Japan and Islam Policy During the 1930s

The 1920s may have been the time of liberalism and internationalism for many in the Japanese public but from the perspective of the Islam-oriented Japanese of the Asianist and army circles who had already formed contacts with Muslim activists during the Meiji period because of the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–5, it was a time for cultivation of contacts along the lines of Islam policy [kaikyō seisaku], an idea put forth first with the 1909 visit to Japan of Abdürreşid ibrahim, the Russia Tatar cleric Pan-Islamist activist. During the early years of the 1920s, the Japanese military authorities in Manchuria had contacts with particularly the Pan-Islamists and Pan-Turkists of the Romanov and Ottoman dynasties, the old world empires which had been destroyed as a result of the First World War, known as the Great War. The present essay introduces aspects of the second stage of Japanese and Islam-oriented activities during the Taishō and Shōwa periods that is part of research in progress on the subject. Based primarily on sources in the Gaikō shiryōkan, the Diplomatic Record Office of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dealing with religious and missionary activities in the home country and abroad, this essay juxtaposes contemporary Japanese accounts of these events with others. A major contrast is found between the Gaimushō [Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs] records and the intelligence reports of the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during the Second World War dealing with Japanese infiltration among Muslims that have been declassified since 1983. The OSS reports dramatically portray the history of Japanese Muslim relations as a grand conspiracy from the Meiji period, understandably because they were written with the purpose of deciphering the intentions and actions of the enemy during war. The Japanese documents of course reflect no conspiracy as such but on and off talk about the same events in a patchy manner, being fairly contemporary accounts of the events involving Japanese policies toward the Islamic world during the 1920s and 30s, later dealt with in OSS reports written during the 1940s. One surmises from an overview of the documents that during the early 1930s the Gaimushō appears quite distanced to any machinations in favour of an overseas Islam policy, which in the documents is indirectly ascribed to military elements [gunbu], or the available sources can be interpreted that way today. But Gaimushō telegrams and research reports of the late 1930s exhibit an increased advocacy for Islam policy from the ministry as well.

As the newly-founded Soviet Union and the Turkish Republic rejected the ideological currents of their respective ancient regimes, the Kokuryūkai, the Amur River Society of Japanese Asianist nationalism, and the military authorities in Manchuria such as the Kwantung Army and the Mantetsu, the South Manchurian Railway research organization of Japanese empire building, provided haven to émigrés from these empires. Manchuria became an indefinite home to Russia Muslim Tatar émigrés who came in with the White Russians, but they were not alone. Former Young Turk officers and intelligencers of the now defeated German-Ottoman alliance of the First World War, men no longer officially welcome in the Turkey of Kemal Atatürk, now sought Japanese help. Ottoman royalists of the now defunct Ottoman empire replaced by the secularist revolution of Kemalism also were to appear in the Far East in search of a last political hope of restorationism. This was a Diaspora of Pan-Islamists—Pan-Turkists primarily of the Turkish world who had played out their political careers during the Great War. Some had been also party to the Basmaçi uprising of Turkic populations in Central Asia in 1917–22 led by the exiled Young Turk leader of the Ottoman government, Enver Pasha, who had gone to Central Asia to organize a military uprising against the Bolsheviks in a last stand of the Pan-Turkist cum Pan-Islamist vision of the First World War. After Enver Pasha died, literally in a single-handed charge, galloping towards a line of Bolshevik machine-guns in the middle of nowhere in today’s Tajikistan, some of his comrades in arms came to the Far East as part of the Muslim population which spilled over from the turbulent revolutions and national conflicts of the age.3

After the 1917 October Revolution and the Siberian Expedition, the Japanese authorities in Manchuria and Japan accepted a sizeable Russian Muslim émigré population as part of the large White Russian emigration with the end of the Siberian Expedition in 1922. Most Russian Muslims were Tatars from the Kazan region east of Moscow who had already had close contacts with the Japanese during the Russo-Japanese War and the Bashkir area to the south. Some émigrés from the Bashkir area, south of Kazan, were members of the local militia, which had supported Czech troops and had fought with the White Russian Cossack armies against the Red Army during the civil war after 1917. Defeated by the Bolsheviks the Bashkir militia leaders had retreated into Central Asia with their families. They ultimately found asylum in Manchuria. Together with the White Russian émigrés, the Tatars settled mostly in Harbin and Mukden and began small family businesses selling leather goods and clothing. By the early 1930s, of the roughly 10,000 Tatars living in the Far East, about one thousand Tatar émigrés had relocated to Japan, forming the bulk of the émigré Muslim residents of the home islands consisting also of British Indian Muslims, and some Indonesians from the Dutch Indies.4

For the Japanese circles this émigré population was now to become the initial fertile ground to launch Japanese army strategies with respect to Islam policy in Asia, particularly Northwest China and Inner Asia during the Taishō (1912–26) and early Shōwa periods during the 1930s. A former intelligence officer of Harbin intelligence, Nishihara Masao, succinctly explains in his 1980 account of the Harbin intelligence in the 1930s the military view of the matter. He states:

… from 1931, 1932 on, the army developed a deep interest in the Islam question, and thought that if we could ride the religious communal solidarity of these people, it would promise a very beneficial agitation and operation strength. Thinking this