

Constructing Memory in the Tatarstan Republic

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The ethnic composition of the Russian Federation is a product of centuries of colonization policies from both the imperial and Soviet governments. Once the Russian state had solidified around a common national identity, it began expanding into new territories, often forcefully. The tactics used by the Russian rulers, and later the Soviet government, were at times those of pragmatists or of those who wanted to create complete cultural and religious unity within their borders. The changing practices between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as well as the differences in policy within these two specific eras, prevented the stable construction of national memory and identity in the colonized areas. When the Soviet Union dissolved, some of these territories regained the ethnic sovereignty they had lost to the Russians. Others, however, were granted partial sovereignty within the newly created Russian Federation. This nebulous political status created an interesting challenge for the construction of post-colonial memory in these regions.

This is particularly true in the case of the Kazan Tatars, the majority of whom reside in the Tatarstan Republic. This region became a part of the Russian Empire in the sixteenth century and has never possessed a greater amount of cultural and political sovereignty from the Russian state in over five hundred years. This paper will examine the creation of memory in the Tatarstan Republic by analyzing different sites that represent particular memorial or historical themes for the Tatars. It is divided into four sections: a discussion of the field of cultural and historical memory

studies, a history of colonization of the Tatars, the current political relationship between the Russians and the Tatars, and, finally, the sites of memory themselves. Ultimately, the complex legacy of colonization in Tatarstan has forced the Tatars to deviate from traditional post-colonial memory construction in pursuit of a more appeasing and conciliatory approach when constructing to their new national myth.

Making Memory

Examining the collective memory of a given national group has in recent years become a popular method for analyzing a state's past and present. Throughout history, national entities invented social memories and traditions in order to strengthen certain cultural or political values and legitimize their power.¹ These constructed national memories were embodied in physical monuments and museums, but were also formed in more intangible ways. Focusing on such sites of memory as a way of examining national identity carries the danger of focusing too much on the construction of memory from the top-down. However, this possibility is somewhat avoided by including an examination of how the common people identify and relate to each site of memory. In this way, top-down and bottom-up perspectives are both included in the analysis.

Tatars as a Subject Population

The national development of Tatarstan, first under Imperial Russia and then Communist Russia, is something that modern Tatars have attempted to rewrite in order to legitimize their newly gained independence from the Russian state. It is important to understand the impact that Russian and Soviet dominance had, and continues to have, on Tatar cultural development. It is clear that the sites constructed after 1991 are an attempt to break from the tsarist and Soviet past, but not to deny outright Russian cultural influence on the Tatar community.

Russian and Soviet Rule

Russian expansion and accumulation of territory was never executed in a uniform manner. Variations in practices existed throughout the Tsarist and Soviet periods, as each new leader

developed different strategies for dealing with the multi-ethnic Russian state. As a now sovereign group in the Russian Federation, the Tatar people have attempted to construct a longstanding, cohesive national identity for themselves. However, inconsistently-implemented imperial and communist policies, and their subsequent effect on Tatar development, have hampered the creation of a stable identity. Examining the fluctuating Russian development of the Tatars demonstrates the modern difficulty faced by this ethnic group to assert a nationalist sentiment successfully.

Russian tsars were hesitant to enforce policies of complete cultural integration within their empire for fear of fostering rebellion. Hence, for the most part of the sixteenth-twentieth centuries, non-Russians in Kazan and elsewhere were allowed to maintain their cultural and religious heritage. Elites were co-opted into the administrative structures set up by the Russian court, creating a semblance of independence from Muscovy, even if it was only in appearance.² This pragmatic approach to Russia's multiethnic territories lasted until Peter the Great's reign during the early eighteenth, which was characterized by forced cultural and religious integration. However, in the later part of the eighteenth century, Catherine the Great abandoned these tactics once again and implemented pragmatic measures that afforded the Tatars some religious and cultural freedoms.³ Despite the brief return to brutal colonizing policies in the Petrine era, the attitudes of Russian tsars to Kazan and other imperial holdings were flexible towards non-Russian ethnicities and cultures. After the fall of the Empire and the creation of the Soviet state in the 1920s, there was a continuation of the imperial policies towards with the Tatars that was coached in Soviet rhetoric.

