

POLITICAL IMAGINATION AND IMPERIAL SOVEREIGNTY:

THE CASE OF KAZAN

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Jane Burbank
New York University



National Council for Eurasian
and East European Research
University of Washington
Box 353650
Seattle, WA 98195
info@nceeer.org
<http://www.nceeer.org/>



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Executive Summary

In the spring of 1991, campaigning in Tatarstan for the presidency of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, Boris Yeltsin pronounced his famous phrase, "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow." Many aspects of the political moment were novel to Yeltsin, his listeners, and Soviet citizens generally. The Communist Party, after what later turned out to have been its last party conference in July 1990, no longer claimed a monopoly on political representation. Yeltsin, a successful insider self-transformed into an ardent and flamboyant critic of the Soviet leadership, had left the party and was running against an array of Communist candidates. Most radically, this was the first time the leader of the Russian Republic, the largest of the fifteen "union" republics that composed the Soviet Union, was to be elected directly by popular vote. Nothing was politics as usual for Soviet citizens at the time, although no one knew that the country would disappear, along with Communist power, by the end of the year. But still what would possess a political activist running for president of the Russian Republic to invite people in the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, a sub-unit of the Russian federal republic with a large non-Russian population, to stake as big a claim as possible on political authority?

Sovereignty as Consumable: the Place Setting

In the spring of 1991, campaigning in Tatarstan for the presidency of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, Boris Yeltsin pronounced his famous phrase, "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow."¹ Many aspects of the political moment were novel to Yeltsin, his listeners, and Soviet citizens generally. The Communist Party, after what later turned out to have been its last party conference in July 1990, no longer claimed a monopoly on political representation. Yeltsin, a successful insider self-transformed into an ardent and flamboyant critic of the Soviet leadership, had left the party and was running against an array of Communist candidates. Most radically, this was the first time the leader of the Russian Republic, the largest of the fifteen "union" republics that composed the Soviet Union, was to be elected directly by popular vote. Nothing was politics as usual for Soviet citizens at the time, although no one knew that the country would disappear, along with Communist power, by the end of the year. But still what would possess a political activist running for president of the Russian Republic to invite people in the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, a sub-unit of the Russian federal republic with a large non-Russian population, to stake as big a claim as possible on political authority?

This article considers the meanings of "sovereignty," seen from a place – the city of Kazan in its many political settings, over a long time – from roughly the 11th to the 21st centuries. Kazan is today the capital of the Tatar Republic, nested inside a state one of whose official names is Russia.² But over the thousand years of its history,³ the city has belonged to, and

¹Rafael' Khakim, *Ternisty put' k svobode* (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2007), 361-363.

²Russia and the Russian Federation are both official names of the polity. See Section 1, Statute 1, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation: "The names Russian Federation and Russia have are equal in meaning (*ravnoznachnyi*)."

³On the controversies over Kazan's founding, see Fred Hilgemann, *Le Tatarstan: Pays des musulmans de Russia* (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2007), 14-15.

sometimes reigned over, several large polities: the Bolgar Khanate, the Golden Horde, the Khanate of Kazan, Imperial Russia, the USSR, and finally, or rather as of now, the Russian Federation. The city has been a nodal point of tribal power, a dependency of a huge Eurasian empire, the capital of an independent khanate, a frontier region, an imperial province, a Soviet autonomous republic, very briefly a Soviet union republic, and a federal subject in the Russian Federation. From a spacial perspective on political units, Kazan was sometimes a center; sometimes, to use conventional terminology, it was a "periphery," sometimes both, depending on who was looking.

Kazan provides us with a promising case for thinking about empire and sovereignty, in part because its political status shifted over time, but also because the population of the region was and is what we now call "mixed." (Of course, the notion of mixing derives from a particular and historically speaking peculiar perspective on culture: at present we generally regard uniformity – unmixedness – as normal and unlikeness as remarkable. It's difficult to find a vocabulary that describes difference and variety as ordinary human situations.)⁴ In any case, for at least the last 500 years, Kazan with its hinterlands has been a region where people of various ethnicities, religions, ranks, and occupations lived or passed through with purpose.

This mingled condition is in part related to the city's geographical position near a crucial bend in the Volga river. The river flows roughly west-east from what is now the central Russian area around Moscow, then near Kazan turns south toward the Caspian. The Volga's trajectory gave traders, raiders, tribal chiefs, and state-makers ample opportunity for profit and brought them and their dependents into this region. The area was also compatible with animal husbandry, agriculture, and forestry. Steppe, woods, and even black soil offered plausible platforms for both

⁴The notion of mixing depends in turn on identifying what is being mixed. See Rogers Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 7-27 on the problematic connection of ethnicity to a group.

nomads and settlers. It is no accident that Kazan was founded earlier than Moscow: the location offered far better prospects for the ambitious. Among the region's extractable resources were gypsum, clay, and sulfides; in the 20th century, Tatarstan's great attraction became oil.⁵

Attracted by these multiple opportunities, many people with diverse interests and experiences moved into this mid-Volga region. Leaping ahead to census data taken by the Russian imperial administration, we find that in 1913 the officially counted population of the province of Kazan was 2,850,101; of these, 1,940,630 were Orthodox; 853,715 were Muslim. Seven other religious groups accounted for the rest. Fifteen different ethnic groups, plus a residual category for "others," were recorded. The four biggest ethnic categories were Russians (1,108,085), Tatars (898,653), Chuvash (649,940) and Cheremis (145,550).⁶

At the beginning of the twentieth century, and for many prior centuries, aspirants to political authority in this region would have to manage a complex array of ethnic and confessional groups. The area around Kazan and the city itself were populated by people who worshiped their gods in multitudes of ways, spoke a variety of Slavic, Mongol, Finno-Ugric, and Turkic languages, and, by the late nineteenth century, wrote in Arabic, Cyrillic, Latin, and Hebraic scripts. Certainly a hodge-podge, although completely "normal" for those who lived in it).

Let us turn to the question of imperial sovereignty and its expressions in this region. My argument is the following: There is no singular "imperial" connection to the configuration of political, social, and cultural conditions. What matters are the ruling traditions of the empire

⁵On resources in the late 19th and early 20th century, see L. Veinberg, "Kazanskaia guberniia," *Entsikopedicheskii slovar' E. A. Brokgauza i I. A. Efron* (St. Petersburg, 1890-1907), <http://www.vehi.net/brokgauz/index.html>; on oil, see Hildermann, *Tatarstan*, 158-166, and "Nef't', *Tatarskii entsikopedicheskii slovar'* (Kazan: Institut Tatarskoi entsiklopedii AN RT, 1999), 393.

⁶*Obzor Kazanskoi gubernii za 1913 god* (Kazan: Tipografiia Gubernskogo pravleniia, 1915), vedomosti 2, 3, 4.

concerned (its repertoire of rule⁷), the extant political culture of people in the area acquired or sought after, and the wider framework of international, inter-imperial competition and collaboration at a particular moment. There are many ways to rule an empire, just as there are many ways to try to rule a nation-state. The configuration of power around and in any area can shift over time, turning an area into an outpost, a center of political authority, a frontier, or a unit in a larger entity.

Sovereignty on the Volga: From Bolgars to Romanovs

In the beginning, there were the Bolgars. Or at least that is how the story is now told in Kazan. Tatars today trace the origins of their political being to the Bolgars, a people of Eurasian origin who migrated into the middle Volga region in the seventh century. (Other Bolgars moved further west to the area of today's Bulgaria.) The Volga Bulgars displaced or subordinated Finno-Ugric peoples (ancestors of the present-day Maris), contended with rival Turkic tribes, and provided defensive services as well as problems to the Byzantines. For long periods, Bolgar khans were subject to the overlordship of the great Khazar empire that dominated the northern Caucasus, the lower Volga, and coastal regions of the Caspian and Black Seas from the mid 7th to the mid 10th centuries.⁸

Out of the multiple conflicts, migrations, shifts of allegiance, and alliances with or against empires and tribes – the stuff of politics in the area⁹ – Bolgars made themselves into a

⁷On the concept of repertoires of rule, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 16-17.

⁸On the history of Bolgars, including discussion of sources, see Bariev, R. Kh., *Volzhkie bulgary: Istorii i kul'tura* (Saint Petersburg: Agat, 2005). The Bolgar origins story comes in many variants; Soviet and post-Soviet versions are not easy to disentangle. See Katherine E. Graney, *Of Khans and Kremlins: Tatarstan and the Future of Ethno-Federalism in Russia* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 2-4.

⁹On politics in the region, see Beatrice Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge, U.K., Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2-9, "The Turko-Mongolian Heritage."

powerful people, leaders of a budding empire with a capital city near the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers, 160 kilometers south of today's Kazan. This juncture was a promising place: the Kama descends with propitious bends for over one thousand miles from the north-east before merging with the Volga. The city of Bolgar became rich from its advantageous situation that linked northern Europe and waterways west of the Urals to the Mediterranean, Central Asia and beyond. The city's wealth attracted the covetous attention of empires – the multi-faith Khazars and the dynamic Muslim dynasties.

In 921, the Abbasid Caliph, responding to a request from the Bolgar khan (at least this is one version of this event), sent the indefatigable Ibn Fadlan from Baghdad to Bolgar. In some accounts, the Bolgar khan had asked the Caliph for instructions on the Islamic faith and for help in building a mosque. Another version, not incompatible, is that the Caliph wanted to acquire a subordinate and thus expand his sway in the northern steppe regions. One element is common in these narratives: Ibn Fadlan's delegation, arriving in Bolgar in 922, encountered a ruler, Khan Almysh, who professed the Muslim faith. One way or another, the Bolgars had become Muslims around this time.¹⁰

Six decades later Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev, who may have shared some genes as well as political practices and aspirations with his Bolgar neighbors, also made a choice for a monotheistic faith, in his case Christianity. Both khan and prince were polytheists before their conversions; both headed clans who held sway over peasants and foragers with their own local cults; both were made rich by control over trade routes to the Mediterranean and further East. Conversion to either Islam or Christianity in the 10th century brought cultural and economic

¹⁰A Russian-language version of Ibn Fadlan's account, based on a 1939 publication, packaged with a description of the Baghdad Caliph's mission to the Bolgar "tsar" can be found in [Puteshestvie Akhmeda Ibn-Fadlana na reku Itil' i priinatie v Bulgarii islama. Drevnii tekst pereskazal Sultan Shamsi](#) (Kazan: Mifi-Servis [1992]); cited by Bariev, [Volzhskie bolgary](#), 83.

assets: connections to the old, distinguished Byzantines or to the young, sophisticated Caliphates. Kievan princes went one way; Bolgar khans the other. In both cases, they brusquely converted the denizens of their cities along with royal families. These choices became part of political repertoires and cultural assets of descendant polities in Kazan and Kiev and later in Moscow; they inflect the discourses of sovereignty to this day. Viewed from an anachronistically territorialized concept of the state, Islam came to lands that would later become part of "Russia" a good sixty years before the iconic date (988) of the Rus' prince's conversion in Kiev.¹¹

The city of Kazan became a center of commerce, craft, and Islam during the reign of the Bolgar khans in the 11th and 12th centuries. Although it is not my intent here to follow the city's history forward in time in any detail, several aspects of the area's deep past are relevant to the questions of empire, space, and sovereignty. First, the city was made possible by imperial power at a time and in a place where borders, if they even existed in any one's imagination, were fungible. It was not by drawing lines in the sand that the empires in the region were created. In the middle Volga region, what was desired was not territory, but control: control over trade routes (the Kama and the Volga and their watercourses in this case), over city centers with their cultural and artisanal production, and over laboring populations who could supply agricultural and other products.¹² Bolgars, Khazars, Rus' princes, and other warrior clans extended their power by securing positions as superior rulers, who could collect from the people they conquered.

