

# Letters from the Ottoman Empire: Migration from the Caucasus and Russia's Pan-Islamic Panic

Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky 

University of California, Santa Barbara, [vhstroyansky@ucsb.edu](mailto:vhstroyansky@ucsb.edu)

In 1877, several anti-Russian uprisings broke out throughout the Caucasus. Muslim rebels in Abkhazia, Chechnya, and Dagestan wished to rid themselves of Russian occupation and openly sympathized with the Ottoman empire in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78. As tsarist authorities scrambled to suppress the uprisings, they discovered that an unlikely inspiration for the rebellion were private letters that had been smuggled into the Caucasus from Istanbul. The letters allegedly came from Ghazi Muhammad (1833–1902), the oldest surviving son of Imam Shamil (1797–1871), who had led fierce resistance against Russian expansion in the Caucasus before his surrender in 1859. Ghazi Muhammad lived in exile in Istanbul, where he made a career as a general in the Ottoman army. Letters attributed to him urged Caucasus Muslims to support the Ottoman cause in the war as their best chance of liberation from Russian rule.<sup>1</sup> Whether those letters, none of which survive, were authentic or even existed remains unclear.<sup>2</sup> What matters is that many North Caucasian Muslims at the time believed that Imam Shamil's son had sent letters and called on them to fight against Russia,

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1. Abdurazak Sogratlinskii, "Istoriia imamata 1877 goda i vosstaniia na territorii Dagestana," in Timur M. Aitberov, Iu. U. Dadaev, and Kh. A. Omarov, eds., *Vosstaniia dagestantsev i chechentsev* (Makhachkala, 2001), 168.

2. Several participants in the uprisings did not mention the letters in their memoirs; Khaidarbek Genichutlinskii, *Istoriko-biograficheskie i istoricheskie ocherki*, trans. Timur M. Aitberov (Makhachkala, 1992); Raasu Gaitukaev, "Istoricheskii ocherk o vosstanii v Chechna. Memuary," Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Respubliki Dagestan (Central State Archive of the Republic of Dagestan, hereafter TsGA RD), fond (f.) 133, opis' (op.) 2, delo (d.) 1 (after 1881). Iskhak Urminskii and Ali Saltinskii reported that Ghazi Muhammad sent oral messages; Aitberov, Dadaev, Omarov, *Vosstaniia dagestantsev i chechentsev*, 14–15, 64, 119.

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as evidenced in the participants' and observers' memories of the uprisings.<sup>3</sup> Russian authorities certainly thought of the letters as a real threat, based on their consular intelligence.<sup>4</sup> The emotive power that Ghazi Muhammad's letters held in the Caucasus added to the tsarist government's apprehension of Muslim correspondence between the Russian and Ottoman empires.

This article explores the circulation of popular knowledge, via private letters, between Muslim populations in the Russian and Ottoman empires from the mid-nineteenth century to World War I. Russia's expansion in the Caucasus created a long land border with the Ottoman empire and facilitated greater mobility between their populations. Russia already claimed millions of Muslim subjects in the Volga region, the Urals, Crimea, the Kazakh steppe, and Siberia. Muslims had long been Russia's second largest religious community, after Orthodox Christians. Russia's conquest of the Caucasus, however, was violent and resulted in mass displacement. Between the 1850s and World War I, about a million Circassians, Abkhazians, Abazins, Ossetians, Karachays, Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, and Avars were either expelled or emigrated from the Caucasus to the Ottoman empire as refugees, or muhajirs.<sup>5</sup> By the early twentieth century, many Caucasus Muslims were scattered throughout Ottoman Anatolia, the Balkans, the Levant, and Iraq.

This article argues that written communication across the border fueled tsarist paranoia about alleged pro-Ottoman and Pan-Islamic sentiments of Caucasus Muslims, both in the Ottoman diaspora and in Russia. Russian authorities considered Muslim transborder ties to be detrimental to tsarist governance of the Caucasus, which led to a greater censorship and restrictions on Muslims' mobility. While the existing scholarship on imperial Russia's Muslims focuses on how the authorities incorporated Islam into Russia's governance and how Muslim communities reacted to state reforms and built new institutions within the tsardom, this study examines how the tsarist government tried to keep its former Muslim subjects and their ideas outside of Russia's borders and to suppress transborder communication of Caucasus Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

The ideas and letters that Russian authorities tried to police flowed across a space that I call the Russo-Ottoman Muslim world. It was part of

3. Recollections of the uprisings of 1877 are preserved in the Institut istorii, arkhologii i etnografii Dagestanskogo federal'nogo issledovatel'skogo tsentra RAN (Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography of the Dagestan Federal Research Center, hereafter IIAE DFITs RAN) f. 1, op. 1, d. 179.

4. Sakartvelos sakhelmtsipo saistorio arkivi (National Historical Archive of Georgia, hereafter SSSA) f. 5, op. 1, d. 5022 (Ob otpravlenii synom Shamilia lezgin s pis'mami i vozzvaniiami, 1877).

5. On North Caucasian refugees, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, "Imperial Refuge: Resettlement of Muslims from Russia in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914," (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2018); David C. Cuthell, "The Circassian Sürgün," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2003): 139–68.

6. Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Agnès Nilüfer Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy* (Ithaca, 2014); Elena I. Campbell, *The Muslim Question and Russian Imperial Governance* (Bloomington, 2015); Mustafa Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire, and European Modernity, 1788–1914* (Cambridge, Eng., 2015); Danielle Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, 2020).

a much larger and increasingly self-conscious global Muslim community.<sup>7</sup> The Russo-Ottoman Muslim world comprised Muslim communities that lived in the vast borderlands of the two empires, stretching from the northern Balkans, around the Black Sea, and into the Greater Caucasus. Recent scholarship reveals astounding Muslim mobility across the Russo-Ottoman borders by slaves, prisoners of war, and pilgrims.<sup>8</sup> Crimean, Nogai, and Volga Tatars, Georgian Muslims, Kurds, Laz, and others have long been traversing the two empires for trade, raids, and refuge. By the final decades of imperial rule, most migrants crossing the border had been North Caucasian refugees.

Muslim migrations from Russia to the Ottoman empire spurred a vigorous exchange of knowledge between the newly created diasporas in the Middle East and the communities left behind, and yet we know very little about the nature of that exchange. On the elite level, Turkic intellectuals in Bukhara, Kazan, Crimea, and Istanbul used print media to engage in trans-imperial debates about modernization and educational reforms.<sup>9</sup> On the popular level, clandestine transborder correspondence ensured the transfer of private information. James H. Meyer described Muslim populations who traveled and lived in the Russian and Ottoman empires as “trans-imperial Muslims.”<sup>10</sup> They navigated different imperial bureaucracies, negotiated multiple identities, and preserved familial and business connections to a different imperial realm. This article focuses on their letters as trans-imperial objects, which bound Caucasus Muslims in the two empires and kept transborder connections alive. The letters allowed families and friends to stay in touch, facilitated travel and emigration out of Russia, and prompted tsarist officials to enact new policies to restrict trans-imperial mobility.

Private letters were typically smuggled in and out of the Caucasus to evade Russian censors. I located copies or translations of several dozen letters exchanged by Caucasus Muslims across the Russo-Ottoman border in archives in Moscow, Tbilisi, Baku, Vladikavkaz, and Makhachkala and in the private collections of recipients’ descendants in Zarqa’, Jordan and Kizilyurt, Dagestan.<sup>11</sup> Tsarist reports mention hundreds of other letters that were

7. On the evolution of the “Muslim world” in the nineteenth century, see Cemil Aydın, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017); James L. Gelvin and Nile Green, eds., *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley, 2014). For a recent articulation of the “Russo-Ottoman space,” see Uluğ Kuzuoğlu, “Telegraphy, Typography, and the Alphabet: The Origins of Alphabet Revolutions in the Russo-Ottoman Space,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (August 2020): 413–31.

8. Hannah Barker, *The Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500* (Philadelphia, 2019); Lâle Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire* (Stanford, 2020); Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca, 2015); Will Smiley, *From Slaves to Prisoners of War: The Ottoman Empire, Russia, and International Law* (Oxford, 2018).

9. James H. Meyer, *Turks Across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856–1914* (Oxford, 2014); Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1998).

10. Meyer, *Turks Across Empires*, 5.

11. Full transcripts of private letters from the Ottoman empire to the Caucasus appear in Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv (Russian State Military Historical Archive, hereafter RGVIA) f. 400, op. 1, d. 7, ll. 137–37ob, 150–53 (O pis’makh Shamilia, 1865–66); RGVIA f. 13454, op. 15, d. 343 (O poriadke uvol’neniia gortsev v Turtsiiu, 1859);

confiscated and not transcribed or preserved, a fraction of a vigorous culture of writing and smuggling letters across the Russo-Ottoman border.<sup>12</sup> Caucasus Muslims also routinely mentioned to tsarist authorities that they had been receiving letters from their relatives in the Ottoman empire.<sup>13</sup> Letters were usually written in Arabic, which had long been the literary lingua franca in the northeast Caucasus, especially in Dagestan, and occasionally in Ottoman Turkish, particularly by Circassian refugees in the Ottoman empire. Some letters included expressions in the native languages of the Caucasus, such as Chechen and Avar.

