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ISMAIL GASPIRALI'S EDUCATIONAL LEGACY IN TURKESTAN IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the comprehensive and innovative impacts of the Usul-i Jadid (New Method) movement, led by Ismail Gaspirali, against the backdrop of increasing pressure from the Russian Empire and internal backwardness among Turkic peoples in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Gaspirali's principle, "Unity in Language, Thought, and Action" (Dilde, fikirde, işte birlik), is analyzed as a strategy for existence and development for Turkic and Muslim communities. Gaspirali initiated a fundamental educational reform by establishing "Usul-i Jadid Schools," which offered modern science and practical knowledge as an alternative to the defunct traditional madrasa system. These schools aimed to foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills in students, demonstrating a vision ahead of its time, particularly in his emphasis on the education of girls. His unique approach, viewing education not merely as individual development but as the foundation for national consciousness and social development, distinguished him from other modernization efforts of the era. Language unity was a vital pillar of Gaspirali's unifying vision. He pursued the creation of a plain, common written language to bridge the gap between different Turkic dialects through his newspaper "Tercüman" (The Translator), founded in 1883, and his children's magazine "Alem-i Sıbyan" (The World of Children). These publications spearheaded the dissemination of a common literary language and contemporary ideas across the Turkic world, playing a decisive role in the formation of a national identity. The Jadidism movement rapidly spread to Turkestan, evolving beyond education and language to become a broad-based national development initiative encompassing socio-political and economic goals, such as liberating from feudal mentality, forming modern state structures, and building a national economy. The article emphasizes that all of Gaspirali's endeavors took place during a challenging period marked by escalating political, economic, and cultural pressure from the Russian Empire on Turkic Muslims, with Central Asia becoming the focal point of geopolitical competition. Gaspirali's unique solutions, which synthesized elements of Eastern and Western civilizations, provided a path for modernization while preserving Turkic identity and developing an

intellectual defense against external pressures. His enduring legacy remains a guiding light for the Turkic world today, a powerful and lasting testament that cultural independence and progress are only possible through comprehensive education, a common language, and a conscious strategy against constant geopolitical challenges.

KEYWORDS: Ismail Gaspirali, Education Reform, Turkestan, Jadidism, Language Unity, National Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The late 19th and early 20th centuries mark a critical period in the historical trajectory of the Turkic world, characterized not only by internal quests for reform and awakening but also by intense external political, cultural, and economic pressures—a veritable "struggle for existence." The comprehensive modernization drives initiated by Peter I, following the political unification of the Russian Tsardom under Ivan IV, continued unabated during the reign of Catherine II. This expansionist process brought about efforts to enlarge Russia's sphere of influence and exert strict control over the scattered Muslim populations within its borders. The ideological and methodological foundations of these control efforts were shaped by the policies of figures such as Nikolay Ivanovich Ilminskiy. Ilminskiy advocated for the use of the Cyrillic alphabet among Turkic peoples and the elimination of Arabic and Persian elements from their languages to sever their ties with the Islamic world. Under this system, communities that had not yet established a unified literary language were fragmented into artificial dialects and vernaculars, with Russian imposed as an inevitable supra-language through educational institutions and press organs (Aydoğan & Korkmaz, 2025).

Indeed, the educational policy of Tsarist Russia during this period was framed not merely as an enlightenment effort but as a systematic project of assimilation. The words of the Minister of Education of the period, D.A. Tolstoy, in 1870—stating that 'the ultimate goal of Russo-native schools is to indisputably Russify and unite all other nations living on Russian soil with the Russian nation'—clearly demonstrate that the ultimate objective of this policy was cultural destruction. This admission contextualizes why intellectuals like Gaspirali embarked on urgent and radical reforms in the face of the danger of being obliterated as a "nation" (Murzakhodzhaev, 2025). However, Ilminskiy's recommendations could not be fully implemented in the field; on the contrary, this coercive threat of assimilation triggered a national awakening by creating a backlash (*aksülamel*) among Turkic peoples. In this context, Jadidism emerged on the historical stage as an organized movement of defense and civilizational revival against Ilminskiy's divisive maneuvers (Sarı, 2023).

