with the Qur’an among Russia’s Muslims. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Qur’an was part of the aesthetic manuscript culture that developed in the Volga-Ural region in the aftermath of the Russian conquest. At that time, little original work was being composed, and the texts in circulation were produced elsewhere. The first half of the nineteenth century saw a move towards both translating Qur’anic texts and commenting on them in the Volga-Ural Türki-Tatar language. The emergence of the first Tatar tafsīrs can be linked to the broader process of vernacularization of Islamic literature at the turn of the nineteenth century: many Arabic and Persian texts at that time were rendered into the local tongue. In particular, the active usage of Turkic-language narratives in exegesis became a prominent aspect of engagement with the Qur’an. Further, the sources presented here reveal the increased prominence of the Qur’an in the self-fashioning of Muslim individuals throughout the twentieth century – despite the fact that this century was ostensibly an era of secularism in Russia.

The present chapter has explored two important aspects of this development. One aspect marks the move from the literature-like commentaries of the previous period toward more philologically focused translations and more detailed exegesis linked with hadith studies. Another aspect reflects the incorporation of the Holy Book in life-writing, as in cases where Muslim individuals fashioned life narratives that were a performance of the Qur’an. Private photography, the composition of literary works, and annual ritual ceremonies all supported the development of Qur’anic culture in Soviet Russia. The sound and materiality of the Book became increasingly meaningful to individuals who fostered their (Muslim) identities with the help of the Qur’an. I suggest that we view these changes in the social meaning and function of the Qur’an as emanating from the broader developments reflected in the manuscript sources. The earlier stages should be seen in the context of the aesthetic culture and circulation of Arabic and Persian texts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The subsequent development by which the Qur’an became the central (and, in some cases, only) text for Muslims was a consequence of the reorientation of Russia’s Muslims towards Ottoman centers of learning, as well as the cultural primacy that Arabic gained in the late nineteenth century.
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