Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia

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Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy.

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Introduction

In 1866, the police arrested a well-to-do trader who had petitioned that his village be officially recognized as Muslim. His father, a parish elder, begged him one more time to rejoin the church, but Mikhail Matveev stubbornly refused to listen. In desperation, his father asked him to take off his fine leather boots and replace them with rude bast shoes—a vivid warning about the grim fate that awaited him in Siberia. But the father’s pleas changed nothing. Matveev’s wife proudly stood by his decision, repeating tirelessly that they both considered themselves Muslim. What explained this young couple’s determination? What did it mean to become Muslim in Imperial Russia?¹

Over the course of the nineteenth century, tens of thousands of Orthodox Christian Tatars like Matveev and his wife formally petitioned the czar to be legally recognized as Muslims. At great personal risk—including the possibility of arrest, imprisonment, deportation and exile—these “apostates” from Christianity asked to leave the favored established faith for membership in a tolerated, but second-class, religion. Many of these Tatar Christians known as Kräshens, from the Russian word for baptized, made this difficult choice through the influence of a well-developed network of Islamic primary education, brought to them by neighboring Muslim Tatars. Rooted in a thaumaturgical tradition that dated back to the fourteenth-century conversion of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, this educational network was far from moribund but provided a cultural treasury of miraculous stories about saints and prophets that the apostates could draw upon as they fashioned their new Muslim communities. Apocalyptic stories about God’s final judgment of the infidels, marvelous accounts of Muslim martyrs in pagan lands, and tales of divine deliverance fueled the apostasy movements. Filled with miracles, this literature served to expand the boundaries of Islam among Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples of the Middle Volga, including many of the baptized Tatars who had converted to Christianity after the Russian conquest in the sixteenth century. For these Kräshen converts to Islam, becoming Muslim meant participation in the moral order described and defined in these traditional narratives: a world in which God actively and miraculously intervened on behalf of the Islamic community. These stories affirmed the possibility of divine empowerment for the most ordinary believer, and they emphasized the imminence of the final judgment.

The apostasy movements launched a major struggle over the religious and cultural identity of entire peoples living along the Middle Volga. Some chose to remain within the Orthodox fold and rejected Islam; a small but vigorous Kräshen cultural and religious revival persists in the region to the present day. Those who remained faithful to the church responded to the influx of these pious Islamic stories by developing their own historical memory of heroic martyrs, miraculous salvation, and ethnic Turkic saints. Many baptized villages, not immune to Islamic influence but ambivalent toward their Tatar neighbors who viewed them as infidels, turned to Christian hagiographies of Roman, Greek, and Turkic martyrs to solidify their communal distinctiveness.

The Kräshens—descendants of Muslim and animist Volga Tatars who had converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries—are located on the frontier between Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy. They provide a fascinating example for exploring how non-Russian peasants integrated and transmitted religious knowledge in Imperial Russia, and how both colonizers and colonized used religion and education to forge new identities. During the hundred years preceding the 1917 Russian revolutions, a variety of alternative identities and cultural systems, including popular Orthodoxy, mystical Islam, animism, and Islamic modernism, competed for allegiance in the Volga region. Educational policies and practices emerged from a debate—a complex one that was often difficult and heated, to be sure—among Sufi imams (Muslim mystics), Orthodox missionaries, Russian state officials, and Islamic modernists called jadids from an Arabic word meaning “new.” Alarmed by the apostasies, Orthodox missionaries and Russian bureaucrats investigated these movements and left a telling record about how Muslim Tatars used traditional forms of knowledge to spread their faith. In the late nineteenth century, the Kräshens were subject to several experiments in education. While Muslim Tatars sought to win them for Islam, Orthodox Russians struggled to keep them from apostatizing from Christianity to Islam. Ultimately, both enjoyed important successes: Islam kept and/or made many converts and a Christian community, still vibrant after seventy years of atheistic communism, survived among the Volga Tatars.

The apostasies also affected other non-Russian peoples besides the Tatars. Although Moscow had conquered the Volga khanates of Kazan in 1552 and Astrakhan in 1556, this region remained in many respects a frontier until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Large populations of national minorities along the Volga, including the Tatars, Cheremis (Maris), Chuvash, Bashkirs, Votiaks (Udmurts), Kalmyks, lived in common or mixed villages, spoke languages other than Russian and often followed a faith other than Orthodoxy. The Turkic-speaking Tatars and Bashkirs were predominantly Muslim, but a portion had converted to Eastern Orthodoxy. Although many of the Chuvash, Udmurts, and Maris had adopted Orthodox Christianity as well, some continued to practice their native animistic faiths—or to integrate elements of their pre-Christian religion into their Orthodox practice. The transmission and assimilation or rejection of Qur’anic and Christian knowledge among these people played an important role in their self-definition. Although many scholars have dismissed the traditional Muslim village school as mindless rote learning, in fact this network of primary education proved extremely effective in shaping
the religious—and, consequently, the ethnic and political—identities of the peoples of the Middle Volga. Far from being stagnant, the village Qur’anic schools introduced revolutionary changes in the religious geography of central Russia, not only among the Kräshens but also among other ethnic groups.