The smuggling of Muslim correspondence in the late imperial Caucasus advances our knowledge of how the Russian empire operated in its borderlands. First, in the age of transportation revolution and increased long-distance traffic, European colonial empires grappled with the transborder circulation of information, which imperial officials often labeled as propaganda or rumors. C.A. Bayly insightfully identified the “information panic,” which stemmed from the imperial government’s lack of knowledge about its colonial populations and led to over-policing and territorial expansion.<sup>14</sup> In the Caucasus, the information panic came not only from the Russian government’s poor understanding of indigenous Muslim societies but also from its inability to censor information from the outside, especially the Ottoman empire. Tsarist administrators believed transborder correspondence could undermine the Caucasus Muslims’ loyalty to Russia. In other words, it was a panic not over a lack of information but over a lack of control over information. Second, contraband letters contributed to the evolution of Pan-Islamism as a phantom threat that the officials used to justify the surveillance of Russia’s Muslim colonial subjects. We already know that Pan-Islamism, which was upheld as a political project by Muslim reformists and the Ottoman government, was also amplified as a useful boogeyman by European colonial officials

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SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 452, ll. 10–15 (Pis’ma dagestanskikh pereselentsev, 1869); Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Tarix Arxivi (National Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, hereafter ARDTA) f. 45, op. 1, d. 35, ll. 17–23 (O nadzore za litsami zanimaiushchimisia pantiurkistskoi propagandoi, c. 1900); Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Respubliki Severnaia Osetiia-Alaniia (Central State Archive of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, hereafter TsGA RSO-A) f. 12, op. 8, d. 27, ll. 2–3ob (O proverke korrespondentsii iz Turtsii na imia gortsev, 1867); TsGA RD f. 66, op. 5, d. 21a, ll. 43–44 (O politicheskoi blagonadezhnosti vernuvshchisheia iz Turtsii, 1912). Several original letters are preserved in IIAE DFITs RAN f. 16, op. 1, d. 2004 (Pis’mo emigrantki, 1909); op. 3, d. 666 (Pis’mo iz Stambula k brat’iam, date unknown).

12. TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 5, d. 29, ll. 25–26, 164–67, 170 (O vozvrashchenii gortsev iz Turtsii, 1866); d. 30, l. 3 (O vozvrashchenii gortsev iz Turtsii, 1866); TsGA RD f. 2, op. 2, d. 77 (O begstve v Turtsiiu, 1894).

13. Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Kabardino-Balkarskoi Respubliki (Central State Archive of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria) f. I-2, op. 1, d. 613, l. 7 (Ob uvol’nenii v Turtsiiu, 1862); d. 808, l. 39 (Ob uvol’nenii gortsev v Mekku, 1866).

14. Christopher A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 143, 149, 171–73. For an elaboration of the thesis in Russian and Central Asian contexts, see Alexander Morrison, “Sufism, Pan-Islamism and Information Panic: Nil Sergeevich Lykoshin and the Aftermath of the Andijan Uprising,” *Past & Present* 214, no. 1 (February 2012): 255–304.

in the late nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> This article demonstrates that messages from the North Caucasian diaspora in the Middle East had nourished tsarist officials' Pan-Islamic panic in the Caucasus, which guided their suppression of transborder Muslim communication and mobility, such as the hajj and return migration. The intercepted letters, no matter how mundane, became physical artifacts of the ambiguous Pan-Islamic threat and purported disloyalty of Russia's Muslims. The idea that foreign correspondence evidenced one's lack of fidelity to the regime lived on and was further weaponized in the Soviet era.

### North Caucasian Refugees

Prior to the Russian conquest, networks of pilgrims, scholars, and merchants intricately tied the Caucasus into the larger Arab, Turkic, and Persianate worlds. The city of Derbent, in southern Dagestan, became part of the Rashidun Caliphate in 652 CE, only a generation after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and, over the centuries, Dagestan, home to dozens of ethnic groups, none of which spoke Arabic natively, turned into a renowned center of Qur'anic learning. The southeast Caucasus, home to speakers of Armenian, Turkic, and Iranian languages and within a striking distance to Tabriz and Tehran, had long been part of the Iranian world and, through the Caspian Sea, connected to Central Asia. Meanwhile, the western Caucasus on the Black Sea coast, home to Circassians, Abkhazians, and Georgians, had closer connections to the Ottoman empire and the Crimean Khanate. The two coastlines separating the Caucasus Mountains from the Black and the Caspian seas long served as highways between the vast Muslim Tatar world of Russia and the Ottoman and Iranian empires. Trade and conquest fostered transregional mobility of slaves, prisoners of war, runaway peasants, pilgrims, and scholars in the Caucasus.

The Russian state had been making inroads toward the Caucasus region ever since Muscovy's conquest of the Muslim khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan in the mid-sixteenth century. The Caucasus, a home to dozens of largely self-governing communities, became a frontier between Orthodox Russia, Sunni Ottoman empire, and Shi'i Iran.<sup>16</sup> Russia grew assertive in its southern expansion since the reign of Catherine the Great and completed the conquest of the Caucasus within a century. In 1763, the Russians founded their first fortress in Mozdok in the northcentral Caucasus. By 1828, tsarist armies annexed several Georgian kingdoms and principalities and Muslim khanates on the southern slopes of the mountains, administratively molding these heterodox territories into the region of Transcaucasia, or the South Caucasus. Between 1817 and 1864, Russia fought the Caucasus War against autonomous Muslim communities to the north of the mountains. The war ended in Russian victory, and since then the North Caucasus remained within the Russian state.<sup>17</sup>

15. See David Motadel, ed., *Islam and the European Empires* (Oxford, 2014).

16. See Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington, 2002); Thomas Barrett, "Lines of Uncertainty: The Frontiers of the North Caucasus," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 578–601.

17. For an overview of historiography of the tsarist North Caucasus, see Vladimir O. Bobrovnikov and Irina L. Babich, eds., *Severnyi Kavkaz v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow, 2007).



The Russian conquest led to a massive displacement of Muslim communities, expanding the realm of Caucasus Muslims far beyond the mountains. Between the 1850s and World War I, about a million North Caucasians left for the Ottoman empire.<sup>18</sup> The emigration began during the Caucasus War. By 1862, up to 150,000 Nogai Tatars, western Circassians, and Abazins fled their territories.<sup>19</sup> Between 1862 and 1864, Russia's military carried out an ethnic cleansing of Circassian villages and then expelled, or abetted the flight of, about a half-million western Circassians.<sup>20</sup> Following the consolidation of Russian rule throughout the Caucasus region, which was governed as the Caucasus Viceroyalty with the capital in Tiflis (now Tbilisi, Georgia), Muslim emigration continued for the remainder of tsarist rule. For example, the failed uprisings in Abkhazia in 1866 and 1877 led to the emigration of, respectively, 19,342 and between 30,000 and 50,000 Muslim Abkhazians.<sup>21</sup> Tsarist land reforms, which had privileged Cossack colonists and had disadvantaged indigenous communities, and anti-Muslim discrimination pushed out several hundred thousand Kabardians (eastern Circassians), Karachays, Balkars, Ossetians, Chechens, and Dagestanis from the Caucasus.<sup>22</sup>

North Caucasian refugees who survived the journey were accepted as new immigrants and subjects by the Ottoman government. They established hundreds of villages in the Ottoman Balkans, Anatolia, the Levant, and Iraq. In these largely mono-ethnic villages, refugees preserved their languages, customs, and memories of the Caucasus. By World War I, western Circassians in the Ottoman empire outnumbered those in Russia, and a significant share of the Abkhazian, Abazin, Ossetian, and Chechen populations lived outside of the Caucasus.<sup>23</sup>

Families that found themselves on different sides of the Russo-Ottoman border communicated by letters. Travel was expensive, dangerous, and, in most cases, unlawful. Both the Russian and Ottoman governments instituted legal roadblocks to circumscribe the mobility of their North Caucasian

18. Neither the Russians nor the Ottomans held a comprehensive count of refugees. Kemal H. Karpat, an Ottoman demographic historian, estimates that, between 1859 and 1879, up to two million people, mostly Circassians, left the Caucasus for the Ottoman empire and that, in 1881–1914, a half-million more Circassians and Crimean Tatars arrived; *Ottoman Population, 1830–1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison, 1985), 69–70. For demographic estimates, see Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal, 2002), 25–27, 171n102.

19. Bedri Habiçoğlu, *Kafkasya'dan Anadolu'ya Göçler* (Istanbul, 1993), 75.

20. The lowest estimate, based on Russian military data, is 470,753 Muslims, including 436,103 western Circassians, who left from the Circassian coast in 1858–65; see Adol'f P. Berzhe "Vyselenie gortsev s Kavkaza," *Russkaia starina* 33 (1882): 161–76, 337–63, and 36 (1882): 1–32. In recent decades, several scholars and diasporic organizations argued that the expulsions constituted a genocide; see Walter Richmond, *The Circassian Genocide* (New Brunswick, 2013).

21. Georgii A. Dzidzariia, *Makhadhirstvo i problemy istorii Abkhazii XIX stoletii* (Sukhumi, 1982), 278–95, 356–80.

22. Hamed-Troyansky, "Imperial Refuge," 46–50.

23. Zeynel Abidin Besleney, *The Circassian Diaspora in Turkey: A Political History* (London, 2014); Anzor V. Kushkhabiev, *Cherkesy v Sirii* (Nalchik, 1993); Anastasiia A. Ganich, *Cherkesy v Iordanii: osobennosti istoricheskogo i etnokul'turnogo razvitiia* (Moscow, 2007).

populations. Tsarist authorities required Muslim residents in the Caucasus, who wished to travel to the Ottoman empire, to request temporary leave. One had to demonstrate sufficient funds for travel and upkeep of their family in the Caucasus, permission from their village council and local administration, and a hefty deposit of 70 rubles per applicant.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, the Ottomans required North Caucasian refugees to apply for travel documents to leave their district for any reason. Those who left without authorization risked losing immigrant subsidies and free land, provided by the Ottoman government.<sup>25</sup> In the absence of legally authorized travel, Muslim families who were split between the Caucasus and the Middle East could only communicate in writing. Yet neither Ottoman nor Russian postal services could guarantee an effective delivery of letters across the border and then into mountainous Caucasus villages; nor did refugees trust either government with their correspondence. Instead, pilgrims, emigrants, and returnees crossing the Russo-Ottoman border smuggled letters in and out of the Caucasus.