In this arduous geopolitical and socio-cultural environment, Ismail Gaspirali (1851-1914) undoubtedly became one of the most significant and visionary figures seeking rational, practical, and sustainable solutions to the deep-seated problem of backwardness, aiming to internalize the progress of

Western civilization. His motto, "Unity in language, thought, and action," served not only as a slogan but as a comprehensive roadmap and philosophy of life. It advocated for balancing the political, economic, and cultural pressure of Russia on Muslims and uniting Turkic communities around a common consciousness and identity by overcoming internal fragmentation (Erkan, 2019). Gaspirali was convinced that the key to achieving this strategic goal and elevating Turkic communities to the advanced level of Western civilization lay in comprehensive educational and linguistic reforms that would ensure the radical transformation of the existing social structure. Indeed, Gaspirali established the intellectual infrastructure of these reforms at the very beginning of his journey in his 1881 treatise *Russkoe Musulmanstvo*. In this work, he emphasized that to prevent the alienation of Russian Muslims in their own homeland, the 'elimination of ignorance' was paramount. For him, education was the only way to transform the Muslim subjects from a passive mass into a modern, self-confident society with a voice within the empire (Gaspinskiy, 1881).

This article examines the central and transformative role of the Jadidism movement, launched under the leadership of Ismail Gaspirali, in the process of Turkic modernization, the details of his modern understanding of education, and the strategic importance of his linguistic unification efforts. Furthermore, it delves into the expansion of these initiatives in the Turkestan region—a constant area of geopolitical competition known as the 'heart of Eurasia' (Sahin, 2023)—their development under the fluctuating Islamic policies of Tsarist Russia (Somuncuoğlu, 2014), and their enduring legacy across the Turkic world. Gaspirali's broad vision, which encompassed not only cultural but also socio-political and economic goals, was essentially a comprehensive renewal project that began in Crimea and influenced the entire region. The fundamental aim of this movement was to enable Russian Muslims to compete with Russians in every field, to instill a national consciousness in society, and ultimately to unite all Turkic peoples under a cultural and political umbrella (Kutushova, 2017).

2. DATA AND RESEARCH METHODS

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research is constructed upon a qualitative research design aimed at analyzing the central role of Ismail Gaspirali in the Turkic modernization process and the macro-geopolitical implications of the Jadidism movement. In the interpretation of historical data, descriptive analysis and comparative

synthesis methods have been adopted, examining Gaspirali's biography, educational reforms, and publishing activities alongside their socio-political reflections within the Turkestan and Crimea axes.

2.1. Theoretical Framework and Primary Source Analysis

In establishing the theoretical and methodological foundation of the study, Ismail Gaspirali's seminal 1881 work, published in Simferopol, "Russkoe Musulmanstvo: Mysli, Zametki i Nablyudeniya Musulmanina" (Russian Muslimness: Thoughts, Notes, and Observations of a Muslim), has been designated as the primary source. Within the framework of qualitative analysis, this text has been examined in depth regarding the necessity of modernization for Russian Muslims, the New Method (Usul-i Jadid) educational model, and strategies for cultural integration. The historical data and original observations presented by Gaspirali in this work constitute the fundamental evidence for validating the "social transformation through education" analyses championed in this article. Thus, it has been methodologically substantiated that Gaspirali's ideas were not merely theoretical constructs but a holistic defense doctrine grounded in the socio-political realities of the period.

2.2. Data Collection and Source Diversity

To ensure the historical consistency and argumentative depth of the study, a comprehensive review of secondary sources was conducted alongside primary materials. At this juncture, Nadir Devlet's biographical study, "Ismail Bey (Gasprinsky)" (1988), was utilized as a pivotal reference point to verify the chronological development of Gaspirali's lifelong activities and their impact on the Turks of Russia. Devlet's work provided an analytical dataset supporting the research findings by presenting educational reforms and political strategies from a broad perspective. Additionally, current academic literature was reviewed to incorporate variables such as the assimilation policies of Tsarist Russia, the Ilminski system, and Turkestan's position within the geopolitical arena of the "Great Game" into the data pool.

