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The Muslim “Federalist Debate” in Revolutionary Russia

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Abstract

SUMMARY:

This article examines the debate between Muslim delegates at the First All-Russia Muslim Congress in May 1917 over the form that Muslim autonomy would take in the new Russian state. Could Muslims be citizens of a “Muslim nation” within a unitary Russian state? Or would Muslims be better served by creating their own ethnic republics within a federated Russia? Contention over the form of Muslim self-rule proved the greatest obstacle to Russian Muslims’ goal of a unified political and cultural movement in the early months of the revolution. “Unitarists” and “Federalists” both used the language of citizenship and nationality, but over the course of the eleven-day congress, it became clear that delegates deployed this language in support of radically different projects. Muslims argued over which type of state best promoted freedom and

Elizabeth BOSPFLUG

THE MUSLIM “FEDERALIST DEBATE” IN REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA*

In May 1917, 900 delegates from across the Russian Empire gathered in Moscow for the “First All-Russian Muslim Congress” to create a common political platform for Russia’s 20–30 million Muslims.¹ These 900 men and women – from different social, ethnic, and political backgrounds – voted on declarations concerning women’s rights, the Sunni–Shia split, the problems of land tenure and labor, and Muslim soldiers’ participation in the then-ongoing world war. Yet the most acrimonious debate at the congress concerned the future form of the Russian government. Should Russia be-

* The author acknowledges the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

¹ Russian officials and Muslim leaders gave widely different estimates of the Muslim population of the Russian Empire. The delegates at the May Congress in 1917 quoted the statistic of 30 million – and potentially as many as 40 million – Muslims in Russia, far higher than 1897 census data, which counted 13.9 million Muslims, or 11 percent of the population. The figure of “30 million” compensated for undercounting population growth, and the populations of Bukhara and Khiva, who were not counted in the 1897 census. Of these, the delegates claimed 29 million were Turkic-speaking. Russian officials estimated 20 million Muslims in the empire. For a detailed accounting of the Russian Muslim population in 1917, see Sahwat Iskhakov, *Rossiiskie musul'mane i revoliutsiia, 1917–1918*. Moscow, 2003. Pp. 79–90. Four gatherings had already taken place under the title “All-Russian Muslim Congress” (*Vse-rossijskij musul'manskij s'ezd*) in 1905–1906 and 1914, but the May Congress was the “first” in post-revolutionary Russia and dramatically larger and more representative than its predecessors.



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The Muslim Federalist Debate in Revolutionary Russia, three-component education, despite the fact that on Sunday some metro stations are closed, instantly.

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