Private letters remain an elusive type of evidence in histories of Muslim migrants between the Russian and Ottoman empires.<sup>26</sup> Few letters have survived: most perished during civil wars and population displacements in the 1910s and 1920s; others were destroyed because overseas correspondence presented a liability in the Soviet and Turkish republican periods; and many letters were neglected and discarded because the new generations of custodians, proficient only in the Cyrillic and Latin scripts, could no longer read the Arabic script, in which their grandparents wrote the letters.

Most of the remaining letters survive in national archives, which in itself suggests a bias in how they relate to the broader epistolary corpus. Those letters were apprehended by tsarist police, selected to be sent to the Caucasus authorities, and then preserved because the government found them particularly damaging. We should keep in mind that most surviving letters, while hinting at the vast world in which they were conceived, in their curated form testify best about what tsarist authorities feared this world could be.

Letters that refugees sent home commonly expressed sadness over separation and the loss of homeland, and longing for family reunification. Thus, in 1869, Abdullah Said oğlu, an Avar silversmith in the Zakatala district on the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains, who had recently emigrated to the Ottoman empire, wrote bluntly to his son Yusuf:

My beloved son, I am surprised that you have not come to us yet. You must know that I cannot come to you to take you all here. I did not realize you were actually that stupid. After all, muhajirs continue arriving from your side to our side. Therefore, I ask you, my son, to come to me and bring your mother, if you are a son of mine. Know that [being in] the land of Islam and [with] your father is better for you in the eyes of Allah and of the people. Try to sell

24. SSSA f. 7, op. 1, d. 2694, ll. 43–46 (December 27, 1872).

25. Grégoire Aristarchi Bey, ed., *Législation Ottomane*, 7 vols. (Istanbul, 1873–88), 1:16–19.

26. On Muslims' correspondence in the Russian empire, see Alfrid Bustanov, "On Emotional Grounds: Private Communication of Muslims in Late Imperial Russia," *Asiatische Studien* 73, no. 4 (2019): 655–82.

our property before you come, but if you cannot sell, still come here, even if you have nothing. Everything is in the hands of Allah.<sup>27</sup>

Refugees often urged their families to leave Russia and described the journey to the Ottoman empire as *hijra*, or emigration from a territory under non-Muslim rule to one ruled by a Muslim dynasty. The debate of whether *hijra* was a religious obligation of good Muslims continued in the Caucasus throughout late imperial rule. Many anti-colonial rebels, including the Dagestani ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Thughuri, who penned a treatise in Arabic in support of *hijra*, considered Russia *dār al-ḥarb* (abode of war), whereas several government-appointed imams declared Russia to be part of *dār al-islām* (abode of Islam), a view accepted by many Caucasus Muslims.<sup>28</sup> Letters like that by Abdullah Said oğlu drew on popular perceptions of the Ottoman empire as a land of Islamic justice, where the government of the sultan-caliph would take care of all Muslims, whatever their origin and native tongue. The realities of life for Muslim refugees rarely matched those lofty expectations, and rumors of the poverty of recent emigrants had been slowly trickling back to the Caucasus. Yet the allure of returning under Muslim rule and escaping tsarist reforms and Slavic settler colonization remained a strong incentive to emigrate for the next half-century.

In the early 1910s, Hajj Jan‘aq, a Chechen from Dagestan, wrote to his brother, Kerim-Sultan, who had emigrated and settled in Zarqa’ in Ottoman Transjordan. (Figure 1) Hajj Jan‘aq considered *hijra* to be a highly moral aspiration for Muslims and invoked early Islamic history to praise his brother’s emigration: “Our hearts are full of sadness because of our separation. We see you as a prophet by the name of Ya‘qub, who was separated from his son Yusuf. [As they were reunited later,] we wish to come to you.”<sup>29</sup> Ya‘qub and Yusuf are Qur’anic characters, known as Jacob and Joseph in the Torah and the Bible, who reunited in Egypt. This Chechen family tried to make sense of emigration by referring to the revered prophets who had also experienced separation and loss. Hajj Jan‘aq informed his emigrant brother that many young men in their village wished to emigrate to the Ottoman empire but feared the unknown. In response, Kerim-Sultan wrote that he and other emigrants heard from the passing pilgrims about injustices that Dagestanis were suffering under Russian rule and mourned with them. He urged his brother to tell all those wishing to emigrate that the houses were already built for them in Transjordan and they would live in comfort after *hijra*.<sup>30</sup> This letter survives because Kerim-Sultan carefully copied it in a notebook, which his descendants in Jordan preserved alongside copies of letters that he had received from Russia over a century ago.

27. SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 452, ll. 13–14 (early 1869).

28. Michael Kemper, “Khālidiyya Networks in Daghestan and the Question of Jihād,” *Die Welt des Islams* 42, no. 1 (2002): 50–51; Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 3, 86–89.

29. Hajj Jan‘aq to Kerim-Sultan (c. 1910–12), Sultan Private Collection, Zarqa’, Jordan.

30. Kerim-Sultan to Hajj Jan‘aq (c. 1910–12), Sultan Private Collection, Zarqa’, Jordan. On North Caucasian settlement in Jordan, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, “Circassian Refugees and the Making of Amman, 1878–1914,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 605–23.



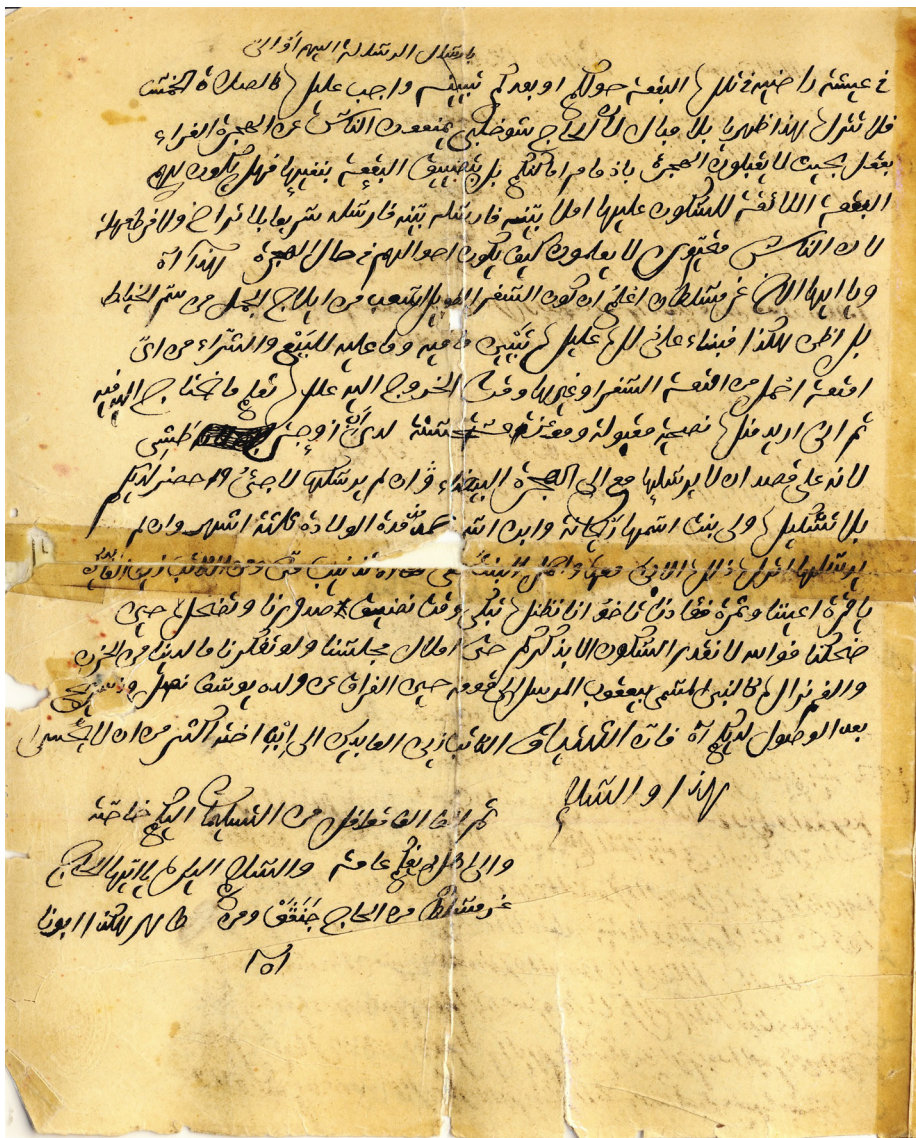


Figure 1: Letter of Hajj Jan'aq (in tsarist Dagestan) to Kerim-Sultan (in Ottoman Transjordan)

Source: Sultan Private Collection, Zarqa', Jordan. Letter B (c. 1910–12)

### Transborder Correspondence as a Threat

The tsarist government had long been suspicious of communication across the Russo-Ottoman border. During the Caucasus War, the Russian military came to view transborder correspondence as a threat to Russia's expansion and governance. In the final stages of the war, western Circassian elders in the northwest Caucasus actively communicated with their emigrants in the

Ottoman empire, on whom they relied to secure Ottoman support against Russian advances. Thus, in 1863, Abzakh (western Circassian) notables in the Ottoman empire sent a letter urging their community in Circassia to keep fighting for independence while waiting for Ottoman military aid.<sup>31</sup> Promises of foreign support also came from the Ubykh (western Circassian) leadership in exile in Ottoman Anatolia, who wrote, “We sent complaints [about Russia’s annexations] to the great [Ottoman] empire, its ministers, and ambassadors of all courts; sent our deputies to Paris, London, and Cairo. . . These empires will soon deliver aid and give you an opportunity to fight, so that you can be independent.”<sup>32</sup> The Ottoman government never sent the Circassians sufficient military or financial support. These letters and other letters from Circassians in the Ottoman empire, however, were intercepted by tsarist authorities and shaped their image of the North Caucasian diaspora in the Middle East as pro-Ottoman and anti-Russian.

