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Loyalty and Tsarist Authority in Bashkiria, 1552-1917

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Charles STEINWEDEL

Threads of Empire

Loyalty and Tsarist Authority in Bashkiria, 1552-1917

Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2016, 398 p., ill., maps.

This is a book that has been long awaited and badly needed. While we now have a vast array of English-language works exploring the history of the Volga-Urals region, they have in fact concentrated on Tatars in the middle Volga from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, leaving Bashkirs and the Urals either ignored or cursorily addressed. This means that while scholars have had a good conversation with publications from Tatarstan, very rich literatures from

Bashkortostan have mostly remained to be integrated into the English-language scholarship. In addition, since the focus of recent works is on Islam, Muslim communities, and their interactions with the state, this book serves as an important warning and correction to the tendency to reduce multiple rationales of human behavior exclusively to religion. As Steinwedel puts it, the history of Bashkirs is “the history of constant, multipolar negotiation about the names and identity of people, their status, and their territory.” [6] Furthermore, the author provides us with broad comparative angles at the end of all seven chapters equivalent to his periodization as well as at the general conclusion that enriches our understanding of Russia’s empire in terms of its internal diversity and its place in the world history of empires.

Steinwedel weaves a history of Bashkiria with loyalty as the central motif, identifying colorful threads that connected people to the will of the sovereign: estate status, force, religious confession, and nationality. In the period from 1552 to 1730 Muscovite Russia followed a pan-Eurasian pattern in distinguishing sedentary from nomadic and semi-nomadic subjects. While in the middle Volga Moscow worked to apply the Muscovite social and political system, in Bashkiria it adapted patterns that had long regulated political life on the steppe. The Muscovite incorporated the region through a bargain, in which the state recognized Bashkir hereditary landholdings and awarded native elites with prestigious titles in exchange for Bashkir tribes’ payment of *iasak*. Tranquility was broken, when Bashkirs took arms to make Moscow observe its side of the agreement. By the beginning of the eighteenth century Bashkirs became a privileged estate group legally distinct from their neighbors. Peter the Great rejected the Eurasian steppe pattern of sovereignty, however. Western absolutism backed by force became the essence of imperial authority in Bashkiria, demanding a much more intensive and persistent loyalty from the subjects. Bashkir resistance was mercilessly crushed, which was followed by the redistribution of rebels’ lands to those who had demonstrated their loyalty. Meanwhile Orenburg governors were pragmatically committed to religious tolerance, trying to respect customs and to practice fairness and moderation among the Kazakhs. They also made Kargala, a suburb of Orenburg, pivotal to the regional commerce and to the empire’s influence in Central Asia. Yet Muslims’ eastward flight from more intense persecution in Kazan as well as the increased burden and elimination of privileges among the Bashkirs escalated tensions, which led to Mullah Batyrsha’s uprising in 1755. The Pugachev Rebellion of 1773-1775 revealed imperial authority’s fragility and the state’s tenuous connections with local elites. Ekaterina II was forced to initiate changes based on ideas of Enlightenment, co-opting non-Russian elites and fitting them into the empire’s hierarchy of estates, supporting Islam, and creating rational, systematic administration. The clearest embodiments were the Orenburg Muhammadan Ecclesiastical Assembly and the Cantonal system. Refashioning Bashkirs as a militarized estate group, the latter also promoted the creation of small but influential Muslim elite in the region by the mid-nineteenth century. Under Nicholas I, meanwhile, the imperial state’s interventions to reduce Bashkir

particularities were the most forceful and far-reaching yet, transforming Bashkirs from border guards into laborers in woods and from semi-nomadic pastoralists into peasants growing cereals. As a result Bashkiria turned into a relatively calm region.

While Alexander II's Great Reforms reached Bashkiria with their universalistic thrust and emphasis on participation, the local society defined by legal status did not easily change. Bashkirs became "free rural residents" holding all rights permitted Russian peasants in 1861, but still retaining communal ownership rights to their lands. The militarized quality of administration diminished with Ufa Province separated from Orenburg Province and the Cantonal system abolished in the same 1865, and finally in 1881 the Orenburg governor-generalship itself disappeared. Yet the former Bashkir canton elites were equated with the Russian nobility as a whole; imperial officials themselves valued them as intermediaries with the local population in promoting reforms. Nonetheless, to be truly loyal subjects of the tsar, not only elites but also much lower strata of social hierarchy were now required to participate in a common civic order by learning the Russian language. Meanwhile, the last governor-general N.A. Kryzhanovskii tried to reinforce a "Russian element" of the region by limiting the amount of land Bashkirs could keep and transferring acquired lands to agricultural migrants. The abuse of Bashkir land removed Kryzhanovskii, but Bashkirs continued to be impoverished, losing their hereditary lands with animal husbandry declining rapidly. The policies of Alexander III represented a restoration of order by strengthening and centralizing authority in the hands of Russian speakers and the Russian Orthodox Church, which encountered robust challenges in Bashkiria. The Ufa governors themselves continued to rely on members of the Muslim noble estate, whose interests largely overlapped with those of the imperial state. The provincial zemstvo was becoming increasingly leftist, attempting to limit the authority of the church in education with greater attention to vernacular languages and practical skills. Likewise, Muslim elites sought to establish more direct and meaningful connections with their coreligionists, making the faithful understand and act in accordance with the tenets of Islam in new ways. Thus, the imperial dilemma deepened: how to reconcile the long-standing accommodation of differences with the urgency of national integration?

