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Muslim Soldiers in the Russian Army

By [Franziska Davies](#)

During the First World War, at least half a million Muslim soldiers fought in the Russian Army. In spite of efforts of the Ottoman Empire to mobilize Russia's Muslims against their rulers, Muslim soldiers continued to serve the Tsarist Empire loyally until its downfall in February 1917.

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Muslims' Military Service in the Russian Empire

The majority of Muslim soldiers came from the Volga-Ural region which had been subjugated to Muscovite rule in the 16th century and whose Muslim population had been providing recruits to the regular army since the 18th century. The introduction of universal conscription to military service in 1874 further increased their influx into the military. Still, the majority of the [Russian Empire's](#) culturally and ethnically diverse Muslim population remained exempt from conscription even after 1874 and only small numbers served in separate "ethnic units." This included the Muslim peoples of Central Asia, the Northern and Southern Caucasus, and the Crimea. The reasons for their exemption varied: in the case of the Crimean Tatars, administrators feared that subjugating them to military service would precipitate another mass exodus to the [Ottoman Empire](#); in the case of the Muslims of the Caucasus, the [government](#) remained unsure about their allegiance to Russia in spite of the military's fascination with their military potential, especially the mountaineers; in Central Asia, the state's weak administrative penetration of the region and the allegedly low combat abilities as well as

questionable loyalties of the local population impeded their recruitment for several decades.

During the First World War, several Muslim units were formed, with the so-called “wild division” (*dikaia diviziia*) from the Caucasus gaining a reputation for both its ruthlessness and its courage in Russia and abroad. In the summer of 1916, Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia (1868-1918) decreed that the male population of Central Asia should be drafted into labor battalions behind the front lines, which led to a massive uprising in the region. The vast majority of Muslims served as rank-and-file soldiers. On the eve of the First World War, there were only around 300 Muslim officers in the Russian Army, ten of whom had reached the rank of general. The majority of these officers came from the local elite in their respective communities and had risen to the upper echelons of the military hierarchy as a result of St. Petersburg’s policies of highly selective social integration in the empire’s Muslim peripheries.

Russian Imperial Policies toward Muslim Soldiers

During the First World War, the military was generally optimistic about the loyalty of Muslim soldiers. This did not change after the Ottoman Empire entered the war and the sultan declared a “holy war” against the allied forces and called upon the Muslim subjects of the Russian, British, and French empires to rise against their governments. Already before the outbreak of the war, the Russian war ministry had created nine official posts for Muslim military chaplains and between 1914 and 1917 this number increased to over forty positions. From the point of view of both Muslim soldiers and the Muslim public in the Volga-Ural region, the number of Muslim chaplains remained far from sufficient. The installment of military chaplains was the government’s only proactive policy toward Muslims in the army. Accordingly, Muslim soldiers voiced their dissatisfaction with the lack of specific arrangements at the front for burial rites and diet. As among other ethnic groups, Muslim civic organizations, especially from the Volga-Ural region, assumed functions the state was unable or unwilling to fulfill such as the establishment of a network of charities dedicated to helping wounded soldiers and their families.

Muslim Responses to the War

Early in 1915 Muslim politicians emphasized the contribution of Muslim soldiers to the war effort and the Muslim population’s loyalty to Russia. The Muslim press in the Volga-Ural region pointed to the contribution of their peers and reported on Muslims who had been decorated for their service or who had perished at the front. Over the course of the war, Muslim politicians and intellectuals grew more critical of the government, which they accused of still disadvantaging Muslims in comparison to Russian-Orthodox subjects in spite of the fact that they were serving at the front on equal footing. Muslim soldiers from the Volga-Ural region sometimes voiced discontent with the imperial government and generally interpreted the call to arms as a personal tragedy rather than a patriotic endeavor. Nonetheless, they continued to serve loyally. The politicization of some soldiers during their time in the army only became clear in February 1917, when they emerged as a vocal and

organized group in the wake of the [Russian revolution](#). Like their Russian counterparts, Volga-Ural Muslims formed soldiers' councils and voiced specific political demands. Central to their agenda was the reorganization of the army to allow Muslims to form their own units, which the [Provisional Government](#) generally supported.

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