The tsarist government censored overseas correspondence of prominent former leaders of anti-Russian resistance. Imam Shamil, probably the most famous Muslim subject of the Russian empire, was a prominent target of Russian censors. Shamil was the third and last ruler of the Caucasus Imamate, a short-lived state in Dagestan and Chechnya (1828–59), and mounted the strongest indigenous opposition to tsarist expansion in Russian history. His surrender to Russian troops in 1859 all but ensured Russia’s victory in the Caucasus War. Shamil and his family were exiled to Kaluga, a town southwest of Moscow. In his glorified captivity, Shamil received hundreds of letters from his followers.<sup>33</sup> Shamil’s correspondents likely surmised the Russians’ strict scrutiny of Shamil’s life in captivity, first in Kaluga and then in Kiev (now Kyiv, Ukraine), and self-censored their letters. Most writers sought Shamil’s advice on spiritual matters as an imam and a *shaykh* (spiritual master) of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. “Are we allowed to eat meat that was cut by Jews?” asked one correspondent, unsure about the compatibility of halal and kosher dietary laws. “What about sugar?” he added.<sup>34</sup> Shamil also received mail from overseas. He corresponded with ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri, an Algerian Sufi scholar, who had fought French colonialism and, following brief captivity in France, emigrated to Damascus. ‘Abd al-Qadir offered Shamil to intercede with the Russian emperor to let Shamil emigrate to Mecca or Medina, as Shamil had repeatedly requested.<sup>35</sup> In 1869, the Russian government finally granted Shamil approval to conduct the hajj. In the same year, Shamil left

31. R. Kh. Gugov, Kh. A. Kasumov, and D. V. Shabaev, eds., *Tragicheskie posledstviia Kavkazskoi voiny dlia adygov (vtoraia polovina XIX–nachalo XX veka): Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Nalchik, 2000), 90.

32. Gugov, Kasumov, Shabaev, eds., *Tragicheskie posledstviia*, 90–91.

33. On Shamil’s exile, see Thomas M. Barrett, “The Remaking of the Lion of Dagestan: Shamil in Captivity,” *Russian Review* 53, no. 3 (July 1994): 353–66. On Shamil’s letters, see Kh. A. Omarov, *100 pisem Shamilia* (Makhachkala, 1997); R. Sh. Sharafutdinova, *Arabotazychnye dokumenty epokhi Shamilia* (Moscow, 2001).

34. RGVIA f. 400, op. 1, d. 7 (1865–66); TsGA RD f. 133, op. 3, d. 3 (Perevody s arabskikh pisem Shamilia, 1865–66), quote from l. 14.; IIAE DFITs RAN f. 16, op. 1, d. 2966 (Pis’mo Shamiliu iz Mediny, date unknown).

35. For ‘Abd al-Qadir’s letter, see RGVIA f. 400, op. 1, d. 7, ll. 150–53 (early 1865); for Shamil’s response, see ll. 153, 161–61ob (July 19, 1865).

for Istanbul, where he was a guest of Sultan Abdülaziz, before retiring to the Hejaz; he died in Medina in 1871.

Following the conquest of the Caucasus by 1864, the Russian government fought a series of anti-colonial uprisings in Chechnya (1864), Abkhazia (1864, 1866), western Circassia/Kuban (1870), Dagestan (1866, 1871), and the Zakatala district (1863, 1869–70).<sup>36</sup> Tsarist authorities attributed several of these uprisings to propaganda by Ottoman emissaries, many of them of North Caucasian descent.<sup>37</sup> The Russian government, struggling to solidify its authority in the Caucasus, grew increasingly paranoid about influences from the Ottoman empire on its newest Muslim subjects in the Caucasus. The Caucasus officials spent the empire's final half-century searching for smuggled letters and clamping down on correspondence and mobility between the Russian and Ottoman empires.

In 1866, Russian border guards captured a group of Ossetian and Kabardian Muslims who had left Russia in 1860 and attempted to clandestinely cross the border to visit their families in Russia. The detained returnees carried 53 letters, mostly in Arabic, from other refugees to their kin in the Caucasus.<sup>38</sup> Later in the same year, the Russian police near Aleksandropol (now Gyumri, Armenia) captured two Chechen returnees, who carried 67 “important” letters and many others “of lesser importance.”<sup>39</sup> Tiflis officials launched an investigation to determine who had been in correspondence with whom. They discovered that at least twenty letters had been written by the influential Kundukhov family. Musa Kundukhov, a Muslim Ossetian general in the Russian military service, had organized the emigration of at least 23,057 Chechens, Karabulaks, Ingush, and Ossetians after the failed uprising in Chechnya in 1864.<sup>40</sup> Kundukhov himself chose not to return to Russia, joined Ottoman service, and even led an Ottoman regiment of North Caucasian refugees against Russian troops during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78. In addition to Kundukhov's family, other letter-writers were Kabardian, Ossetian, and Chechen notables, both men and women. On the receiving side in the Caucasus were the Mal'sagovs, Kubotievs, Dudarovs, Tuganovs, Tkhostovs, Anzorovs, Bekuzarovs, Dzhintievs, Aldatovs, Kundukhovs, and others, or, in other words, some of the most prominent Muslim families in Ossetia, Kabarda, and Chechnya, on whose support Russia relied for the smooth governance of the region.<sup>41</sup>

The discovery of letters, smuggled by Kundukhov's hired mules, alerted tsarist authorities about the scope of transnational correspondence across

36. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (National Archive of the Russian Federation, hereafter GARF) f. 677, op. 1, d. 511 (Materialy po Kavkazu, 1878).

37. ARDTA f. 45, op. 2, d. 82 (O rasprostraneniі miuridizma, 1863–64); TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 8, d. 93 (O poiavlenii turetskikh softov, mull i emissarov, 1879).

38. TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 5, d. 29, ll. 25–26 (January 25, 1866).

39. TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 5, d. 29, ll. 164–67, 170 (May 1866).

40. See Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, “Population Transfer: Negotiating the Resettlement of Chechen Refugees in the Ottoman Empire (1865, 1870),” in Eileen Kane, Masha Kirasirova, and Margaret Litvin, eds., *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History* (Oxford, 2023), 60–68.

41. TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 5, d. 29, ll. 164–67, 170 (May 1866).



the porous Russo-Ottoman border. The region's most influential families had open communication channels with their relatives, who had explicitly refused to live in Russia. In addition to the notables writing letters, lower-status refugees asked others to compose letters for them. Some refugees mentioned that they had joined the Ottoman military service, a prospect that terrified Russian censors, who then duly flagged those remarks.<sup>42</sup> The authorities commonly interpreted letters from Muslim refugees as pro-Ottoman propaganda and incitement for disloyalty to the Russian tsar. Russian authorities translated the intercepted letters, scanned the text for clues about intended recipients, and established surveillance over those individuals.<sup>43</sup>

The letters from the Ottoman empire continued rattling Russian authorities. In 1867, the Terek authorities in Vladikavkaz came into possession of three letters in Arabic that had arrived from the Ottoman empire by regular mail. The letters from Kabardian notables were addressed to the Atazhukin princely family. Russian officials opened envelopes and made translations of the letters in secret, not to offend their powerful recipients. (Figure 2) In one of the letters, Gushasukh, a Kabardian princess and daughter of prince Murzabek, berated her relatives for not having followed her into the Ottoman empire:

When a person comes into need in *dār al-ḥarb*, their duty is to leave for *dār al-islām* to alleviate their sufferings. How are you God's creatures if you do not move to *dār al-bayḍā'* [white house; here likely the Ottoman empire] to claim your rights and settle your affairs? It is unreasonable for me to be a shepherd of your money and protector of your share [of the property].<sup>44</sup>

The governor of the Terek region, Prince Mikhail Loris-Melikov, interpreted this and other letters as propaganda of emigration targeting the Muslim landowning class, whose economic situation was particularly vulnerable after the Russian-led abolition of serfdom in Kabarda in 1866. The governor then issued an order to the postal service to deliver all letters sent to Chechen, Ingush, Kabardian, and Ossetian Muslims from the Ottoman empire directly to his office, effectively placing Muslim overseas correspondence under government surveillance.<sup>45</sup> Loris-Melikov's order generated opposition within the government. Baron Aleksandr Nikolai, chief of administration of the Caucasus Viceroy and head of the Russian post in the Caucasus, opposed the surveillance, asserting that the existing Russian legislation protected "one of the most sacred and dearest properties of society, namely the integrity and inviolability of correspondence." He insisted that the surveillance of correspondence was only permissible when the government possessed evidence of anti-tsarist activities but should not be applied to the entire region, lest it "undermine the trust in governmental decrees and institutions in society."<sup>46</sup> Yet the governor of the Terek region insisted on suspending the Muslims' right to the privacy of correspondence in the interests of consolidating Russia's

