



## **Individual Advanced Research Opportunities (IARO) Program**

### **Research Report**

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Russia**

#### **Mullahs, Intellectuals, Politicians and the Struggle for Authority in Early Twentieth-Century Volga-Ural Muslim Society**

The activities and conflicts of Volga-Ural Muslim elites in late imperial Russia; ways in which the subjects and strategies of these conflicts and the outlook of the elites themselves changed with the changing political circumstances in Russia from 1905 to 1920; Specifically, it examines 1) the evolution of narratives of community history; 2) the debate over the essential traits of the community; 3) the community's place (and the place of its individual members) within the empire and the ideal relationship between the community and the state.

#### **Relevance and contribution to field**

My research examines the development community identity among what eventually became the Tatar and Bashkir nations as well as the dynamic relationship between the Russian imperial government and its Muslim minorities. Besides re-examining these issues within the context of a variety Americana and European theoretical literature on nationalism, Islam, and colonialism, my research has brought me into contact with a large number of relevant Tatar-Turki and Arabic-language sources – histories, newspapers, memoirs, diaries, letters, and manuscripts – that, to date, have not been examined in the existing western scholarship on the Muslims of the Russian Empire. Also, in contrast with several recent works Russia's Muslims, which focus more on the Russian-official side of the relationship between the state and the Volga-Ural Muslims, this research has focused on the discourses within the Muslim community.

In relation to policy relevance, Russia was and remains a multi-ethnic state. This research adds to our basic knowledge of the history of the Russian government's relationship with its non-Russian populations, and in particular, with its Muslims. The administrative boundaries (ie Tatarstan and Bashkortstan) established in the Volga-Ural region in 1920 remain in effect to day. Likewise, many of the figures, events, and institutions examined in my work have gained new relevance in the post-Soviet period as Tatar and Bashkir leaders and scholars attempt to re-configure the official past to fit modern Russia's political possibilities and limitations.

At a broader level, my research focuses upon the problems of relationships between the central government and its ethnic-religious minorities in a situation in which the former is divided from the latter by language and culture. It also examines the role of religion, language, political-administrative institutions and socio-economic factors in the forging of community identity, the development of competing identities within a single community, and the ways in which minority groups interact with, debate and subvert officially-sanctioned stereotypes.

## **A concise summary of approach and research methodology including a list of research sites**

As my dissertation topic concerns the discourses within the Volga-Ural Muslim community, my research focused mainly upon published and unpublished sources in the Tatar language, though I also made use of Russian sources, particularly from the Kazan governor, the gendarme, the courts, the zemstvos and the department of police for pinpointing moments at which the state became entangled in these internal conflicts and for comparing the terms Muslim elites used in communication with the state with those they employed among themselves. These sources were also used to examine when and how elites invoked various branches of the Russian administration to resolve their conflicts. In examining the dialogues over community identity among Muslim elites themselves, I examined various Tatar-language newspapers and journals, biographical dictionaries, and letters and memoirs of various intellectuals, clergy and community leaders. Finally, in exploring the problems of transmission of new narratives of history from the elites to the masses as well as the evolution of popular concepts of identity and empire school curriculum schedules, textbooks and student notebooks, poetry, songbooks, novellas, tracts on Islamic law, and popular religious literature.

### Research sites in Kazan:

1. National Archive of the Republic of Tatarstan (NART)
2. Central State Archive Political-Historical Documentation of the Republic of Tatarstan (TsGA IPD RT)
3. Archive of the Institute of Languages, Literature and Art of the Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Academy of Sciences (IYALI ANT)
4. Kazan State University Academic Library (in the name of Lobachevsky)
5. The National Library of the Republic of Tatarstan

### Research sites in Ufa

1. Central State Archive of the Republic of Bashkortostan (TsGA RB)

2. Archive of the Ufa Academic Center -- Russian Academy of Sciences (UNTs RAN)
3. National Library of Bashkortostan (in the name of Zeki Validi)
4. Library of the Ufa Academy Center – Russian Academy of Science

Research sites in Helsinki:

10. National Library of Finland

### **A summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions**

When I applied for funding to conduct research for my dissertation, I had planned to examine the struggle for local authority among the Muslim elites of the Volga-Ural region as a driving force behind the debates over community, Islam, and education in the early twentieth century. I planned to focus, in particular on various leaders' understanding of the origins of power in the Russian imperial context and the ways in which this understanding influenced the strategies they used to gain control over the fate of their society.