Successful imperial implantation in these conditions meant conquest usually, but

¹¹On Vladimir's conversion in its imperial context, see Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*, 186-188. On the historiographically torturous relationship between "Russian" history and Kazan, see Edward L. Keenan's classic study, "Muscovy and Kazan': Some Introductory Remarks on the Patterns of Steppe Diplomacy," *Slavic Review* 26, 4 (1967): 548-558.

¹²On the notion of an administrative center for the collection of taxes and as a node of trade for the Rus', see the discussion of the word *pogost* in Daniel Kaiser, *The Growth of Law in Medieval Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1908), 181-183. Kaiser notes, "the idea of territoriality is developed very weakly in the *Ruskaia Pravda* ", *op. cit.*, p. 180.

maintenance of control required working through intermediary layers of command, with city councils, with tribal leaders, through religious authorities. Islam and Christianity were useful in at least two respects: their ritual practices could enhance the rule of an earthly sovereign, and their religious authorities (monks, clerics, teachers, spiritual guides, etc.) were potentially managers of local populations. Toiling people, whether farmers or horsemen, were expected to follow their leaders, including religious ones. The art of empire was in creating or absorbing effective power brokers and keeping them loyal.

If the goal was not territorial, space nonetheless made a difference. Asserting power over the human beings who could manage the nodes and lines of long-distance trade, transhumance, and settlement was no mean feat. But the game was worth the candle and there were multiple contenders for the position of ultimate ruler. The technical means of play was armed warfare, mostly on horseback;¹³ the political condition was personal allegiance connecting commanders of troops. Which meant that contenders changed not just horses but loyalties all the time. There were no "sides" to this game of empowerment steppe-style; instead the players could re-group at any moment and take the ball with them to places they found propitious. (Here is where physical geography and technical conditions both play critical roles: when rivers were the major transport lines, then the ball will be chased to some place along them. Later, the invention of railroads and airplanes would change the contours of the game.)

From this spacial perspective, we might consider Kazan a miniature Constantinople/Istanbul. Constantinople (under different names) with its extraordinary site on the Bosphorus had been fought over for over a millennium before the Bolgars arrived from Central Asia; the great city would continue to be a site of contention among defenders and

¹³On the horse and steppe warfare, see Alessndro Stanziani, Bâtitseurs d'empires: Russie, Chine et Inde à la croisée des mondes, XVe - XIXe siècle (Paris: Raisons d'agir éditions, 2012), 26-28.

builders of empire for centuries to come. Bolgar tribes were sufficiently strong to participate in the contests for a share of Byzantium's riches,¹⁴ but it was in cities in the middle Volga region that Bolgar leaders managed to consolidate authority and fend off rivals for control of Byzantine hinterlands. Kazan was an ideal collection point, and more defensible than Bolgar to the south, which was repeatedly attacked by Rus' princes in the 12th century.¹⁵

Both the Bulgars and Kievan princes, and everyone else in the way, met more than their match during the Mongols' great campaign (1236-1242) through Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Pontic steppes, along the Volga and Dniepr rivers, and into the heart of central Europe.¹⁶ After Bolgar armies had been defeated and the Bolgar emir became a Mongol client,¹⁷ Kazan became a node of control in the western division of the Mongol empire. Kazan's leaders were invested by Mongol khans who ruled the Ulus of Jochi, otherwise known as the Golden Horde or the Kipchak Khanate (Desht-i-Kipchak).¹⁸ When the Ulus of Jochi disaggregated in the 14th century, a result of the usual contests among members of the dynasty, one of the descendant polities was the Khanate of Kazan, ruled by the heirs of Chinggis the conqueror.

Thus the first substantial political entity based in Kazan emerged after centuries of competitions for control over the Volga trade routes that connected northern Europe to the Mediterranean, to Central Asia and points farther east and south. Encounters among armed gangs of "protectors," merchants, tribal authorities, and imperial armies had shaped the political

¹⁴On Bolgar interventions in Byzantine politics, see Warren Threadgold, "The Struggle for Survival (641-780), 137, 142, in Cyril Mango, ed., The Oxford History of Byzantium (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁵See Bariev, Volzhskie bulgary, 55-84.

¹⁶On the Mongol campaign, see David Morgan, The Mongols (Malden: Blackwell, 1990), 61-73, 136-145.

¹⁷For versions of this defeat and subordination, on the issue of whether the Mongols ever made Bolgar a major site of rule, and on Bolgar's flourishing economy as a Golden Horde client, see Bariev, Volzhskie bulgary, 153-184.

¹⁸On the Kipchak Khanate, see Morgan, The Mongols, 141-145. The controversy over the name is a minor skirmish in the huge ongoing war over the relationship of the Mongols to Russian state formation. See Donald Ostrowski, Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589 (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998) for a strong position.

culture of the area, as had inevitable contacts with the more powerful empires to the south and east.

Kazan as a City-State

The Khanate of Kazan was no blank slate: it had the basic materials of sovereignty written all over it. Rulers in Kazan as well as their followers would find it natural and possible to organize power along lines and nodes of control (not by drawing borders). They would want to make authorities in regional towns and agrarian communities into their subordinates; they would use rituals of allegiance to turn tribal leaders into their loyal followers; they would deal cautiously with other polities by making alliances with rivals against greater powers or to counter immediate threats. As for administration, the Kazan khans used the regulatory techniques employed by the Golden Horde. Taxes were allocated according to the 10s and 100s system of the Mongols, collected and recorded by officials. In accord with Mongol tradition, the ruler, the khan, had to be from the Chinggisid bloodline, but there was no fixed system of succession. The khan was advised by inner circle of counselors, including his military commanders and other notables. The practice of consulting authorities also took the form of an occasionally summoned grand council of leaders (similar to and probably a descendant of the Mongol kuriltai) that would chose the new khan or at least influence the choice of a new khan from among Chinggisid contenders.¹⁹ Under Uzbek Khan, the Mongols had like the Bolgars chosen Islam as the dynasty's faith; Kazan over time became a center of Muslim education and education. At least three elements of the khanate's history would continue to shape politics in this area: the fluid practices of personal allegiance both inside the ruling dynasty and between rulers and

¹⁹On the kuriltai, see Morgan, Mongols, 40, and on Mongol political culture generally, see Fletcher, Joseph, "The Mongols: Ecological and Social Perspectives," Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 46 (1986): 11-50.

subordinated elites; Islam as a first-choice religion and cultural reference point; and the regulated exploitation of economic resources derived from Kazan's physical location.²⁰

Was the khanate a kind of tribal nation-state, run by and for a single ethnic group? Groups that vied for control and allegiance in this area eventually acquired names, often more than one, that were recorded in accounts on which our historiography is based. Either Bolgars were in charge of Kazan, or Khazars, or Mongols. In this sense, the polities and tribes in the mid-Volga region were identified by themselves or their competitors with specific names and can be regarded as "nations." And all around Kazan, in areas supervised by the khanate, were other peoples, also provided sooner or later with ethnic labels: Mari, Udmurt (with their Finno-Ugric languages); Chuvash, Bashkir, and Nogai (with their Turkic languages) among them. Ambitious leaders who succeeded in putting their groups (clans, tribes, confederations) into commanding positions or at least making them visible to other powers have left these nominal traces; historians with various motives can forage through widely scattered sources in efforts to find "their" ancestors. Today, people in Tatarstan are told to look back to the Khanate of Kazan to find the nation from whence they descend – the nation of Tatars who are thought to have been the masters of Kazan.

Who were these Tatars? The name has become associated with several groups and polities and of course controversies. Most neutrally, Tatars are considered a Turkic speaking group, with Siberian origins. It is claimed that they were conquered and pushed west by the Mongols, some of them ending up in the mid-Volga area. In western Europe, the whole of Russia was sometimes called Tartary, which offended many Russians who associated Tatars with Mongols, the "Mongol yoke," etc. The association with Mongols can have both positive and

²⁰For the history of governance of the Khanate of Kazan, see I. R. Tagirov, Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti Tatarskogo naroda i Tatarstana (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2008), 119-153.

negative glosses for Tatar specialists, too. The predominant interpretation, mentioned above, is that today's Tatars are descendants of the Volga Bolgars. But as we have seen, the Bolgar polity was taken over by the Mongols, and it was Mongol khans who led the Khanate of Kazan. The question of whether Tatars are ethnically Bolgars or mixtures of Bolgars, Mongols, and other groups (Kipchak Turks) who might have mingled under the rule of the Golden Horde reveals more about nationalisms today than about Kazan when it flourished under Chinggisid rule in the 14th and 15th centuries.²¹

The controversy over ethnicity does bear on questions of sovereignty, empire, and space. Although the ethnonym Tatar is hard to trace and was probably not adopted with much enthusiasm by "Tatars" themselves until the 19th century, the place-name Kazan has enjoyed a strong hold on political imagination. Enthusiasts of a "Bolgar" vs. a "Tatar" identification use the label "Kazan Bulgaria" (Kazanskaia Bulgariia) to describe the Khanate of Kazan,²² whereas "Tatar" loyalists describe the polity with its toponym. Russian sources, too, focused on the city; these accounts use the names Khanate of Kazan, Tsardom of Kazan, and, after gaining control, Kazan Province. This focus on the place name reminds us that what counted for the ambitious was not gains for a whole people, but command over a site where wealth could be collected, concentrated, and redistributed in ways that would keep essential intermediaries loyal. It would be more accurate to call the Khanate of Kazan a "city-state" rather than a "nation-state,"²³ and it is the city name that lives on continuously in documents and imagination.

²¹On the differences and some of the implications of the various definitions of Tatars, see Закиев М. З., Волжско-булгарское государство и роль Золотой орды в его падении (и своего тоже), <http://www.bulgarizdat.ru/book401.shtml>. This site on Bolgar history is called "The Treasures of the Bulgar People (Sokrovishcha bolgarskogo naroda)."

²²For an example see Bariev, Volzhskie bulgary. Chapter four's title, p. 213, is "Maturity: The Historical Path and Cultural Achievements of Kazan' Bulgariia (Зрелость: Исторический путь и культурные достижения Казанской Булгарии)."

²³Stanziani uses city-state for the Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, making a distinction between these city-based polities and the Khanate of the Crimea, a more extensive and powerful actor in the inter-empire politics on the spaces formerly part of the Mongol empires. See Stanziani, Bâisseurs d'empires, 95-97.

Setting aside the misleading read backs of various ethnic identifications onto Kazan's rulers, one thing we can be sure of is that the denizens of the city and the khanate's subjects in surrounding areas did not constitute a single ethnic or confessional group. The governed peoples – the ones who had to pay tribute (iasak) to tax collectors for the khanate – were from multiple origins. Some were the descendants of Finnish and Siberian migrants; some were Turkic speakers whose ancestors had been pushed out of Inner and Central Asia; some were raiders and traders with distant connections reaching out in many directions. The city's economic possibilities attracted artisans and merchants from Central Asia and the near East.

