

MARSIL N. FARKHSHATOV/ISOGAI

MASUMI: “MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY”

BY ḤASAN ‘AṬĀ’ GABASHĪ IN 1928: Sebastian Cwiklinski
‘ULAMĀ’ AND SOVIET POWER

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In the last decades there was a growing interest in the way people in the Soviet Union coped with the task of reconciling their complex, manyfold and sometimes ‘deviant’ identities with the realities of the Soviet State, and this holds true not only for Soviet studies in general, but for research on Islam in the Soviet Union in particular as well. The lifting of many ideological obstacles and the opening of archives paved the way for researchers uncovering and publishing new, hitherto unknown sources. However, regarding the researchers’ interest there was until recently a remarkable difference between ‘general’ research on the Soviet Union and studies on Islam: while researchers dealing primarily with Russian-language sources were right from the beginning interested in the fate of both intellectuals and ‘ordinary’ people, research on Islam in Soviet times concentrated in the beginning primarily on ‘outstanding’ personalities from the first ranks of the Muslim elites. It was only in the last decade that researchers on Islam in Russia and the Soviet Union slowly began to look at the way ordinary Muslims and those from the second ranks were coping with a life in an a-, if not anti-religious state.

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As Marsil Farkhshatov and Masumi Isogai show in their introduction to the present edition, Ḥasan ‘Aṭā’ Gabashī (1863–1936) belonged to both the religious and the intellectual elite of the Muslims in the Volga-Ural region, before he had to find himself in the second ranks: Having studied at a reform-oriented *madrasā* in Kazan for no less than 17 years, he became *imām*, an acclaimed author of religious and historical works, judge at the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, but at the end of the 1890s he withdrew to his native village of Sulabash in the Province of Kazan, where he continued working as *imām*. Later he returned to responsible posts in the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, and in 1917 he was elected one of the chairmen of the First All-Russian Muslim Congress, before once again withdrawing to his native village. Since the late 1920s Gabashī increasingly had to face hardships because of the Soviet anti-religious and ‘anti-bourgeois’ policies. In 1928, the forced closing of his mosque deprived him totally of his income, and in 1932 he fell victim to dekulakization, being arrested, expropriated and convicted to imprisonment in a labour camp. He was released only shortly before his death in 1936 due to his poor health.

The manuscript presented in facsimile in the present edition, his Tatar-language autobiography from 1928 in a reformed Arabic script, had an interesting, yet not untypical fate for the work of an intellectual facing repression in the time of the Stalinist purges: when Gabashī was arrested in January 1932, his papers were thrown on the street, but rescued by a passer-by and donated to the Nikolay Lobachevsky Scientific Library of Kazan University (now: Kazan Federal University) where they have been kept until today (Zahidullin, 2015, p. 138). Farkhshatov and Isogai are surely right in assuming that Gabashī wrote his autobiography

to present himself in a good light to the Soviet authorities, thus downplaying the religious aspects of his Muslim identity and underlining both his upbringing in a poor peasant family and his reformatory and anti-feudalist views (Farkhshatov & Isogai, 2020, p. xxxviii). While it is not very likely that the present manuscript has ever served the intended purpose (it is not known if, but quite unlikely that the authorities took ever notice of the manuscript in the library), a second manuscript which is preserved in the prosecutor's investigation files of the case against him (kept at the Central State Archive of Historical and Political Documentation of the Republic of Tatarstan, see Farkhshatov & Isogai 2020, p. xxxvii) probably did play a role in the process that led to his conviction.

The researchers rightly underline the fact that Gabashī's autobiography is not unknown to contemporary researchers, it has even been edited in Cyrillic script by Raisa Sharafiyeva (Ğabāši, 2015) and used in the secondary literature by some researchers. For various reasons Sharafiyeva's transcription cannot serve as a substitute to the present edition, even if it has been done meticulously (in a cursory comparison of the original and her transcription we didn't find any mistakes). Firstly, in scientific research it is always better to have the original source at your disposal, and the present edition offers a high-quality facsimile of the whole manuscript. Secondly, following the standards of contemporary Tatar manuscript research, Sharafiyeva has brought the text of Gabashī's autobiography slightly closer to the present-day Tatar literary language, for instance by assimilating the plural suffix *-lär/-lar* to *-när/-nar* after nasal consonants. Even if this is standard in Tatar manuscript research and reflects the actual pronunciation of the suffix in Tatar, its consequence is that the transcription does not entirely correspond to the original. The third reason why the transcription cannot replace the present edition is that it didn't offer page numbers, thus making it impossible to cite the work properly. The present edition should thus be given credit to for making an important autobiographical source of the intellectual history of the Tatars in the 20th century accessible to further research. The edition is completed by a photograph of Gabashī and his wife which the authors discovered at the Center for Written and Musical Heritage of the G. Ibragimov Institute of Language, Literature and Art of the Tatarstan Academy of Sciences (Kazan, henceforth: Center for Written and Musical Heritage).

There are only minor aspects of the present edition that a reader might be critical about. It would have been good, for instance, if the editors had pointed out the fact that Hasan 'Aṭā' Gabashī has written not only two Tatar-, but also a Russian-language autobiography, the manuscript of which is kept in his son's papers at the Center for Written and Musical Heritage and has been studied by Dinara Mardanova (Mardanova 2017), and perhaps the authors might have told the readers how the two Tatar-language versions of the autobiography relate to each other, because they seem to be the first ones to draw attention to the second manuscript. For future research it might be interesting to investigate to which extent the three versions of Gabashī's autobiography are related to each other.

The English translation of the Russian-language introduction might have been done a bit more carefully, because apart from the negligible fact that some formulations could have been a bit more elegant, some of them are misleading. For instance, when writing about the publication of an official institution, the Russian phrase *neofitsial'n[aya] chast'* (p. xxxii) shouldn't have been translated just as 'unofficial pages' (p. xii), but rather as 'the unofficial section' as in the Russian Empire there was a clear division between the official section of such publications, containing official announcements and documents, and the unofficial one, containing articles, statistical and other material. Not entirely wrong, but unusual and

slightly odd is the denomination *Orenburg Muhammadan Ecclesiastical Assembly* for an institution that is widely known as the *Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly* in English-language literature.¹

The admittedly minor problems with the translation and the fact that Dinara Mardanova's research might have been taken into account are by large outweighed by the benefits of the present edition. It makes an important source accessible, which could be studied before only at the Lobachevsky library of Kazan Federal University itself, and in their introduction the editors shed new light on the context in which Ḥasan 'Aṭā' Gabashī wrote his autobiography, citing the work they are editing. We can assume with certainty that Marsil N. Farkhshatov and Masumi Isogai won't be the last ones to make use of their precious edition.

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1. In the translator's favour we have to concede that the proposal in the translation is not entirely unknown in the secondary literature, yet it remains unusual and is misleading as it evokes a Christian context.