The question of how to administer the Tatars took place within a larger debate in the Soviet government on how to deal with the multiple nationalities of the former Russian Empire. Lenin advanced a modified version of national self-determination as the answer to what he saw as an inevitable rise in nationalist sentiment.⁴ As a break from the Empire's imperial practices, Lenin wanted to promote nationalism amongst the different ethnic minorities. However, he still wanted to maintain the territorial borders of the Russian Empire, meaning that self-determination could not be allowed to progress to its natural conclusion. To do so required a delicate balancing between encouraging ethnic nationalism and loyalty to the Soviet government as a supra-national institution.⁵

The inability of the Tatars to completely extract themselves from the culture and history of their colonizers is most evident in the modern-day reconstruction of Tatar memory. In the post-Soviet Russian Federation after 1991, the Tatars were finally allotted a degree of sovereignty and control over their nation similar to the control that they had last experienced during the reign of the Kazan Khanate. The following decade in the Tatarstan Republic, offers a case study in how societies can transform their memory in order to advance their own national agenda. One of the most prominent examples of the construction of memory in post-1991 Tatarstan is the recent construction of the Kul Sharif mosque in the late 1990s. The historiography that has been attached to its creation demonstrates the modern day national identity that the Tatars have chosen for themselves.

Kul Sharif Mosque

Located within the Kazan Kremlin walls, the Kul Sharif Mosque is the largest mosque in the Russian Federation, a state with a significant Muslim population.⁶ Its construction in the late 1990s is an obvious example of the way that the Tatars reconstructed their history in this period. As a dominantly Islamic people, the Tatars place huge cultural and significance in the mosques as a major site of Islamic memory. However, centuries of Russian colonialism had all but erased the physical representations of Islam in the Tatar culture. Constructing this mosque was a calculated physical and symbolic attempt to erase the religious restrictions that had once been placed on the Tatar people.

After invading the Kazan Khanate in 1552, one of Ivan the Terrible's first actions was to raze its largest mosque. In a highly symbolic move, an Orthodox Church named the Blagoveshchenskii Sobor was erected on the site where the old mosque once stood.⁷ This was an attempt to demoralize the Islamic Tatar people and reinforce the inferior position of the Tatars to the conquering Russians. Additionally, the razing of the Kul Sharif mosque marked the beginning of a centuries-long campaign to convert them to Russian Orthodoxy.

During Ivan's reign, a staggeringly high number of mosques were destroyed and often replaced with Orthodox cathedrals.⁸ The Tatar landscape was quickly transformed to mirror the religion of its Russian conquerors. Prior to Ivan's invasion,

Tatar historians report, five mosques stood within the Kazan Kremlin's walls.⁹ This practice of constructing cathedrals and limiting the number of mosques in conquered territories endured throughout the imperial and communist rule of the Tatars. As the Russian Empire conquered and incorporated the region of Central Asia and its growing Muslim population, it imposed harsher limitations on Islamic religious architecture. Many state officials called for a complete ban on mosque construction, and, often, the Russian state sponsored eradication of working mosques. Between 1738-1745, 418 mosques were dismantled in the district of Kazan alone.¹⁰ The Soviets were also willing to shut down mosques for fear that they would spread religious resistance across the Union.¹¹

State-sponsored religious intolerance, under both the Russian and Soviet Empires, helped to undermine the importance of Islam in Tatar culture. When religious freedoms were fully restored following the events of 1991, Tatar elites wanted to return to their Islamic heritage. The mosque seemed an obvious symbol to demonstrate a period of Islamic revival for the Tatars, and mosques could once again become a dominant presence in the Tatar landscape. From here, the proposal to erect the Kul Sharif mosque emerged.

In 2005 the construction of the Kul Sharif mosque and its inauguration were complete, coinciding with the millennial celebration of Kazan's own construction, as the official website of the Republic Tatarstan helpfully informs us.¹² Its impressive structure dominates the Kazan skyline, towering over many of the other buildings in the Kremlin. The juxtaposition of the mosque to the other buildings that surround it is apparent. The Kremlin fortress is ancient, and many of the structures that reside within its white walls have been there for centuries. In the center of this area is a pristine mosque, which is garishly lit up at night.

Despite its appearance of not belonging, the mosque has been furnished by its builders with a historical myth to justify its placement within the Kremlin. Reportedly, the Kul Sharif mosque is the replacement of the ancient mosque destroyed by Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century. The name Kul Sharif comes from a Tatar soldier who died in battle against Ivan's army.¹³ The message conveyed by this mosque then is one of defiance to the Russian state, clearly an unwelcome presence in the Tatar land. By choosing a name that overtly recalled their opposition to Russian encroachment, the Tatars wished to evoke feelings of independence

and national sovereignty. Nonetheless, although it would be easy to interpret the mosque simply as a defiant gesture against the Russian state, the issue is actually more complex. To stop the interpretation here would fail to consider the other symbolic intricacies that the mosque contains.