42. Ibid.

43. SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 452, l. 2 (April 5, 1869).

44. TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 8, d. 27, ll. 3, 9ob (November 18, 1866).

45. TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 8, d. 27, ll. 1–2ob (early April 1867).

46. TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 8, d. 27, ll. 15–15ob (April 21, 1867).

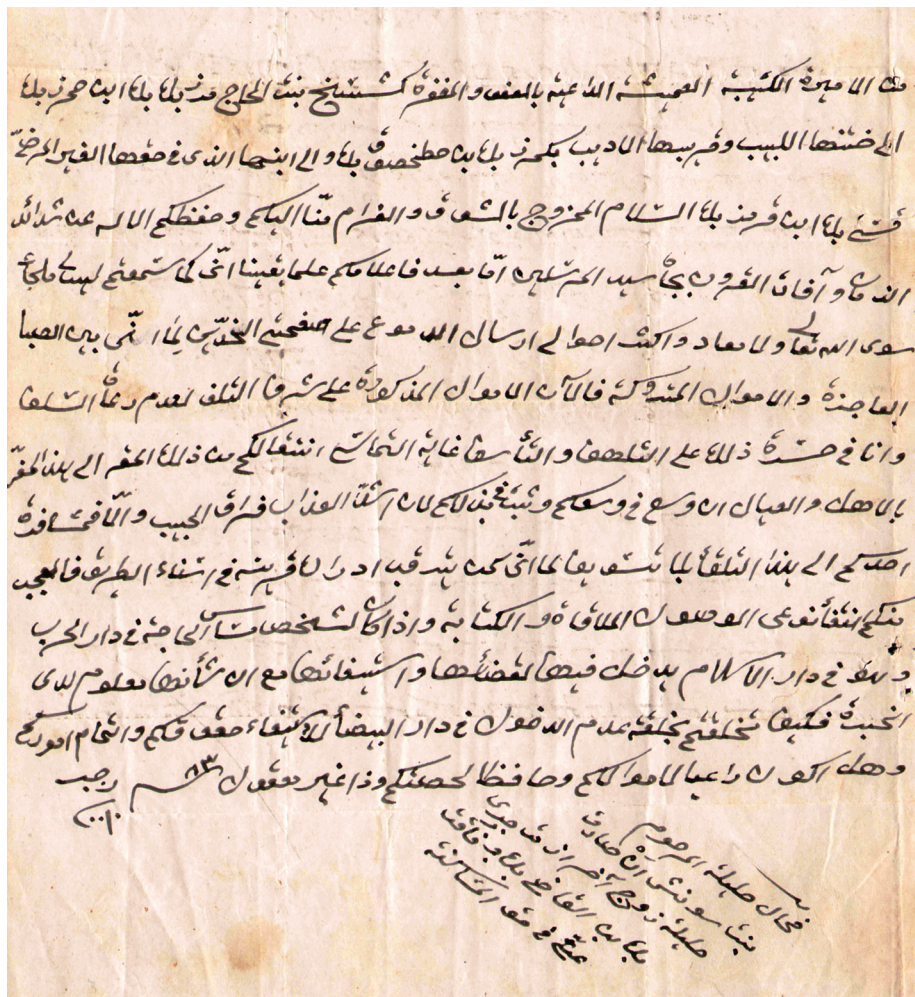


Figure 2: Princess Gushasukh, daughter of Hajj Murzabek (in Ottoman Anatolia) to Prince Bekmurza Atazhukin (in tsarist Kabarda)

Source: Central State Archive of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, Vladikavkaz, Russia, f. 12, op. 8, d. 27, l. 9ob (November 18, 1866)

land reforms and preventing notables' emigration to the Ottoman empire.<sup>47</sup> Other authorities in the Caucasus continued the surveillance of Muslims' correspondence in subsequent decades.<sup>48</sup>

During the Caucasus War, tsarist authorities banned the return of North Caucasians who had been expelled or emigrated from Russia. Many North

47. TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 8, d. 27, ll. 16–17 (May 16, 1867).

48. For example, in 1900, the administration of the Dargin district in central Dagestan admitted that it had read all overseas letters to its residents and delivered only those that it deemed free of anti-government language; TsGA RD f. 66, op. 1, d. 65, ll. 52–52ob (May 10, 1900).



Caucasians wished to return home, as attested by Russian consuls throughout the Ottoman empire whom refugees asked for repatriation.<sup>49</sup> For example, in 1872, the Russian government received a petition on behalf of 8,500 refugees, many of whom were Circassian slaves taken to Ottoman Anatolia by their masters against their will.<sup>50</sup> The petition was rejected. The Russian government publicly justified its ban on returnees by citing the scarcity of land, as refugees' land had already been reassigned to Slavic immigrant communities, and the high cost of reintegrating returnees into their societies. Yet the main reason, permeating the internal correspondence of the Caucasus Viceroyalty since the late 1860s, was a concern that North Caucasian returnees could be "emissaries" sent by the Ottoman government to instigate pro-Ottoman and anti-Russian sentiments.<sup>51</sup> The tsarist government wished to prevent ideas from the Ottoman empire spreading to Russian domains. The intercepted letters from the Ottoman empire, which largely encouraged emigration and praised life in the sultan's domains, made the Russian authorities view the North Caucasian diaspora as a destabilizing influence in the Caucasus.<sup>52</sup> The government could not enforce the ban on re-immigration, and about 40,000 Muslims, primarily Abkhazians, Chechens, Ingush, Kabardians, and Ossetians, returned to the Caucasus between the 1850s and World War I.<sup>53</sup> Yet on paper, the government maintained the ban. The government's opposition to North Caucasian return migration continued into the Soviet and post-Soviet era. Descendants of North Caucasian refugees living in Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Israel, and Iraq remain ineligible for repatriation under current Russian laws.<sup>54</sup>

### Russia's Pan-Islamic Panic

Starting in the 1870s, the tsarist government's mistrust of the Caucasus Muslims' transborder communication propped up its developing paranoia about Pan-Islamism. Pan-Islamism, or Pan-Islam, was a set of beliefs advocating the unity of the *umma*, or global Muslim community, and meant multiple things. First, it was a broad movement by Muslim modernists in the Ottoman empire, Egypt, Russian Turkestan, and British India to implement reforms in their societies. Pan-Islamism was a response to European imperialism and, closely related to it, a global revolution in transportation and communications that shrank space and time for those who produced and disseminated

49. James H. Meyer, "Immigration, Return, and the Politics of Citizenship: Russian Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 1 (February 2007): 15–32.

50. SSSA f. 5, op. 1, d. 3011, ll. 3–5 (O proshenii cherkesskoi deputatsii iz Maloi Azii, 1872).

51. For example, SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 2836 (Slukhi o gotoviyashchemsia vosstanii kavkazskikh gortsev), ll. 2–5 (September 7, 1870).

52. Individual cases of returnees being accused of pro-Ottoman propaganda appear in SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 469, ll. 5–11 (1869); d. 250, ll. 278–79, 367–68 (1869).

53. Hamed-Troyansky, "Imperial Refuge," 379–439, esp. 429 for estimates.

54. Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, "Welcome, Not Welcome: The North Caucasian Diaspora's Attempted Return to Russia since the 1960s," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2023): 585–610.

knowledge.<sup>55</sup> Second, it was an ideology used by the Ottoman empire to project influence in the Muslim world and challenge its Russian, British, French, and Dutch rivals in their colonial domains. It was employed during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909) and during World War I.<sup>56</sup> However, as Lâle Can demonstrated, Pan-Islamism was hardly a cohesive ideology and did not shape all Ottoman policies toward foreign Muslims.<sup>57</sup> Finally, and this is what Muslims' transborder correspondence reveals, Pan-Islamism was a phantom threat, invoked by imperial officials who were wary of their Muslim colonial subjects. It became a useful pretext for officials in Saint Petersburg, London, Paris, and the Hague—or even more so in Tiflis (Tbilisi), Calcutta (Kolkata), Algiers, and Batavia (Jakarta)—to develop new mechanisms of control, counter-insurgency, and censorship in their Muslim provinces.<sup>58</sup>

The Russian government in the Caucasus centered its fears of Islam as a tool of Ottoman propaganda on the hajj. Thousands of Muslim pilgrims from Russia traveled to Mecca annually. On their way to the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, many pilgrims visited other centers of Islamic culture and learning, such as Istanbul, Bursa, Damascus, and Jerusalem, as well as Karbala, Najaf, and Baghdad for Shi'i pilgrims. Their hajj encompassed the sacral landscapes of those cities, replete with famous madrasas, mosques, tekkes (Sufi lodges), tombs, and living shaykhs.<sup>59</sup> While many Muslim pilgrims from Russia, especially from the Volga region and Siberia, took a train to Odessa (now Odesa, Ukraine) and from there a steamship to Istanbul and then to Jeddah, for many Caucasus Muslims the hajj remained an overland journey.<sup>60</sup> North Caucasian pilgrims often visited villages of their fellow Circassian, Chechen, and Dagestani refugees, which now dotted the Anatolian and Levantine countryside. Pilgrims were known to pass on letters to refugees from their families in the Caucasus and collect letters on their way back. For example, pilgrims

55. Adeb Khalid, "Pan-Islamism in Practice: The Rhetoric of Muslim Unity and Its Uses," in Elisabeth Özdalga, ed., *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy* (Abingdon, Eng., 2005), 201–24; Nile Green, "Spacetime and the Muslim Journey West: Industrial Communications in the Making of the 'Muslim World,'" *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 2 (April 2013): 401–29.