2.3. Analysis and Synthesis Process

The collected data were classified using a thematic approach and grouped under subheadings such as pedagogical formation in education, linguistic unity, and the construction of national identity. During the analysis phase, causal relationships were established

between the data, and the thesis that Gaspirali's initiatives constituted a "struggle for survival" against the interventionist policies of Tsarist Russia was assembled within a synthetic framework. This methodology allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of Gaspirali's multi-dimensional legacy and his contribution to the Turkic modernization process within its historical context.

3. RESULTS

As a result of the detailed literature review conducted for this research, the following primary findings regarding the central role of Ismail Gaspirali and the Jadidism movement in the modernization process of the Turkic world have been reached:

3.1. The Dysfunctionality Of Traditional Education And The Rise Of Usul-İ Jadid:

- In the late 19th century, the fact that Turkic and Muslim communities remained "behind the times" in the fields of education and culture was identified as a fundamental problem (İme, 2022).
- Gaspirali emphasized that the existing madrasa education was based on rote memorization, detached from life, and incompatible with modern scientific developments; thus, it had "completely lost its function." This diagnosis formed the basis of his reformist approach.
- As a solution, Gaspirali established "New Method (Usul-i Jadid) Schools," incorporating modern sciences (physics, chemistry, mathematics, geography, history) and practical knowledge into the curriculum (Koncak, 2013;İme, 2022). These schools aimed not only for students to memorize information but also to develop critical thinking, comprehension, analysis, and problem-solving skills.
- The most striking data proving the pedagogical success of the system is the radical reduction in the duration of education; while it took 10-12 years to train a student in the old-style schools, this period was reduced to 3-4 years thanks to the program designed in accordance with the nature and age of children. Furthermore, these schools were not limited to basic literacy; through simple and graded textbooks prepared in the 'Turkestan dialect,' they instilled a socio-political consciousness in students at an early age (Bahritdinovna & Salahitdinovna, 2025).
- Gaspirali's educational vision prioritized social development and was inclusive of all segments of society, regardless of gender. In particular, the importance he attached to the education of

girls and his advocacy for the opening of girls' schools are recorded as extremely progressive and revolutionary steps for the period.

- Gaspirali believed that education formed the foundation not only for individual development but also for a strong national consciousness, cultural renewal, and social progress. Indeed, it has been stated that in a period when most modernization efforts neglected education, Gaspirali was a significant intellectual who "grasped the anxieties regarding the era" and "expressed" these anxieties most strongly within the context of education (Ergunes, 2014).
- Although Jadidism encountered significant backlash and opposition from certain conservative segments of society, namely the Traditionalists (Qadimids), Gaspirali determinedly continued his educational reforms (Güngör, 2008)..

3.2. *The Unifying Power Of Language Unity And Publishing:*

- -Gaspirali identified that the fragmentation between different dialects in the Turkic world prevented the formation of a common national consciousness. This situation parallels the identified lack of cultural affinity in the contemporary Turkic world (Selçuk, & Özçelik, 2020).
- -Directly opposing Gaspirali's ideal of "unity in language" was the strategy of the Russian missionary N.I. Ilminskiy to fragment Turkic peoples by dividing them into artificial dialects. Ilminskiy aimed to sever the ties of Turkic communities with each other and the Islamic world by advocating for the use of daily vernaculars instead of a literary language in education and their transcription into the Cyrillic alphabet (Murzakhodzhayev, 2025).
- -Consequently, Gaspirali adopted the principle of "unity in language, thought, and action" and worked towards the creation of a simple and standardized literary language that all Turkic communities could easily understand.
- -The newspaper *Tercüman* (The Interpreter), which he began publishing in Bakhchysarai, Crimea, in 1883, reached all corners of the Turkic world, contributing to the spread of a common literary language, increasing cultural interaction, and the deep dissemination of modernization ideas. The newspaper's simple and intelligible style allowed readers to easily grasp complex ideas and ensured that the

Jadidism movement spread as a significant reflection of the Western Enlightenment philosophy in the Islamic world.