While the religion of the khans and increasingly of elites and subjects in the region was Islam, many who lived in the forested areas or villages were animists or shamanists of various kinds. Some merchants would be Jews, and some would be Christians of Eastern variants (Georgian or Armenian, as well as Byzantine). Mongol khans, who were notoriously eclectic in their personal religious choices, traditionally protected multiple faiths and clerics. This umbrella approach to religion and to cultural differences had been a political asset when the Mongols extended their control across most of Eurasia.²⁴ From their Mongol predecessors in the Golden Horde, the Khanate of Kazan inherited both Islam as a state religion and the practice of confessional tolerance.

In the extended competitions for control along the Volga route and in its hinterlands, religious adherence played a minor role. For some elites, confession served as a language of loyalty; conversion to a faith could be an expression of fealty to a particular sovereign. For sovereigns, religion could offer a useful linkage with some dependents. But successful expansion of control in this multi-confessional region required a tolerance for difference. Khans and tsars

²⁴On Mongol rule and religion, see Burbank and Cooper, Empires in World History, pp. 108-109.

did not conduct wars of religion, and they were more than willing to ally with leaders who professed or even styled themselves protectors of a different faith.

A Space for Imperial Expansion

The Khanate of Kazan was a by-product of intra-dynastic struggles for leadership within the Golden Horde. But the disaggregation of the Horde into separate khanates in the 14th century did not end the contests for power in the unruly lands north of the Black Sea. Around the edges of this space, several other new or reconfigured powers emerged over the next hundred years, among them the Khanate of Astrakhan further south along the Volga and the Khanate of Crimea. To the west, a branch of the Rus' dynasty, expanded its control outward from the small town of Moscow. In the still open spaces of the steppe north of the Black Sea and along the lower Volga, several confederations of nomadic tribes – Nogais and Bashkirs – carried on the usual political economy of protecting and exploiting trade routes and jockeying for beneficial alliances with other powers. Great empires were arrayed around the outside of this turbulent middle ground – the powerful Grand Duchy of Poland-Lithuania to the west and the Ottomans to the south. Their distant location left room for smaller powers to accumulate resources and expand.

Both Moscow and Kazan, as well as Astrakhan and Crimea, had been under the sway of the Golden Horde; their leaders had learned their political lessons as dependants of the Mongol khans. The princes in Moscow, descendants of Riurik, the legendary founder of the Rus' dynasty, were aggressive upstarts in the region. The Moscow leaders succeeded in becoming superior rulers (grand princes) over other Riurikids by cultivating good will and legitimation from the Mongol khan. Moscow's Grand Prince continued to pay tribute to the khans until late in the 15th century, all the while expanding the principality's control over what would later become known

as central and northern Russia.²⁵ Alliances between Riurikid princes or would-be princes, Mongol khans or would-be khans were frequent in the multiple contests over resources and lands that had earlier been united by the Mongols into a huge Eurasian economic space. Moscow and the khanates at times allied with each other against the aggressive empires on their borders. Poland-Lithuania threatened both Moscow and Crimea; the Ottomans threatened the Crimean khan. And in between armed and mounted tribes – Nogais, Kazakhs, Bashkirs – could make their deals with both rebels against and supporters of these various polities.

This was the volatile context in which Moscow made its great move east and ultimately into sovereignty in Kazan. In accord with the politics of subordination, Moscow first tried, beginning in the 1480s, to put its client on the throne of the khanate. This worked off and on. Collaboration was another option: Kazan's khans and some of the local elites could cooperate with Moscow in the management of at least some of the region's resources and waterways. For a time, a separate Mongol-headed polity, the Khanate of Kasimov, was set up under Moscow's supervision on the Oka river, part way to Kazan.²⁶ In the 16th century, Moscow began to extend its lines of fortresses further into Tatar territory, commanding the allegiance of peoples who were discontent with their Tatar overlords. The multi-ethnic and sparsely populated region nominally under Kazan's control offered a perfect context for peeling off other empires' subjects.

As Moscow expanded its control over the Volga and its feeder waterways, the Crimean khans began to get nervous. The threat of an alliance between the Crimean and Kazan khanates against Moscow may have been a factor in the decision of Ivan IV (the Terrible) to renounce the politics of clientage and to attempt to take over Kazan militarily. It took more than one try. In

²⁵On Moscow's expansion and its rivals, see Stanziani, *Bâtisseurs d'empires*, 95-98.

²⁶Matthew P. Romaniello, *The Elusive Empire: Kazan and the Creation of Russia 1552-1671* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 28. On the Kasimov khanate, see Bulat Rakhimzianov, *Kasimovskoe khanstvo (1445-1552 gg.) Ocherki istorii* (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2009).

1551 the Russian forces built a fort on the Volga upstream from Kazan, from which they could block supply routes to the city, attract support from local people, and potentially attack the city. Maneuvering among the Kazan's elites and Crimean delegates did not produce peaceful submission to the Tsar's formidable forces. In September 1552, after a month-long siege, the city fell to the Muscovite army.²⁷

Kazan under Russian rule

The conquest of Kazan is traditionally considered the starting date of Russian empire. The incorporation of a large Muslim population into the polity signals, for many scholars, the ethnic diversity that conventionally defines an imperial polity.²⁸ But we should note that the whole process of Muscovite extension from its shaky beginnings in the 13th century involved extending control over cities, settlements, and trade routes where people of distinct cultures, religions, and languages lived. The leaders of the Kazan khanate and their Bolgar predecessors had acted in the same fashion. There was no real ethnicized core to these empires in the making. Empire builders in the central "Russian" and mid-Volga areas did not have firm borders between themselves and others on the mind. Their concerns were control over critical nodes of concentrated populations and over lines of trade. The "conquest of Kazan" was just that – the conquest of a city; it did not bring with it a demarcated territory. Kazan's new overlords would have to work hard to bring the surrounding peoples under their command and their taxation

²⁷For an account of the conquest, see Tagirov, *Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti*, 140-153.

²⁸See the classic study, Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson, 2001), 21. Kappeler sees the conquest of the city as an "unparalleled step in the history of the Muscovite state," in that it concerned "the annexation of a sovereign state that had never belonged to Rus, and was a part of the Mongolian empire, the political system established by Genghis Khan, and the Islamic community."

regime.²⁹

To make the transition from conquerers to rulers, the Russians relied on practices of sovereignty that they shared with the city's former rulers and surviving elites. At the apex of power was the ultimate leader: the Russian tsar (equivalent of Kaiser and Caesar) replaced the khan. His military commanders – of many origins – were delegated considerable powers in the first decades of Russian rule, as troops managed to extend lines of defense against Nogais, Bashkirs, and other nomads.³⁰ Gradually, Russian officials established administrative and judicial institutions. All these intermediaries commanded in the name of the tsar. The establishment of imperial authority over the multiple peoples of the area proceeded with the usual combination – the stick of violence and the carrot of protection by an imperial overlord.

There was one, big, difference for people of Kazan. Now the religion of the rulers was Russian Christianity, not Islam. Worse, from the perspective of many, the Orthodox church was the major ideological support for Russian power. This had many consequences for government in Kazan. An archbishop was established for the area and leading churchmen took prominent roles in the rituals of conquest. Kazan's kremlin (fortress) was consecrated as Christian space. Churchmen were aggressive constructors of new fortified monasteries that established and extended Moscow's control. The Tatars of the city, considered infidels by the church, were pushed out of the center into a special Tatar quarter. Conversion was, of course, the goal of the

²⁹Matthew P. Romaniello notes that it took until the 1570s for the Russians to subdue populations outside the city of Kazan: Matthew P. Romaniello, The Elusive Empire: Kazan and the Creation of Russia 1552-1671 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 19.

³⁰On the extension of the lines, see Carol B. Stevens, Soldiers on the Steppe: Army Reform and Social Change in Early Modern Russia (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995) and her Russia's Wars of Emergence 1460-1730 (Harlow: Longman, 2007); Brian L. Davies, Warfare, State and Society on the Black Sea Steppe, 1500-1700 (New York: Routledge, 2007); Michael Khodarkovsky, Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

Orthodox hierarchs.³¹

The representation of Russia's triumph in Kazan as a Christian conquest played out spectacularly back in Moscow, and in a long lasting way. The famous St. Basil's cathedral outside the Moscow Kremlin was built to commemorate the victory over Kazan. But as Matthew Romaniello points out, the tsar's policies were much more cautious than these dramatic gestures suggest. Moscow's success in the middle Volga was precarious in that it brought the prospect of conflict with the greater powers to the south. The tsar took care to inform the Ottoman sultan that he, the tsar, would protect his new Muslim subjects. More immediately, the tsar needed Muslim troops to subordinate the multiple tribes in the region: Tatars and Nogais were interested in the gains to be had by helping the new empire out. Tatar nobles were able to make their way into Moscow's good graces as loyal servitors. Churchmen could put profit above conversion. By Russian law Christian peasants could be assigned to military servitors, and therefore monasteries that relied on non-Christian villagers for work shared with their laborers an interest in keeping Tatar peasants Muslim.³²

Russian rulers thus took a characteristically pragmatic approach to the task of governing new populations and faiths. The recognition of diversity came naturally to them – it had been essential to their formation of a polity. The normality of incorporating elites with their followers into armies, and of ruling over peasants with a multitude of customs prevailed even after Muscovy had become strong enough to defeat a Muslim khanate. Orthodox Christianity, unlike Islam, did not provide a legal apparatus for governing people of other faiths, and Christian churchmen could be inconveniently aggressive in their universalistic quests. But Orthodoxy was the only high culture available to the Russian tsars in the 16th century. They took what worked,

³¹Romaniello, *Elusive Empire*, 31-35, 40-42.

³²*Ibid.*, 6, 37, 72-82, 153-155.

and gradually acquired other languages of moral rule.

Had Kazan, a city on a river flowing through unterritorialized space, become an imperial borderland? The period of the Russian conquest is the best candidate for this description. Moscow's armies, with their various allies, were gradually extending control outward in all directions from their base on a bend in a lesser river. Land, and not just lines of connection, was important to the Russian princes; they paid their military servitors, with land grants, accompanied by laborers. But once the Moscow princes had defeated their Rurikid rivals in the towns of what is now central and northern Russia, they ran up against much greater powers to north and west (Livonians, Swedes, Poland-Lithuania). To the south, the Ottomans and the intervening nomads presented dangers. The most promising direction was east, toward the Volga and beyond. Kazan became a crucial city on the western edge of Russia's space, and in this sense it was a borderland.

But note two things. First, the border kept moving. The politics of the line of fortresses was Moscow's basic military tactic, but as in other empires on the move, the line was not so much a fixed border but a salient.³³ Moscow's lines of fortresses were both barriers against attacks by uncoopted nomads, but also places from which new expeditions could be launched. If we take a bird's eye overview, Kazan was a borderland that was rather rapidly moving westward (backward?) toward the center, starting from the mid 16th century.

Second, the area around Kazan was no more messy or violent or contrarian than it had been before Moscow got there. Conquest was violent, but it took place in a context where the multiple groups in the population were used to being ruled by a distant sovereign; moreover, they had leaders who understood the advantages and risks of switching allegiances. The early years of

³³On the moving line, see Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 138-158.

incorporation introduced a new field of play – conversion to Christianity – but multiplicity of religions and peoples remained a constant of empire in this area. What did shift with Moscow's implantation in Kazan was the wider field of inter-empire competition, as Russian rulers came closer to the stronger Ottoman empire.