56. For a classic work on Pan-Islamism, see Jacob M. Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization* (Oxford, 1990). Germany also attempted to use Pan-Islamic sentiments against the Allies; Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011), 26, 122–23.

57. Lâle Can, "The Protection Question: Central Asians and Extraterritoriality in the Late Ottoman Empire," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 4 (November 2016): 679–99; Can, *Spiritual Subjects*, 17, 20–23, 178–80.

58. Michael Christopher Low, "Empire and the Hajj: Pilgrims, Plagues, and Pan-Islam Under British Surveillance, 1865–1908," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 2 (May 2008): 269–90; Kris Alexanderson, "'A Dark State of Affairs': Hajj Networks, Pan-Islamism, and Dutch Colonial Surveillance During the Interwar Period," *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 4 (Summer 2014): 1021–41.

59. Lâle Can, "Connecting People: A Central Asian Sufi Network in Turn-of-the-Century Istanbul," *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (March 2012): 373–401.

60. Eileen Kane, "Odessa as a Hajj Hub, 1880s–1920s," in John Randolph and Eugene M. Avrutin, eds., *Russia in Motion: Cultures of Human Mobility since 1850* (Urbana, 2012), 107–25.

carried letters between aforementioned Kerim-Sultan in Ottoman Jordan and his relatives in Dagestan.<sup>61</sup>

The Russian government served as a patron of the hajj for Russian Muslims since the mid-nineteenth century, but tsarist provincial authorities had many misgivings about its impact.<sup>62</sup> The Caucasus authorities repeatedly complained that pilgrims, upon their return, spread pro-Ottoman propaganda in the Caucasus.<sup>63</sup> That view was shared by the Russian ambassador in Istanbul, Nikolai Ignat'ev, who claimed that the hajj "did not agree with our political interests, as the Muslims' visitation of the holy places animates fanatical prejudices in them, which they in turn attempt to promote among their coreligionists upon their return."<sup>64</sup> The Russian Interior Ministry even suspended issuing passports for Russian Muslims to go to Mecca in 1872, on the pretext of preventing cholera, while the Caucasus Viceroyalty administration invited provincial governors to discuss whether to ban the hajj permanently.<sup>65</sup> The hajj was not banned, but instead the Russian authorities made it more administratively burdensome and expensive for Caucasus Muslims to obtain permission to conduct the hajj after 1872.<sup>66</sup> For the rest of tsarist rule, the hajj remained a sore issue for many officials.<sup>67</sup>

The hajj and transborder correspondence soon became tied to Pan-Islamism in the minds of Russian officials. In 1874, the Russian ambassador in Istanbul warned the Foreign Ministry that "theories of Pan-Islamism," aiming to create political unity among Muslims, became popular throughout the Ottoman empire, and Russian Muslims passing through Istanbul could be exposed to them. It was one of the earliest European references to Pan-Islamism, made specifically in reference to the hajj.<sup>68</sup>

Russian officials seized on "chain letters" as evidence of the purported harmful influence of the hajj on Russian Muslims. Chain letters were a captivating genre of popular literature that pilgrims occasionally brought home from Mecca. Their origin traditionally attributed to industrializing England and the United States, chain letters demand from readers to copy the original message and pass it on, and threaten them with bad luck, illness, or death should they break the chain of transmission.<sup>69</sup> Hajj chain letters, which might

61. Interview with F. F. Sultan, Zarqa', Jordan, August 17, 2014.

62. Kane, *Russian Hajj*, 20–46.

63. SSSA f. 5, op. 1, d. 2570 (O poezdke gortsev na bogomol'e), ll. 2–4 (December 14, 1871); f. 545, op. 1, d. 966 (Ob udalenii iz Konstantinopolia syna Shamilia), ll. 2–4 (December 23, 1874). Lâle Can suggests that many pilgrims spoke well of the Ottomans because the Ottoman government provided financial assistance that allowed impoverished pilgrims to return home; *Spiritual Subjects*, 146.

64. SSSA f. 5, op. 1, d. 2570, ll. 1, 12–13 (1871–72).

65. Kane, *Russian Hajj*, 61–66; SSSA f. 416, op. 3, d. 672 (O poezdke gortsev na bogomol'e, 1872).

66. SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 2852 (O vozvrashchenii v Turtsiiu gortsev probравshikhsia taino na rodinu), ll. 389–96 (December 21, 1872).

67. Can, *Spiritual Subjects*, 52–58.

68. The term was coined in the 1870s; Khalid, "Pan-Islamism in Practice," 203. For Russian usage, see SSSA f. 5, op. 1, d. 3317 (Ob ustroistve v Konstantinopole podvor'ia dlia musul'man iz Rossii), l. 4 (November 21, 1874).

69. Herbert Halpert, "Chain Letters," *Western Folklore* 15, no. 4 (October 1956): 287–89.

be an older phenomenon, utilized the same replication logic. They often contained messianic and apocalyptic messages. European imperial expansion in the Muslim world, and the loss of Muslim sovereignties, prepared fertile ground for ominous narratives about the upcoming end of the world. Chain letters often chastised Muslims for having lost their faith under infidel rule, feeding off the umma's anxieties about the effects of colonialism.<sup>70</sup>

One chain letter, which circulated in the northeast Caucasus around 1885, was penned by Gadzhi (Hajji) Aliev, a Dagestani man who had emigrated to the Ottoman Hejaz, where he became known as Shaykh 'Ali. Shaykh 'Ali claimed prophethood and direct communication with the Prophet Muhammad, which he had purportedly established after praying over the Prophet's grave in Medina. In his letter, he warned Muslims of the impending end of the world, forewarning of apocalyptic events on the 1320th, 1330th, and 1340th anniversaries of the Prophet's death, respectively a three-day solar eclipse, divine revocation of the Qur'an, and uprisings led by the *Dajjal* (anti-messiah in Islamic eschatology). The letter asked readers to give money to the last person who had copied and passed on the letter in exchange for progressively large divine bonuses, akin to both Catholic indulgences and modern pyramid schemes:

Whoever gives the copyist of this letter 10 kopecks will have their sins of missing prayers forgiven by Allah. Those who give 20 kopecks will be saved from evil spirits and *shaytan* [devil]. Those who donate 35 kopecks will have the gates of hell closed to them. Those who give 40 kopecks will have all gates of paradise open to them, and the Prophet himself will protect them.<sup>71</sup>

Tsarist police confiscated all chain letters, whether they were generic messages to all Muslims or crafted toward Russian Muslims specifically, and prosecuted those who kept them for sedition against Russian rule.<sup>72</sup> The Russians were not alone in their fears of chain letters from Mecca. Hajj chain letters circulated since at least the 1840s and appeared in North Africa, Iraq, India, and Southeast Asia.<sup>73</sup> In the early twentieth century, one such chain letter from Mecca sparked a debate within the German administration about its policies towards Islam in its East African colonies.<sup>74</sup>

70. Benjamin F. Soares, "A Warning About Imminent Calamity in Colonial French West Africa: The Chain Letter as Historical Source," *Sudanic Africa* 14 (2003): 103–16.

71. TsGA RSO-A f. 12, op. 8, d. 227, ll. 24–24ob, 26–26ob (May 3, 1893). Another circulating chain letter, by Omar of Mazandaran, promised to protect those who pass it on from cholera and other diseases and warned that those who fail to pass it on would die within forty days; SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 245, ll. 10–14, 24–25 (O propovedi Makhmudom Efendi tarikata, 1866).

72. One chain letter was a message for Abkhazian Muslims. Tsarist authorities exiled its custodian to Kharkov (now Kharkiv, Ukraine) and then Kursk, and in their deliberations expressed a wish for "re-Christianization" of Abkhazia; SSSA f. 545, op. 1, ch. 2, d. 2862 (O rasprostraneniі pisem vrednogo soderzhaniia, 1872).

73. Jonathan G. Katz, "Shaykh Ahmad's Dream: A 19th-Century Eschatological Vision," *Studia Islamica*, no. 79 (1994): 157–80; Gajendra Singh, "Throwing Snowballs in France: Muslim Sipahis of the Indian Army and Sheikh Ahmad's Dream, 1915–1918," *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 4 (July 2014): 1024–67.

74. Jörg Haustein, "Religion, Politics and an Apocryphal Admonition: The German East African 'Mecca Letter' of 1908 in Historical-Critical Analysis," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 83, no. 1 (February 2020): 95–125.

