

BOOK REVIEWS

AGNES NILUFER KEFELI, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014). Pp. 312. \$52.50 cloth. ISBN: 9780801452314

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Those of us working on Russia's eastern minorities have long been anticipating this book, and it was worth the wait. The primary protagonists of *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia* are the Kräshens (literally the “baptized”), or the officially Christianized non-Russian communities of the middle Volga region. Originally Muslims or animists, ethnically Turkic or Finnic, mostly speaking Turkic-Tatar, and having been introduced to Christianity by Russian Orthodox missionaries since the 16th century, the Kräshens occupied a liminal space between Muslim Tatars and Orthodox Russians. While registered as Christians, several Kräshen communities repeatedly petitioned the tsarist state to recognize them as Muslims throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, Kräshen “apostasy,” forbidden by law, turned into an embarrassing and frustrating problem for the Russian state and the Orthodox Church. Tsarist officials and missionaries who painstakingly studied the causes of this “problem” and tried to develop measures to stop it produced a copious amount of records about the Kräshens.

Agnès Nilüfer Kefeli taps into this material, along with the Sufi Muslim literature that was widely available to the Kräshens in the 19th century, and supplements her readings with fieldtrip observations among contemporary Kräshen communities to help us understand the Kräshens' religious imaginary and choices of communal affiliation in late imperial Russia. She demonstrates how various Kräshen communities as well as individuals navigated a highly charged environment of religious and inevitably political contestation that involved the attempts of Sufi Muslims, Orthodox missionaries, and eventually Tatar modernists to influence the hearts and minds of this liminal population. She explains how Turkic-language Sufi literature translated into an enchanted religious lore that blurred the boundaries between Islamic, Christian, and animistic traditions and opened a pathway into Islam for the Kräshen communities. Yet, she goes beyond mere content analysis of the Sufi literature. She demonstrates how agents and venues of contact between the region's Kräshen and Muslim communities—such as Sufi proselytizers, itinerant craftsmen, Kräshen brides marrying Muslim men, kinship networks, shared shrines, Muslim-owned textile and leather factories, and seasonal festivals—guided Kräshens along that pathway.

This demonstration successfully challenges the more conventional explanation of Kräshen history, which posits that the Kräshens, who demanded to be recognized as Muslims, had been forcefully baptized (especially in the 18th century) and had actually remained crypto-Muslims all along. In Kefeli's account, the Kräshens' choices were much less set in stone—or in what would later be called “national identity”—and their communal affiliations were much more fluid, thus leaving room for the interplay of various agencies and contingencies.

Having established the fluidity of “the construction of Kräshen identity” (p. 184), Kefeli moves on to explain the efforts of Christian missionaries and Tatar modernists to channel that fluidity in directions that *they* saw fit. The book's explanation of the missionary responses to Kräshen

attempts at conversion to Islam offers a new perspective. Moving beyond an analysis of the broad discussions of Russification that preoccupied late-imperial Russia's policy makers, Kefeli outlines how Orthodox missionaries attacked Sufi literature as unauthentic and inconsistent yet simultaneously learned from and utilized the same literature's capabilities and mechanisms of transmission in vernacular languages in order to improve Orthodox proselytization among non-Russian communities. Consequently, Kefeli explains, the Orthodox missionaries and their sponsors in the tsarist bureaucracy succeeded in keeping many Kräshen communities in Christianity, but they also prepared the foundations of what would eventually evolve into a nationalistically formulated Kräshen identity, as distinct from both the Orthodox Russians and Muslim Tatars.

Meanwhile, many other Kräshens still opted for Islam, especially when the Russian state largely lost its ability to dictate its subjects' religious affiliations after the Revolution of 1905. This helped consolidate the views about the Kräshens' forced baptism and continuing secret adherence to Islam, therefore providing nationalist Tatar intellectuals with a powerful motif to represent the "plight" of Muslims in the Russian empire. Similar to the missionaries, some modernist Muslim intellectuals criticized the region's Sufi literature for being superficial and tried to promote a more literalist and sterilized version of Islam instead. And some others adapted that literature into modern narratives of national identity. In this modern mode of thinking, the fluidity of "the construction of Kräshen identity" would leave its place to a solidified merger of national and religious identities according to which "a Tatar [could] be only Muslim and a Russian only Orthodox" (p. 262).

Kefeli's emphasis in her fifth and last chapter on this connection between popular Islamic lore and the discourse of modernist Muslim intellectuals, or the "Jadids" as they are commonly known, is also noteworthy. She relates the intellectuals' desire to promote a literalist version of Islam to their embarrassment over the missionary critiques of the local Sufi literature. This is a credible and revealing addition to our understanding of the Russian Muslim modernist movement. However, readers who are less familiar with the subject should keep in mind that the Jadid movement was deeply embedded in transregional Muslim networks of reform, modernization, and Westernization at the turn of the 20th century and was more than a response to missionary criticism. Kefeli acknowledges this in a paragraph at the end of her fourth chapter (p. 212), but it is easy to miss that passing caution in the following forceful narrative that ends the book.

One aspect of *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia* that some *IJMES* readers may find troubling is Kefeli's repeated attempts to compare the Volga region's Turkic Sufi literature to the Qur'an, the prophetic traditions, the theological and legal schools of Sunni Islam, and the works of prominent Islamic scholars such as Imam al-Ghazali. Much of this comparison is based on a reading of *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* by Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1981) and several works by Annemarie Schimmel, especially *Deciphering the Signs of God* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994). Without underestimating the worth of these sources, Kefeli's limited approach to understanding various positions in what her missionary protagonists would call "'high' Islam" (p. 139) is by no means a match for her meticulous and insightful reading of popular Sufi texts.

Despite this incongruity, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia* is a must read for anyone who wants to have a deeper understanding of the question of conversion and to fathom the furthest reach of the Islamic tradition in its northern frontiers. Kefeli both demonstrates and inspiringly analyzes the liminal nature of religious imaginary and the resulting fluidity of communal affiliations in that frontier. Full of real people and colorful stories, her narrative brings "the foreign country" of the past to life and tells us how they did "things differently there."