The conquest of Kazan occurred shortly before the most threatening period for Russian sovereignty, the crisis called the Time of Troubles, 1584-1613. When Ivan IV's only surviving heir, the weak-minded Fedor, died, the Riurikid dynasty came to an end. This disastrous event for a polity based on rule by a single family led to a lengthy struggle for the throne, involving not just pretenders from Muscovy, but also the forces of powerful neighbors – Sweden and Poland-Lithuania. Countering the usual assumptions about imperial power, Russia's new subjects in Kazan did not try to break away. Instead, local elites and military men took part in many episodes of the struggle for the throne, making efforts to place a dynastically legitimated person on the throne. Some troops from Kazan fought for the "false Dmitri," who was seen as a true tsar to be supported against the Russian nobleman (Prince Shuiskii) who replaced him; at a later date, people from the region helped drive out the Poles.³⁴

Why did people in the Kazan region act for, not against, the authority of their recent conquerors? At stake were offices that were redistributed as the contests over power multiplied and what people in Kazan, as elsewhere, seemed to see as essential to order, well-being, or just survival – a clear chain of command to local authorities and a legitimate tsar at the head of state. In short, the basic attributes of Eurasian sovereignty.

The firm re-anchoring of Russian power in Kazan under the new Romanov dynasty (1613-1917) turned out to have long-lasting implications for the political possibilities of the

³⁴See the excellent account in Romaniello, *Elusive Empire*, 46-49.

region. Within a few decades of the 1552 assault, Russian rule in Kazan had turned into a fact of life, and one worth protecting. The area would remain part of Russia's several empires for the next 460 years, and still counting. It would become less a border region and a more a center for imperial management as the empire stretched out across Siberia. The institutions of governance would be altered multiple times, as they were throughout the empire; the tricky business of managing a large Muslim population would produce shifts in strategy and institutions; and activists in Kazan would be critical in at least two more near crashes of the Russian state, in 1917 and 1991. Before turning to these revealing 20th century moments when sovereignty was, twice, in free fall, let me point to a few critical aspects of Russian administration under the Romanovs.

First, Romanov rule relied, as did that of empires generally, on the use of intermediaries who could in principle manage their dispersed and disparate populations. The Romanovs, like their Riurikid predecessors, attracted elites from a variety of groups into imperial management. This meant that Tatar and other elites could find a home in the "Russian" nobility, and earn rewards for their service.³⁵ One of these rewards was the land grant, and often the labor to go with it; elites from the Kazan region thus partook of the largesse offered by Russia's rulers to its loyal commanders. The allocation of rights in particularistic, even individualistic ways was a keystone of Romanov rule. Like the Mongol khans earlier, Russian sovereigns asserted their right to control the land of the realm, which meant, generally, assigning it to noble servitors, of many ethnic origins.³⁶

Second, and connected to the emperor's land-allocating practices, the Romanovs ruled

³⁵See Romaniello, *Elusive Empire*, p. 213, on how this history of elite service has been distorted by recent nationalizing historians.

³⁶See Ekaterina Pravilova, "A Private Empire: Public Interest and Property Rights in Imperial Russia," manuscript, for an extended and revisionist discussion of legal interpretations of the allocation of property to servitors by the emperor. On land donation as a sovereign prerogative, see Ekaterina Pravilova, "The Property of Empire: Islamic Law and Russian Agrarian Policy in Transcaucasia and Turkestan," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, 2 (Spring 2011): 353-386.

through law. The emperor, like a Eurasian khan, was expected to issue laws and to provide access to judicial procedures. This obligation was one expression of the sovereign's duty to protect his subjects, often from harm caused by the intermediaries on which the emperor also depended.³⁷ The emperor assigned his various dependents rights and obligations in a collective fashion: the law defined specific rights of different groups in the population. Through this regime of allocated rights subjects, including those of Kazan, received from their sovereign legally protected possibilities to engage in particular kinds of commerce, take on certain tasks, exploit resources, and construct family and other social relations.³⁸

A third characteristic of Romanov rule was its flexibility. With the emperor as the sole source of law, the legal regime could be manipulated and adjusted to fit new circumstances. The emperor him or herself was a critical actor in the imperial regime of rights, but so too were the high ranking servitors, court and other intimates, and top administrators who could influence the making and remaking of the laws. To participate in the highest politics of the realm, one had to be part of the inner circle of advisors or companions of the emperor or empress. Thus, the politics of personal allegiance and of shifting alliances moved from the open field of military competition on the steppe and into the capitals of Romanov power, first Moscow, then St. Petersburg.

The Muscovite princes had an imperial ideology that buttressed their authority: Eastern Christianity, deployed in a variant developed and transformed as the Russian church became an institution under its Metropolitan, later Patriarch, headquartered in Moscow. The first Romanov, crowned in 1613, was the son of the Metropolitan of the Russian church. Over the course of the

³⁷On the ethic of imperial protection in Muscovy, see Nancy Shields Kollmann, *By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

³⁸On the regime of allocated rights, see Jane Burbank, "An Imperial Rights Regime: Law and Citizenship in the Russian Empire," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, 3 (Summer 2006): 397-431.

next two centuries, the Romanovs got the upper hand over their clerical advisors, constricted and controlled church and monastic resources, and turned the church into a well disciplined partner of the commanding emperor. This politics of subordinating Orthodoxy to imperial control had significant consequences for the administration of Kazan and its region. Although Orthodox hierarchs were forever pushing for a politics of conversion, the state could back off from extreme measures when these proved inconvenient.³⁹

Under Peter the Great, who took pains to assert his primacy over the Russian Patriarch in the capitals, the imperial administration began a campaign of mass conversions to Orthodoxy, including granting tax exemptions and other privileges to the newly converted. A few decades later, this aggressive policy was countermanded by Catherine the Great. Her 1773 ukaz, "On the tolerance of all confessions and on the forbidding of hierarchs to interfere in matters concerning the other (inovernnyi) confessions and concerning the building according to their law of prayer houses, and the transfer of all these [matters] to the secular authorities," expressed one side of the imperial politics of confessional pluralism. The other arm of Russian strategy was control over the clergy, of all faiths. In 1789, the state opened the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, an institution that was to train the clergy under the supervision of their imperial overseers.⁴⁰

The recognition of the multi-cultural composition of the empire was explicit in imperial law in the 19th and 20th centuries. For example, the law allowed different marital regimes to people of different faiths, and most family matters would be settled by religious institutions to

³⁹For an example of such an episode, see Robert Geraci, "Russian Orientalism at an Impasse: Tsarist Educational Policy and the 1910 Conference on Islam," in Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzarini, eds., Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 138-161.

⁴⁰On imperial legislation in the 18th century on religion in the Kazan region, see Aidar Nogmanov, Tatary srednego povolzh'ia i priural'ia v Rossiiskom zakonodatel'stve vtoroi poloviny XVI-XVIII vv. (Kazan: Fen, 2002), 100-132. Catherine the Great's law on tolerance was issued as an ukaz by the Holy Sinod on June 17, 1773: Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii, 1 series, t. 19, no. 13.996, s. 775-776. On the Muslim Spiritual Assembly, see Robert D. Crews, For prophet and tsar : Islam and empire in Russia and Central Asia (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2006), 52-91, and Robert P. Geraci, Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 22.

which subjects belonged.⁴¹ Writing laws for specific groups and circumstances was an ordinary practice of imperial governance right up until the overthrow of the dynasty in March 1917. The variability of legislation was always an irritant to someone, especially to the liberal professionals who became more active in imperial governance over the course of the 19th century. The empire's multiplex approach made centralism and universalism into handy arguments for reform.

One approach to regularization was through definition of the units of the empire. Catherine the Great was a critical figure in the spacial configuration of administrative boundaries: her provincial reform created 35 provinces inside the empire, each with its capital city and its governor. Gradually the number of the provinces rose to 50. Kazan had been designated as a "province (guberniia)" under Peter the Great; its area was based on that of the former khanate, considered to have become the property of the Moscow Grand Prince. Over the 18th century, this very large region was redivided several times; several new provinces were carved out of the khanate's space. Kazan remained the capital city of the reduced province and the cultural center of the middle Volga area. The Kazan Theological Academy, opened in 1842, became a center for training in Orthodoxy and for religious instruction in the languages of the region.⁴² A gymnasium was opened to train civil servants in 1759; Kazan University was opened in 1804. Kazan became the central node in the regional circuit court, opened after the 1864 reform, as well as for the military administration.

By the end of 19th century, Kazan's administrative structures were similar to those central Russian provinces. As in other areas, there were distinctive regimes of rights applying to groups in the population, defined by civil status (estate), confession, locality, function, or location. For example, peasants of whatever ethnicity, had access to the township courts for small civil suits

⁴¹See Burbank, "Imperial Rights Regime."

⁴²Geraci, Window on the East, 49-61.

and misdemeanors, and all subjects in the province were subject to the supervision of police, circuit courts, and officials assigned to duties in townships, counties, cities, as well as those serving in the provincial offices.⁴³

The province was still mixed confessionally, despite the on-and-off efforts of Orthodox authorities to acquire converts. The effective Il'minsky system of teaching pagan children to read the Gospels in their native languages had produced significant numbers of converts among animist groups.⁴⁴ Part of the Tatar population was Christian, descendants of the converts from the 18th century. This development was expressed in the administration's labeling of its subjects: Tatar villagers were identified as "Tatars" or "baptised Tatars." The efforts of modernizers of various faiths also left an impact. Muslims differed over how to school their children, and authorities in the Muslim hierarchy interpreted Sharia in conflicting ways.⁴⁵ Kazan was a capital for Tatar culture, with a Tatar language theater, Tatar publications (written in Arabic script), Tatar institutes of learning. Although Russians dominated the administrative apparatus of the city and the province, Tatars served as lower level civil servants. Some Tatar merchants and philanthropists were prominent members of Kazan's economic elite.⁴⁶

For Russian empire, the diversity of subjects within a single province and across the empire was nothing strange. For Tatars, discord over proper schooling, politics, and religious truth was also a familiar condition of so-called communal life. Kazan was physically part of

⁴³For the official listing of government institutions in the beginning of the twentieth century, see [Adres-Kalendar' Kazanskoi gubernii na 1905 g.](#) Izdanie Kazanskogo gubernskogo statisticheskogo komiteta, pod redaktsiei isp ob Sekretaria Komiteta, D. P. Malov (Kazan: Tipo-litografiia Imperatorskogo Universiteta 1905).

⁴⁴On Il'minsky and his system, see Geraci, [Window on the East](#), 47-85.

⁴⁵See Crews, [For Prophet and Tsar](#), 297-300, 316-330; on Islamic modernizers in Central Asia, see Adeeb Khalid, [The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁴⁶On Tatar achievements, see Azade-Ayse Rorlich, [The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resistance](#) (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986). On Tatar theater, see Madina Goldberg, "Russian Empire – Tatar Theater: the Politics of Culture in Late Imperial Kazan," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009.

"European Russia," now well to the west of the geographic middle of the country, but it was as diverse as ever. Had this re-centering transformed in any fundamental way the relations between subjects and their state?