Russia's Pan-Islamic panic surged during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78. Local Muslims launched a pro-Ottoman uprising in Abkhazia, and the Ottoman navy even briefly recaptured Abkhazia. Although Russia defeated the Ottoman empire, which lost half of its territories in Europe, the war underlined the fragility of tsarist rule in the Caucasus. Since then, Russia's fear of Pan-Islamism stemmed largely from concerns about Ottoman political and military subversion through Russian Muslims.<sup>75</sup> The difficulties in conquering and then suppressing rebellions in the Caucasus further amplified tsarist paranoia about Pan-Islamism in the empire's other Muslim regions.<sup>76</sup>

Letters attributed to Ghazi Muhammad endorsed the uprisings in Dagestan and Chechnya in 1877. The Russian authorities were familiar with Ghazi Muhammad. Twenty years earlier, he had surrendered to the Russian army alongside his father, accepted Russian subjecthood, and spent time in Kaluga under house arrest. After Ghazi Muhammad had buried his father in Medina, he received tsarist permission to temporarily return to the Ottoman empire to take care of his family, but instead decided to stay there.<sup>77</sup> He joined the Ottoman military and, during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, led a cavalry of North Caucasian refugees against Russian troops on the eastern Anatolian front. As the oldest surviving son of Imam Shamil and a prominent emigrant leader in Istanbul, Ghazi Muhammad seemed to have the perfect profile to unite North Caucasian Muslims in an anti-colonial struggle. His alleged letters calling on Muslims to fight the Russians are not the only ones attributed to him. During my fieldwork, I met a man in Kizilyurt, Dagestan, whose family preserved copies of private letters that its village received from the Ottoman empire. He showed me a letter that the family believes to have come from Ghazi Muhammad himself. The letter urged Muslims to conduct hijra to the Ottoman empire because it was both legally permissible, with the Ottomans and the Russians having purportedly signed a treaty allowing emigration, and a religious duty of good Muslims, as reportedly endorsed by religious authorities in Mecca.<sup>78</sup>

In the age of European colonialism, stories of Muslim insurgency against foreign rule traveled far and wide throughout the Muslim world, turning into legends. Ghazi Muhammad had an unlikely afterlife in one such story. A Malay manuscript from 1896 tells the story of Ghazi Muhammad as a Muslim hero in a war between the Ottomans (“Sultan Istanbul”) and the Russians (Tsar Alexander [II]). The war itself, as narrated for the Southeast Asian readership, appears as part of a centuries-old battle between Islam and Christianity. Shamil's son, whose cavalry division was not particularly successful during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, emerges victorious in the Malay retelling, clinching the victory for Islam. He wins the battle by blinding Russian troops

75. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 89–94.

76. Morrison, “Sufism, Pan-Islamism and Information Panic,” 287.

77. RGVIA f. 400, op. 1, d. 403 (O povedenii v Turtsii Gazi-Magometa, 1874–75).

78. Letter attributed to Ghazi Muhammad (c. 1870s–90s), Abdurazakov Family Collection, Kizilyurt, Dagestan. See also Zaira B. Ibragimova, “Problema mukhadzhirstva v dagestanskikh pamiatnikakh epistolarnogo zhanra kontsa XIX–nachala XX vv.,” *Voprosy istorii* 4 (2012): 152–56.



with magical green and red crystals.<sup>79</sup> This fascinating Malay manuscript testifies to a vibrant circulation of knowledge and rumors, where politics and the supernatural merged easily. Such an exchange of information, whether through legends or letters, only increased the Russian government's resolve to shut off the Caucasus from what it perceived to be the global domain of Muslim anti-colonial sentiment.

Between 1878 and World War I, Pan-Islamism evolved into an all-encompassing threat for Russian officialdom. All contacts between Muslims in Russia and the Ottoman empire fell under suspicion as Pan-Islamic. Tsarist secret police described as Pan-Islamic a range of activities in the Caucasus: jadidist schools, occasionally staffed by Ottoman-educated teachers; fundraising for charities in the Ottoman empire and Iran; and sermons by imams, who had allegedly arrived from the Ottoman empire.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Russian Muslims' activities, involving any critique of the Russian state, were understood as part of the Pan-Islamic conspiracy. After the Russian Revolution of 1905, even Russia's leading Muslim activists, such as Ismail Gasprinskii, were denounced in the press as fanatics and Pan-Islamists.<sup>81</sup> By then, Russian officials routinely dismissed the nuanced politics of Russia's Muslim reformists, viewing them only in terms of their Muslim identity.<sup>82</sup> The government also often conflated Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism, a movement in support of the cultural unity of Turkic people, linking both to the Ottoman empire as a twin threat to Russia in its vast Muslim territories.<sup>83</sup> By the 1910s, Pan-Islamism became whatever an imperial bureaucrat wanted it to be. For example, some officials feared that Pan-Islamic emissaries were now steeped in constitutional ideals of the Ottoman Revolution of 1908 and would preach against tsarist autocracy to Russian Muslims as well as Russian socialists and university students.<sup>84</sup>

Pan-Islamism as a threat to Russian governance was not solely a creation of tsarist officials. Muslim individuals contributed to it to advance their own interests.<sup>85</sup> Traditional Muslim elites started denouncing Muslim reformists as Pan-Islamists to discredit their work.<sup>86</sup> In a remarkable case in Turkestan,

79. Vladimir I. Braginsky, "Russians, Circassians and . . . the Discovery of Laser Weapons: 'The Story of the War Between Sultan Istanbul and the Russian Tsar Alexander,'" *Indonesia Circle* 24, no. 70 (1996): 193–217.

80. Tsarist police reports on Pan-Islamism can be found in GARF f. 102 (Departament politzii Ministerstva vnutrennikh del), arranged by province and year; see also f. P5325, op. 4, dd. 79–81, 172, 345, 504, 596.

81. On Ismail Gasprinskii, see Hakan Kırımlı, *National Movements and National Identity Among the Crimean Tatars* (Leiden, 1996), 116–49; Meyer, *Turks Across Empires*, 36–42, 142–44, 157–58.

82. Meyer, *Turks Across Empires*, 73, 144; Campbell, *Muslim Question*, 177–88.

83. On tsarist fears of Pan-Turkism, see Meyer, *Turks Across Empires*, 33, 148. On limits of Pan-Turkism in foreign policy, see Michael A. Reynolds, "Buffers, not Brethren: Young Turk Military Policy in the First World War and the Myth of Panturanism," *Past & Present*, no. 203 (May 2009): 137–79; Can, *Spiritual Subjects*, 21–22.

84. GARF f. 102, op. 242, d. 74 (Sekretnye doneseniiia departamenta politzii), ch. 51, ll. 5–5ob (July 18, 1912).

85. For a similar argument on Pan-Turkism in Russia, see Meyer, *Turks Across Empires*, 13.

86. For example, GARF f. 102, op. 208, d. 1922 (O turetskom poddannom zapodozrennom v propagande panislamizma, 1911); Meyer, *Turks Across Empires*, 145–48.

as Alexander Morrison demonstrates, a Kazakh man likely forged a letter, in Chaghatay, or Turki (an eastern Turkic language that was once a shared literary language throughout Central Asia), about an impending Kazakh rebellion against the Russians, which he purposefully planted to be discovered by tsarist officials. The Russian government readily believed it to be a Pan-Islamic conspiracy because the letter's purported author had spent time in the Ottoman empire. During an extensive investigation, tsarist authorities speculated that Ottoman propaganda might be reaching Central Asian Muslims via Kazan Tatars. The real author manipulated Russians' fears of Pan-Islamism and transborder correspondence to exact revenge on his father-in-law and estranged wife.<sup>87</sup>

At the heart of Russia's Pan-Islamic panic was the concern that Russia's Sunni Muslim subjects might regard the Ottoman sultan-caliph not only as their spiritual but also political authority. Tsarist censors read transborder correspondence with an eye to evidence alleging disloyalty of Russia's Muslim subjects. For example, in 1902, Russian authorities confiscated a letter from Jamal al-Din al-Daghistani, an emigrant from the Caucasus who resided in Bursa, northwestern Anatolia. He was a religious student and wrote to his uncle to tell him about his studies. Russian officials translated his letter, from Ottoman Turkish and Persian, and found most damning that he referred to the Ottoman sultan as "our ruler," noting indignantly on the margins that "a subject of the Russian Emperor writes a thing like this!"<sup>88</sup> Transborder communication elevated tsarist anxieties about whether Muslims in the Russo-Ottoman borderlands have accepted the authority of the Russian tsar.

Tsarist authorities were particularly suspicious of Sufism, a mystical tradition in Islam. Few Russian officials knew what Sufism was and what Sufis believed in, or understood the differences between different Sufi orders (*tariqa*).<sup>89</sup> The long Caucasus War shaped the Russians' impressions of Sufism. Notably, rulers of the Caucasus Imamate (1829–59) had been shaykhs of the Naqshbandi order, although historians debate to what extent Sufi ideas influenced the anti-Russian *jihād* of Imam Shamil and his predecessors.<sup>90</sup> In 1864, followers of Kunta Hajji, a shaykh of the Qadiri order, participated in an uprising in Chechnya and subsequently chose to emigrate to the Ottoman empire.<sup>91</sup>

87. Morrison, "Sufism, Pan-Islamism and Information Panic," 272–83.

88. ARDTA f. 45, op. 1, d. 35, ll. 17–23 (1901–2).

89. Alexander Knysh, "Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm: The Issue of the Motivations of Sufi Resistance Movements in Western and Russian Scholarship," *Die Welt des Islams* 42, no. 2 (2002): 139–73.

90. The Soviet and, until recently, western scholarship stressed the influence of the Naqshbandi order on anti-Russian resistance in the North Caucasus; Moshe Gammer, "The Beginnings of the Naqshbandiyya in Daghestan and the Russian Conquest of the Caucasus," *Die Welt des Islams* 34, no. 2 (November 1994): 204–17; Anna Zelkina, *In Quest for God and Freedom: The Sufi Response to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus* (London, 2000). Recent works questioned the Sufi impact on the *jihād* ideology of the Caucasus Imamate; Knysh, "Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm"; Michael Kemper, "The North Caucasian Khalidiyya and 'Muridism': Historiographical Problems," *Journal of the History of Sufism* 1–2, no. 5 (2007): 151–67.

91. Alexandre Bennigsen, "The Qadiriyyah (Kunta Hajji) Tariqah in North-east Caucasus: 1850–1987," *Islamic Culture* 62, no. 2–3 (1988): 63–78.