This topic continues to be an important factor in my research. However, as I worked with the primary source material, I found myself drawn away from the question of strategies for realizing authority and specific visions of community – in many cases, the same kinds of strategies were used by individuals and factions with very different goals – and toward the visions themselves and developments that created the framework in which the struggles themselves were carried out. The basic narrative of my dissertation expanded from a story of elite conflict, to one of the development, differentiation and ultimate fate of competing models of minority community identity in multi-ethnic empire.

### **1. The role of ethnography and inorodtsy education**

In my initial proposal I raised the question of the impact of the encounters between local 'ulama and Russian pedagogues, scholars and missionaries from the 1860s onward. I proposed that cooperation between members of these two

groups in fields of non-Russian education and ethnographic, linguistic and historical research exposed Muslim elites in the Volga-Ural region elements of European and Russian scholarship, philosophy and political outlook to an extent that was unparalleled in Turkistan, the Kazakh steppe or, for that matter, many other parts of the Islamic world, and, in the process, provided the basic underpinnings for new concepts about the role of language, culture and history in community identity among the Volga-Ural Muslims.

The primary sources I encountered in Kazan and Ufa verified this hypothesis, but also added to it new elements. Such sources as the letters between Sh. Marjani and Kh. Faizkhanov and R. Fakhreddinov's analysis of Marjani as a historian revealed the ways in which new concepts of history and scholarship were adopted, digested and transmitted among the Muslim elites. Also, the sources such as K. Nasiyri's recollections of his efforts to start Russian classes for Muslims and M. Umetbaev's translations of then newly-published Russian works on the history of Orenburg guberniia, revealed the importance of the late-nineteenth century Russian-Muslim contacts in creating, on one hand, a framework and funding source for the teaching of Russian language among the Turkic-speaking population, and, on the other, a small, but active group of Muslim clerics and service elites interested in translating Russian-language literature and scholarly work into Tatar, thereby making this work accessible to their co-religionists.

Overall from my reading of the works of the pre-1905 Volga-Ural Muslim clergy and intelligentsia, I concluded that the discourses over community, Russian-language, education reform, and the general influence of western philosophy were all present well before 1905 and well-enough disseminated that the Muslims of Kazan guberniia (and Russia proper in general) were able to respond more rapidly and in more diverse ways to the changes brought by the 1905 Revolution than did the Muslim populations in the Kazakh steppe and Turkistan.

## **2. Liberalism, Socialism and Traditionalism**

The historiography of the Tatar-Bashkir-Muslim intellectual movements from 1905 to February 1917 has been plagued by the problem of the political affiliations the Muslim elites themselves. While Soviet historians emphasized these intellectuals' ties to the Bolshevik party, Cold War-era western scholarship highlighted the relationship between Muslim elites at the liberal Kadet party. Post-Soviet studies, both in Russia and abroad have also stressed the liberal politics and strategies of Muslim community leaders.

What I have found in my research over the past eight months has suggested a different model. While there were perhaps few genuine Bolsheviks (that is to say, members of the Russian Social Democratic Party-Bolshevik), there were certainly socialist-leaning intellectuals and clergy within Volga-Ural Muslim society. Several of the intellectuals of the generation born in the late 1870s and early 1880s, and many of those born in the 1890s affiliated themselves with the Socialist Revolutionary party or with some branch of the Social Democratic Party. Others flirted with a variety of leftist political views, sympathized with the goals of the socialist parties, and had friends and relatives who belonged to these parties. The influence of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Edward Bellamy and other socialist or revolutionary writers is evident even in the works of certain Tatar writers and historians who did not commit themselves to particular party before 1917.