Two Imperial Transitions in one Century

For the remainder of this article, I focus on Kazan during two periods of "transition" when the foundations of the empire were shaken and the recovery of sovereignty was in question – the twenty years or so after 1917 and after 1991. In both cases, the very premises of state power – the legal supremacy of the emperor in 1917 and the "leading role" of the Communist Party in 1991 – had been vociferously rejected by centrally located elites and their mobilized followers. If the logics of empire to nation-state, or empire-decolonization-independence had been at work in history, Russia should have fragmented and remained in shards after the fall of the autocracy in 1917 or at least after the rejection of Communist rule in 1991. Nationalized scenarios were available and appealed to by some activists in both periods; in both cases some major parts of the empire became independent, in the first case, temporarily, in the second—who knows. But neither collapse led to full-fledged independence for the majority of the national groups in the empire. Instead multiple actors put much of the state back together again and retained its imperial – complex and differentiated – configuration.

I propose that the so-called transitional periods – when people did not know what the future held or where they were transitioning to – are times when we can see assumptions about politics, states, and social behavior more clearly than in periods of assumed stability. When people have a chance to make states, or think that they can do so, they may try to promote the dreamworlds that earlier inspired attacks on the state order, but their actions are guided by their

underlying presumptions about how power is exercised and how states can be organized. The post-revolutionary situation demands that people make guesses about what is socially viable in their relations with each other; these guesses reveal expectations about how society and government will work. The “transition” thus becomes a window on the past – on what are assumed to be normal relations of people to each other, to property, and to power. The behaviors of people in these times, of both rulers and ruled, thus lays bare the skeleton of a state – if its bones were strong.⁴⁷

One of my arguments is that Russia survived as a polity and Kazan as a unit within in it through these two periods of post-revolutionary uncertainty because activists and ordinary people, after 1917 and after 1991, shared assumptions about the state and its functions and about how society would be organized and by whom. In both cases, despite the ideological efforts of nationalists – of various nationalities – leaders in Russia, including those of Tatar ethnicity, recomposed the state and reclaimed or compelled subjects' loyalty. They did so by accommodating the multi-national, multi-confessional composition of their polity, drawing ambitious nationalists and other would-be leaders back into the fold, and managing these elites with the flexible statecraft of patrimonial uncertainty.

But while so-called transitional periods offer a glimpse of ongoing, accepted ideas of state structure and function, the polity itself may survive by exploiting instability and by sustaining processes of reconfiguration and redefinition. Contrary to the idea of sovereignty secured by explicit, reliable rules applicable in principle to all members of the polity (the "rule of law" so dear to many political theorists and scholars), sovereignty can reside in the capacity for ongoing adjustment of rules, and in rules that are not the same for all members of the polity. In

⁴⁷In other words, contrary to Agamben, there is no "bare life." When the state seems to go away, its long term effects are still at work; see Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Russia's case, and probably in other places, the state was sustained both through crisis and beyond it, by flexibility, uncertainty, and pragmatic innovation on the part of its leaders and their political and economic intermediaries. One expression of this "unity through variability" for Russia is the politics of federalism, which in both periods offered solutions to the problem of reconstructing sovereignty. So let us return to Kazan, and examine the post-imperial "transitions" of the 20th century for this multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, "mixed" region.

Reconstituting the State after 1917

Rafael Khakimov, an intriguing political theorist and commentator on today's transforming politics in Kazan, noted in 2003, "History tells us that empires do not become federations."⁴⁸ But in fact and as Khakimov, an influential political figure in Tatarstan, himself knew better than most, this was what happened in Russia at least nominally in the two crucial periods of post-revolutionary reconstruction. Let us look briefly at the first phase of reconfigured empire after 1917.

What gave the post-imperial, Soviet state its structure, its institutions, and its political culture? A too strong focus on what Communists said they were doing – enacting the proletarian revolution – can obscure the ways that Bolsheviks and others mixed in a set of “European” ideas concerning socialism with their own assumptions about how to rule. These assumptions had been nurtured in the last decades of the imperial period (as classically defined), a time when the founding fathers of Soviet empire acquired their notions of government and learned their practices of association and power. At an ostensibly revolutionary moment, the Bolsheviks had something to work with: the politics of state-making and state protection forged over centuries in

⁴⁸Rafael Khakim, Ternisty put' k svobode (Sochineniia. 1989-2006) (Kazan: Tatar'skoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2007), 362.

the Russian imperial situation. The habits of imperial rule had been acquired and honed by the people on whom the new rulers would have to rely: army officers, administrators, accountants, prison officials, police, as well as by most of the Bolsheviks' supporters and opponents.

If we look at results, rather than declarations, the Bolsheviks took over critical structures from Russia's earlier imperial repertoire. First, the new state was multi-national – not an obvious political form for a supposedly united world proletariat and in no way a logical response to Lenin's theories of capitalist imperialism – but definitely in the Russian state tradition, with inputs from other empires (notably, Austro-Hungarian Marxist theory), and a huge push from Russia's social scientists. Francine Hirsch's pioneering study, Empire of Nations, locates the agents of imperial transformation in the metropolises, where academics and activists strove as in the past to put their ideas into the service of the state and to find their place in it. In the struggles over the subdivisions of the union, ethnographers and economists proposed both nationality and economic development as organizing principles of the first communist state. No academics more deserved the name of "social scientists" than the ethnographers on the Commission for the Study of the Tribal Composition of Russia (KIPS) and in the Ethnographic Bureau of the People's Commissariat of Nationalities (Narkomnats) or the specialists promoting economic regionalism on the State Planning Commission (Gosplan) as they literally remapped – in several variants–the internal boundaries of the state.⁴⁹ The federal structure of the U.S.S.R. and the nesting of administrative sub-units within it were 20th century variants on Russian practices of imperial management.

Another aspect of the Communist configuration of power was the supreme leader and his ruling circle. Here, too, older traditions of sovereignty quickly entered into practice, if not right

⁴⁹Francine Hirsch, Empire of Nations : Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 5-9, 62-98.

away into ideology. Elites themselves, not just the masses, acted in accord with the imperial habitus. Lenin, the elder (“starik”), moved into the emperor’s place without hesitation. His successors, particularly the first one, only heightened the mystique of the all-caring, all-knowing, all-powerful emperor. Like the emperors and grand princes before him, the supreme ruler was advised by an inner circle of high-ranking counselors, dependent on his good will. The second Soviet great leader disciplined his advisors with ferocity and charisma.

In material matters, the Communist state also replayed the Russian (Eurasian/Moscovite/imperial) principle that all resources – land, people, labor, knowledge – belonged ultimately to the emperor and could be manipulated by him. Bolshevik leaders resurrected, in different versions, the conditional land grant – a building block of tsarist power in Kazan and elsewhere – as well as forced and transportable labor for peasants and other workers, while resources were doled out and retracted in point-making ways to party and other managers along the multiple chains of command.

Finally, as before the revolution, the new state’s elites included people from the empire’s diverse ethnic groups. Moving into the ranks of the rulers and out of the ruled could be facilitated by playing the national card – becoming a representative of one’s “people.” Even in the extreme case of the Roma, as Brigid O’Keeffe has recently shown, the language of Soviet politics – of elevating and protecting its peoples – permitted ambitious and worried figures from the pre-revolutionary Gypsy elite to work their way into administrative responsibilities and resources in the “new” polity.⁵⁰

Earlier studies of Soviet history accented the repressive policies of Soviet power regarding national groups, while more recent ones underscore its “affirmative” qualities, with

⁵⁰Brigid O’Keeffe, “Becoming Gypsy, Sovietizing the Self: 1917-1939,” Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2008.

accompanying ambiguities.⁵¹ But what is often missed is that most participants in the transformations of the state presumed that nationalities had to be represented somehow: the real questions were by which mechanisms and, most important, by whom. The formal composition of the country on federal principles – an innovation – combined with the politics of ongoing revolution – a twist on tsarist patrimonialism – were crucial elements of the Bolsheviks' transformation of the Russian empire and their survival as its leaders.

The construction of the Soviet Union as a "federation" of Soviet Socialist Republics, rather than as a unitary national state, may be seen, along with the one-party state as one of Russia's influential contributions to world history. (Until recently the significance of this aspect of Soviet state construction was overwhelmed by attention to the communist property regime and its threat to capitalism.) But in 1917, no one, including the Bolsheviks after their shockingly effective coup d'état knew what communism would look like as a state, rather than a slogan. Furthermore, the Bolshevik leaders were only one group among many competitors, including foreign powers, vying for control of Russia or for its parts. The survival of the state itself was in doubt, let alone its leadership, and its legitimizing principles.

As Francine Hirsch, Jeremy Smith and others have observed, federal organization of the state had not been a goal of the Bolshevik party. Lenin had defended national liberation, not federalism in the wide-ranging and high pitched socialist debates before the war. The "right of nations to self-determination" was in the program adopted by the 1903 congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, as were references to cultural rights of nationalities and the end

⁵¹Among many recent works, see Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire : Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

of national disabilities.⁵² But after 1917, confronted with the asserted independence of Ukraine and Belorussia, the triumph of the Whites in "free" Finland, the disintegration of the former Empire, and enemy occupations of much of it, Lenin reconsidered the potential of federalism as a means to re-unify the territories and peoples of the former Russian empire.⁵³ During the Civil War, the Bolshevik program of "national-territorial autonomy" and a commitment to an undefined federalism were assets in the bloody contest with the White armies, most of whom supported the slogan of a united Russia.

The Bolsheviks' first formal commitment to the federal principle was expressed in the "Declaration of Rights of the Toiling and Exploited Peoples," adopted by the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies in January 1918. The document pronounced "the Soviet Russian Republic" to be "founded on the basis of the free union of free nations as a federation of Soviet national republics." The last point of the declaration announced, with the ambiguity that would become the hallmark of federal relations in the future USSR, that

[S]triving to create a really free and voluntary, and consequently a fuller and more solid union of the laboring classes of all nations of Russia, the Third Congress only establishes the fundamental principles of the federation of the Soviet Republics of Russia, proposing to the workers and peasants of each nation to take their own decision at their own plenipotentiary soviet congress: Do they want and on what basis to participate in the federal administration [pravitel'stvo] and in the other federal soviet institutions?⁵⁴

The same congress also adopted a resolution, "On the Federal Institutions of the Russian Republic." This declaration labeled the new state somewhat differently – "the Russian Socialist

⁵²Jeremy Smith, The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-1923 (Houndmills & London: MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1999), 14.

⁵³Hirsch, Empire of Nations, 67.

⁵⁴Cited in I. R. Tagirov, Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti tatarskogo naroda i Tatarstana (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2008), 169.

Soviet Republic" – but also described it as "founded on the voluntary union of the peoples of Russia, as a federation of soviet republics of these peoples." The resolution spelled out the possibilities for union in somewhat greater detail:

The means of participation of Soviet republics of the separate regions in the federal administration, of regions differentiated by particular ways of life and national composition, as well as the delimitation of the spheres of activity of federal and regional institutions of the Russian republic are to be defined rapidly, after the formation of regional soviet republics by the All Russian Central Executive Committee and the central executive committees of these republics.⁵⁵

"The Declaration of the Rights of the Toiling and Exploited Peoples," drafted by Lenin, had been adopted by the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets just days before the opening of the Constituent Assembly on January 5, 1918. The Bolsheviks' goal was to preempt the Assembly's constitutional powers, and at the opening session, Sverdlov, the chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the party, read out the Bolshevik declaration. A majority of the delegates voted against making it the basis for deliberations. After the Bolshevik delegates walked out of the Assembly, the remaining members (roughly 3/4 of those elected)⁵⁶ proceeded to adopt foundational statements. Acting "in the name of the peoples who compose the Russian state," the delegates voted to declare this state "the Russian Democratic Federal Republic, peoples and regions united in unbreakable union, sovereign within limits established by the Federal constitution." This Constituent Assembly declaration was, like the Bolshevik one, vague on structural questions.⁵⁷

People intending to reconstruct Russia thus declared federalism as the basis of the new

⁵⁵Ibid, 169-170.

