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FINAL REPORT**

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*Revolution in the Turkic World: A History of Tatar Nationalism across Eurasia, 1917-1953*

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**Research Abstract:**

Thanks to a Title VIII Research and Language grant, I was able to spend nine months in Kazan, Russia, taking Tatar language classes and conducting dissertation research. My dissertation follows a group of Tatar intellectuals who had been politically active in the Russian Empire, and after 1917 pursued political careers in the Soviet Union, Turkey, and in the widespread Tatar diaspora from Japan to Poland. I aim to understand how pre-revolutionary developments among educated Muslims in Russia – such as the beginnings of secular nationalism, reforms in Islam, and engagement with Russian and regional politics – transformed to fit the new exigencies of revolutionary states. One of the most striking features about the revolutionary careers of Tatar intellectuals is the similarity between the goals of those who remained to in the Soviet Union and those who emigrated. Whether in the USSR, Turkey, or in emigration, the former “Muslim nationalists” of the Russian Empire abandoned modernizing Islam in favor of Tatar, Turkish, and Turkic nationalism (or a combination thereof). They contributed greatly to changing the written and spoken language, politically marginalizing the

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

Muslim clergy, elevating education, and re-positioning Tatars (always a minority) within multi-ethnic states.

**Important Research Findings:**

In 1928, millions of literate Muslims in the Soviet Union and the Republic of Turkey suddenly became illiterate. The Arabic writing of the past was banned, and new alphabets based on Latin letters were introduced. Latinization in both countries was the most visible facet of policies intended to weaken Islamic identities and replace them with secular, ethno-linguistic ones. Similarities in the goals of the Bolshevik and Turkish revolutions were not coincidental: In both the Muslim areas of the Soviet Union and in Turkey, revolutionary projects were outgrowths of intellectual developments in the Turko-Islamic world dating from the late nineteenth century, radicalized by experiences of world war, civil war, and the breakdown of empires. And yet political Islam, socialism, democracy, and Turkish nationalism – along with the interwar histories of the Soviet Union, Turkey, and Europe – suffer from historiographical and popular compartmentalization. By looking at individuals who synthesized and practiced all of these ideologies across the “Turkic World,” my dissertation shows the multiplicity of options available to “Muslim revolutionaries” and what it meant to choose between them.

At the nexus of the Soviet and Turkish revolutions was a new class of secular Muslim elites from the former Russian Empire. Between 1918 and 1920, most members of this group chose one of three paths: The first was to embrace Bolshevik promises of cultural autonomy

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

within a socialist framework, joining “Muslim national communists” in an alliance that would last into the 1930’s. The second option was to flee to Ankara and Istanbul, supporting Atatürk and aiding in the “Turkification” of the new Turkish state (while renouncing political irredentism – the USSR and the Turkish Republic were after all allies). A third group rejected both the Bolsheviks and the Kemalists, placing hope in the eventual destruction of the USSR and the rebirth of recently discovered “nations” as part of a pan-Turkic federation. In Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, and the Far East, they joined other non-Russian exiles from the Soviet Union to hasten the end of communism, while their nationalism took on the radical characteristics of interwar Central Europe.

While each of Russia’s diverse Muslim populations (Turkestanis, Azerbaijanis, North Caucasians, and Crimean Tatars) followed similar trajectories, my research focuses on individuals from Russia’s Volga-Ural region (present-day Tatarstan and Bashkortostan). The Volga Tatars, as they came to call themselves, had been part of the Russian Empire since Ivan the Terrible conquered the Khanate of Kazan in 1552. The diaspora of Tatar merchants throughout the Russian Empire, Central Asia, and the Far East meant that cities with significant Tatar populations (Kazan, Orenburg, Ufa) served as major centers for the Empire’s economic, cultural, and religious life.<sup>1</sup> As Richard Pipes writes, “The Volga Tatars were the first of the Turks in Russia, or for that matter, anywhere in the world, to develop a middle class. This

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<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

enabled them to assume leadership of the Turkic movement in Russia.”<sup>2</sup> This distinction continued into the interwar period. Volga Tatars were uniquely successful in their respective nation-building projects: Tatars in the Tatar ASSR were the only Eastern Soviet nationality to not be categorized as “backward,” having literacy rates and educational attainments comparable to neighboring Russian *gubernii*.<sup>3</sup> In Turkey, exiled Tatar intellectuals maintained political relevance by serving as experts, who by virtue of their origins in Central Asia could “rediscover” the pure Turkic past unadulterated by Middle Eastern accretions.

