

Danielle Ross. *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia.* Bloomington: IU Press, 2020. ISBN 978-0-253-04570-6 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-253-04571-3 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-253-04572-0 (E-book). 288 pp.

Review by Sabira Ståhlberg (independent researcher)

In the nineteenth century, European authors of books about Russia and Central Asia often saw Russians as heirs to the “Tartar supremacy” in Europe and Asia. Today only deeper research might tell if this opinion was based on contemporary political attitudes acknowledging Russia as a world power in the East, Russian sources and propaganda, the authors’ personal observations, or some other knowledge which has been lost since then. The fact is, however, that these European “experts” on Russia and Central Asia (anybody from spies and explorers to adventurers and merchants) linked the expanding Russian Empire with the Tatar/Mongol legacy. Certainly, the connection was not a flattering one, with the word ‘Tartar’ being fairly synonymous with ‘barbarian’, but the idea of Russia “inheriting” the empires of the Mongols and Tatars contained some grains of truth.

The book *Tatar Empire* by Danielle Ross discusses the Russian-Tatar connections from the end of the seventeenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century. The title and description of the book promise an interesting narrative about how Tatar intellectuals based in Kazan and its surroundings cooperated with Russian officials in building and extending the Russian Empire to the South Ural region and Central Asia. The Kazan Tatars, the author argues, were instrumental in the expansion not only as interpreters and merchants, but also as transmitters of knowledge and culture; yet eventually these faithful allies became problematic subjects in the Russian Empire.

In the introduction, the author establishes the question of how and why the Kazan Tatars became instructors, mediators, and leaders for Muslims in the Russian Empire and throughout Central Asia: they viewed the empire as also their own, and within the large imperial framework they could create and develop their own spaces. A key group in the Tatar world was comprised by the ‘*ulamā*’ (Muslim scholars), who formed close-knit networks of teachers and community leaders based in the Kazan area. They had far-reaching connections not only in Central Asia but the whole Muslim world. The biographies of several important actors among these scholars are the major sources for the book.

The three main goals of *Tatar Empire* are to reconstruct the social hierarchies and internal dynamics of the Muslim communities in the Volga-Ural region, to trace continuity in community leadership, and to identify and disentangle the relationships of the persons involved. The author also indicates how closely the leaders were interconnected, despite differences in ideology. The introduction of the book contains a discussion about the focus of earlier research on modernity and secularisation, and

the Kazan Tatars' utilisation of modernisation as a rhetorical device for gaining and maintaining social authority over other peoples in the South Ural area and Central Asia.

Chapter 1 covers the end of the seventeenth century and its upheavals, as well as the new possibilities that the expanding Russian Empire offered to the Kazan Tatars. Settlement (legal or illegal) was one of the methods for enlarging Tatar influence in the Ural region. The author describes how influential Tatar individuals and Russian officials developed a kind of alliance based on mutual interests – or, in her words, a co-dependent relationship. Tatar merchants and settlers received protection, and the Russian officials gained information about the border regions and support from the Tatars to pacify unrest (among the Bashkirs, for instance). In the time of Catherine II, the relationship between the Russian state and Tatars became more formalised, despite factionalism, internal competition, and conflicts among the latter. Chapter 2 focuses on the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly and the early nineteenth century. Several groups of Tatar scholars and also individuals competed for the prestige and status that the Russian-installed institutions provided. Scandals, “affairs”, and hostile attacks, as well as both imperial and personal agendas and their implementation, are presented.

In Chapter 3, international trade enters the scene. Kazan Tatars participated actively in the overland trade to different parts of Asia, and they also traded with Europe through Russia. The Tatar communities prospered economically and culturally, and life in Kazan changed with the new fashions, but simultaneously criticism grew among conservatives. Literacy and the spread of literature created an education boom in which women and girls also took part. Through education, prosperity, and increased contacts with the outside world, the understanding of faith and concept of Tatar history changed. The Russian and Tatar views on Islamic revival differed by now, finally ending in a parting of ways. The author sees the growing conflict as a result of the successes which the Tatars had enjoyed in relation to overland trade and the Russian frontier policy.

Chapters 4 and 5 map out a specific historical situation, the so-called Machkaran network (named after a village with an important school). New actors had entered the scholarly scene, among them merchants, who poured money into education and religious activities and changed the face of the Tatar elite. These chapters discuss several families, considered to be the authorities in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the new rural gentry they formed. University studies, Russian Orientalism, and encounters with Western European learning, as well as colonialism and conflicts between European states and their Muslim subjects or Muslim countries, transformed the Tatar world. Educational and historical disputes (including the question of the Bulghar past) reflected the shift in the Tatar understanding of identity.

In Chapter 6, the narrative moves to the Ural region and Central Asia at the end of the nineteenth century. The author locates the origins of modernisation among Tatars in the earlier reforms, institutions, and educational projects, especially within the Machkaran network and the activities of a few important schools. Chapter 7 continues the discussion on reformism and Jadidism, beginning with a discussion on Salafism among the reformers in the Volga-Ural area. Critical or ideological novels and writings about society and education are used to show how young, educated Tatars moved away from what they saw as tradition. They tried to create new approaches and to reform learning, legal theory, and theology, and they also established new centres for education.