Correspondingly, tsarist authorities in the Caucasus held Sufism to be more dangerous to Russian governance than mainstream Sunni Islam.<sup>92</sup> Some officials, betraying both their ignorance of contemporary Islamic movements and Eurocentric biases, perceived Sufi orders to be clandestine subversive networks, akin to socialist revolutionary groups whom they were pursuing at the same time. They believed that Sufi networks might hide criminals, who sought to escape to the Ottoman empire, and, above all, disdained the thought that Sufi adherents in Russia could be following orders of religious figures from outside the empire.<sup>93</sup> Russian censors were not alone in regarding Sufism as a political movement. French colonial officials in North Africa also charged Qadiri and Rahmani Sufis with conspiratorial anti-French activities.<sup>94</sup>

The most prominent target of Russian censors was the Naqshbandi order of shaykhs from the village of Kikuni in central Dagestan, precisely because it operated between the Russian and Ottoman empires. Shaykh Muhammad al-Kikuni was an active proponent of Russian Muslims' emigration to the Ottoman empire. He participated in the anti-colonial uprisings of 1877 and was deported to one of Russia's northern provinces, which he successfully fled for the Ottoman empire.<sup>95</sup> The Ottoman government granted the shaykh and his followers land near Yalova, in northwestern Anatolia, where they founded the village of Reşadiye (now Güneyköy, Turkey). Reşadiye, known locally as "little Dagestan," emerged as a prominent Naqshbandi center and a pilgrimage site for Russia's Dagestani pilgrims, complementary to their hajj to Mecca. By the early twentieth century, the al-Kikuni order spanned over a thousand miles between historical Avar and Dargin lands in the northeast Caucasus to diasporic villages near Kars, Sivas, Tokat, and Bursa, and to Dagestani Sufis in Istanbul and the Hejaz.<sup>96</sup>

The al-Kikuni shaykhs maintained their connections with Sufi adherents in Dagestan through correspondence. Some Reşadiye residents traveled back to the Caucasus to visit their families and carried messages from the shaykhs. Reportedly, some smuggled correspondence across the Ottoman-Russian border in the sole of a shoe.<sup>97</sup> These transnational ties lasted for at least two generations. In 1914, tsarist authorities conducted raids in central Dagestan in search of compromising correspondence from the Ottoman empire, by then Russia's opponent in the war. The raids revealed that local residents had often

92. Morrison, "Sufism, Pan-Islamism and Information Panic," esp. 287.

93. TsGA RD f. 66, op. 1, d. 65, ll. 52–52ob (May 10, 1900).

94. Knysh makes this comparison in "Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm," 160–61; see also Julia A. Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800–1904)* (Berkeley, 1994).

95. On North Caucasian deportees of 1877, see Austin Jersild, "Imperial Russification: Dagestani Mountaineers in Russian Exile, 1877–83," *Central Asian Survey* 19, no. 1 (2000): 5–16.

96. Vladimir O. Bobrovnikov, "Dagestan v transnatsional'nykh sufiiskikh setiakh: Sheikhi iz Kikuni i ikh ziraiat v Turtsii," *Vostok (Oriens)* 5 (2018): 21–36; Zaira B. Ibragimova, "Muhammad-Hajji and Sharapuddin of Kikuni," in Moshe Gammer, ed., *Islam and Sufism in Daghestan* (Helsinki, 2009), 71–77.

97. L. A. Gadzhieva and Zaira B. Ibragimova, "Vospominaniia Ali Usta o sheikhe Sharapuddine Kikuninskom kak istochnik po istorii dagestanskogo mukhadzhirstva kontsa XIX–nachala XX vv.," *Vestnik Instituta IAE* 4 (2013): 41–46.

been writing to the al-Kikuni shaykhs. In one letter, a Dagestani man asked about a local Muslim saint interred at a mosque in Golotl' and whether he had participated in the "holy war" against the Russians.<sup>98</sup> In one of his intercepted responses, Shaykh Sharaf al-Din al-Kikuni (Şerafeddin Dağıstani) wrote a poem in the Avar language, criticizing what had become of Dagestan under Russian rule: "The wicked are on top, the faithful are under their feet, which is a true sign that the end of the world is near."<sup>99</sup> The Russian police regarded this Sufi order to be subversive to Russian governance, holding Shaykh Sharaf al-Din responsible for organizing the Dagestanis' unauthorized emigration to the Ottoman empire and his followers in Medina for sending letters to Dagestan, urging local Sufis to emigrate.<sup>100</sup> The authorities established surveillance over Dagestanis whom they believed to be followers of the al-Kikuni shaykhs.<sup>101</sup>

The transborder correspondence of Caucasus Muslims remained illegal throughout the late imperial era. In 1912, Russian officials were investigating a Dargin woman, Rukiyat Bagand kızı, from the village of Akusha in Dagestan. She claimed that she and her husband, Abdulkadir Gadzhi Bulat oğlu, conducted the hajj five years ago but fell ill and had to stay in the Ottoman empire because they ran out of money for a journey back home. She briefly returned to her ancestral village in Dagestan, which is when the officials arrested her and seized a letter from her husband. The letter, in Arabic, read: "Please let me know how your journey went, whether you suffered or were mistreated on the road. How is our family back home, and does anyone wish to join us in the hijra? Please hurry to return. . . Our supervisors want us to rebuild our shops."<sup>102</sup> The military governor of Dagestan declared Rukiyat to be "politically unreliable" and used the confiscated letter as evidence that she had allegedly returned to Dagestan to "seduce [others] toward resettlement in Turkey." It did not help her case that she and her husband had settled in Reşadiye, where the al-Kikuni Sufi shaykhs resided. The authorities then speculated whether she had been involved in the recent unauthorized emigration of forty Dagestanis, who had rented a train car to travel from Dagestan toward the Ottoman border in Georgia. The investigation concluded that Rukiyat was seventy years old, and her husband was twenty years her senior, which made them unlikely masterminds of an illegal train escape. The two seniors merely wished to reunite with their family in Russia.<sup>103</sup> Elderly Rukiyat fell under investigation because her case wove together many threads that triggered the Russian government's paranoia about transnational Muslim connections, including a smuggled letter, the hajj, a Sufi order, unauthorized return to Russia, and a call to Muslim emigration.

98. TsGA RD f. 66, op. 5, d. 48 (O politicheskoi blagonadezhnosti mestnogo zhitelia), ll. 2–2ob (December 23, 1914).

99. Ibragimova, "Problema mukhadzhirstva."

100. TsGA RD f. 66, op. 5, d. 34 (O politicheskoi blagonadezhnosti mestnogo zhitelia), l. 61 (October 10, 1914); f. 66, op. 1, d. 65 (O litsakh bezhavshikh v Turtsiiu), ll. 52–52ob (May 10, 1900).

101. TsGA RD f. 2, op. 2, d. 93, 8ob (O zhiteliakh vernuvshikhsia iz Turtsii, 1914).

102. TsGA RD f. 66, op. 5, d. 21a, ll. 43–44 (March 26, 1912).

103. TsGA RD f. 66, op. 5, d. 21a, ll. 3–3ob (December 12, 1912).

Letters between Muslims in the Caucasus and their relatives and friends in the Middle East sustained the Russo-Ottoman Muslim world. Refugees, emigrants, pilgrims, and others, who found themselves in the Ottoman empire, wrote to the Caucasus to tell their loved ones about how they fared in their journeys, where they resided, and whether life was better in the sultan's realm. They often asked about the situation back in the Caucasus, extended many greetings, exchanged addresses, and, sometimes, encouraged others to emigrate from Russia.

Transborder correspondence provides a new vantage point on how imperial Russia governed in the borderlands. The tsarist government perceived Muslims' correspondence between the Ottoman and Russian empires to be subversive because it came to understand Muslim identity as inherently political, lending easily to paranoia about the Pan-Islamic threat to Russia's colonial project in its expanding Muslim dominions. The Russian government attempted to limit Muslims' transborder communication and migration, using information in intercepted letters to justify restrictions. The Caucasus officials placed Muslims' correspondence under surveillance, temporarily suspended the hajj and tightened its regulation, and banned return migration of North Caucasian Muslims. The government's criminalization of transborder mobility did not stop it but drove it underground, further increasing the authorities' suspicions of migrants' intentions and resolve to communicate with their loved ones. Muslims' letters circumvented the notoriously porous Russo-Ottoman border, but the tsarist hunt for them reinforced the frontier, making a clear distinction between Muslim refugees' lives before and after displacement, as subjects of the tsar or the sultan.

By the early twentieth century, the Russian authorities still surveilled border crossings and searched for contraband correspondence, but the dreaded Pan-Islamism that haunted the previous generation of colonial officials was no longer their primary concern. All transnational ties had become suspect in the Caucasus, as the government pursued socialists and anarchists who smuggled clandestine press from the European capitals and Armenian revolutionaries who operated between the Caucasus and Ottoman Anatolia.<sup>104</sup> In the 1920s, the Russo-Ottoman border turned into the Soviet-Turkish border, which, after World War II, was part of the Iron Curtain. The much-reinforced border reduced human mobility but did not stop an intellectual and cultural exchange between Muslim populations living on its different sides.

VLADIMIR HAMED-TROYANSKY is Assistant Professor of Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is a historian of migration in the Ottoman and Russian empires. His first monograph, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State*, is forthcoming with Stanford University Press in 2024.

104. Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi imperii (Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire) f. 151, op. 482, dd. 3442, 3444–45 (Ob armianskikh revoliutsionnykh zamyslakh, 1894–1905); GARF f. 102, op. 238, d. 32, ch. 65 (O tainom vodvorenii oruzhiia, 1908).