

## Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training Program – Final Report

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**Location and Dates:** Kazan, Russia; 1 September 2011 – 8 May 2012

**Project Title:** Socialist in Form, National in Content: Islam, Anti-Colonialism, and the Tatar Communist Party Organization, 1920-1940

### **Overview**

During the 2011-12 academic year, I spent eight months in Kazan, Russia, conducting predissertation research and studying the Tatar language. As I surveyed local archival and library material, the research questions and hypotheses that I formulated for my project, originally entitled “Socialist in Form, National in Content: Islam, Anti-Colonialism, and the Tatar Communist Party Organization, 1920-1940,” evolved to reflect the categories that I actually encountered. In addition, I spent twelve hours a week in language courses at Kazan Federal University, studying both contemporary Tatar and the old Arabic and Latin scripts used during the first decades of the twentieth century. Participating in a number of conferences and academic projects, along with consulting local scholars about my project, supplemented my archival and university work. Furthermore, as a result of many conversations with both Russians and Tatars living in Kazan and throughout the Republic of Tatarstan, I gained an even greater understanding of how my research can contribute to the policy objectives of the United States in the region. Many of the questions that Tatars confronted in the early twentieth century, such as how to use language and culture to express local and national identities, remain equally as relevant in the present day. Cumulatively, this program allowed me to lay crucial groundwork for pursuing my research objectives and investing in the scholarly and civic communities of Kazan.

## **Research Objectives, Findings, and Accomplishments**

In applying for the Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training Program, I proposed to conduct archival work under the rubric “Socialist in Form, National in Content: Islam, Anti-Colonialism, and the Tatar Communist Party Organization, 1920-1940.” I developed this plan after writing my MA thesis on Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev (1892-1940), an ethnic Tatar and at one time the highest-ranking Muslim in the Communist Party, who was arrested in 1923 and later executed for allegedly promoting “nationalist deviation” among Russia’s Muslims. I depicted Sultan-Galiev as a mediator between the worlds of communism, nationalism, and Islam, suggesting that he modeled a new, modern identity for non-Russians that could potentially draw from all three of these sources. I considered how, from 1920 to 1923, Sultan-Galiev translated and moderated changes to the social and cultural milieu of Russia’s Muslim community, developing the program of “Muslim National Communism,” an unapologetically anticolonial vision for spreading socialism to “the East” by igniting preexisting tensions among colonized minority groups. Sultan-Galiev claimed that, as evidenced by Russia’s Muslim population, a socialist revolution would thrive most dynamically when championed by ethnic minorities who desired national liberation in spite of any internal class differences. I concluded that Stalin ordered Sultan-Galiev’s arrest in 1923 in part as a consequence of this anti-colonial rhetoric; the vilification of traditional colonial regimes in the East was simply too suggestive of the new Soviet empire emerging in Moscow.

I envisioned that the next step for this research would be to explore how other Tatars in the Bolshevik Party also fashioned a modern, Islamic sense of identity by combining nationalist objectives with Bolshevik ideals. I imagined discovering in Kazan a hotbed of Tatar party functionaries on a Muslim path to communism via real—not imagined—national autonomy.

After beginning my work in the archives and libraries of Kazan, though, I realized that such stark national and religious categories among Bolsheviks were largely absent from the historical record. I spent much of my time this past year in the National Archive of the Republic of Tatarstan (NA RT) and the Central State Archive for Historical and Political Documents (TsGA IPD). I initially directed my attention toward archival collections in which I expected to find Muslim identities at play. I first looked at the Menzelenskii Canton Party Committee and Naberezhno-Chelny Canton Party Committee files, whose archival guides suggested that these collections would contain details about apparent anti-Soviet agitation by Muslim clergy in the 1920s and the state's response, as seen through the propaganda of the anti-religious "Union of the Godless" society. The material in these archival holdings, however, revealed very little about the activities of local Muslims and described the antireligious activities of the local Party cells in only the most general of terms. Moreover, I found it difficult to place these local incidents in a broader context of what was going on in the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Tatar ASSR). Frustrated with not finding material that spoke directly to the conflict between national identity, Islam, and Bolshevism, I shifted between holdings in both TsGA IPD (moving from provincial canton party committees to the Tatar Oblast' Party Committee) and NA RT (going between various state institutions such as the Central Executive Committee, the State Planning Commission, the People's Commissariat for Education, and the People's Commissariat for Interior Affairs).