⁵⁶Bolsheviks were one quarter of those elected to the Constituent Assembly, but the numbers of those who walked out and of those who remained is not clear.

⁵⁷Анатолий Гаранжа, "Всероссийское Учредительное собрание о государственном устройстве страны," «Казанский федералист» / 2005 / номер 2-3(14-15), <http://www.kazanfed.ru/publications/kazanfederalist/n14-15/12/>.

Russian state in two variants in January 1918. One federalism was to be "democratic," one "Soviet and socialist," and each announced a different mechanism for defining the "limits" of "sovereignty" (in the Constituent Assembly version) or on "spheres of governing activity" (the Soviet phrase).

One of these constitutional statements was wiped out within a few hours. In the early morning of January 6, 1918, the Bolsheviks closed the Constituent Assembly, and put an end to the Russian Democratic Federal Republic. The Third Congress of Soviets was convened rapidly thereafter. Its adoption of both the Declaration of the Rights of the Toiling and Exploited People and the resolution, "On the Federal Institutions of the Russian Republic" provided the Bolsheviks with two foundational statements at this critical juncture. Both were incorporated into the Bolsheviks' first constitution, adopted in July 1918, by the Fifth All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers, Peasants, Soldiers' and Red Army Deputies.

These pronouncements of a new kind of sovereignty in Russia enacted, at least in theory and selectively, principles of federalism that had inspired theorists and activists in the Russian empire for over a century.⁵⁸ Both the Soviets' and the Constituent Assembly's declarations of a federal state are cited in recent discussions of Russian federalism as "juridical" statements, relevant to questions about the transfer of Russian sovereignty from the institutions of the Russian Empire under the Romanov dynasty to something else.⁵⁹

Which institutions or people were to execute which powers in the new federal state remained ambiguous in both founding statements, but each constituting document declared certain qualities to be intrinsic to the state and certain groups within it to have the power to set

⁵⁸See Mark von Hagen, "Federalisms and Pan-movements: Re-imagining Empire," in Jane Burbank et al, Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 494-510.

⁵⁹Rafael Khakimov, Rossiiskii federalizm v usloviakh sotsial'no-politicheskoi transformatsii (Kazan: Institut istorii AN RT, 2009), 113; Tagirov, I. R., Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti, 169-170.

the rules of association. The Bolsheviks' Declaration proclaimed the "Soviets [councils]" representing workers, soldiers, sailors, peasants only and their executive committees (whose members were undefined) to be the bodies who would determine the relations of republics, regions, and subunits of republics with the center. In the Bolshevik version, sovereign power rested with the representatives of the working classes, acting in the various republics and working together with the center. This initial position was tightened up in the 1918 Constitution, which assigned the All-Russian Congress of Soviets and the All-Russian Central Executive Committee the right to "accept new members of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic [the name had settled down] and to recognize the exit from the Russian Federation of parts of it."⁶⁰ The center – that is, the administration in the capital – thus retrieved the decisive role in defining or at least claiming Russia's territories.

The Constituent Assembly's constitution had not gotten off to any kind of start and how the Assembly would have enacted federalism remains a matter of speculation. The wording of the Assembly's declaration of the Russian Democratic Federal Republic makes clear, however, the delegates' commitment to an "unbreakable union" of the states' component parts, whose sovereignty would be limited by a federal constitution. Like the Bolshevik constitution, this declaration empowered central institutions over regional or national ones, but it offered no mechanism at all for exit from the "unbreakable" union. The Constituent Assembly's resolution recognized both "peoples" and "regions" as component elements of the state, a formula that like the Soviet description of "regions differentiated by particular ways of life and national composition" opened wide up questions about what could constitute a unit of the whole.

The similarities of the federalisms declared by the Bolsheviks and the Constituent

⁶⁰Point 49, cited in Tagirov, *Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti*, 170.

Assembly in 1918 are striking, and they help us to identify underlying assumptions of activists from bitterly opposed parties about political structure and power. While the two founding statements derive their legitimacy differently – sovereignty is located either in the laboring classes or in the democratically produced Constitution – both documents define the Russian state as federal. Both signal that more than one principle will be used to define Russia's component parts – peoples, way of life, regions, etc. – and both assign central institutions the task of defining the powers of the components of the union. There is no notion in either document that the regions in play might have horizontal relations with each other. The imperial imaginary at work in both cases worked vertically, re-configuring Russia with a central administration to which each subordinate unit was connected directly. Finally, and most important, both documents were vague about the powers of the component elements of the federation and about the mechanisms for realizing the federal state. They weighted central authorities over regional one; they established a playing field for the definition and redefinition of powers. These foundational – "juridical" – texts from 1918 thus made sovereignty both federal and transformable.

Revolutionary Federalism in the Tatar Lands

The 1918 declarations of federalism expressed principles and presumptions of party activists, but they were also responses to other initiatives, some of which pointed in a federal direction and some – such as the exits of Poland and Finland – threatened it. In or around today's Tatarstan, the National Soviet (Council) of Muslims and other activists was divided over the question of organizing around national (ethnic), regional, or cultural principles, as well as by specific problems such as the relations between Tatars and Bashkirs. Meeting in Ufa from 20

November 1917 to 11 February 1918, the "Milli Medzhlis" – the Muslim National Soviet – discussed federal programs based on territorial autonomy for Volga Tatars as well as statehood for Muslims in a federation based on the model of the United States. Military organization was of the essence as the civil war began. In early January 1918, the Second All-Russian Islamic Military Congress met in Kazan, the capital of the former imperial province, and voted for the constitution of a "Ural-Volga" republic based on Turkic and other peoples of this region. The Ural-Volga republic was to constitute with other republics the "United Republics of Russia."⁶¹

These initiatives directed toward the founding of a Muslim republic were taking place simultaneously with conflicts between the Bolshevik leadership and the Constituent Assembly in Petrograd. Paralleling events in the capital, Bolshevik delegates, who were a minority in the Second All-Russian Islamic Military Congress in Kazan, set up a rival "military staff." After the dismissal of the Constituent Assembly on January 6, 1918, an "All-Muslim Military Shuro," speaking in the name of Muslim soldiers issued its own declarations in favor of Soviet power. By the end of January, Muslim activists had carried out exactly the provisions expressed in the Bolshevik constitutional program, forming a Central Executive Committee of Soviets of workers, soldiers, and peasants deputies as a "higher organ of Soviet power" that would represent the Ural-Volga state [shtat] and its particular interests to a Federal Council of Russian republics.⁶²

But this project for a large Ural-Volga Muslim polity threatened the aspirations of Kazan's Bolshevik leaders, who declared military law in Kazan, arrested prominent members of the Muslim Shuro, and broke up the Second Muslim Military Congress, as well as other attempts

⁶¹Tagirov, *Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti*, 176-185; Ravil' Bukharlev, *Skaz o Kazani: Zhizneopisanie tsiacheletnego goroda v desiati pesniakh* (St. Petersburg: Slavia, 2005), 224.

⁶²Tagirov, *Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti*, 195.

to form a Tatar Autonomous Republic.⁶³ In March 1918, the Bolshevik central leadership, in the person of Stalin, along with local Bolshevik activists, found an acceptable formula in the "Tatar-Bashkir Republic," whose existence was decreed from Moscow and published in Izvestiia on March 1918.⁶⁴ The center had taken back the initiative in defining the qualities of the federation and its component parts.

These initiatives were only the beginning of a long struggle for the state and for the capacity to define its various powers across the former empire, a struggle whose end result would seem to have been determined by the Bolsheviks' victory in the multiple civil wars. The redrawing of the federal map took many twists and turns in these years. As the center regained control, the project for a large-scale Muslim republic lost out to reorganization along ethnic/national lines.

The Tatar-Bashkir republic created in 1918 was a victim of this tendency. On the 27th of May 1920, the top Bolshevik institutions – the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets and the Council of Peoples Commissars – decreed the formation of Autonomous Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic. Kazan became its capital. Bashkirs and Tatars were not to be united in a single unit and the Tatar republic lost its right to organize a military command.⁶⁵ When the USSR was constituted in 1922, the Autonomous Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic was incorporated as a unit of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic; it was not configured as a distinctive and allied Soviet Socialist Republic as were Ukraine, Belorussia, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. This "autonomous," i.e., subordinate, status within the RSFSR was re-articulated

⁶³Ibid., 196-202; Ravil' Bukharaev, Skaz o Kazani, 224. Tagirov, op. cit., 202, cites a letter from M. Sultan-Galiev to Lenin, dated 7 August 1919, in which Sultan-Galiev declares that "the liquidation of the All-Russian Muslim Soviet, the All-Russian Muslim National Soviet [and the] National Parliament of Muslims of Internal Russia ... this was my fundamental service to the revolution."

⁶⁴Tagirov, Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti, 203-4.

⁶⁵Ibid., 222.

in the constitution of the Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic issued in 1926.⁶⁶

My account radically reduces the complexities of political initiatives, positions, and actions in this critical conjuncture, but my point is that all significant actors in rewriting Russia's political institutions operated with federalism on the mind. The distribution of powers among component parts of a complex polity was the major political field of play, not the creation of nation-states. Moreover, as this brief summary of events centered on Kazan suggests, the imprint of Russia's imperial political culture is visible in both the imaginable projects and the actions of people who were trying to constitute the post-imperial polity.

First, note that the most effective actors were those who used their vertical connections to the capital to win locally. As authorities in the capital regained control, this habit was reinforced. Second, the central Bolshevik government, when it could, undermined horizontal ties across the population: the splitting up of the Muslim Tatar-Bashkir republic into separate ethnicized units was one example of this. Third, the Bolshevik government repeatedly made choices in favor of an ethnic, or national, principle of regionalization, even though many Russian Bolsheviks in local areas opposed the empowerment of non-Russians.⁶⁷ Fourth, critical functions, such as military command, were displaced toward the center. Fifth, and most important, this "transition" after 1917 from complex polity to complex polity was never stabilized. Powers, borders, and policies, including those concerning ethnic or religious questions, would continue to be re-defined, both before and after the formal composition of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922, the adoption of constitutions by the various Soviet Socialist Republics in the 1920s, and the later Soviet constitutions of 1936 and 1977.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Ibid., 255-6.

⁶⁷See Bukharaev, *Skaz o Kazani*, 226; Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 6.

⁶⁸For English translations of the Soviet constitutions, see Jan Triska, ed., *Constitutions of the Communist Party-States* (Stanford: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, 1968), 1-87.

A conventional perspective on sovereignty might regard this on-going rule-writing as a source of political instability. Republics of different statuses and their functions were never settled down into a long-lasting structure. But I want to make the opposite point. The transitions in Russian sovereignty allow us to see an enduring politics of empire. The expectations of composite statehood were strong in 1917, and many elite actors wished to be part of the new state's new governance. The way to be in the state-making game was to deal with powers in the capital and to be a rule-maker. Impermanence of boundaries and functions kept the game going, and kept elites engaged along the vertical axes of power. The official ideology declared power to be delegated to executive committees, and sovereignty was thus formally shared out through intermediaries. "Juridical" rules counted, but they and the persons who made them could be changed. This impermanence sustained a sovereignty based on vertical connections and engaged intermediaries who could claim to represent differentiated groups and regions of the population.