Liberalism was not absent from Volga Muslim society, but it found its audience among a slightly older group of intellectuals, clergy and pedagogues. Those who favored a liberal approach tended to be those who had come of age and established themselves before 1905. Adapted to working under much more restrictive conditions, they were favored the concept of working for change within new and existing official institutions – the zemstvos, the dumas, etc. – and were willing to severely limit their demands concerning community rights and their relationship with the state. Before 1917, they did manage to accomplish certain educational and religious reforms, which, while limited, were still more than their

younger socialist coreligionists managed. However, these small victories proved insignificant after February 1917. Not anticipating the sudden disappearance of the imperial government, they had no ready plan for Muslim or Tatar self-governance, and given that all of their political experience was built around working very cautiously within a system that no longer existed, they proven incapable of generating one.

Despite some recent attempts to re-evaluate the Muslim liberals in Russia, its political record appears to be one of temporary gains balanced against ultimate failure. As sponsors, publishers and educators, they played an integral role in the dissemination of new forms of literature and new ideas about progress, empire, community identity and individual right. But even their success here was tainted insofar as they left very few intellectual heirs. The students they taught and writers they promoted drifted inexorably to the political left.

A similar statement must be made for “qadimism” or Islamic traditionalism in the western part of the Volga-Ural region. Far from the ignorant fanatics portrayed in modernist propaganda and Cold War-era historiography, the traditionalists wrangled with many of the same problems as the modernists, the most central of which was the preservation of the community. However, their stance differed in that they placed Islamic faith rather than native language or shared ancestry as the main basis of the community’s identity. Where their liberal and socialist counterparts strove for equal standing of Muslims with Russians as a means of defending the rights of their coreligionists, the traditionalists viewed institutionalized separateness of the community as a surer means of preventing assimilation. Within this separate system, the ‘ulama and traditional elites would act as intermediaries between the community and the state.

All of these opinions influenced the traditionalists’ understanding of the basic structure and purpose of the maktab and the madrasa, the community’s native educational institutions. These institutions were intended to teach the child the

basic tenets of Volga Muslim culture and, at the higher levels, educate new generations of clergy who would carry on that system, preserving local Islamic practices, using their knowledge of Islamic law to resolve conflicts within the community and mediating between the community and the state. Those who wished to pursue a more secular education could do so within the educational institutions provided by the state, but subjects like natural sciences and western languages had no place in the madrasas because they reduced the amount of time devoted to the subjects that, in the qadimists' eyes, the religious schools were supposed to be teaching. Finally, traditionalists saw the reformist madrasas as beds of shakird (student) radicalism.

The traditionalists' anxieties were not entirely baseless. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the reformed and modernist madrasas turned out relatively few clerics. Their main product increasingly became the mugallim, a Tatar-Muslim variant on the Russian village teacher, who traded the traditionalists' deep knowledge of commentaries and Islamic jurisprudence for a broader (if shallower) field of knowledge, including everything from the basic tenets of Islam to world geography, astronomy, vernacular literature and French. Like the traditionalists, these young teachers saw themselves as defenders of the community, but in place of a community built around Islam, they saw native language and common historical experience as the basis for communal identity and set out to defend and promote these elements, often setting themselves against the traditionalists. As to student radicalism in the new madrasas, published poetry and prose, personal letters, memoirs and court records all suggest that anti-colonialism, nationalism and socialism became increasingly popular among Muslim youth in the last years of the empire. The most radical individuals (and many of those who played important roles after 1917 or in the early soviet period) came out of either the Russian-Tatar school in Kazan or the "new method" madrasas where lessons in Russian (and sometimes other European languages) as well as liberal or socialist-leaning teachers gave their students access to a variety of European and Russian political and philosophical works. These madrasas also became

consumers for new textbooks on Turkic history and vernacular-language literature.