The study of Kräshen apostasies uncovers ways traditional Qur’anic knowledge was lived and understood. Most historians have generally adopted the Tatar nationalist view and presented the Tatars as essentially Muslim; the conversions of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries were either forced or insincere—conversions of convenience, not conviction. In their view, the Tatars who converted to Christianity in the sixteenth century—called starokreshchenye (old converts)—were originally Muslims or nominal Muslims, whereas those baptized in the eighteenth century—the novokreshchenye (new converts)—were definitely Muslim. This view presents the Kräshens as crypto-Muslims who had been forcibly converted to Christianity and returned to an open confession of Islam when they saw the opportunity. As proof, these historians point out that beginning in 1800 many of the Kräshen villages petitioned the government to be recognized as officially Muslim. In their collective petitions, the “apostates” often claimed that they had never in fact been Christian at all, and that they were practicing Muslims. In other words, their “apostasy” from Eastern Orthodoxy was simply an effort to force the Russian authorities to recognize their true faith.2

This assumption that the Kräshens were superficially Christianized crypto-Muslims accorded well with Western and Soviet views of Imperial Russia as a “prison-house of nations,” with the secularist distaste for proselytism of any kind, and with fashionable critiques of colonialism in all its forms. Western and Tatar historians continue to assume that the Kräshens were not really Christians but were simply playing a role to avoid persecution or to obtain some benefit. They continue to regard Tatar identity as fixed, defined by national heritage, and not as an evolving phenomenon, and view the apostasy movement exclusively as a political, anticolonial event in Tatar national history. This approach, however, fails to explain both the process by which indigenous peoples developed or maintained an Islamic identity and the survival of a vibrant Christian community among Kräshens. It also ignores the role of religious literacy in the baptized Tatars’ internalization of Islamic and later Christian values.

The reality was much more complicated. Not all the Kräshens were secretly Muslims or were insincere Christians, for they lived in a religiously hybrid milieu; some even participated in the religious cultures of both Islam and Orthodox Christianity and at the same time continued the veneration of local and ancestral spirits. The mass

apostasies of the nineteenth century were not a mechanical “return” to Islam, but constituted vast communal movements of conversion involving people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds and, for the Muslim Tatar community, movements of renewed commitment to their faith. They represented a major missionary effort on the part of Muslims to expand their community in Turkic and Finno-Ugric milieus. Although conversion sometimes implies a sudden and complete change of heart, in the case of the Kräshens conversion to Islam or Eastern Orthodoxy was the result of a gradual change that did not necessarily wipe out preexisting identities.

Nationalist Tatar historians have looked at apostasies of Christian Tatars from Christianity to Islam as simply a return to their original faith. However, U.S. scholarship views these apostasy movements as posing a legal challenge to the imperial Russian state which, on the one hand, promoted tolerance toward a diverse group of religions in Russia and, on the other, supported Eastern Orthodoxy as the state religion. The apostasies offer a bottom-up perspective on how non-Russian peasants manipulated and adapted the idea of citizenship, promoted by the Orthodox Church and the Russian state, to meet their own needs. But the Kräshen apostasies do more than illuminate the tensions between the peasant worldview and state priorities. They also contribute to the debate over the development of different religious strategies and discourses among the natives. Tatar modernism arose in part as a reaction to a vigorous—and not decaying—system of Muslim beliefs and knowledge characterized by popular mystical works, which attracted segments of the Kräshen, Mari, Chuvash, and Udmurt populations to Islam. This same popular Islam was also the target of attacks by Eastern Orthodox missionaries.  

Most important, a nationalistic or an exclusively legalistic approach to the apostasy movements fails to appreciate the dynamics of Islamic traditional knowledge and its noninstitutional dissemination, as well as the economic and spiritual networks inside and outside the Volga region. Apostates did not simply imitate Russian peasant revolts in order to affirm the importance of religious conviction. Their protest was also the outcome of a major reform movement within Sufism beyond the borders of the Russian Empire, which dates back to Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564?–1624) and Shaykh Wali Allah (1702–1762) of Delhi in Mughal India. Michael Kemper and Allen Frank’s research reveals a great deal about the Sufi orders that spread their faith in central Russia, but not as much about their activity among the Kräshen population.  

