

Musa Jārullāh Bigiyev (1875-1949)

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Musa Jārullāh Bigiyev was a Muslim Tatar religious scholar, journalist, politician, educator and a prolific writer, who devoted his entire life to reconciling Islam with modern progress. He published more than sixty books in Arabic and Old Ottoman dealing with the issues of Islamic jurisprudence, theology, sciences of the Qur'an, sciences of the *hadith*, literature, economics, law, politics and history.

Life and Times

Musa Jārullāh was born in 1875 in Novo-Cherkassk, a Russian city near Rostov-on-Don to a middle-class, scholarly Tatar family. His father died when Jārullāh was six years old. Jārullāh's mother, Fatima, strove to raise her two sons – Zahir and Musa – as religious scholars. Rostov-on-Don was inhabited mostly by ethnic Russians and was a business centre and thus, was not conducive for Islamic learning. Consequently in 1888 his mother sent Jārullāh to the city of Qazan, where he enrolled in the most famous local religious school of that time, Apanay, and later, in the Kul Buye *madrasah*. Two years later, Jārullāh returned to Rostov-on-Don and completed his studies at the Rostov-on-Don Real Technical lyceum. Then he went to Central Asia, particularly to Bukhara and Samarqand. Unable to satisfy his religious and intellectual curiosity in the educational systems prevalent in Central Asia and Russia, Jārullāh journeyed to Istanbul, and then, after spending a short time there, to Egypt. Here, he studied under Shaykh Muḥammad Bakhit al-Muti^cī (d.1935), one of the most influential scholars of the country, a student and follower of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and close friend of Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905).¹ Jārullāh also attended public lectures delivered by 'Abduh. He also researched on the history of the Qur'ānic studies at the National Library of Egypt. Later Jārullāh went to perform *hajj*. He stayed in Makkah and Medina for two years, seriously and continuously studying the Qur'ān and *Aḥādīth* of the Prophet Muḥammad (Peace be upon him). He later travelled to India, and spent about a year in Uttar Pradesh and learned Sanskrit so that he could read the Mahabharata. From India he travelled back to Egypt and continued his research at the National Library there for another three years. He then went to Beirut, and from there by foot to Damascus.

¹ Ahmet Kanlıdere, *Reform Within Islam: The Tajdid and Jadid Movement among the Kazan Tatars* (Istanbul: Eren, 1997), 53-54.

In 1904, Jārullāh returned to Russia very depressed upon seeing the miserable situation of the educational system prevailing in the Muslim world. He settled down in St Petersburg and joined the Law Faculty at the university there.² Jārullāh’s move to the Russian capital coincided with the 1905 Revolution and, as a consequence, the proclamation of the freedom of the press, political activities and religious practices for all peoples of Russia, including the Muslim community. Jārullāh eagerly joined the political and educational activities of Russia’s Muslims, who tried to benefit from this piece of liberalism and freedom provided by the Tsarist government under the pressure of revolutionary upheavals. Together with his comrade, a famous Tatar Pan-Islamist activist and thinker, ‘Abd al-Rashid Ibrahimov (1857-1944), Jārullāh founded the ^{radiyallāhu}_{‘anhā} *Ifet* and *Tilmiz* newspapers in St Petersburg. Jārullāh was also active in organising the All-Russian Muslim Congresses during 1905-1917, which aimed at uniting all Muslims living under the Tsarist rule and to find the appropriate solutions for their social, religious, educational and political dilemmas. He also served as a Central Committee member of the Russian Pan-Islamist party, *Russiya Musulmannarining Ittifaqi* (Union of Russia’s Muslims), throughout 1906-1917. In 1910, he was appointed as an *imām* at the St. Petersburg mosque.

Jārullāh welcomed the Russian February Revolution of 1917 claiming, perhaps naively, that “slavery is gone, and will never return back.”³ When the Bolsheviks came to power following the October Revolution, his confidence in freedom for Russia’s Muslims did not decrease. The new regime had issued “A Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia” (October 26, 1917), which proclaimed the equality and sovereignty of the different people living in Russia and confirmed their rights to self-determination. Jārullāh consequently considered the Soviet regime a potential ally of world-wide Muslims against European imperialism, primarily that of Britain. However, when the civil war ended in 1920 with the establishment of the undisputed authority of the Soviet regime in Russia including the Muslim populated territories of the Volga-Urals region, the Caucasian area and Central Asia, the Communists began doing everything in their power to liquidate Islam. In 1920, Jārullāh wrote his *Alphabet of Islam* in response to *The Alphabet of Communism* (1919) of Nikolai Bukharin, the main theorist of the Communist identity. Two months later, due to his harsh criticism of the Marxist ideology, Jārullāh was arrested by the *Cheka* in St Petersburg but was later released under the pressure from international Muslim communities. In 1926,

²Abdullah Battal-Taymas, *Musa Carullah Bigi: Kişiliği, Fikir Hayatı ve Eserleri* (Istanbul: M. Sıralar Matbaası, 1958), 8.