Like the liberal-allied modernist intellectuals, the traditionalists' legacy was weak, at least in Kazan Guberniia and the western parts of the Volga-Ural region. By 1917, there appear to have been no prominent traditionalists from this half of the region under the age of fifty. In the eastern half of the region (in what is now Bashkortostan), where the majority of the Muslim population belonged (or formerly belonged) to various service *soslovie* (Cossacks, mirzas, the then-disbanded Bashkir-Mishar host), the situation was somewhat different. Here the jadidist-modernists and their new method madrasas found little support. The elimination of separate status that the modernists called for had brought economic crisis. With the disbanding of the Bashkir-Mishar host in 1865, speculators had rushed into the region to buy up Muslim lands which were no longer under the protection of the War Ministry. While there does not appear to be a strong Bashkir national strain in pre-1917 Turkic-language literature, there is a definite nostalgia among writers from that region for an idealized past in which the service Muslims still had their privileges, their land, and the possibility of living their "traditional" way of life. These writers (whether Bashkirs, Mishars or others) presented romanticized images of the natural beauty of the trans-Volga region and the free and noble Bashkir nomad. Here, the traditionalist, as servitors, mediators and defenders of the older order of administrative separateness found more support and continued to play a role up to 1917 and beyond.

### **3. Muslims and the First World War**

Long overshadowed by the revolutions of 1917, World War I or the Great War has only lately begun to draw the attention of historians of Russia. With the exception of a handful of Tatar-language studies on Muslim POWs, the effects of the war on the Volga-Ural Muslim community remains unexamined. Yet a preliminary examination of the sources for 1914 to 1918 suggests that the war

played a critical role in shaping communal identity and concepts of nation, empire and autonomy in the Volga-Ural Muslim community.

A large number of Muslims from the Volga-Ural region served on the fronts or reserves garrisons. Of these, between 12,000 and 17,000 were captured and sent to prisoner of war camps in Germany. There they became targets of a cooperative German-Turkish effort to convince them join the Ottoman army and fight against the Russian Empire. Both proponents and opponents of this course took a variety of actions, including circulation newspapers and publications and organizing reading classes and dramatic performances. Here answering the question of identity became critical for individual soldiers as they were asked to choose between their homeland in Russia and their coreligionists and fellow Turks in the Ottoman Empire. Some Russian Muslim soldiers refused to go over to the Ottomans. Others accepted the authority of the Ottoman sultan and willingly joined the Turkish army. Others still, pretended to submit to the Ottomans, then shot their Turkish officers and set out for Russia, reaching home with their weapons and their political views in time for the Russian civil war. All of these cases, Volga-Ural Muslim soldiers made a choice one way or another about who they were and to whom or what they owed loyalty.

But the effects of the war were felt well beyond the prisoner of war camps. On the home front (as among the ethnic Russians), the initial outburst of patriotism was followed by disillusionment and despair as the empire began to face defeats on the front and economic crisis at home. The Great War introduced a number of Russian words into the Tatar vernacular – *okop'* [trench], *plen'* [prisoner], *raninyi* [wounded], etc. --, and, by 1915, the Muslim public was becoming better acquainted with these words, not only through Tatar-language newspapers, but through a variety of popular literature – poems, novellas, songs, ballads – describing the plight of the Muslim soldier on the front.

The full impact of the war experience upon the Volga-Ural Muslim community would be seen only after the February revolution of 1917. Though pre-1917 intellectual leaders continued to provide at least symbolic leadership through early 1918, they increasingly found themselves being pushed to action by All-Russian-Muslim War Soviet, an organization of young reservists, veterans, and deserters who often combined Russian or reformist/new-method educations with political radicalization and new expectations based on the discussion of the national question in Europe. This background not only caused them to demand soldiers' rights and military re-organization, but to envision a future for their community far different from either the national-cultural platform prepared by their liberal elders or the from the pro-Bolshevik Muslims who had avoided military service.

#### **4. Defining *Millät*: the Problem of Identity in the Volga-Ural Muslim community**

From the end of the nineteenth century to 1920, the discussions over the fate of the Volga-Ural Muslim community revolved around the term *millät*. In the Soviet period, both Soviet and western historians accepted the term as an equivalent for the Russian *natsia* [nation]. In more recent studies, there has been a general trend to read *millät* as closer to its Ottoman Turkish relative *millet*, that is, a confessional community under the rule of a government of a different faith, having a particular status, privileges, and obligations. In the most extreme instance, some historians have argued that national identity was practically non-existent among the Volga-Ural Muslims before the revolutions of 1917, what has been so often mistaken for national identity was an overarching Islamic identity. The pre-1917 gendarme and court records seem to show a similar confusion on the meaning of the word *millät*, translating it sometimes as nation and other times as religion. Nor does the tendency of Volga-Ural writers to use a combination of Islamic (certain local mosques and heroes of local Islamic poetry) and non-Islamic imagery (the Mongols and the Golden Horde) necessarily help in narrowing the meaning of *millät*.