The spread of Islam among the non-Russian peoples of the Volga region was also the outcome of major economic transformations within the Tatar community at the end of the eighteenth century, in particular the growth of wool, leather, and cotton-related industries, resulting from the increase of trade between Russia, Central Asia, and India. Women like Matveev’s wife constituted another crucial element

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in the spread and consolidation of Islamic knowledge among Christian Tatars. These women served as clandestine teachers, producers, and transmitters of religious mystical poetry. They carried with them medieval Turkic tales of the prophets and other epics, filled with miracles and Sufi metaphors. This literature, which has elicited little interest from scholars in Eurasian studies except for Tatar and Turkish linguists, offered paradigms of behavior and scripts for conversion for Muslims living in a non-Muslim environment.5

The word “apostate” (otpavshii) was a Russian legal term for any baptized native who rejected Christianity by sending a petition to state officials asking to “revert” officially to his or her so-called original beliefs. The baptized who leaned toward Islam had to affirm their elected identity against the grid constructed and imposed by Russian officials. Tatars themselves (and the inhabitants of former apostate villages) also used and still use the word apostate to identify the history of these communities. Conversely, the term Krâshen refers to baptized Tatars who had not yet petitioned to change their faith or had refused to live officially like Tatars; that is as Muslims.

To better contextualize popular Islamic and Christian religious discourse, this book draws equally on sources of Russian and native origin. These include published and unpublished Russian and Krâshen missionary and ethnographic literature; state and church reports on the Krâshen apostasies; petitions in Russian and Tatar; government legislation, reports of the local governors, education conferences sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Education; Krâshen religious prose and poetry; local epics and women’s diaries from “apostate” villages; select jadid religious textbooks, memoirs, and newspaper articles on the apostasies; local interviews and field work observations in the former apostate villages of Elyshevo, Kibiak-Kozi, Ianyli, and the Krâshen villages of Chura, Staryi Karabaian (Qulbaghiš), and Urias’bash in 1996, 2000, and 2008; nineteenth-century Tatar biographies of local Sufi teachers; and popular Sufi or didactic works that were read or recited by apostates in the Middle Volga and Urals as they could be reconstructed through the prism of missionary, police reports, and the libraries of former “apostate” families.

The first three chapters evaluate the dynamism of traditional methods of learning before the rise of Tatar reformism. The first chapter, “Apostasy, Conversion, and Literacy at Work,” argues that the apostasy movement was not a simple “return” to Islam, but a genuine movement of conversion to Islam. It traces the origin and religious diversity of the Krâshen community, analyzes the mechanics and causes of the apostasy movement, and characterizes its leadership. It also shows how apostates used Russian and Islamic literacy as tools of communal resistance. The second chapter, “Popular Knowledge of Islam on the Volga Frontier,” deals with the Krâshens’ complex religious world and, in particular, its sacred geography. It analyzes the themes and models of behavior in Sufi literature, widely used in school and at home among Tatars and converts to Islam. The content of this literature, which also included talismans,
constituted one of the sources used by peasants to conceptualize their universe and their relation with the “Other” (especially with Russians). The third chapter, “Tailors, Sufis, and Abïstays: Agents of Change,” examines the ways this specific Islamic knowledge, largely influenced by Sufism, spread among the Krâshens. It focuses on internal and transborder economic, Sufi, and kinship networks of transmission. The last two chapters deal with official and local Russian and native responses to the knowledge carried by apostate Krâshens and their proselytizers. The fourth chapter, “Christian Martyrdom in Bolghar Land,” examines Russian missionaries’ attacks against thaumaturgical Islam, their “readings” of popular Islamic literature, and the emergence of a genuine Christian community conscious of its unique identity and salvific mission. It also looks briefly at the state’s attempt to play the role of a reformer of traditional Islam and its partial failure. The final chapter, “Desacralization of Islamic Knowledge and National Martyrdom,” analyzes the Tatar modernists’ response to Eastern Orthodox missionaries’ successes in the Krâshen milieu and their criticisms of popular Islamic literature. It examines the jadid effort to introduce a more “rational” view of the universe through the recollection of older clusters of memory, modernize traditional methods of proselytism, and integrate the history of the former baptized communities into a more dignified memory of national martyrdom.

The nineteenth-century apostasies and the formation of a genuine Christian community among Tatars remain the object of politically charged debate in contemporary Tatarstan. While Krâshen nationalists ask for their recognition as a separate nation, Tatar intellectuals and some contemporary ulama, concerned with linguistic Russification (obrusenie), growing urbanization, and the current globalization of Islamic knowledge via the Internet, wish to resurrect the memories by which Tatars defined themselves in the past. They remember the forced Christianization of Tatars and contrast it with the peaceful Islamization of the Bolghars, their Turkic ancestors, and the tolerance of the Mongol khans; they reprint prejudiced Sufi literature, which in the past has helped Tatars to keep their identity separate from the Russians. For them, Sufi medieval and eighteenth-century thaumaturgical books, now sung or staged on TV or at the theater, still constitute a valuable repository of old-Turkic metaphors and Arabic words forgotten by new generations. Once again, these books could be used as a vector of Islamization in the contexts of both major religious holidays and secular schools, where they have become part of the literature curriculum. These current developments echo the cultural competition between Orthodox Christianity and Islam so clearly exemplified in the apostasy movement of the nineteenth century.7

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