³Ibid, 17; and Elmira Akhmetova, “Musa Jārullāh Bigiev (1875-1949): Political Thought of a Tatar Muslim Scholar,” *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2008), 53.

Jārullāh attended the International Islamic Conference at Makkah, as one of the seven elected Russian delegates. Shortly afterwards, he was accused by the Soviet regime of being a “spy of Turkey and India,” and, consequently, left the Soviet Russia secretly in 1930.

Jārullāh travelled extensively throughout the Muslim world - India, China, Japan and Europe. In 1933, he founded an Islamic Publishing House in Berlin with the intention of transforming it into a religious and scientific Islamic Centre, which would unite all European Muslim intellectuals. In the following year Jārullāh visited Finland and from there he went to Iran and Iraq to learn about the situation of Muslims in those countries and to study the Shi’ah branch of Islamic belief. By the end of 1935, he returned to Cairo and continued his research in Qur’ānic studies. In 1937, Jārullāh went to India, moving from Bombay to Benares, studying the Hindu Vedas literature. In 1938, he was invited by his friend Ibrahimov to Japan. Afterwards, they together visited China, Java, Sumatra (Indonesia) and Singapore as preachers of Islam. In 1939, with the outbreak of World War II, Jārullāh had to leave Japan for India. He then decided to settle down and end his expeditions, thus heading for Kabul, Afghanistan. He, however, was arrested by the British in Peshawar and imprisoned for several years without any charge. The ruler of Bhopal, Muḥammad Ḥamidullāh Khan (1894-1960), managed to secure his release from prison, but Jārullāh was put under house arrest by the British until 1945. Though difficult, these were the most fruitful years of his scholarship evidenced by the publication of ten major works on different issues.⁴ Jārullāh passed away in Cairo in a charitable hospice in October 1949.

Views on Islam and Civilisational Renewal

In his numerous writings, Jārullāh deliberated about the problems faced by the Muslim world, the reasons for Muslims’ backwardness in **current realities** and he proposed certain ways to achieve progress and virtue. In his significant work, entitled *Khaliq Nazarina Bernicha Mas’ala* (Several Issues for Public Attention, published in 1912), Jārullāh praised Europe (he called it a ‘civilised world’) for its freedom of thought generated by Protestant Reformation, and, at the same time he decried the miserable situation in the Muslim world wherein the will, reason and people’s thoughts became captive to the restrictions favoured by the followers of *madhhabs*. Jārullāh consequently asserted that constriction of the unlimited potential of Islam

⁴ Akhmetova, E., “Musa Jārullāh Bigiev,” 57.

into the narrow circles of the existing *madhhabs* was the main reason for the decline of Islamic civilisation.⁵

Jārullāh also believed that educational stagnation that was prevalent in Muslim societies deeply confined Muslims' willpower and reasoning. After returning from his educational travels across the Middle East, Jārullāh expressed his dissatisfaction with the existing educational system in Muslim countries, accordingly:

Seeds of love for religious sciences were planted into my heart by the hands of the Almighty; after wasting ten years in religious schools of Qazan and Mawaraennahr, I departed to the Muslim countries full of hopes. I used to travel in the Islamic lands of Turkey, Egypt, Ḥijāz, India and Shām for nearly five years; and was staying at religious *madrasahs* of those countries for either short or long periods. I have seen every famous religious school of those lands. But, unfortunately, the thing that I was able to find least in these 'great religious *madrasahs*' was religious education.⁶

Jārullāh consequently stated that an urgent educational reform was the only way to achieve real success and progress in the Muslim world. At the same time, he acknowledged that the defects of the Muslim educational system were not due to the incompetence of the teaching staff, but because of the wrong selection of text-books, which were not capable of guiding students to deliberate or apply their knowledge in the contemporary world.⁷ Thus Jārullāh began to write quality text-books for Islamic educational institutions, with the objective to activate brains, will and deliberation amongst the Muslim youth. In 1909, Jārullāh began teaching at the Husainiyah *madrasah* in Orenburg, Russia, which was renowned for its diverse and progressive teaching staff. Yet, soon afterwards he lost this job due to the propagation of the idea of the universality of God's Mercy. The theses of this idea were expounded in his two books published in 1911, entitled *Rahmat Ilahiyye Borhannary* (Evidences on the Mercy of God) and *Insannarning 'Aqidah Ilahiyatlarene Ber Nazar* (A Glimpse at the People's Belief in God). In the same year, Jārullāh published another controversial work, entitled *Ozin Konnarda Ruza: Ijtihad Kitaby* (Fasting during Long Days: A Book of *Ijtihad*), a result of his journey to Finland. Based on his *ijtihad*, Jārullāh suggested that there is no obligation for Muslims to fast during the phenomenon of polar nights, but they are required to pay *fidya*. A Russian scholarly periodical *Mir Islama* (The World of Islam) appraised the publication of these books as a significant event in the Muslim world that: "Works of Musa Bigiyev suddenly became an object of special attention. The ideas of

⁵Jārullāh, *Khaliq Nazarina Bernicha Mas'ala* (Qazan: Electro-Tipografiya Umid, 1912), 38-39.