- -Publishing activities were not limited to adults; the first Turkish children's magazine in Russia, *Alem-i Sibyan* (World of Children), published as a supplement to *Tercüman* between 1906 and 1915, was read in many Turkic cities beyond Crimea. Alongside contemporary and scientific information, the magazine consistently addressed "Turkish consciousness, Turkic awareness, and the new education (Usul-i Jadid) approach," reflecting Gaspirali's vision of transferring the ideal of linguistic unity to future generations (Karahan, 2020).

3.3. *The Spread Of Jadidism In Turkestan And Its Comprehensive Goals:*

- Influenced by Gaspirali's reforms in Crimea, the Jadidism movement rapidly spread to Turkestan, emerging as a national development movement encompassing all aspects of social life in the early 20th century. The spark ignited by Gaspirali in Crimea turned into an institutional wildfire in the Turkestan geography through the hands of local revolutionaries such as Mahmoud Khoja Behbudi and Munawwar Qari. The surge in the number of New Method (Usul-i Jadid) schools in the region from approximately 100 to 5,000 between 1903 and 1916 is the most concrete evidence of the movement's socio-political acceptance in Turkestan. This process was not merely a pedagogical success; it served as the intellectual laboratory for the Turkestan-based political structures established after 1917 and the nation-building processes of today's independent Central Asian states (Abdirashidov, 2021). Gaspirali's pedagogical revolution transcended a mere intellectual awakening to become an institutional breakthrough. Consequently, a significant increase in the number of and interest in Usul-i Jadid schools occurred between 1904 and 1916 (Buriyev, 2025).
- Through the roles of pivotal figures like Mahmoud Khoja Behbudi, the fundamental goals of Jadidism in Turkestan were not limited to educational and linguistic reforms. The movement embraced profound socio-political and economic objectives, such as "purging feudal loyalty and ancient superstitions," "ensuring the adaptation of the country and its people to the modern age," "establishing a state

consisting of a national assembly and deputies," ensuring the adoption of a national currency, and creating policies for the liberation and enrichment of society by state leaders (Kaya & Kushmuratov 2020).

- The pioneers of Jadidism also played active roles in the political activities that emerged after the 1905 Russian Revolution, indicating that the movement acquired an increasingly distinct

political dimension over time.

Ismail Gaspirali was a thinker and reformer known for his significant contributions to the modernization efforts of Russian Muslims. He particularly stood out for his pioneering reforms in the fields of education and culture. The fundamental principles of his reformist approach can be examined in detail in Table-1 presented below. This table clearly outlines the principles that constitute the essence of Gaspirali's educational philosophy.

Table 1: Fundamental Principles of Gaspirali's Education Reform.

Principle No	Fundamental Principles of Education Reform	Explanation
1	Separation of School and Madrasa	The necessity of distinguishing between traditional madrasa education and modern school education was emphasized. This aimed for both types of education to better serve their specific objectives.
2	Specially Trained Teachers	It was advocated that teachers for primary schools should be specially trained, possess pedagogical formation, and have professional competence. This was considered the fundamental condition for enhancing the quality of education.
3	Regular Teacher Salary	It was stated that teachers' livelihoods should be secured by a regular salary from the state, rather than being dependent on aids like "charity." This would increase teacher motivation and allow them to focus more on their profession.
4	Phonics-Based Literacy Instruction	Modern methods like "phonics-based reading" or "extended reading" from new alphabet books were suggested instead of the traditional and inefficient "spelling out" method for literacy instruction. This aimed to make the learning process easier and more effective.
5	Emphasis on Writing Instruction	It was stressed that the development of writing skills, in addition to reading comprehension, should hold a significant place in education. This was deemed critical for individuals to express themselves better and facilitate their access to information.
6	Separate Schools and Writing Instruction for Girls	The opening of separate primary schools for girls and teaching them writing skills alongside literacy was advocated. This was seen as a crucial step for strengthening the role of women in social life and ensuring equality of opportunity in education.
7	Programmed Instruction and Age-Appropriate Textbooks	It was stated that instruction should be conducted within a specific curriculum framework, utilizing textbooks prepared according to the needs of each age group. This would ensure that education was managed in a more systematic and efficient manner.

