



**Danielle Ross.** *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. 288 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-04571-3.

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In *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia*, Danielle Ross makes a major contribution to both the history of the Russian empire and to the history of its ethnic and religious minorities. She skillfully argues that the Kazan Tatars were both colonized and colonizers, suffering the consequences of their initial defeat at the hands of Ivan the Terrible in 1552 but also participating actively in Russia's colonial expansion as interpreters, ambassadors, mediators, traders, and settlers. Most important, Ross does not portray them as mere puppets of Russian officials but as allies and, most interesting, as a colonizing force, creating its own spheres of religious and economic influence, its own geography, and its own hierarchies of subjected people. Drawing from a large array of Russian and Turkic-language sources familiar to experts in the field—imperial archives, biographical dictionaries, villages histories, letters, Sufi genealogies, theological works, and literary production—Ross focuses on one group, the Kazan Tatar ulama, and its material-intellectual history from the seventeenth century until the revolutions of 1917. Because seventeenth-century Russian decrees targeted Tatar nobility, Kazan's ulama came to play a bigger role in local Muslim politics, and in the eighteenth century, they allied themselves with Russians in their

illegal grab of Bashkir pasture lands in the South Urals. Kazan mullahs and their descendants founded new villages at the expense of the Bashkirs, and Russians preferred to rely on these newcomers for establishing their authority instead of the Urals' indigenous imams. When Bashkirs joined Emel'ian Pugachev's rebellion, the Kazan ulama remained faithful to the crown, and Catherine II rewarded them with the creation of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly. There, Ross, challenging Robert Crews's contention that the Russian state shaped Islamic discourse through this institution, argues convincingly that the Kazan ulama took initiative in the making of the assembly. For instance, its first appointed head, Mukhamedzhan Khusainov, whose uncle, a legal scholar, helped Russians suppress the 1730s Bashkir rebellion, asked for the title of mufti to increase his prestige among the Kazakhs. Ross also successfully shows that the Muslim Spiritual Assembly had limited powers, which allowed Islam to develop freely outside Russian imperial state control, and that its politics, largely dependent on local personal relationships, was marred by interethnic conflicts within the Muslim community. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Turkic-Bulghar histories integrated the South Urals as part of the Volga region sacred Islamic geo-

graphy. There was no mention of Kazan Tatar migration to the Urals nor of the Russian state facilitating this migration. Ross could have added that this map also included Eastern Orthodox Tatar villages that Tatars considered Muslim (or Muslim-to-be).

One prestigious network of Kazan Tatar ulama and their merchant patrons that originated from the village of Machkara near the town of Malmyzh played a central role in the consolidation of that geography. Mainly interested in fathers and sons, Ross delves into their life stories and explores the question of modernity. When did these scholars of Islam become modern? she asks. For Ross, the process of modernization did not start in the 1880s with the emergence of the *jadid* reformed school system in the Crimean Peninsula, as expounded by the pioneer of Eurasian studies Alexander Bennigsen. Instead, it began at the turn of the nineteenth century, thanks to wider access to Islamic knowledge due to the increased circulation of paper and the establishment of the Asiatic printing press. Calls for reform emerged neither as a response to economic decline nor as a product of proximity to Western thought. In fact, the Kazan Tatar economy flourished, assuring the prosperity and multiplication of mosques, schools, factories, and shops. Scholars of the Machkaran network became more concerned about risks of scriptural misinterpretation. They drew stricter parameters for legal interpretations of scriptures, and they imagined new ways of imparting knowledge to serve the needs of their communities.

Popularization of knowledge is one of the criteria of modernity, but as Ross successfully argues, this trend had already started well before Ismail Gasprinskii created a faster method of imparting basic literacy. Traditional madrasa education and its scholastic debates imparted skills that could easily be applied in the world (for instance the calculation of inheritance). Ross's argument regarding the dynamism of Tatar Islamic literacy before the 1880s is corroborated by the expansion of Is-

lam among animist and baptized Turkic and Finno-Ugric peoples of the Middle Volga and the Urals in the nineteenth century. Partly thanks to the same Machkaran network of scholars she describes, some Orthodox Christian villages and individuals converted to Islam and asked for official recognition of their Islamic identity. Astutely, Ross also argues that these imams planted the seeds of their own demise, and that the student strikes in their madrasa were less the result of external influences—the students having access to Russian subversive political literature—than they were the product of their teachers' popularization of knowledge, initiated in the late eighteenth century. With wider access to Islamic knowledge, students challenged their former teachers' authority, which was based on kinship, spiritual lineages, and communal recognition.