The Volga-Ural Muslims used a number of terms to identify themselves in the pre-1917 period: Muslim, Turk, Northern Turk, Kazan Turk, Tatar, Bashkir, Mishar, Teptiar, Bulghar. Excluding the last term, most of these overlapped in various ways and could co-exist without canceling out one another. Existing studies on this region have downplayed the complexity of identity before 1917. On one hand, importance of confessional identity made it possible for Volga Muslims to think of themselves as part of a larger Russian Muslim community. Likewise, with the spread of ideas about the role of language in defining nation and community -- and under the influence of pan-Slavism and pan-Germanism -- made it possible to envision Turkic-speaking peoples in the Volga as kin to Turkic-speakers elsewhere. Finally, *adat*, *soslovie*, differences in administrative structures and state-sponsored linguistic and ethnographic projects at the end of the nineteenth century all suggested the possibility of narrowed divisions of identity.

That a Kazan intellectual expressed solidarity with the Muslims of Turkestan did not mean that he saw himself and the Turkestanis as identical. After 1905, the idea of Russian Muslim solidarity became appealing to Duma deputies attempting to construct political alliances. Likewise, many Volga Muslim elites had studied in the Ottoman empire and Turkish claims to leadership over all Muslims begged to be responded to. But for every piece of evidence in the Turkic-language press and literature that suggests support for a broad Islamic or Turkic identity, there is another that proposes a more geographically-limited local identity behind the term *millät*.

My research has suggested several things. First, the understanding of the precise meaning of *millät* varied even within the Volga-Ural Muslim community itself. In general, it was the slightly older generation of liberal intellectuals who envisioned the community in broader terms (although usually still united under Russian rule). The generation that came of age after 1905 gravitated toward

symbols that suggested a more local identity based on language or ethnicity in addition to religion. In fact, the Kazan-centered intelligentsia never did succeed in generating a symbolic language to represent a collective identity stretching far beyond the Volga basin.

Secondly, advocacy of a narrower ethnic identity did not amount to rejection of belonging to broader Muslim or Turkic communities. Different individuals, however, did prioritize their loyalties differently.

Finally, so long as the Russian imperial government was a reality, there was no possibility of creating an independent Muslim, Turkic or national political entity. At the same time, assimilation into Russian society – whether through state-sponsored schools, religious conversion, land policies, voluntary participation in Russian political and cultural life or the internal decay of Muslim society feared by the modernists – was a threat whose existence most factions in Muslim society could agree upon. In this context, *millät* stood in a broad way for community. What precise meaning individual writers and readers read into the term – nation, religious community, etc -- was not always critical because the defense of any of these was, in most cases, the defense of all of them.

From 1905 to 1917 the term *millät* appeared more and more often as an equivalent for *natsia*. However, as long as the imperial government existed, “political” questions could be kept at the margins of Muslim discourse, the use of vague or layered terms such as *millät* lent an illusion of unity to the Volga-Ural Muslim intellectual community. This situation truly changed only after 1917. With the disappearance of imperial authority and the accompanying threat (real or imagined) of assimilation vanished, new identities and political constructs suddenly became possible. Moreover, circumstances – the need to establish local order, the demands of competing political parties – thrust Volga-Muslim elites into a position in which they had to declare their support for one identity-platform or another.

At this point, Russian-Muslim identity, Russian Turkic identity and Kazan Tatar identity ceased to be identical or readily compatible. The discourse over national self-determination further forced local elites' hands, and broader trans-national identities lost support as the idea of the national-territorial state came to be thought of as the international political unit. Finally, after 1917, the stakes in the discourse, the stakes in the discourse over identity radically increased. The struggle to define and establish one's community became closely interwoven with the struggle for land, resources and political rights. For individual Volga-Ural Muslim elites, the price of losing this conflict was at best, arrest or exile and, at worst, death.

