

4 TATARS AS MESO-NATION

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The concepts of meso-area and mega-area, as developed by Osamu Ieda and Kimitaka Matsuzato, can be useful in describing relationships between ethnic minorities and the majority population of the country in which they live. Just as a meso-area is defined as a region whose identity is formed through interaction with neighboring regions and with the core areas known as mega-areas,¹ so a meso-nation might be considered as emerging from a set of cultural and political interactions between itself and its neighbors, and especially between itself and the majority population. In this chapter, I seek to develop the idea of meso-nation by examining the relationship between Tatars as meso-nation and Russians as mega-nation. I examine three aspects of this relationship: the Tatars' position as the Russians' other, the duality of Tatar identity as they relate to Russians and to other neighboring ethnic groups, and the duality of Tatarstan's international position as a Muslim sovereign entity within the Russian Federation.

THE RUSSIANS' OTHER

Tatars have traditionally seen themselves and been seen by Russians as part of Russia but not Russian. In this way they have served as the Russians' most significant "other." The Tatar ethnonym came into common usage during the period of Mongol control of Russian lands and was then applied by Russian ethnographers and officials during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an identifier for all Turkic groups living on Russian-controlled territory.² In this way, only

¹ "What are Meso-areas?," Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University. (<http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/program2-e.html>)

² M.Z. Zakiev, "Etnonimika i etnogenez" in M.Z. Zakiev, *Tatary: problemy istorii i iazyka* (Kazan, 1995), pp. 105-110.

distantly related Turkic groups living in the Crimea, the Volga region, the Caucasus, and Siberia all came to be known as Tatars. During the pre-Soviet period, members of these groups did not refer to themselves as Tatars, preferring instead to use ethnonyms based on region of habitation, (Kirimli for the Crimean Tatars, Kazanly for Volga Tatars) or clan or tribal origin (Koibaly in present-day Khakassia, Nogai among present-day Astrakhan Tatars), while many identified generically as Turks or Muslims. While some of the ethnic groups that were called Tatar by Russians in the nineteenth century continue to call themselves Tatar, others were given new names by Soviet officials and ethnographers in the 1920s, leading to the appearance of new ethnonyms such as Khakass and Shor in Siberia.

Russian perceptions of Tatars as their others have influenced interactions between the two groups since the conquest of Kazan in 1552. Most importantly, the Tatars came to be associated with the Mongol Horde that conquered Russia in the thirteenth century. As a result, many negative stereotypes came to be associated with the Tatars, including untrustworthiness and cruelty. Some of the stereotypes persist among the Russian population to the present day. The Tatar response has been somewhat ambivalent. One segment of the Tatar intellectual elite seeks to distance the Tatar ethnic group from the Mongols by downplaying the Tatar role in the Mongol invasion and the subsequent period of Golden Horde control of Russia and focusing instead on Tatar descent from the pre-Mongol Bulgar population of the region.³ Another segment of the elite instead seeks to emphasize the historical greatness of the Tatars by focusing on their past history of regional dominance and independent statehood, both in the Bulgar state and in the Golden Horde and its successor, the Kazan Khanate.⁴ The former group wants to show that Tatars were as much victims of the Mongol yoke as the Russians were while the latter group seeks to portray the Tatars as, at least historically, equals to the Russians.

The end result of this uncertain relationship between Russians and Tatars is that while most Tatars see themselves as citizens of Russia and

³ M.Z. Zakiev, "Zolotaia Orda v sisteme gosudarstvennosti Tatarskogo naroda" in M.Z. Zakiev, *Tatary*, pp. 111-117.

⁴ Ravil Fakhрутдинov, *Zolotaia Orda i Tatary* (Naberezhnye Chelny, 1993).

therefore Russians in a non-ethnic sense, they maintain a certain cultural distance from Russians. As I show in subsequent sections of this chapter, this duality is most evident in differences in Tatar and Russian attitudes toward the Muslim world.

MINORITY OR IMPERIAL NATION?

Throughout history, the Tatars have often played a role as intermediaries between the Russian majority and other neighboring ethnic groups. In recent decades, this intermediary position has resulted in the somewhat contradictory position taken by Tatar elites on the question of ethnic assimilation. These elites have gone to great lengths to denounce perceived efforts to assimilate Tatars as Russian imperialism, while at the same time undertaking very similar efforts toward other ethnic minorities in the region. This ironic contradiction came out most clearly during the run-up to the 2002 Russian census.