Simultaneously, I began meeting regularly with my local academic advisor, Professor Alla Arkad'evna Sal'nikova, who is the chair of the Department of Historiography, Sources, and Methods of Historical Research within the History Faculty of Kazan Federal University. In addition to discussing my research interests with Professor Sal'nikova, I also attended seminars

that she and other colleagues facilitated. Through these courses and consultations with historians such as A. L. Litvin, S. Iu. Malysheva, Z. G. Garipova, and I. R. Minnullin, I gained a greater understanding of the research that Kazan scholars had already conducted on topics of relevance to me, ranging from daily life in Kazan during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the devastating famine of 1921-22, to the repression of Kazan political, religious, and cultural elites in the 1930s. Such conversations provided insights for new directions that my research might take, what sources I could gain access to, and other scholars to meet. I realized that the aspects of Sultan-Galiev's life that had captivated me while conducting my earlier research had already provoked much reflection from Kazan historians too, particularly among those who first gained unfiltered access to his archival files in the 1990s. Moreover, a lot of material concerning the many Tatars like Sultan-Galiev who ran afoul of the Bolshevik regime and were subsequently exiled or executed has already been published. While such resources are invaluable for my research, I also do not want to retrace already well-worn ground in the archives.

As I began working my way through local historiography, I made a number of discoveries that informed the direction of my concurrent archival work. While I remained interested in questions of subjectivity and identity as seen through the lens of nationality, I noticed that Russian and Tatar experiences were almost always treated individually in the existing scholarship. This separation of national historiographies is one of the great deficiencies of the field, as it suggests that national identities developed and endured independently of outside forces. Traditionally, most Tatars in Kazan lived separately from Russians in the Old Tatar District. Religion and language served as markers of national difference until the Soviet regime began trying to erase some of these boundaries in the early 1920s. Around that time, state and party officials in the Tatar ASSR began paying careful attention to the number of Tatars (and

other minorities) within their ranks, even actively recruiting Tatars to increase these statistics. After Tatar was named an official government language of the Tatar ASSR in 1921, Tatars who could speak both Tatar and Russian were hired and placed on the fast track for promotion in various state institutions. As a part of the “Realization of the Tatar Language” initiative, courses for Russians to learn Tatar were organized, judicial and bureaucratic proceedings were conducted in Tatar, and, in an apparent modernization effort, the Tatar alphabet itself was changed from Arabic to Latin, and later, to Cyrillic. Similarly, indigenization (*korenizatsiia*) policies in the 1930s provided new opportunities for Tatars to pursue higher education and work in specialized labor fields alongside Russians.

While thinking about these themes, I began noticing in the historical record a number of physical spaces in Kazan in which Russians and Tatars negotiated the contours of their relationship with each other, their national and religious backgrounds, and the nascent Soviet regime. Such spaces included universities and educational institutions, religious establishments, factories, housing units, and cultural sites, such as the theater. In 1920, Tatars made up only 16% of Kazan’s residents, 80% of which were Russian. Over time, as more Tatars came to Kazan to escape famine and collectivization, or to pursue educational and employment opportunities, the Tatar population grew. To offer just one example of what this meant for life in Kazan, while working in the Rare Books Department of Kazan Federal University’s Lobachevskii Library, I was granted access to a collection of unpublished memoirs written by various students and scholars affiliated with the university in the Soviet era. In several memoirs, Tatars described the poverty they endured in villages before finally being permitted to move to Kazan to study, although a lack of financial resources and sanitary living conditions complicated these efforts. Nonetheless, many Tatars successfully integrated into university community. In

other memoirs, Russian scholars, assigned to teach non-Russians, related their initial reluctance to interact with these students, many of whom spoke Russian poorly. One Russian biologist, though, admitted that, after seeing non-Russian students band together and help each other in times of desperate need, he came to love and appreciate them and even learned their languages.