During the construction of the Kul Sharif, many Tatar nationals demanded that the Russian-built Blagovshchenskii Sobor be torn down and replaced with the new mosque. This would effectively have undone Ivan's earlier actions and restored the mosque to its rightful location inside the Kremlin. They decided against this. In a highly symbolic gesture, it was decided that the Kul Sharif mosque would be situated across from Ivan's cathedral.¹⁴ The Tatar leaders are quick to use the proximity of these two religious icons as an example of the tolerance and acceptance of the Tatar community. Tatars promote the idea that the Kazan Kremlin is the only location in the world where both a Christian and Islamic building can be seen so close to one another. When the current United States' Secretary of State Hilary Clinton visited Kazan in 2009, one of the most reported stops on her tour was the Kul Sharif. "You are well known as someone who has fostered religious tolerance," she said, congratulating the Tatars for their tolerant attitudes. "It's a wonderful example of what can be done if people work together. I am happy to be here in a place that models interfaith tolerance. [It is] so important in the world today."¹⁵

The history surrounding the construction of the Kul Sharif mosque reveals more complex meaning than the simple exertion of nationalistic desires. While the mosque is meant to demonstrate the longevity and vitality of the Tatar ethnic identity and its ties with the Islamic religion, it also demonstrates the inextricable link between the Tatar and Russian cultures. Centuries of colonial rule continue to affect the political relationship between Tatarstan and the central Russian government. Shaimiev and other elite Tatars recognized the impossibility of completely erasing the Russian influence from a modern Tatar identity. What the Kul Sharif mosque represents as a site of memory has dual meanings for the Tatars: their reclaiming of an ancient history, and their established connection with their Russian conquerors. However, the Kul Sharif reconstructs this relationship with the Russians, to create more of an equal relationship, as opposed to one of an oppressor and oppressed. Herein lies the reconstruction of memory that the Kul Sharif mosque emblemizes.

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15-43. One such 'invented tradition' was the Scottish kilt. For centuries, the kilt was seen as a representation of a more barbaric period. However, the kilt was later adopted to symbolize national pride, as the Scots attempted to separate themselves from the dominant English culture. Today, the kilt is only associated with positive imagery in the Scottish psyche, even though this is a very recent development in the Scottish existence. This construction of memory and tradition occurs in all societies throughout history.

² Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic Empire* (New York: Longman, 2001), 30.

³ Kappeler, 32.

⁴ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 70.

⁵ Martin, 71.

⁶ "Europe's Largest Mosque opens in Tatarstan," *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, (26 June 2005) <<http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/13494/europe-s-largest-mosque-opens-in-tatarstan.html>> (17 February 2010).

⁷ Katerine Graney, "Making Russia Multicultural: Kazan at its Millennium and Beyond," *Problems of Post-Communism* 54, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2007): 21.

⁸ Graney, "Making Russia Multicultural," 32.

⁹ Helen Fallor, "Repossessing Kazan as a Form of Nation-building in Tatarstan, Russia," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2002), 84.

¹⁰ Shireen Hunter et. al., *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security* (New York: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004), 8.

¹¹ Adeeb Khalid. *Islam after Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 72.

¹² "Clinton Praises Tolerance in the Republic of Tatarstan," Republic of Tatarstan Official Website, 15 October 2009, <<http://www.tatar.ru/?lang=eng&full=43037>> (29 January 2010).

¹³ "The Kul Sharif Mosque," Republic of Tatarstan Official Website, n.d., <<http://www.wm.edu/as/history/undergraduateprogram/historywritingresourcecenter/handout/s/documentingelectsources/index.php>> (29 January 2010).

¹⁴ Graney, 21.

¹⁵ "Clinton Praises Tolerance in the Republic of Tatarstan," Republic of Tatarstan Official Website, 15 October 2009, <<http://www.tatar.ru/?lang=eng&full=43037>> (29 January 2010).

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Notes on Contributors

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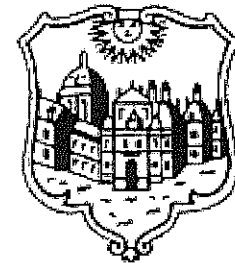
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Table of Contents

Dancing for Distinction:
Pierre Beauchamps and the Social Dynamics of
Seventeenth-Century France
Kathryn Hansen
5

The German Occupation of Serbia:
Developing and Implementing Hitler's Policy of Violence
Elizabeth Wheless
15

Russian Tuberculosis Crisis:
An Analysis of the Role of Institutional Failures in Post-Soviet
Russia on Increasing Rates of TB
Andrea Gregory
29

Facing the Power of a Media Mogul:
Woman's Continued Struggle for Equality in Contemporary Italy
Monica LoBue
41

Equality of Sacrifice:
Morale and the Private Life of the British Monarchy
during the Second World War
Amy Limocelli
52

Examining Compliance Rates of European Union Member States
Omar B. Farid
62

Constructing Memory in the Tatarstan Republic
Sarah Argodale
76

Notes on Contributors
86