Sovereignty after 1991

The politics of rewriting the rules was dramatically expanded by Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt to "reconstruct" [perestroit] the Soviet Union. More than two decades have passed since political activists from Lithuania and in the other Baltic republics turned the discussion into a challenge to the union itself. These twenty some years, a time of enormous uncertainty about a future that had been declared to be different from the past, open another window on presumptions concerning sovereignty, and on the "imperial condition" of Kazan that had been sustained and transformed during almost 75 years of Communist power. Key elements of late Soviet and post-Soviet reconstructions were, as after 1917, a federative impulse, a search for juridical definition and, simultaneously, the politics of re-writing rules.

Although the emphasis in our scholarly literature is on the "fall" or "collapse" of the USSR and a "transition" to democracy (this prediction is getting shakey), there are strong continuities, above all human ones, between the states on either side of the 1991 divide. It's important to recall that no one expected the USSR to disappear,⁶⁹ and that until the botched putsch against Gorbachev in August 1991, Soviet elites were negotiating changes in what they thought was an ongoing polity. Gorbachev sent a strong signal to ambitious insiders, including an invitation to re-write the rules. "We have no prepared recipes," he wrote in his manifesto, Perestroika and New Thinking, published in 1988.⁷⁰ From this point on, elites both within the Communist party and without engaged – in multiple ways – with the politics of rule making and, in many instances, explicitly in the redefinition of sovereignty.

Independence became for some an item on the table. Beginning in March 1990, leaders in the Baltic republics reclaimed national sovereignties they had lost in 1939. By 1991, the generally accepted fiction of a world of nation-states was available for mobilization even by Communist leaders who only a year or so earlier would not have dreamed of becoming heads of independent polities. When over the course of the fall of 1991, highly placed Communists negotiated their way out of the Soviet Union, the system of union republics provided a template for the formation of fifteen independent states, none of them nationally homogeneous, of course.

But even the "transition" to independence was conducted in the language of federation, as party activists sought a "juridical" and mostly peaceful way out of the Soviet kind of federation. The opening salvo in what became known as the "parade of sovereignties"⁷¹ was the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic's "reestablishment of the independent

⁶⁹A reality described by Alexei Yurchak in his Everything was Forever, Until It was No More: The Last Soviet Generation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁷⁰Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, Perestroika i novoe myshlenie dlia nashei strany i dlia vsego mira (Moscow: Izd-vo polit. lit-ry, 1988), 62, cited in Tagirov, 259.

⁷¹M. V. Gligich-Zolotarev, cited in Khakimov, Rossiiskii federalizm, 120.

Lithuanian state" on March 14, 1990. (This was the day that the Third Extraordinary Congress of People's Deputies meeting in Moscow amended the Soviet Constitution to remove the controlling role of the Communist party, a decision that had been taken in February by the Party's Central Committee.) In Lithuania, the Soviet constitution was replaced by the "Temporary Fundamental Law of the Lithuanian Republic."⁷² These actions triggered not only a year of conflict over the status of the Baltic republics, but also a series of constitutional assertions by various Soviet bodies, claiming their own rights. The Russian Federation declared its "sovereignty" on June 12, 1990. This action cracked open the Communist party's control, prepared the ground for the election of a Russian president over Communist candidates a year later, and, not coincidentally, unleashed declarations and discussions of sovereignty on the part of the sub-units – the "autonomous" republics and other territories – inside the RSFSR. The language of "sovereignty" and "federalism," in most cases not seen as antithetical, became once again a means through which political organization and powers could be adjusted.

The most visible example of this federal tendency was the Commonwealth of Independent States, founded in early December 1991 by the leaders of the Belorussian, Russian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics. The Commonwealth, with its explicit reference to the British model, offered each of the union republics a way out of the U.S.S.R. Each would become an independent state, while all could retain their connection as allies with shared goals. The precise nature of their relationships was left quite open-ended, and the politics of rule-writing and re-writing has been going on in and around the C.I.S. ever since. As eleven out of fifteen union republics joined the Commonwealth of Independent States over the course of the month,

⁷²Tagirov, *Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti*, 262.

they effectively abolished the U.S.S.R. and replaced it with a confederation.⁷³

But a second kind of federal reconstruction was ongoing inside the Russian Federation, as the various regions and their own activists claimed back powers from the weakened center. Although activists, both Communists and others, in various areas could now with impunity call for independence or succession, for the most part this discussion was about the terms of inclusion in a reconstructed federation. This was probably a majority position within the population as well. In March 1991, Soviet citizens voted in a referendum on the following question:

Do you consider necessary the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics in which the rights and freedom of an individual of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?⁷⁴

This question reflected dissatisfaction with the sovereignty arrangements as they stood. A "renewed" federation of "equal sovereign republics" with "full" guarantees of individual rights and "freedom" was clearly not the existing USSR. The referendum nonetheless put the question of remaining together in a federal state clearly, and 76.4% of voters answered yes.⁷⁵ Thus, by March 1991 the task for many Soviet political figures was to redesign a federation based not on Communist control, but on some other kind of "sovereignty."

Redefining Tatarstan

To conclude I return to Kazan and to what is now the Republic of Tatarstan, during this second episode of federal reconstruction. Looking back from 2007, Rafael Khakimov described

⁷³See Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 109-111.

⁷⁴For the text of the referendum, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Union_referendum,_1991. On the issue of preserving the union, from the perspective of Tatarstan's foremost politician, see Mintimer Shamiev, "Soiuz imel real'nye shansy na sokhranenie," *Respublika Tatarstana*, 19 August 2010.

⁷⁵For sources on the vote, see those cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Union_referendum,_1991

Tatarstan's trajectory as "the thorny path to freedom."⁷⁶ But, as the March 1991 referendum on the USSR suggested, "freedom" did not mean "independence." Freedom, and rights, were to be guaranteed within the framework of the Soviet federation of national republics.

The first steps along Khakimov's thorny path had been taken during perestroika, when activists in Tatarstan began to agitate for the rights of a "union" rather than an "autonomous" republic within the USSR. During the economic chaos of the late Soviet years, some of the communist hierarchs in Tatarstan strove to take more control over their republic's economy. Union status was seen as a way to gain both cultural and economic rights, as well as a greater say in Soviet administrative and representative institutions.⁷⁷

The goal of abolishing the distinction between union republics and autonomous ones recalls the early struggles after 1917 when the Tatar republic had been demoted to an "autonomous" unit within the Russian Republic. In August 1990, after the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic declared its own republic's sovereignty inside the USSR,⁷⁸ Kazan's Communist party, under the leadership of the party's first secretary, M. Sh. Shaimiev, organized meetings with non-party representatives to discuss the question of Tatar sovereignty. On August 30, after complex discussions and negotiations, the Supreme Soviet of the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, declared the sovereignty of the "Republic of Tatarstan." The labels

⁷⁶Khakim, Ternisty put'.

⁷⁷Khakim, "Tatarii – Status soiuznoi respubliki," in Kakhim, Ternisty put', 6-9. Originally published in Vecherniaia Kazan, February 2, 1989.

⁷⁸The declaration of sovereignty by the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic asserted the primacy of the Russian republic's laws, rather than Soviet ones. This action, one of a series of declarations of sovereignty by the republics of the USSR, opened the way for negotiations of a new "Union Treaty" among the republics. The negotiations for this new treaty continued throughout the next year and played a role, it is thought, in the putsch of August 1991. The Russian republic's sovereignty provided the framework for the election of a president of the RSFSR (not the USSR) in June 1991. Boris Yeltsin's victory in this election made him the first president of the Russian Federation, a role that became vastly expanded in importance after the August 1991 putsch discredited the Soviet leadership. On the declarations of sovereignty, see Kotkin, Armageddon Averted, 90-92.

"Soviet and Socialist" were dropped, along with the problematic descriptor "autonomous."⁷⁹ The 30th of August, 1990, is still celebrated as Tatarstan's national holiday, although, as I discovered in 2010, after twenty years few people remembered why.

Enacting the juridical declaration of Tatarstan's sovereignty has been the subject of politics in both the Tatar Republic and in Moscow ever since 1990. The ways by which activists sought to make sovereignty real and the results of their actions reveal their underlying assumptions about where state power should be located. I. R. Tagirov, a leading historian of Tatarstan and an active participant in politics at the time, described the situation in this way:

There were two paths [to firming up the Declaration of sovereignty] – the first, conducting a popular referendum, which would be an undeniable expression of the will of the multi-national people of Tatarstan; the second, achieving the recognition of the Declaration by the Russian Federation by means of a two-sided agreement.⁸⁰

In Tagirov's formulation, sovereignty could lie either with the people or with their representatives in Kazan and Moscow. The path preferred by activists close to power in Kazan was negotiation with Moscow. This approach was favored, according to Tagirov, because it would open the way for "contractual relationships with the Russian Federation," which would amount to a "revolution without an argument with the Procuror [the equivalent of the U.S. Attorney General]."⁸¹ The search for a juridically correct solution, negotiated with the center by Communist leaders, began.

A negotiated contract proved difficult to carry out in the heady days of 1991. Not only did Moscow drag its heels, but in Kazan people mobilized around multiple issues, including whether or not to participate in the election of the President of the Russian Federation. Was

⁷⁹For a detailed discussion of this process, see Tagirov, *Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti*, 305-328.

⁸⁰Tagirov, *Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti*, 328.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 329.

Tatarstan a component of the Russian Federation or a separate republic? If Tatarstan was its own republic, why would its citizens vote for the president of the Russian Federation?

The decision of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Tatarstan to hold the election for the President of the Russian Federation in Tatarstan elicited a strong public protest. In June 1991, voters elected M. Sh. Shamiev, the regional Communist Party leader, as the president of Tatarstan by a huge margin, but less than half of voters turned out to elect the President of the Russian Federation.⁸² This demonstration of disaffection pushed negotiations forward between Shaimiev and Boris Yeltsin, but before their discussions were completed, the putsch against Gorbachev opened the window of political possibility further.

How wide open was that window? Americans, among others, expected that democratic forms of government, modeled on the United States, would naturally spring up once Communist power lost its hold. Similarly, fetishism of the nation-state led many to assume that nationalists throughout the Soviet Union would demand independence. In hindsight it is easier to see that even in conditions when sovereignty seemed up for grabs, people worked with conceptions and practices that were familiar to them. The characteristics of a long-lasting imperial condition, reliant on "juridical" legitimacy, but also on delegated and flexible authority, and based on differentiated governance of distinctive social and territorial units, came to the fore in 1991 as they had in 1917.

Personal politics and, above all, the person of the emperor – the party secretary or the president – still mattered enormously to how sovereignty was reconfigured. When the Soviet Union was no more, Tatarstan became an enthusiastic, astute, and empowered player in the new sovereignty game. But the outcomes of this game depended in large part on the emperor, the

⁸²Ibid., 330.

"first person," as Russia's second president described himself in his autobiography.⁸³ The two first presidents of Russia took Russian federalism in different directions.