Chapters 8 and 9 close the book by showing the scholarly – and, finally, political – conflicts at the beginning of the twentieth century. These ensued from the now widely divergent interests of the Russian state and Tatar scholars. A court trial and other examples are advanced to show

how far from each other the previous allies had drifted. The final chapter concludes with the breaking out of World War I and the complicated period shortly after the fall of the Russian Empire, when the Kazan Tatars tried to extend their national and religious power through the South Ural region and Central Asia.

Tatar Empire is an ambitious title, and this work answers to it only in part. The book would have profited from more careful editing; in particular, the transcription from several languages needs revision. There are several interesting ideas and approaches, but far too often they remain in the background or are overshadowed by the many personal biographies. The materials on individuals bring forward a more detailed picture of certain persons, yet others remain obscure. The historical importance of any individual can and should be debated, but it is not always clear why the author has chosen one over another. With the great quantity of persons and places mentioned, a comprehensive list at the end, with the individuals, their personal information, and important locations, along with full versions of their names, could be useful – and more efficient than giving the information in several places and providing a simple index. Many persons and places appear in the text with two or more variations of their name, which is logical, considering that most had a Tatar, Bashkir, or other name version, plus a Russian one. However, it would be easier for the reader to navigate this rich gallery, after all known name variations are provided, if one form was chosen and used systematically throughout the text.

Behind the strong focus on personal biographies and the effort to reconstruct networks and personal relationships, the larger picture and context also remain in the background. The analysis of the Russian imperial perspective, economic and cultural ties, and ongoing dialogue with the Tatar communities could be deeper and better documented. In many instances, the author prefers a Tatar-sided approach. Russia's ambiguous relationship with the Tatars becomes clear from the narrative, but the Tatars were only one of many peoples in the empire and not always in a unique position. The situation at the end of the nineteenth century worsened for many others, too, in the wake of growing Russian nationalism and other processes within and outside the empire. A comparison with other groups could contribute to the richness of the study and show the position of the Tatars more clearly. Further research on this topic is essential.

One example of the missing broader context is the so-called Great Game in Central Asia, mentioned mainly in passing. As noted in the descriptions of overland trade in Chapter 3, the Kazan Tatars were not isolated from global politics. However the political, economic and other implications of the activities of Russia, Great Britain and the Manchu Qing Empire (and many smaller actors, both European and local) were – and are today even – far more important for the Kazan Tatars' "empire" than is mentioned in this work. The three superpowers significantly enlarged their spheres of influence in the regions which were important for the Kazan Tatars, changing forever the face of trade, local politics and power relations.

A more global approach to the Kazan Tatar networks would be an important topic for research. Non-Russian and non-Tatar sources can provide new clues on the complex processes taking place in Central Asia in the nineteenth century. As Russian sources tip the scales in one direction and Tatar sources weigh heavily in another, more balance is needed to understand the situation. For the eighteenth century, for example, the German- and Russian-language travel reports on Kazan Tatars, Bashkirs, and other peoples written by the Russian Academy of Science explorers (among them Johan Peter Falck, Johann Gottlieb Georgi, and Peter Simon Pallas) can provide another point of view. In the nineteenth century, there are scientific and travel reports from Russia and the Grand Duchy of Finland, as well as reports from spies, political agents,

and many others. Kazan and other places mentioned in *Tatar Empire* were visited by several travellers from other countries, who observed the political situation, the literacy of the Tatars, and further important aspects.

Several classifications in the book are too general, and there is an overall lack of material to back up the categories. For instance, automatically equalling Meshcheryak in the South Ural region with Mishār is doubtful. Also, the Tatars in Finland are Mishārs from the Nizhny Novgorod province and not Kazan Tatars. They certainly read publications, were influenced by, and had contacts with Kazan Tatars, but their background, language use, geographical interests, and networks were different. The degree of Kazan influence and connections with Tatars in the Nizhny Novgorod and other provinces, and especially in the capital Saint Petersburg, certainly merit further research and could probably result in another book. Contacts in Saint Petersburg and Finland with some Kazan Tatar intellectuals mentioned in *Tatar Empire* have been recently researched by Renat Bekkin, Islam Zaripov, and Ramil Belyaev.¹

Tatar Empire is a book which requires background knowledge; with its many personal details and lack of larger frameworks it can be confusing. Therefore, it is not a work for beginners. It will be more rewarding for readers who have already gained some idea about the period and the geographical region. The reader also needs to be previously acquainted with the existing discourses on many topics concerning the Tatars (for instance, Jadidism). The book often enters into dialogue with previous research, but several loose ends remain open. In the English-language literature, this book certainly fills a gap for readers who do not have a working knowledge of Tatar or Russian (or Central Asian languages), but as it is focused on specific topics and aspects, the overall picture and background must be acquired elsewhere. With *Tatar Empire*, Danielle Ross opens up the possibility for much further discussion, not only among scholars but also about earlier research and the sources used in the book and, last but not least, about how Tatar history has been viewed in the past and how it is understood today.

1 See Sabira Ståhlberg & Sebastian Cwiklinski (eds) 2020. *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 8(2).