Tatar activists decried the centuries of Russian cultural and political domination of Tatars, pointing to symbolic events such as the killing or exile of the entire Tatar population after the sacking of Kazan in 1552 and the history of mass forced conversions to Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They saw Soviet efforts to eliminate Tatar culture and language as the continuation of the tsarist Christianization and Russification programs that sought over time to turn as many Tatars as possible into Russians.

Throughout the 1990s, Tatar leaders campaigned to reverse the decline in Tatar language and cultural knowledge, attributing this decline to a Russification campaign undertaken by the Soviet government and specifically to the elimination of Tatar language schooling from urban areas in Tatarstan and from virtually all schools in Tatar-populated areas outside of Tatarstan. They also complained about efforts to eliminate the Tatar language from the public sphere through official refusal to interact with the public in Tatar and the reprimands given by Russian speakers to anyone speaking Tatar in public. Academic studies showed that Tatars living outside of Tatarstan had high rates of intermarriage and that the vast majority of children

resulting from such intermarriages listed their ethnic identity as Russian rather than Tatar.⁵

In order to redress these grievances, Tatar leaders sought to revive Tatar language education by opening Tatar-language schools in urban areas and especially in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan. They also encouraged the revival of Tatar language schooling outside of Tatarstan by increasing the supply of teachers and textbooks to areas where Tatars were compactly settled. In order to equalize the position of the Tatar and Russian languages within Tatarstan, the Tatarstan parliament passed a law declaring both languages as the republic's official languages.⁶ This law made Tatar language instruction mandatory for all schoolchildren in the republic, regardless of ethnicity. It also required government offices to function in both Tatar and Russian. Finally, it enacted several symbolic measures, such as ensuring that all street signs and public announcements were fully bilingual. Outside of the language realm, Tatar cultural revival measures included efforts to open republic film and radio studios, restoration and cleanup of Tatar architectural and archeological monuments, and the establishment of an independent Tatarstan Academy of Sciences.

While Tatar intellectuals protested and sought to counter linguistic Russification and assimilation, they proposed very similar policies toward related minority groups in the name of Tatar unity. In particular, the 2002 census brought a concerted effort on the part of Tatar cultural leaders to portray small groups such as the Kriashen, Astrakhan Tatars, and various branches of Siberian Tatars as all comprising a united and indivisible Tatar nation. Efforts by cultural leaders of these groups to assert their separate ethnic identity were met with hostility and cries of treason. For example, the prominent Tatar intellectual Damir Iskhakov argued that Siberian Tatars were just a geographically separate part of the Tatar nation that did not have the requisite attributes, such as its own language and distinctive cultural practices, for recognition as a separate ethnic group. He warned that if they were recognized as a separate ethnic group after the 2002 census, they could no longer count

⁵ T.A. Titova, *Etnicheskoe samosoznanie v natsional'no-smeshannykh sem'iakh*, (Kazan, 1999), p. 45.

⁶ See the text of the language law, reprinted in Damir Iskhakov, ed. *Suverennyi Tatarstan*, Vol. 1. (Moscow, 1998), pp. 48-58, at p. 49.

on assistance from the Tatarstan government in fulfilling their cultural and educational needs, a development which would undoubtedly, in his view, lead to a speedy assimilation of these groups by the Russian majority. Kriashen activists were warned that their group was just a subset of the Tatar nation and that by insisting they comprised a separate group they were betraying the interests of the Tatar group to the Russians, who wanted to divide Tatars among themselves in order to weaken them politically.⁷ Throughout this public campaign to ensure that Tatars achieve the maximum possible numbers in the 2002 census, Tatar intellectuals refused to allow that individual choice must be at the basis of any determination of ethnic identity, focusing instead on historical, anthropological, and cultural factors that “proved” the existence of a single and indivisible Tatar nation.

Tatar activists’ concern about assimilation by the larger Russian nation ironically increased their efforts to assimilate related ethnic groups, at least some of whose leaders asserted that they should be considered entirely separate from the Tatar nation. Because of the Tatars’ status as a meso-nation, they sought to distance themselves from the Russian nation while following Russian ideas on ethnic identity and ethnic categorization.

SUPPORTER OF ISLAMISTS OR RUSSIA’S LINK TO THE MUSLIM WORLD?

