

*Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia*. Danielle Ross. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780253045706.

The mid-sixteenth-century conquest of the Khanate of Kazan, one of the successor states of the Golden Horde, was a pivotal moment in Muscovy's transformation into the multiethnic polity of Russia. The khanate's capital, the city of Kazan, is situated at the point where the Volga River shifts southward toward the Caspian Sea. Its fall to the armies of Ivan IV ("the Terrible") in 1552 not only brought the first major Muslim population under the control of the tsar, but was also a catalytic development in facilitating Russia's dramatic expansion across northern Asia. It remains a striking symbol of Russia's multiethnic, imperial history to this day. Despite its location in what many consider the heart of Russia, it is the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, a city with street signs in both Russian and Tatar that is oriented around a kremlin (fortress) with not only a Russian Orthodox cathedral—built in the wake of the Russian conquest in the 1550s—but also the massive Kul Sharif Mosque, built to commemorate the Kazan's 1,000-year anniversary and named in honor of a Tatar imam who died defending the city during the Russian conquest.

*Tatar Empire*, building on work that has spotlighted the roles of many different subject peoples in the building of the empire, suggests that, for the Kazan Tatars, the Russian Empire "was as much 'their' empire as the Russians'" (2). Ross provides an impressively detailed study of the place of the Kazan Tatars within the Russian Empire from the seventeenth century through the revolutions of the early twentieth century. She describes and analyzes the emergence and evolution of the Kazan Tatar ulama (Muslim scholars) as a regional elite during the course of the expansion of the Russian Empire eastward, emphasizing that the "building of a Kazan Muslim world in the middle of the Russian empire did not occur in isolation from the construction of the empire." Rather, imperial expansion and the development of a "network of Muslim institutions,

scholars, and holy men that stretched from one end of the Russian empire to the other” were mutually reinforcing processes (242). The Kazan Tatar ulama played critical roles as intermediaries in the expansion of the Russian Empire southeastward, while also constructing spheres of influence that both enabled their own community to take shape and fostered a sense of superiority vis-à-vis other subject Muslim peoples across the Urals, the steppe, and into Central Asia.

Fundamental to Ross’s analysis is an emphasis on continuity over time. Her examination of the Kazan ulama reveals that despite familiar emphasis on the changing policies of the Russian state and the Jadid movement, the familial and scholarly networks of the Kazan ulama remained quite stable during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Transformation was constant, spurred by such factors as the movement of imperial frontiers, the intensification and expansion of economic exchange, educational reform, and theological debates. But rather than a story of the “modern” replacing the “traditional,” Ross describes a constantly evolving sense of Kazan ulama community identity in which “modernity” came to be used as a “rhetorical device employed by various parties to bolster their claims to authority over Muslims in Kazan and beyond” (10). Nor is hers a story of secularization: Islam remained central to the community throughout the period under consideration. Amid “all this change,” she explains, “a group of families, students, and teachers held their own. Their places of residence, their wardrobe, and their collective narratives of the past changed, but their claim to leadership over the Volga-Ural Muslim community and over any other Muslim community Russian expansion drew into their orbit did not” (13-14).

Ross also stresses the unintended consequences of success. The Russian Empire sought to use the Kazan Tatar ulama to aid in its spread into its southeastern borderlands. But doing so also

shaped and strengthened the Kazan Tatar community, leading to increasing tensions as the attitudes of imperial officials toward Islam changed over the course of the nineteenth century. As Russia became mired in wars in the Caucasus, officials came to regard Islam less as a tool to spread Russian influence and more as a threat, with rhetoric of “fanaticism” and “pan-Islamism” coloring official Russian assessments of the Kazan Tatars and straining the longstanding alliance between imperial officialdom and the Kazan ulama. For their part, Kazan Tatars’ growing knowledge of European colonialism in the Muslim world, of Russian nationalism, and of an emerging nationalist conception of their own history had a similar effect, leading many to reject the empire itself—and shaping how the Kazan Tatars interacted with other former subjects of the empire as it collapsed in the revolutions of 1917.

This is a rich study that makes important contributions to the historiography of the Russian Empire, sharpening our picture of an empire in which lines between colonizer and colonized were far from clear. It is a book aimed primarily at specialists; those relatively unfamiliar with recent scholarship on the Russian Empire and, more generally, with the history and terminology of Islam in Eurasia will find it to be a challenging read. That said, the complexity of the story Ross tells and the detailed analysis that underpins her narrative remain strengths of the book, which does much to enlarge our understanding of a pivotal community at the center of the Russian Empire.

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