CHAPTER 9

Transnational Life in Multicultural Space: Azerbaijani and Tatar Discourses in Interwar Europe

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Dans la période entre les deux guerres, la presse européenne dite d'information ne traitait que rarement des problèmes de l'Orient musulman.2

After a short intermezzo between 1918 and 1921, Soviet Russia was able to reconquer most of the territories of the former Tsardom in the Caucasus, the Ukraine, and in Central Asia, which became independent or at least self-rulled around 1917. The short-lived independent republics of Crimea, Azerbaijan, and Turkestan3 with their predominantly Muslim population were occupied by the Red Army, and then gradually sovietized.4 The Sovietization challenged the political elites of these countries dramatically. Those who survived the invasion of the Bolsheviks either had to accept the Communist regime or escape. Thousands of former politicians and intellectuals, both Shi’a and Sunnis, left for Turkey, France, Germany, and Poland. While living in exile many continued political, journalistic, and public activities writing against Communism, and protesting against the persecutions in the Soviet Union. At the same time, these intellectuals were eager to inform the society in their host countries about their countries of origin, which were left under Soviet occupation. Being quite well integrated into the intellectual milieus of interwar Paris, Warsaw, Berlin, and other European cities in the 1920s and 1930s, they were confronted with European realities, ideas, and views on Christianity and Islam.

1 All translations from Polish, Turkish, Azerbaijani, and German were done by the authors of the contribution.
3 Here Turkestan refers to the geographic name of the region of Central Asia that was dominated by Russia until 1991.
This article explores selected publications, articles, and booklets of several prominent Azerbaijani, northern Caucasian, and Tatar émigré intellectuals in interwar Europe, including Mehmed Emin Rasulzade (1884–1955), Hilal Munschi (1899–?), Ahmet Zeki Velidi Toğan (1890–1970), Haïdar Bammate (1890–1965), and Cafer Seydahmet (1889–1960); these works were published in Europe in Russian, Polish, French, and German. The analysis here focuses on the representation of Islam in the writings of these Muslim intellectuals. Born in the 1880s, all were graduates of Russian and European schools, belonged to the Muslim minority in the Russian Empire, and then spent decades exiled in Europe. Their sojourns in France, Poland, and Germany throughout the 1920s and 1930s did not mean, therefore, a cultural watershed to their primary socialization. As Muslims they were aware of European culture while they lived in the Caucasus or the Crimea under Russian rule.

Socialized under the circumstances of the imperial homogenization ‘from above’ and certain cultural resistance strategies of non-Russian peripheries and educated in imperial high schools and universities, these intellectuals combined the awareness of Russian, Near Eastern, and European traditions and cultures. It is easier to define them as entangled intellectuals who were rooted in several civilizations, than to try to classify them merely as Azerbaijani, Tatar or Muslim intellectuals in interwar Europe. They represented a multicultural hybridity: They lived and were active in the special intellectual space of interwar Europe.

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6 We argue that at least the urban spaces of the Russian Empire, like Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, Kiev, Odessa, Baku, Bakhchesaray, and Tbilisi can be considered European. Therefore, intellectuals who resettled from St. Petersburg to Paris or from Baku to Warsaw still moved within a European cultural space.

7 In this context the term of hybridity is borrowed from the post-colonialist debates initiated by Homi Bhabha.

8 It is difficult, however, to define this intellectual space as the “third space,” in Homi Bhabha’s terms. Being in Europe and therefore outside the territory of the Russian Empire and the USSR, Bhabha’s third space is hardly applicable with regard to the study of Russian Muslims who migrated to Europe. See Jonathan Rutherford’s interview with Homi Bhabha: “The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207–221.