The empire became fragmented into an empire of nationalities after 1905. The far right Russian nationalists consistently used the language of nationality to describe threats to the state, grumbling a lack of Russians in positions of the local authorities. Categorization by nationality entered local politics particularly through political mobilization for the State Duma elections and became the government's yardstick of loyalty, which made even Muslims a suspect nationality alongside Jews and Poles. In Stolypin's era officials saw Islam as a religious-national force that threatened the empire's security and unity. Against a backdrop of his agrarian reform, all peasants now had the right to own land as hereditary property, which undercut what had made Bashkirs most distinctive; even Russians were allowed to be registered in Bashkir communes. This long-standing deprivation compelled

some Muslim intellectuals to identify Bashkirs as a nation embracing special ties to its land. Meanwhile, the Ufa zemstvo in its educational activities supported a sort of Enlightenment universalism as the criterion for political inclusion—the third path different either from that of the Education Ministry pressing the centrality of the Russian language, or from that of the Orthodox Church still recognizing the utility of non-Russian languages to spread Orthodoxy. During the Great War it was national organizations, such as Polish, Jewish, Latvian, Muslim and Russian, that occupied the sphere of social welfare the state could not provide. Most notably, the zemstvo, the local educational administration, and the Church, otherwise conflicting with each other, began to articulate a similar language of patriotism without the tsar as the highest object of loyalty. Peoples in Bashkiria seem to have been ready for Nicholas II's abdication in February 1917.

By covering three and a half centuries Steinwedel reveals what cannot be easily captured otherwise. One of his most significant achievements is tracing meanderings of the Bashkir juridical status in a very careful and rational manner. From at least the reign of Peter the Great to the end of the tsarist regime their exceptional right of hereditary landholdings remained so attractive that less privileged subjects of the tsar migrated into Bashkiria in search of more land and tried to become Bashkirs even through marriages. For the sake of tax collection, tsarist legal acts categorized *pripushchenniki*—those let in to Bashkir land—into Teptiars, Meshcheriaks, Bobyls according to their landownership. Beginning with the 1736 decree, the government oscillated between the ban on Bashkir land sales and the permission and even promotion of land transactions, depending on its necessity either of protecting Bashkir particularities for security reasons or of reinforcing the Russian landowning population. As a result, at the beginning of the twentieth century disenchantment with the Bashkir status made *pripushchenniki* move away from identification as Bashkir to call themselves Maris, Meshcheriaks, and Teptiars [211-212]. Steinwedel's another significant achievement is his constant attention to Muslim noble families, such as the Tevkelevs, Akhtiamovs, Sultanovs, Syrtlanovs, and Umetbaevs. Their metamorphosis from the tsars' servitors, such as interpreters and army officers, into representatives of civil society, such as deputies of zemstvos and the State Duma, effectively demonstrates the transformation of Russia's imperial governance with regional particularities. In addition, addressing individuals also makes it possible to shed light on an important role that the mixture of the private and official played in the tsarist decision-making. When Kryzhanovskii and Ufa governor Sergei Ushakov tried to tighten up their Muslim policy in the 1870s (the latter even proposed the closure of the Ecclesiastical Assembly), Minister of Internal Affairs Alexander Timashev with deep roots in the Orenburg region rebuffed them; the author explains, "the fact that Mufti Tevkelev's aunt had eloped with a relative of Timashev's and converted to Christianity does not seem to have prevented the two men from working together." [134] In short, Steinwedel's *longue durée* enterprise forcefully shows how the region had been shaped by changing patterns of exchanges between the tsars and their subjects with the language of loyalty as their shared currency.

Still, one could wonder if there were other ways of periodization. Was the state the only shaper of the regional history? Is it possible to capture social, cultural, economic, and ecological dimensions of continuities and changes that might slip away from the state's gaze? Perhaps Agnès Nilüfer Kefeli's *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia* could be a lead in studying Bashkir interpretations of the surrounding world through *shäjäräs* (genealogies), folklore, mystical stories, and sacred sites, as well as in doing ethnography of everyday contacts between the Finno-Ugric peoples and Bashkir communities. Land disputes were not only a story of economy but a complex intersection of Bashkir customs, Islamic legal practice, and imperial law. How did changes in ecology of lands and woods over three centuries shape interethnic contacts including disputes over resources? Furthermore, the author's focus of analysis moves to Ufa Province given its separation from Orenburg Province in 1865 and the end of the Orenburg governor-generalship in 1881, as Ufa Province was "the more populous of the two provinces and the one with the most turbulent history in the early twentieth century [10]." It does not mean, however, that Orenburg Province lost its historical significance of an advanced post to the steppe and beyond, having turned into a stagnating colorless area. Ufa, Sterlibash of Ufa Province, Kargala, Orenburg, and Troitsk of Orenburg Province, to name the most important, remained vibrant hubs of Islamic education, with Kazakh and Kyrgyz youth seeking for not only religious but modern knowledge and with Tatar and Bashkir mullahs and teachers going into the steppe. After 1905 Orenburg became a capital of Tatar print culture along with Kazan. While the 1905 Revolution arrived in Ufa by railroad [203], what did the opening of the Orenburg-Tashkent railway in 1906 bring to Bashkiria? How did it change rhythms of economy and mobility among the local population particularly after the famine of the same year? Finally, after October 1917 while Tatar national intellectuals chose Ufa as the seat of their autonomy with the Ecclesiastical Assembly refashioned as one of its departments, their Bashkir and Kazakh counterparts opted for Orenburg as a citadel of their activities. All these robust connections beyond formal administrative borders seem to call for other questions and time frames of explorations. That said, it is undeniable that Charles Steinwedel's book will work as a huge milestone of the history writing of the southern Urals for decades to come.

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