The duality of Tatar leaders’ international position is the final aspect of Tatars’ dual identity that I address in this chapter. On the one hand, Tatar politicians have repeatedly expressed their opposition to Russian support of Christian states engaged in conflict with predominantly Muslim states. On the other hand, they have sought to act as Moscow’s bridge to the Muslim world when such connections are required.

Tatarstan’s foreign policy aspirations are much more muted now than they were in the early 1990s, when the Tatarstan government

⁷ Damir Iskhakov, “Perepis naseleniia i sud’ba natsii,” in D.M. Iskhakov, ed., *Tatarskaia natsiia: istoriia i sovremennost’* (Kazan, 2002), pp. 7-20.

opened its own representative offices in several countries around the world and the Tatarstan legislature passed a resolution announcing the region's desire to become a constituent member of the Commonwealth of Independent States.⁸ But the two situations where Tatarstan's leaders have forcefully opposed the Russian government's foreign policy show the importance of cultural ties in both sides' foreign relations. The first of these situations is Russia's conflict with Chechnia. In the first Chechen war, Tatar leaders stated their opposition to the war and initially refused to let local draftees be sent to the Caucasus. They also expressed opposition to the second war, although by 1999 they did not have the power to prevent draftees from being sent there.⁹ Second, when the Russian government condemned U.S. airstrikes against Serbia during the Kosovo conflict, Tatarstan's President Shaimiev and other top officials put themselves on the side of the Muslim Kosovar Albanians and condemned the "fascist" policies of Yugoslav president Milosevic.¹⁰ These examples show that while Tatar leaders generally followed Russian foreign policy, they were conscious of their status as leaders of Russia's Muslim community and opposed Russian policy when it went against fellow Muslim groups.

Tatarstan's leaders sought to ensure that Moscow saw Tatarstan as a moderate Muslim region. This task was accomplished by formulating the doctrine of Euro-Islam, a moderate Islam that was focused on culture rather than ritual and was designed to directly contrast to the radical brand of Islam practiced in parts of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Euro-Islam was portrayed as a direct descendant of the jadidist, reformist Islam of the late nineteenth century.¹¹ As moderate Muslim regions, Tatarstan and its neighbor Bashkortostan came to serve as crucial links between the Russian government and Muslim states and organizations. Thus, Kazan hosted an international conference on Islamic culture and President Shaimiev was at the forefront of Russian efforts to gain membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).¹²

⁸ E. Tagirov, *Tatarstan: natsional'no-gosudarstvennyye interesy* (Kazan, 1996), p. 125.

⁹ RFE/RL *Tatar-Bashkir Daily Report*, 21 September 1999.

¹⁰ RFE/RL *Tatar-Bashkir Daily Report*, 1 April 1999 and 6 April 1999.

¹¹ Rafael Khakim, *Kto ty Tatarin?* (Kazan, 2002), pp. 30-38.

¹² RFE/RL *Tatar-Bashkir Weekly Report*, 17 August 2004.

Tatarstan's efforts to develop a foreign policy that both reflected its position as part of the Russian state and its status as the homeland of a Muslim ethnic group showed its status as the homeland of a meso-nation working in the shadow of the Russian majority and therefore seeking to separate itself from Russian policies while remaining within the Russian cultural sphere of influence.

CONCLUSION

The concept of a meso-nation, which I have begun to develop in this paper, allows for the conceptualization of a relatively small ethnic group whose culture is dominated by a larger group (the mega-nation) but which nevertheless seeks to emphasize its distinctiveness to the extent possible under the circumstances at any given time. This paper is a preliminary illustration of the concept. A fuller treatment should examine the dynamic nature of this characterization, with the meso-nation's closeness to the mega-nation depending on the relative cultural and political strengths of each party at any particular time. In the Tatar case, the middle and late Soviet period, when the Russian cultural component of the state was at its peak, saw the weakening of Tatar culture and language. The decline of the Soviet/Russian state in the late 1980s and early 1990s allowed Tatar leaders to distance themselves from the Russian state and from Russian culture. They did so by undertaking a cultural revival, renegotiating the relative standing of Tatars and Russians within the Tatar homeland republic, and staking out independent positions on issues of foreign policy. As the Russian state appears to be regaining its strength in the first part of the twenty-first century, it seems likely that the Tatar meso-nation will again be drawn closer to the Russian mega-nation.