It was during the controversial campaign of the Russian Federation presidency that Boris Yeltsin pronounced his famous phrase, "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow," in the Tatar Republic.⁸⁴ For the duration of Yeltsin's presidency, activists in Tatarstan and elsewhere were figuring out answers to this question. After August 1991, the elected parliament in Tatarstan moved toward independence (although never toward a nation-state), and organized a referendum on the status of Tatarstan. In March 1992, this "first path" to sovereignty attained the approval of 61.4% of those who voted,⁸⁵ a result sufficiently ambiguous and empowering to allow activists to continue their disagreements over how to organize power and to get back on the "second" path, preferred by insiders, of finding a juridical solution to the problem.

Both the ambiguities of the referendum and the empowerment of intermediaries who disagreed with each other are visible in the constitution, adopted by the Tatarstan's Supreme Soviet in 1992. Its first article declared,

The Republic of Tatarstan is a sovereign democratic state, expressing the will and interests of the multi-national people of the republic. The sovereignty and authority of the state come from the people. State sovereignty is an inalienable qualitative condition of the Republic of Tatarstan.⁸⁶

But Article 61 of the constitution twisted this description back into some kind of federal knot:

"The Republic of Tatarstan is a sovereign state, a subject of international law, associated with the Russian Federation/Russia on the basis of a contract on mutual delegation of authorities and

⁸³Ot pervogo litsa : razgovory s Vladimirom Putinyim (Moskva: Vagrius 2000).

⁸⁴Khakim, Ternisty put', 361-363.

⁸⁵Yeltsin called on television for a boycott of the referendum; see Tagirov, Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti, 399.

⁸⁶Ibid., 426.

objects of administration."⁸⁷

During the first shaky years of Russia's post-Soviet round of constitutional reconstruction, Tatarstan's representatives were able to defend a strong set of rights for their republic. Tatar delegates objected to the draft constitution of the Russian Federation drawn up in 1993. As a consequence the constitution contained a clause allowing Tatarstan (and Chechnya) to join the federation later under particular conditions.

The Constitution of the Russian Federation was not voted on in Tatarstan in 1993. Instead, agreements were negotiated bi-laterally between authorities in Tatarstan and Moscow. Their 1994 agreement, "On the delimitation of objects of administration and on mutual delegation of authorities between the organs of state power of the Russian Federation and organs of state power of the Republic of Tatarstan," was a high point, from the perspective of Tatarstan's powers, in federal relations. The republic enjoyed control over cultural, economic, and administrative policies, and could draw up agreements with other regions of the Russian Federation, and with foreign powers. Proponents of Tatar sovereignty point to the importance of the 1994 agreement for stabilizing relations among national groups inside Tatarstan.⁸⁸

The next president of the Russian Federation was intent on swallowing sovereignty back up. Once again, this process took a juridical form, through a series of legal protests and suits and attacks on Tatarstan's constitution from the central authorities. In 2002, the State Council of the Russian Federation adopted the law "On the Introduction of Changes and Supplements to the Constitution of the Republic of Tatarstan." These included a new article on citizenship; people were from then on declared "citizens of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Tatarstan." By 2005, 99 of the Republic's laws were changed to bring them into line with Russia's legislation.

⁸⁷Ibid., 426.

⁸⁸Khakim, *Ternisty put'*, 363-4.

These concerned many vital economic, political and cultural questions, including language policy. The use of the Latin alphabet, which had been re-introduced in the 1990s, was forbidden. In a particularly annoying gesture, the Russian Procuror filed a protest, demanding that the Russian flag be displayed on Kazan's parliamentary building, in the same size and at the same height as the flag of Tatarstan.⁸⁹ I can attest to the fact that in the summer of 2010 this condition was fulfilled.

A second challenge to Tatarstan's sovereignty concerned bi-lateral contracts – the core practice of Russian federalism in its active, flexible, and delegated mode. Some activists inside Tatarstan and in the center attacked the constitutionality of Tatarstan's exceptional status in the Russian Federation. By this time, Tatarstan was the only component of the federation whose status was determined by a bi-lateral agreement, rather than by the constitution. Arguments against Tatarstan's special status, formally grounded in concerns for equality and unity across the federation, were made before Russia's Federation Council. Threatened, the makers of Tatarstan's republican sovereignty mobilized to defend their exceptional, negotiated status. They succeeded in keeping the "second path" to sovereignty – negotiations with the center – open, and Tatarstan's second treaty with the Russian federation retained many of cultural and political empowerments of the 1994 agreement. The economic resources on the territory of Tatarstan – land, ores, water, forests, etc. – are declared the "basis of the life and activity of its multi-national people," to be managed by "agreements" and "collective decisions." These formulas enable flexibility in managing Tatarstan's wealth.⁹⁰

It is easy to understand why many, but not all, of Tatarstan's politicians would seek to preserve the principle of bi-lateral agreements, but it may come as a surprise that Vladimir Putin

⁸⁹Tagirov, *Istoriia natsional'noi gosudarstvennosti*, 446.

⁹⁰Ibid., 447-453.

supported the treaty-making process, over uniformity.⁹¹ One explanation is that differentiated and personalized federalism offer advantages to the ruler. The on-going, impermanent, legal allocation of alienable rights had been a mainstay of Russian governance in both imperial and Soviet regimes.⁹² After Putin successfully asserted presidential power over the appointment and dismissal of governors and mayors, he could make treaties with forewarned and disciplined intermediaries, free from the constraints of uniformity and not fully predictable discussions in the Duma.

Conclusion: Sovereignty Still on the Table

The reconfiguration of sovereignty in Russia in the last decade of the twentieth century bears a striking resemblance to the transformations of Soviet sovereignty after 1917. The first stages went in reverse order as the polity came apart. Starting in 1990, the Communist party shed its leading role; the union republics began to reassume the sovereignty they had lost earlier; the "autonomous" republics demanded equal sovereign rights within a federation. But there was no backsliding all the way to revolution, and with one glaring and disastrous exception, the polity did not descend into civil war. Instead, politics took the form of a paroxysm of constitution writing and bi-lateral negotiations, as political activists, formed in the Soviet imperial condition, tried to redefine the state and their positions in it. Then, as the center regained control, the process reversed itself. The central authorities gradually made the regions cough their sovereignty back up. The reconstructed "vertical of power" replaced the party ties; negotiated federalism promises to keep intermediaries on their toes.

⁹¹Ibid., 448, 452.

⁹²See Burbank, "Imperial Rights Regime."

My arguments are first, that sovereignty did not disappear with the "collapse" of the empire or the USSR, but rather was made tangible as people struggled over how it was to be exercised. Second, the process of redefining sovereignty revealed fundamental elements of Russian imperial governance, expressed in the actions and words of leaders and would-be leaders when the levers of power seemed to be at hand. Third, essential elements of this imperial political culture were the emperor or other major leader, a differentiated and composite polity, governance through intermediaries who could claim to speak for parts of that polity through vertical connections to the capital, and impermanent allocations of power. Fourth, the language of sovereignty was law-making, not "the law." Juridical statements articulated the latest negotiation, but could be replaced. Effective constitution-making requires abstraction and vagueness in all settings, but in these two "transitional" periods, rule-making was ongoing and open-ended.

The ordinariness of both "juridical statements" and impermanence was impressed on me in 2010 when I visited the wonderfully named "Museum of Stateness [gosudarststvennost'] of Tatarstan," located inside the refurbished kremlin. The exhibits of Tatarstan's "stateness" were utterly confusing: on one floor, pictures from first revolutionary period captured flags and slogans identifying Kazan as a full Soviet Socialist Republic well into the 1920s. Nowhere was the transition to "autonomy" (i.e., greater dependence) within Russian Federation explained. This floor of the exhibit ended with a huge metal sign, decorated with all kinds of national symbols, to celebrate the declaration of "freedom" [svoboda] of the Republic of Tatarstan on August 30, 1990.

But downstairs in the same museum, a display of constitutions of the Republic presented Tatarstan's independence as declared by its Supreme Soviet in August 1991 and then backed up

with documents produced after the end of the USSR in December 1991. I asked a museum guide about this inconsistency. Hadn't the Republic declared its "freedom" a year earlier in 1990? "But," she said, "how can you be free without a document?"

From 1917 through the present sovereignty has been redefined in Kazan as Russia itself was transformed from one complex polity to another. The law was a moving target, and all actors understood this. Sovereignty was not destroyed but activated by this process of fluid, personal engagement with rule-making. The "second path" of negotiation with the center took precedence, in both transitional periods, over the "first path" of consulting the populace through a referendum. The state did not go away, because most people believed it had to exist, and political activists struggled to relocate sovereignty in fora they could control.

A sovereignty tied to the powers of a distant overlord has, as we have seen, deep roots in Kazan and its hinterlands. No path to independence was conceivable for most people. Kazan's imperial trajectory had created behaviors and expectations that endured in the decades after the discrediting of Soviet authority. The people who were best able to retain and expand their powers at this time were intermediaries, themselves Communists, who had personal contacts with law-writers in the reviving center and with local elites.

In the post-Soviet condition, few activists made political claims based on a single ethnicity. The goal of politicians was a greater and more powerful Tatarstan, and this meant that Tatarstan would be multi-ethnic. A nation-state was nowhere in the picture. Instead, Tatarstan's leaders have consistently propagated and made quite good on a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional cultural policy.⁹³ As a French journalist commented, "Curieusement, le choc de civilisations ne

⁹³See Kate Graney, "Making Russia Multicultural: Kazan at its Millenium and Beyond, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 54, no.6 (November-December 2007): 17-27, and her monograph, *Of Khans and Kremfins*. In this provocative book, Graney proposes what she calls Kazan's "extreme sovereignty project"; a project extreme in its multi-culturalism. My

semble pas y avoir lieu."⁹⁴

Is this so curious? Kazan's political leaders, empowered by the Eurasian/Russian/Soviet imperial regimes of representation, have tried to make their kind of sovereignty speak many languages and faiths.⁹⁵ Jews, Orthodox and other Christians, and Muslims are represented, by intermediaries of course, in the republic's institutions. The republic has tried to put in place a multi-lingual school program, enabling youngsters to learn Tatar, Russian, their "native" tongue, and, in some cases, English, from an early age. The very marker Tatar has been adapted by some younger citizens of the republic regardless of their ethnicity.⁹⁶ Kazan's Ministry of Culture sponsors "national" celebrations for Tatars, Chuvash, Udmurts and many other groups. Christian and Muslim Tatars participate in Tatar folk dance contests.

The trajectory I describe for this erstwhile borderland, then, is incorporation into a successful imperial polity, one whose kind of sovereignty was not popular, but representational and multiplex. The challenges to political peace and well-being in Kazan are not those of the nation-state; the vociferous nationalists of the 1990s have been marginalized by the far more effective wielders of devolved imperial/federal sovereignty. But this is not to say that we've reached political stasis in this re-incorporated region. A series of terrorist actions in Kazan this year has shaken the authorities' confidence. These came from radicalized Muslim youths who attacked not Russians, but the Muftiate – Kazan's highest Islamic authorities. Even firmly in the interior of the Russian Federation, Kazan is as in the past a potential victim of imperial ambitions from inside and outside its borders. Political imagination and international contestations continue to disrupt and reconfigure sovereignty.

study is consistent with Graney's insights, although I am concerned with a different question: uncovering the characteristics of what she might call the "sovereignty project" of Russia.

⁹⁴Hilgermann, *Le Tatarstan*, 20.

⁹⁵For an extended and incisive analysis of Kazan's kind of sovereignty post 1991, see Graney, *Of Khans and Kremllins*.

⁹⁶Jane Burbank, interviews, summer 2010.