My dissertation revolves around the biographies of Tatar intellectuals, who reflect the enormous transformation of the post-revolutionary Russian Muslim community. For example, in the 1920’s and 1930’s, Sadri Maksudi [Arsal] (1878-1957), a former member of the Russian Imperial Duma, regularly attended the infamous drinking parties of Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk], advising him on reforms in language and law. Meanwhile, Galimzhan Ibrahimov (1887-1938), joined the Communist Party and wrote novels about the creation of the New Soviet Tatar man. During the same interwar decades, Gaiaz Iskhaki (1878-1954), a former classmate of Maksudi and co-editor of Ibrahimov, conspired with Polish military intelligence to bring down Bolshevism and establish an independent, secular, and nationalist Turkic republic. The appeal and challenge of my research in Kazan was to follow ideologies that changed as quickly as the political borders of this period, and yet determine which goals remained constant. How does an

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) p. 167.

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

Anglophile member of the Russian Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadet) become a dogmatic Turkish nationalist? Or a mathematics student in Turkey, infuriated by the Allied occupation of Istanbul, decide to return to the Soviet Union and embrace communism? How did men (and a few women) from the same Russian imperial, Islamic milieu, arrive in such different places? In answering this empirical question, I draw out the comparative and interrelated aspects of three seemingly distinct projects: Soviet communism’s nativization policies, the nationalization of the Turkish Republic, and the use of nationalism as a tool of international politics.

My dissertation traces ideas of religious, political, linguistic, and cultural transformation of the Tatar intelligentsia from the first Russian revolution in 1905 through their divergent post-1917 paths. I argue that whether they became communists, Kemalists, or nationalist irredentists – seemingly mutually exclusive categories – progressive Russian (*Rossiiskie*) Muslims simultaneously broke with their earlier goal of reforming their communities according to Islam. In place of religion, they developed secular ethno-linguistic nationalisms. While the forms these nationalisms took began with similar premises stemming from their authors’ pre-revolutionary experiences, during the interwar period they became increasingly contingent on the international political situations in which they developed. With Atatürk’s death in 1938, cultural transformation in Turkey lost its revolutionary zeal. Purged of their revolutionary generation in the USSR, Tatars took pride of place among “loyal” Soviet nations. After a limited revival of pan-Turkic enthusiasm provoked by the upheavals of the Second World War, the Iron Curtain divided the Turkic world.

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

**Research Goals:**

One of my main tasks in Kazan was to acquire a competent reading knowledge of the Tatar language, in contemporary (Cyrillic) and Latin and Arabic script forms. To that end, I attended one-on-one classes for eight hours a week with teachers at Kazan Federal University, divided between learning and practicing the modern and historic languages. I began in September with a good knowledge of modern Turkish and a beginner level of Ottoman Turkish and modern Tatar. By the end of the year, I could (slowly) read Arabic-script Tatar and understand academic writing. This language training was an essential component not only of my research, but also provided an avenue into Tatar culture. While all Tatar people in Russia speak Russian, a demonstrated commitment to learning Tatar led to remarkable enthusiasm and hospitality.

My research goals consisted of identifying useful published primary materials, better acquainting myself with local historiography, using archival collections, and gaining feedback on my dissertation from local academics.

**Research Activities:**

Over the course of the Title VIII grant, I gathered extensive notes, photographs, and other materials from the National Archive of the Republic of Tatarstan (NART), the Central State Archive of Historical and Political Documentation of the Republic of Tatarstan (TsGA IPD RT),

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

the University Lobachevsky Library, and the National Library of the Republic of Tatarstan. I found all of these establishments pleasurable to work in, with extremely helpful staff. I was not only able to piece together an understanding of the activities of Tatar communists and intellectuals who had stayed in the USSR; The archivists and researchers at NART and the National Library have worked to bring materials from the Tatar diaspora to Kazan and make them available to researchers in Russia. While in Kazan, I also copied or acquired published materials not available at libraries in the United States, such as the novels, plays, and collected works of Tatar writers.

Much of my most difficult research was made immensely more productive thanks to the language classes provided through Kazan Federal University and the Title VIII fellowship. I brought archival materials to class to read and discuss with my language teachers. One class a week took place in the rare book division of the university library, where we read periodicals and newspapers relevant to my research. The value of the background and extensive knowledge my teachers brought to my primary documents is immeasurable: Questions of tone, specific choices of words, subtle puns and allusions can only be sensed at a certain level by native speakers, and my research would have been impossible without these insights.

Although I do not intend to incorporate oral history into my dissertation, I spoke with people who identify themselves today as Tatar intelligentsia, and about what that means to them. This perspective has not only been helpful in thinking about the relevance of my research outside of academia, but also in formulating the stakes of my project. The questions that my

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

dissertation's subjects asked are still very relevant one hundred years later: What is the place of Muslims and Tatars within Russia? How can Tatars preserve their national identity while being competitive in broader scientific, technological, and cultural developments (transmitted through Russian)? What is the relationship between Tatars and the larger Muslim/Turkic world? The multiplicity of opinions on these questions today reinforces the complexity and difficulty of answering them in the past.

