



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### [Review of: J.H. Meyer (2014) *Turks Across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856-1914*]

Kemper, M.

**DOI**

[10.1353/jwh.2016.0078](https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2016.0078)

**Publication date**

2016

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Journal of World History

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Kemper, M. (2016). [Review of: J.H. Meyer (2014) *Turks Across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856-1914*]. *Journal of World History*, 27(1), 168-171. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2016.0078>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

*Turks across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856–1914.* By JAMES H. MEYER. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 256 pp. \$99.00 (cloth).

This book is about a group of Muslim intellectuals from the late Russian Empire who were politically active in Russia (including in the set-up of the Ittifaq movement/party and its congresses of 1905 and 1906), but who were also in close contact with the Ottoman Empire, where they contributed to the journal *Türk Yurdu* (Turkic homeland), which became the mouthpiece of what became known as Pan-Turkism. The major personalities in this monograph are the Volga Tatar Yusuf Akchura, Ahmed Aghaoghlu from the South Caucasus, and the Crimean Tatar Ismail Gasprinskii. The former two, and several others, eventually ended up in Istanbul when World War I broke out.

Meyer places the trajectory of these intellectuals into a peculiar context, that of “trans-imperial Muslims” who are “marketing identities.” He argues that while previous scholarship has focused on the ideological aspects of the Pan-Turkists’ writings, it is more helpful to consider their practical concerns, especially their striving for recognition, and their need to obtain money to stay afloat. Consequently, whenever fate brought them into a new political context (through revolutions or transfers), the activists were ready to quickly change their ideologies: Aghaoghlu, for instance, at different times and to different audiences spoke in the name of Persians, Muslims, Caucasus Muslims, Russian Muslims, the Turkic world, and Azerbaijanis (p. 173). The underlying objective of these traveling intellectuals, says Meyer, was never to unite all of the world’s Turks under a common political system (which was clearly not feasible), but “to create a market and address readers on both sides of the Russian-Ottoman frontier, and perhaps even beyond” (p. 161). Meyer explains: “Their goal was not specifically national,

but rather reflected a broader search for embeddedness that could take them into a variety of directions" (p. 144).

Meyer's second major argument is that the project of Pan-Turkism, as a promise or as a threat, was constructed not just by those "Pan-Turkists" themselves. Rather, Pan-Turkism also lived on the anxiety of tsarist government officials and of Muslim conservatives who opposed those progressive Muslim intellectuals and denounced them to the Russian authorities as separatists and revolutionaries. Meyer also argues that professional Orientalists had their share in exaggerating the danger of Pan-Turkism (or Pan-Islamism), but here he is less convincing: One of the major Orientalists to whom Meyer refers, the Turkologist Wilhelm Radlov, made an impression of helplessness when the Ministry of Education charged him with the supervision of Muslim schools in the Volga region (pp. 48–50, 75–76). Radlov was certainly not blowing up any threat; rather, he was trying to accommodate Muslim interests. Another piece of evidence Meyer uses to demonstrate that professional Orientalists contributed to the public anxiety about a Muslim/Turkic threat is a letter written by the director of Russia's Imperial Oriental Society to the Interior Ministry in which he asked for financial support for the publication of a new journal, *Mir Islama* (The world of Islam). In this letter the director (whose name is not given) mentioned the Muslims' desire for "spiritual union on the basis of their common religion and ethnographic relationship," obviously to underline the timeliness of this new journal. Yet there was no Imperial Oriental Society in Russia—just an Oriental Department of the Russian Archaeological Society.<sup>16</sup> It is open to question whether as Meyer claims further, "the Imperial Oriental Society was ready to answer everyone's questions regarding Muslims' belligerence towards Russians and other Europeans." In fact, the journal in question became a very respectable academic product, not an organ of political advice (p. 149).

I found the strength of Meyer's monograph emanating not from his theoretical framework but from his diligent work with materials from a plethora of archives in Russia (including Kazan and Ufa), Turkey, and even the South Caucasus (Baku, Tbilisi, and Batumi), which provide fascinating insights into those transborder activities. While in a case like the one cited above he could have gone the extra mile to expand the context, the book does a very good job in bringing the complexities of

---

<sup>16</sup> Vera Tolz, "European, National, and (Anti-)Imperial: The Formation of Academic Oriental Studies in Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Russia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 1 (2008): 60.

Russia's Muslim intellectual life of the late imperial period close to a readership broadly interested in the modernization of Russia's peripheries and in Russian-Ottoman relations.

The specialist will regret that Meyer misses the opportunity to systematically engage with existing scholarship; his references to the works of Robert Crews (*For Prophet and Tsar*, 2006), David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye (*Russian Orientalism*, 2010), and Mustafa Tuna (*Imperial Russia's Muslims*, a 2007 PhD dissertation that was published in 2015 by Cambridge University Press) are relegated to brief footnotes that appear only here and there. Agreeing with Crews that Russian state officials used Islamic terminology when they addressed Muslim communities, Meyer adds that when Muslim petitioners addressed the state with the same lexicon of *shari'a*, this was interpreted as a token of fanaticism (p. 80). Yet this observation has also been made by Tuna, who devoted a whole chapter to the blunders of the Russian official and missionary discourse on Islam. Furthermore, Meyer opposes Crews's claim that Muslims in Russia regarded the tsarist state mainly as a protector of Islam, and that Sunni Muslims saw the major threat to Islam in Russia as coming not from the state but from non-normative Muslim groups, especially Sufis and Shias. Against this view, Meyer convincingly demonstrates that since the 1870s Muslim communities in inner Russia perceived the state as a threat, especially in view of the administrative attempts at taking control over Muslim schools (pp. 78, fn. 171). This corresponds to Tuna's central argument that in this period Russia moved away from Catherine the Great's model of working through (Muslim) intermediaries to a system of direct control. (Meyer also observes that since the late nineteenth century, Russia's imperial muftis and imams lost status and influence in their own communities.) As in the work of Crews and Tuna, Meyer's argument almost entirely bypasses the Russian North Caucasus, even though the Islamic resistance there had a huge impact on Russian perceptions of Islam.

Finally, one would have liked to see how Meyer views his trans-imperial perspective in relation to Tuna's interpretational framework, which is broader insofar as it also includes a "European domain"—namely, the Europeanization of Russia's Muslim public discourse that came with modernization. Meyer's focus on Russian-Ottoman border-crossing downplays the fact that most of his protagonists had also stayed or even studied in Europe. At the same time, Meyer's focus on Muslims in and from Russia leaves him little room to discuss the actual interaction with Ottoman-born intellectuals in Istanbul; it appears that in Istanbul, the Russian-born intellectuals remained isolated and focused on their home communities

(including for fund-raising). That their impact on “Turkist” and national thought in Turkey was limited is, however, clear from the marginalization that they eventually underwent in republican Turkey, which Meyer briefly discusses in a synoptic epilogue.

MICHAEL KEMPER  
*University of Amsterdam*