3.4. The Socio-Political Function of Education: Building a New Intellectual Class

Ismail Gaspirali's vision of education was a strategic move designed to overcome the problem of ignorance and backwardness into which Turkic-Muslim societies had fallen. Usul-i Jadid schools were not merely institutions providing basic literacy; they were the primary tools for building a new intellectual class equipped to handle social problems

and compete with Western civilization. In line with this vision, education served the following strategic goals:

Competitive Identity and Intellectual Awakening: By creating a new intellectual cadre with a strong sense of civilizational consciousness, Gaspirali prepared the ground for a movement capable of competing both with the Tsarist Russian administration and the Western world on political and cultural levels.

Economic and Technical Transformation: Jadid schools were not limited to theoretical knowledge; they aimed for Turkic societies to adapt to contemporary economic developments and increase their production capacity by utilizing the technical accumulation of the West.

Cultural Preservation and National Memory: These institutions functioned as cultural fortresses that protected the Turkic language and culture against Russian missionary activities and assimilation pressures, thereby developing social identity.

Holistic and Trans-border Unification: The primary political output of education was to bring the entire Turkic world-"from the fisherman in the Bosphorus to the camel driver in Kashgar"-together under a common literary language and civilizational ideal, making intellectual and practical cooperation permanent

4. DISCUSSION

The findings obtained illuminate in depth the multifaceted and strategic response provided by Ismail Gaspirali and the Jadidism movement to the Turkic world's struggle for existence under the geopolitical and socio-cultural conditions of the period. Far from being merely theoretical ideas, Gaspirali's reforms functioned as a practical resistance mechanism developed against the increasing political, economic, and cultural pressures of the Russian Empire. The strategic importance of Central Asia, serving historically as the center of the "Great Game" between Britain and Russia, further reinforced the urgency of Gaspirali's reforms and their critical role in national awakening. The fact that Turkestan remained under Tsarist Russian hegemony until 1917 necessitates treating Jadidism as a struggle for survival and identity preservation in the face of Russia's interventionist policies.

Gaspirali's adoption of the New Method (Usul-i Jadid) educational system represented far more than a simple quest for pedagogical renewal in the face of the inadequacies of traditional madrasas. While the Tsarist administration aimed for systematic cultural assimilation by imposing the paradigm of 'Russian cultural superiority' on the region's youth through Russo-native mixed schools (Russko-tuzemnaya shkola) (Zhakyp et al., 2024), Gaspirali resisted this mental siege. He strove to unite Turkic and Muslim communities with the scientific and technological progress achieved by the West-while preserving their own unique identities. His vision of "evaluating knowledge, reproducing it, and creating a new world with this produced knowledge" reveals his

enlightened and constructive character. Especially in a period when many of his contemporaries relegated education to the background in their modernization efforts,

Gaspirali's emphasis on education proves the uniqueness and strategic depth of his vision. Furthermore, the importance he attached to the education of girls reinforces the belief that social transformation must not be limited to men but must rise on an egalitarian basis encompassing all layers of society. This determination, despite the opposition of the Traditionalists (Qadimids), demonstrates how radical and transformative Gaspirali's reforms truly were. The sharpest front of this radical stance was the intellectual barricade built against the assimilationist policies of Nikolay Ilminski, the educational ideologue of the Russian Empire. While the Ilminski system aimed to isolate Turkic peoples from their historical roots by imprisoning them in artificial dialects and imposing the Cyrillic alphabet as a tool of severance, Gaspirali succeeded in breaking this atomization strategy by transforming it into an intellectual defense doctrine through the ideal of an "Istanbul-centered common literary language" elevated via Tercüman (Yücebaş, 2020).

The motto "Unity in language, thought, and action" and the publication of the Tercüman newspaper were at the center of Gaspirali's strategy to overcome fragmentation in the Turkic world and build a common national identity. By reaching wide audiences with its simple and intelligible language, Tercüman did not merely disseminate information; it also prepared the ground for the formation of a common literary language by building a cultural bridge between Turks in different geographies (Devlet, 1988). Contemporary assessments regarding the lack of cultural affinity among Turkic dialects (Kılıçaslan, 2023) reveal how far-sighted Gaspirali's linguistic unity efforts were and how they remain a valid objective even today (Paksoy, 2022). Publications aimed at children, such as *Alem-i Sibyan*, are concrete indicators of his strategic move to construct national and modern consciousness from the ground up-starting with new generations. This shows that Gaspirali did not only produce short-term solutions but carried out a long-term and sustainable national-building project (Kırimer, 2021).