Such stories of positive coexistence, however, were far from universal. For example, in TsGA IPD, I read a series of complaints from Tatar workers at the Vakhitov Factory in Kazan about the anti-Tatar sentiments and actions of the Russian factory boss. After an investigation, the Central Committee of the Tatar ASSR ordered that the factory boss be removed, that Tatars and Russians working the same job receive equal pay, and that Tatar workers who were fired or demoted without cause be reinstated to their previous positions. Thus, even as the local government strove to create environments in which Tatars and Russians could coexist, individual prejudices often thwarted such goals. Tatar spaces associated with Islam also came under assault in the early Soviet era. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, all but one of Kazan's mosques were closed and then either destroyed or reincorporated into factory, educational, or social spaces. The many mektebs and madrasahs (Islamic primary and higher educational institutions) in Kazan met similar fates. Petitions from Soviet labor organizations to close mosques, in contrast to those from religious organizations to keep them open, illustrate the struggle to define these Muslim spaces in the context of a new political reality. Moreover, many Muslim clergymen were caught up in the ongoing purges of the 1920s and 1930s. Tatar identity could help or hinder in this era, depending on how it was utilized.

My preliminary research likewise indicates how language politics in the 1920s and 1930s mirrored larger debates about how Tatars fit into Soviet space. While working in the archives, I devoted particular attention to the “Realization of the Tatar Language” campaigns and the

transition of the Tatar alphabet from Arabic to Latin in the late 1920s, and then to Cyrillic in the late 1930s. This process provoked a significant outcry among the Tatar intelligentsia, many of whom declared that such language reforms were unnecessary and only served to damage the long-term health of the Tatar language and culture. Proponents of Latinization presented the alphabet change as a harbinger of modernity and a break from an Islamic past in which only a few select had access to education. Many on both sides of the debate fell victim to Stalinist oppression, but the question of how to integrate Tatars into the larger educational, cultural, and political space of Kazan persisted.

These discoveries have led me to conclude that an urban history that recounts the creation of Kazan into a Tatar capital will allow me to pursue questions of national identity without losing sight of the larger cultural, linguistic, and spatial context in which these transformations took place. While working in Kazan this past year, a new research question emerged in my mind: To what extent did the Bolshevik reimagining of urban and linguistic space successfully incorporate Tatars into the Soviet experiment in the 1920s and 1930s? To this end, I spent a significant amount of my time in Kazan archives exploring finding aids and ordering sample document collections in order to prepare to return to Kazan in one year to continue my dissertation research and find answers to this question. I am confident that such an approach, completely unique in the existing historiography, can produce an innovative study that sheds new light on the diversity of Kazan and how the Soviet regime shaped the national experience through it.

### **Language Study**

In addition to my archival work, studying the Tatar language was a central aspect of my Title VIII program that could not have happened anywhere but in Kazan. Every week I attended

twelve hours of Tatar classes at Kazan Federal University. My one-on-one courses covered topics such as advanced Tatar grammar, conversational Tatar, academic Tatar, historical texts, and Arabic- and Latin-script Tatar. Such language study proved indispensable for my research, particularly as I discovered how many of the archival and historical documents I need to read are in the Arabic and Latin Tatar scripts. To maximize my comprehension of such material, I brought to my courses a number of texts practical for my research, such as the journals *Fen hem din* (Science and Religion) and *Iangalif* (New Alphabet). Reading and discussing these documents with my instructors, I established skills that I immediately put to use in the archives. Moreover, through one course that surveyed Tatar cultural and political figures in the early twentieth century, I gained invaluable context for the work I conducted outside of the classroom. As a result, I increasingly came to understand the inextricable link between my language and archival endeavors.

### **Policy Relevance and Implications**

While in Kazan, I became even more aware of how many of the issues Tatars confronted in the early twentieth century—such as the role of Islam in a modern society, the relevance and future of the Tatar language, and how to integrate into Russian society while maintaining cultural traditions—remain just as pertinent in the present day. In fact, my idea of studying environments where national identities were contested in part came from my realization that, currently, many spaces in Kazan remain marked as Tatar as a result of Soviet policies from almost a century ago. Kamal Theater (the primary Tatar-language theater in Kazan), the former Pedagogical University (now a part of Kazan Federal University, in the 1920s it was the Eastern Pedagogical Institute and later the Tatar Pedagogical Institute), and mosques (along with other religious spaces in the



