The present article is devoted to one of the brightest pages in the history of Russian-Arabic cultural ties. For a number of reasons neither Russian nor foreign researchers have studied this subject specifically until very recently. We will focus our attention on the correspondence between two outstanding figures of Egypt and Russia—the Grand mufti of Egypt Muhammad ‘Abdü and the great Russian writer Leo Tolstói.

By the beginning of the 20th century L. Tolstói had indeed become famous all over the world including the Arab countries [1]. As we will find out a bit later, by the time of initiating the correspondence Muḥammad ‘Abdü had been already familiar with literary work and social activity of the Russian writer due to the intermediary efforts of western visitors in Iusnu Poliana. When answering back, L. Tolstói had also possessed considerable knowledge about the Egypt’s Grand mufti Muhammad ‘Abdü, his state and social activity as well as his input into the Egyptian culture and the Muslim Orient in general.

Thus, the ground for this contact was well prepared and the first messages were successfully exchanged. It would be wrong to underestimate the significance of this correspondence in the history of cultural ties between Russia and Egypt.

Before discussing the correspondence per se it seems reasonable to give a brief description to the personality of Egyptian correspondent of L. N. Tolstói.

Life as well as creative, state and public activity of Muḥammad ‘Abdü (1849—1905) has received considerable attention of the researchers. He left his mark as one of the most influential ideologists of Muslim modernism. The scholars point out that in many aspects his teaching was based on the works of well-known medieval theologians Ibn Taymîyya (1263—1328 / 661—728), Ibn Qayyîm al-Jawziyya (1292—1350/691—751), etc. and developed the ideas of Jamāl al-Dîn al-Âfghānî (1839—1897), who was his teacher and senior companion in the fight for Islamic reformation.

The ideas brought forward by Muḥammad ‘Abdü encountered adverse criticism in orthodox and conservative circles. From 1883 till 1888 he led active political life in exile in Paris. When political environment in Egypt changed, Muḥammad ‘Abdü came back there in 1888 to become an influential statesman. Beginning with 1899 till his death he was the Grand mufti of Egypt [2].

Let us consider the correspondence between Muḥammad ‘Abdü and L. Tolstói per se. Until very recently it has existed in two non-overlapping fields and in two different forms. One of them was known to the Russian readers who were familiar with L. Tolstói’s answer but didn’t have access to the letter of Egyptian theologian that was considered lost. The other was known only to the Arabic readers who learned about the letter of Muḥammad ‘Abdü to L. Tolstói from an inaccurate copy and who didn’t know the answer of the Russian writer as far as we can judge. In the light of the abovementioned it makes sense to examine the history of correspondence in more detail.

First of all let us mention the facts that were known to the Russian reader and the scholars of L. Tolstói’s creative work. On May 12, 1904 L. Tolstói sent a letter to an English art historian and writer Sidney Cockrell (1867—1961) where he stated the following:

Now I have received the mufti’s letter and am very obliged to you for forwarding it to me. The mufti’s letter is so orientally laudatory that I find it [is] difficult to answer it. But I will try to do it and am very glad to communicate with such an interesting personality [3].

Leo Tolstói wrote the answer to Muḥammad ‘Abdü the very next day, on May 13.

Cher ami!

J’ai reçu votre bonne et trop louangeuse lettre et je m’empresse d’y répondre en vous assurant du grand plaisir qu’elle m’a procurée en me mettant en communication avec un homme éclairé quoique d’une autre croyance, que celle dans laquelle je suis né et fus élevé, mais de la même re-