**Policy Implications and Recommendations:**

Residents of Kazan are proud of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious diversity of their city. Approximately half Russian/Orthodox and half Tatar/Muslim, Kazan has come to represent the coexistence and interrelations between historically distinct groups. Part of my research addresses how this came to be: Tatar intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century embraced learning Russian and Russian culture as a means of improving the condition of the Tatar community as well as promoting peaceful cooperation with all ethnic/religious groups. In the 1920's, Soviet policies of fostering of minority language and culture complemented this approach. Of course, there are still distinct interests and mutual misunderstandings between different ethnic groups in Tatarstan. Preserving the culture and language of a national minority – in this case Tatars – highly integrated into the society of the Russian national majority is an ongoing challenge. One way of addressing this perceived loss of identity has been in the revival of Islam among Tatars, teaching the Tatar language to the children of all national groups in



**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

Tatarstan's schools, and fostering Tatar cultural programmes. As an outsider interested in Tatar language and culture, I felt immediately welcomed into this world, emphasizing to me the importance of programs such as Title VIII, which give Americans resources to access cultures and societies that might otherwise remain opaque.

An unexpected discovery from my research has been the importance of organizations such as Radio Free Europe and other US and foreign programs which financed émigré cultural productions in diaspora. Although not necessarily a policy recommendation, the existence of such avenues for organizing cultural and political life forms a source for Tatars' rediscovery of an émigré culture that had been severed from the Tatar homeland, resurrecting a pre-Soviet intellectual tradition that had been suppressed under communism.

Finally, in a contemporary international landscape in which both Islam and Russia feature prominently, Western impressions of Islam *in* Russia are surprisingly one-dimensional, focusing on conflict in the North Caucasus. Since Tatars have the longest history as a predominantly Muslim group within the Russian state, their experience perhaps deserves greater attention.

**Co-Curricular Activity:**

On a personal level, the Title VIII grant meant a year of being immersed in the culture of Russia and Tatarstan. I attended conferences and met with historians and scholars of Tatar history affiliated with Kazan Federal University and the Institute of History under the Tatarstan Academy of Sciences. I presented a paper (in Russian with a Tatar introduction) at a conference

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

on “The Preservation and Development of Native Languages” about my own experience growing up in a community with a strong linguistic minority (Cajun French in Louisiana). I gave several interviews with local radio and television stations about my reasons for learning Tatar and American impressions of Russia. I edited academic English language texts for teachers and friends. On several occasions, my Tatar language teachers facilitated formal discussions with university students about my reasons for learning Tatar, academic life in the United States, and other topics.

**Conclusions:**

Benedict Anderson wrote in *Imagined Communities* (1983), “The fate of the Turkic-speaking peoples in the zones incorporated into today’s Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and the USSR is especially exemplary. A family of spoken languages, once everywhere assemblable, thus comprehensible, within an Arabic orthography, has lost that unity as a result of conscious manipulations.”<sup>4</sup> The individuals my research follows were in many ways the archetype of the “conscious manipulators,” although they had not intended to break up the Turkic world. Instead, divisions were created as the “manipulators” had to compromise between what they believed was best for their own communities – which involved new alphabets, languages, literatures, histories, and borders – and what was possible in each political context. The linguistic training and research opportunities provided by the Title VIII grant have allowed me to access a world that is

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1983, reprint 2006) p. 45.

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

fading. Without specialized training, few Tatars (or other Turkic people) can read the Arabic-script writing of their grandparents or great-grandparents, severing not only the specific content of untranslated works, but also an entire culture written in and symbolized by the Arabic script. While I am not yet finished with my research or analysis, my final product will reconstruct the struggle between the producers of culture and the brokers of political power – sometimes the same people – which led to this outcome.

**Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:**

After the expiration of the Title VIII grant, I remained in Tatarstan through the summer to complete my archival work. In September 2013, I presented portions of my research at Yale’s Modern Europe Colloquium in a talk entitled “Language in Revolution: The Tatar Case.” I am currently working on the first three chapters of my dissertation, beginning with the activities of the Tatar intelligentsia before the revolution through the civil war period and early Soviet experience. I will return to archives in Turkey, Poland, and Moscow during Spring/Summer of 2014. I plan to complete my dissertation in Fall 2015, and eventually to publish my research as a monograph.

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**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII  
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

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FINAL REPORT**

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FINAL REPORT**

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