Conceptually, Ross's book is pulled between two poles, one centered on the expansion of the so-called Tatar empire within the Russian empire, and the other, on the nature of modernity in Eurasia. In fact, each pole could have been the subject of a separate monograph. The introduction and the book cover summary mention that the Kazan Tatars were at the forefront of the Russian expansion into western Siberia, the South Urals, and the Kazakh steppes. However, the book focuses only on the South Urals and its borderlands; it does not include the northern Tatar Mishar communities of Nizhnii Novgorod, St. Petersburg, and Finland or the Tatar settlements in Siberia and on the Chinese borderlands, which also have played a role in the expansion of the Tatar empire. By confining herself to one ulama network, she gives the impression that only the Kazan Tatars were at the forefront of the Tatar empire expansion. True, Ross mentions that there is more than just one network, but she does not provide the names of those other scholarly lineages. The sources for the Machkaran network, which have also been analyzed by Allen Frank, Michael Kemper, and Nathan Spannaus, are more readily available. It could be argued, though, that the Mishar Tatar scholars'

network of Nizhnii Novgorod, whose history awaits to be written, could have played an earlier and equal part in the expansion of the Tatar empire. Ross mentions the Mishars, fighting along with the Bashkirs against Russian encroachment, but without giving much explanation for their presence on the South Urals frontier.

Ross masterfully shows how Tatar modernists inherited earlier constructs of sacred topography and invented a hierarchy of Turkic nations with themselves at the top. In this colonial hierarchy, the civilizing heroes, enlighteners, and leaders of the Bashkir, Kazakh, and Turkestanian Orient were no less than the Kazan Tatars. In short, Orientalism is not only a projection of Western power. Muslim Tatars also "orientalized" "the Other" in the creation of their own empire. Ross's book challenges Alexander Bennigsen's and modern Tatar nationalists' reading that Russians were responsible for dividing Tatar lands into two separate autonomous republics. Bashkirs, Kazakhs, and other Turkic peoples of Central Asia rejected Kazan Tatar claims of oversight, and they chose their own path to sovereignty after the revolution.

Besides the making of a Tatar empire within the Russian empire, Ross also explores the question of modernity in the Middle Volga and the South Urals. Following Allen Frank and Devin DeWeese, Ross criticizes earlier scholars for their excessive focus on jadidism (Tatar modernism). Still, Ross, partly because of her heavy reliance on modernist authors, fails to fully explore those imams who did not share the jadid vision. In particular, the more conservative "traditionalist" imams (the subject of Rozaliya Garipova's research) and the radically separationist and "rejectionist" Vaisov movement deserve a more extensive treatment than the passing mention that Ross devotes to them. The result is that jadids still remain a dominant (and familiar) voice in the last chapters of her narrative. In general, in my view, Ross's novelty resides more in her questioning of the European modernity paradigm, and in her fram-

ing of modernity as a product of indigenous religious thought, than in her claim that scholars of the so-called secularization and desacralization camps did not recognize that Islam remained central to Tatar identity and public life before the Soviet experiment. Her strength lies in showing that the jadid discourse was an extension of the Machkaran imperial discourse. In this, she joins the ranks of Alfrid Bustanov, who has revisited jadidism as an ideology preoccupied with its own imperial project.

Ross argues that the secularization of Tatar thought occurred only after the Bolshevik Revolution, even though some intellectuals seem to have embraced a desacralized politics well before the overthrow of the Provisional Government. For instance, as a madrasa student in the years after the 1905 revolution, the future Bolshevik revolutionary Galimdzhani Ibragimov, son of an imam, defied Muslim orthodoxy and questioned the divine origin of the Qur'an. I learned this interesting fact from Ross's dissertation, but she does not mention it in her monograph. Ross does note that jadid madrasa students were exposed to socialist rhetoric. She masterfully shows that their teachers took a Salafi literalist position, packaged theology in an easily explicable format, and called for a controlled *ijtihad* (independent legal interpretation). Many students, however, dreamed of becoming something better than a village mullah, and strove for a more egalitarian society. It also seems that the students may have had a more radical view of the power of *ijtihad*, perhaps under the influence of socialist rhetoric, than their teachers. Unfortunately, the last chapters are peppered with many names of prominent Tatar intellectuals or future revolutionaries without proper introduction or discussion of their understanding of the Islamic "domain." Finally, the book could have been better edited: Pierre Bourdieu's "habitus" appears three times as "habitas" on the same page.

Despite its Kazan-Tatar-centrism, Ross's book is significant. By positioning Tatar history as a col-

onizing force within the Russian empire, she invites scholars to explore further other ulama-merchant networks among Bashkirs, Mishars, and Siberian Tatars. It is also my hope that Ross will write the history of the wives and daughters of the Machkaran network, whose voices remain surprisingly absent in *Tatar Empire*. These women, however, played a role in matchmaking, imagining their children's future, choosing their school, and educating them. They proselytized among Eastern Orthodox and "pagan" minorities, interpreted the sharia, copied manuscripts, wrote their own poetry, and carried the memory of Islamic rituals, songs, and poetry throughout the Soviet period. In conclusion, the remarkable significance of Ross's monograph lies in her contesting the image of Tatar modernity as a late nineteenth-century product of decline and Western influence. Tatar modernity expressed itself in Islamic terms, and, it started much earlier, in the late eighteenth century, as a response to increased material wealth brought by colonizing new lands and advancing the Russian empire (and its own). The history of the expansion of Islam within Turkic and Finno-Ugric communities from late eighteenth century to the revolution, and even beyond, confirms Ross's findings.

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