### **Suggestions for future research**

1. Where possible in my research, I have tried to place the transformation of identity in Volga-Ural Muslim community in the context of Islamic culture as it existed in the region in the last years of the Russian empire. Some work in recovering this culture has been done over the last decade, but as I worked in the archives and libraries of Kazan and Ufa, I came to understand that this reconstruction is far from complete. While there is a large amount of source material on this subject, it is often inaccessible to most local scholars because it is in Arabic. It is slowly becoming accessible to foreign scholars as thousands of un-catalogued manuscripts are gradually being identified and made available. And then, there are sources such as the Spiritual Assembly archives, which are opened to scholars, but only partially catalogued.<sup>1</sup> Robert Crew's dissertation "Allies in God's Command: Muslim Communities and the State in Imperial Russia" examines Islamic legal practices in Russia in a very general way, but such subjects as Islamic modernism, Islamic traditionalism, Islamic legal practice in the Volga Region and a comparative study with Islamic legal culture in other times and places are worthy of study by themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> The existing description of the Spiritual Assembly opis' describes the Russian-language official documents, but not the Tatar and Arabic-language denouncements and other supporting materials.

2. I studied the transformation of community identity among the Volga Muslims in the source material located in Kazan, Ufa and Helsinki. Due to financial and time restraints, I was unable to spend adequate time in Moscow to work in the archives. If the possibility presented itself, in the future, I would want to examine the materials of the Muslim fraction of the Duma as well as the department of police in order to compare them with the information I found in those documents I have already read.

### **Recommendations for the US policy community**

Old adages aside, the study of history does not hold the answers to all of the modern world's dilemmas. A specific series of events and attitudes shaped intellectual and political movements among Volga-Ural Muslims in the early twentieth century, and today the heirs of that community – the Tatars and the Bashkirs – face a somewhat different set of circumstances, and do so with a very different system of culture and values. Still some comments may be made.

Despite some dissention within the community and periodic criticism of imperial policy, Muslim elites in the Volga-Ural region envisioned themselves part of a larger, multi-confessional, multi-ethnic political entity. After February 1917, they tailored their plans for autonomy to fit within this model. Today, the region's cultural and political elites likewise promote the image of cooperation and peaceful coexistence between the Moscow government and Tatar and Bashkir communities. As in the Soviet period, the "oppressive" policies of the past governments – Imperial and Soviet -- are raised for examination and roundly criticized, the policies of the present government do not receive scrutiny in modern scholarship, nor are parallels drawn between past and present clashes between the state and the Tatar and Bashkir communities. While the movement to "uncover" the national past continues, the revival of Tatar national history has moved away from the more radical nationalism of the early 1990s to a more multi-cultural model. That is not to say that all Tatar and Bashkir scholars are

pleased with either this trend or the government's politics toward its Muslim or non-Russian nationalities, but at this point, any discontent is expressed in private circles rather than in publications.

In terms of Islam, the rich, intricate native Islamic tradition that existed in the Volga-Ural region at the beginning of the twentieth century is largely dead. For most Tatars and Bashkirs, being Muslim has become more of a marker of cultural and ethnic identity than a strictly-defined collection of religious rituals and beliefs. The efforts to revive Islam in post-Soviet Tatar and Bashkir society usually promote Islam as it is practiced in Turkey, or, more, often, parts of the Arab world. This new wave of Islam has not won large numbers of supporters among the local Muslim population, not only because of the secularization that took place under Soviet rule, but because the *adat* that is being promoted together with this religion is seen as a foreign imposition. On the other hand, here has been a more general re-Islamization in academic circles, insofar as local scholars have begun to examine the role of Islam in pre-Soviet Tatar-Bashkir society and based upon this, tried to determine the nature and place of religious identity in their society today. This research, for the most part, emphasizes the progressive nature of Islam at the beginning of the twentieth century and its ability to find common ground with the Russian government and other non-Islamic entities.

In conclusion, national consciousness and Islam remain in some way important today. However, the present time, neither presents a particular threat either for the stability of the Russian Federation or the US national security.