⁶Jārullāh, *Al-Luzumiyyat* (Qazan: Sharaf Publishing House, 1907), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

the Tatar philosopher began to spread increasingly amongst the Muslims of Constantinople. His courageous critique of traditional interpretations began to please many.”⁸ A famous Turkish periodical, *Türk Yurdu*, labelled Jārullāh as a *mujaddid* of the fourteenth century Islam. Yet, Mustafa Sabri, *shaykh al-Islam* of the Osmanli Sultanate, banned several groundbreaking books of Jārullāh from circulation in 1913. Very often, Jārullāh was labelled as the ‘Luther of Islam’ and as an ‘Islamic Reformist.’⁹ He repeatedly opposed equating himself with Luther, saying that his aim was not to reform the religion; since “Islam has no need for religious reformation. It is not Islam, but we ourselves who have social, religious and political diseases. For sure, we should seek remedies for these diseases. Therefore... we need to reform ourselves ... It is improper to apply Christian Reformation to Islam.”¹⁰

Political Views

Jārullāh lived during a time when the ideas of nationalism had become one of the principal ideologies in the modern world, which was successfully spreading in the Muslim world as an influence of European colonialism and it offered an alternative to the traditional *ummah* identity. In Russia, the Muslim nations became members of the Soviet regime, which denounced both Islam and nationalistic inspirations as superstition and sources of deviation from communism. Jārullāh in his writings tried to expound on the modern ideologies of nationalism, socialism and secularism through their relationship with the universal values of rights, justice, equality and mutual assistance, principles which are essential for maintaining peace, social stability and human security. He disowned racial ideas of nationalism such as exalting a certain nation as in Turkism, or offering privileges to more advanced nations while ignoring the rights of other ‘backward’ communities as in the Soviet form of nationalism. At the same time, Jārullāh questioned the ‘Proletarian Internationalism’ policy of the Soviet Union, i.e. the unification of the proletariat from all over the world on the basis of hatred against capitalists, and called it as ‘myth’ and artificial remedy,’ which hinders attempts to improve people’s social conditions. He believed that Class-based civil uprisings and enmity destroy the true human civilisation, and ruin any aspiration for social progress; and consequently they develop only the desire to promote the personal interests of individuals, and do not provide any sustained benefit for humanity.¹¹ According to Jārullāh, the protection

⁸See, Akhmetova, *Ideas of Muslim Unity at the Age of Nationalism: A Comparative Study of the Concept of the Ummah in the Writings of Musa Jārullāh and Said Nursi* (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009), 24.

⁹ See, Kanlıdere, *Reform Within Islam*, 58-71.

¹⁰ Jārullāh, *Buyuk Maudu'larda Ufaq Fikerler* (St Petersburg: M-A. Maqsutov Publishing House, 1914), 5.

¹¹ Akhmetova, “Musa Jārullāh Bigiev,” 58-59.

of the natural rights of nationalities and offering universal equality amongst all nations alone would provide the world with real progress and social harmony. As he affirmed, there was only one system capable of bringing equality to all small and big nations in their rights and dignity, and that was Islam. He assumed that, unlike the principles of nationalism, racism or communism, Islam saw all ethnic groups to be equal peers. Jārullāh consequently believed in the equality of all people of the world regardless of their religious and ethnic peculiarities, or the ideologies they follow. According to him, the words of Allah “As long as these stand true to you, stand ye true to them: for Allah doth love the righteous” (The Qur’an 9:7) constitute the basic principle of Islam in conducting relations between Muslims and other peoples. Adhering to this, Jārullāh called for the equality between all nations living in Russia and the entire world, and all genders and social groups, in terms of their rights and responsibilities.¹²

Further Reading:

Akhmetova, E. (2008). “Musa Jārullāh Bigiev (1875-1949): Political Thought of a Tatar Muslim Scholar,” *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 16, no. 1, 49-71.

Akhmetova, E. (2009). *Ideas of Muslim Unity at the Age of Nationalism: A Comparative Study of the Concept of the Ummah in the Writings of Musa Jārullāh and Said Nursi*. Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.

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Kanlıdere, Ahmet. (1997). *Reform Within Islam: The Tajdid and Jadid Movement among the Kazan Tatars*. Istanbul: Eren.

Kanlıdere, Ahmet. (2002). “Musa Jarullah Bigiyef: Why Did the Muslim World Decline While the Civilized World Advanced?”. C. Kurzman (ed.), *Modernist Islam 1840-1940: A Source Book*. New York: Oxford University Press, 254-256.

¹² Akhmetova, “Impact of Nationalism,” 626.