Old Tatar Settlement) are still associated with Tatar identity, primarily as a result of the language spoken there. Other spaces, such as the Kazan Kremlin, where the new Qul Sharif mosque stands alongside Orthodox churches, represent more contemporary attempts to bring together diverse religious and cultural traditions to project a narrative of peace and tolerance. Likewise, just as the “Realization of the Tatar Language” program in the 1920s encouraged Russians to learn Tatar, over the past few years, Kazan Federal University has offered free Tatar language classes for both Russians and Tatars. While these classes are popular, funding and motivation concerns remain paramount, just as in the 1920s. In my interpretation, all of these examples reflect continuing efforts to determine how Tatars fit into the dominant Russian culture.

Given the recent anxieties that have emerged among Tatars in regard to ethnic policies have their roots in the early Soviet period, I believe that my project has a number of implications for American policy. First, since linguistic barriers can delineate ethnic minorities from ethnic majorities, American foreign affairs experts should be aware of the impact of local language policies on ethnic communities. Speaking Tatar can serve as a religious and ethnic marker that differentiates Tatars from Russians, particularly in mixed urban communities. Language plays a large role in national identity, education, and economic integration, and tensions in Tatarstan have been exacerbated in recent years by policies that either promote or limit the study of the Tatar language. Second, as both ancient and contemporary Tatar history indicates, diversity can facilitate both violence and peace. The “national question” in Russia is far from resolved. The fragile alliance of Russian protest leaders has on several occasions threatened to collapse in the past months due to disagreements over various nationalists’ involvement. Those who ignore the heterogeneous composition of Russia in general, and Tatarstan in particular, overlook at their own risk the wide range of cultural, linguistic, and religious interests at play. Finally, I believe

that my experience affirms the importance of actually learning minority languages such as Tatar in order to understand better the particularities of various national communities in Russia. I was continually impressed by how, even as a foreigner, speaking just a few words of Tatar opened up new relationships and insights into people's lives and identities that would have been unavailable if we only spoke in Russian. Cumulatively, embracing Russia's diversity should remain a policy objective for the United States.

### **Additional Scholarly Activities**

During my time in Kazan, I had several opportunities to talk about my research, the American education system, America's relationship with Russia, and similar topics. I made a number of informal presentations in primary and secondary schools, as well as in university classes. In November 2011, I participated in a conference at Kazan Federal University entitled "Teaching and Studying the Languages of Russia and its Neighboring Countries as Foreign Languages." There I presented a paper in Tatar that discussed my study of Russian and Tatar in the context of my research objectives. In January 2012, I traveled with a group of Kazan historians to one of Kazan Federal University's affiliated campuses in Elabuga, another city in Tatarstan, to participate in a round-table discussion on the study of Russian history from a regional perspective. I also presented a paper in Russian on some of my initial research findings during a graduate student round table at the Department of Historiography, Sources, and Methods of Historical Research within the History Faculty of Kazan Federal University. Additionally, in conjunction with my Tatar language instructors, I worked on the publication of a new Tatar-Russian-English textbook and phrasebook as the English-language editor. Finally, I also organized a weekly English-language discussion club at a local business school.

### **Future Plans and Concluding Statement**

During the upcoming academic year, I will use my research from Kazan to write and publish at least one article. I will also present some of this material at an academic conference. In October I will present some of my research conclusions to the US Department of State, and a large portion of my talk will be based on work I accomplished while participating in this American Councils program. During the 2012-13 academic year, I will apply for dissertation research grants to return to Kazan for the following year to finish my archival work. I will then return to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to write and defend my dissertation by spring 2016. I then intend to prepare my research for publication as a manuscript.

In concluding, I want to thank American Councils and the Department of State Title VIII funding apparatus for the opportunity to participate in the Combined Research and Language Training Program. This was a humbling and immensely rewarding experience on both scholarly and personal levels; it allowed me to lay an invaluable foundation of language study and archival research to support my future work. American Councils, in conjunction with Kazan Federal University, provided for my every need. I remain extremely grateful for the investment made in my scholarly career and look forward to applying and sharing what I learned in Kazan.