The spread of Jadidism in Turkestan as a "national development movement encompassing all aspects of social life" proves that the movement was not limited to education and language; it also included large-scale socio-political goals such as purging feudal remnants, creating a modern state structure,

achieving economic independence, and ensuring social welfare. The active participation of Jadidists in political activities following the 1905 Russian Revolution indicates that this movement was not just a cultural reform but also sought direct political change. This situation demonstrates that under the challenging conditions of their time, Gaspirali and the Jadidists adopted a holistic approach against both internal problems and external pressures, blending cultural resistance with political awakening. The shifting Islamic policies of the Russian Empire also prove that Jadidism was an effective social force that even Russian administrators had to monitor closely and position themselves against. With his wealth of knowledge familiar with both the East and the West, the "original and holistic solutions" offered by Gaspirali are the clearest expression of his synthetic and constructive intellectual stance against complex problems. This synthesis became the strongest proof that Turkic communities could modernize while preserving their own unique identities (Tekindag, 2006).

5. CONCLUSION

Ismail Gaspirali served as a critical bridge in the modernization process of the Turkic world, putting forward a unique and far-sighted model of contemporary advancement by blending the accumulations of both East and West. The educational reforms he initiated through the Jadidism movement did not stop at teaching basic literacy; they aimed for a transformation of mindset that encouraged students to think scientifically and analytically. These reforms ensured a profound awakening across society based on the necessity of "changing and developing the educational system and educating the public on this matter." Particularly in an era when other modernization efforts neglected education, Gaspirali's "prioritized" focus on schooling and his "unparalleled" efforts in this field stand out as fundamental characteristics that distinguish him from his contemporaries. Through the New Method (Usul-i Jadid) schools, which he substituted for the dysfunctional madrasas, Gaspirali aimed not only for the transfer of information but for the reproduction of knowledge, thereby "creating a new world."

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His resolute efforts for the dissemination of a simplified common language and the progressive ideas he spread through pioneering publications such as the *Tercüman* newspaper and *Alem-i Sibyan* strengthened the national consciousness of Turkic peoples and led their cultural and intellectual awakening. The widespread resonance of *Tercüman* across the Turkic world and the instilling of Turkish and Turkic awareness in children through *Alem-i Sibyan* are concrete evidence of Gaspirali's strategy to make the ideal of linguistic unity sustainable across generations. The expansion of the Jadidism movement in Turkestan and the role of figures like Mahmoud Khoja Behbudi demonstrate that this movement was not limited to education alone; it was a "national development movement encompassing all aspects of social life," aimed at purging feudal mindsets, establishing modern state institutions, and fostering socio-economic development.

Through his educational activities, characterized as intellectual hubs, Gaspirali enabled Turkic societies to look toward the future with confidence. Despite the political and cultural pressures exerted by the Russian Empire and the difficulties Muslims faced in forming a national consciousness due to local or tribal affiliations, his unifying vision served as a vital anchor. This vision succeeded in preserving national identity as a "cultural gene" through literature and art, despite the physical liquidations carried out in the 1930s under Stalin's accusations of "Pan-Turkism." Today, the transition processes to the Latin alphabet in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, along with the common cooperation models institutionalized within the Organization of Turkic States, prove that Gaspirali's ideal of "Unity in language, thought, and action" has transformed into operational codes in 21st-century geopolitics (Sarı, 2023).

In conclusion, Ismail Gaspirali was not merely an educator or a reformer; he was a great thinker who guided the awakening of the Turkic world and "created a new world by reproducing knowledge." His legacy stands as time-defying proof that cultural independence is only possible through comprehensive education, common linguistic unity, and a conscious strategy against persistent geopolitical challenges.

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