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Sibgatullina, G.

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Author: Sibgatullina, G.

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Chapter 7

From Religious to Ethnic Minority: Discourses on Kräshen History, Language and Ethnicity

This chapter¹ continues the discussion of language choice and policy in religious settings and zooms in on the communities of Kräshens and baptized Tatars whom Sysoev and his followers targeted in their mission. Here I examine how conversion to another faith shapes not only religious but also ethnic and linguistic boundaries.

In the nineteenth century, the Orthodox Christian mission aimed at strengthening the faith of the Tatars who had been baptized in previous centuries, and at transforming them into subjects of the Russian Empire; in this process, perceptions of Kräshen “otherness” increased at various levels. In the Soviet Union, religious markers were downplayed and ethnic ones emphasized; accordingly, the Kräshens were discursively again subsumed under the mainly Muslim Tatar nationality. Today Kräshens find themselves pressed between the major ethnic, religious and linguistic groups that offer competing interpretations of Kräshen identity; thus, the community is becoming involved in the struggle for power and authority in the region.

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published as G. Sibgatullina, “Found to Be on the Fault Line: Discursive Identity Construction of the Kriashens”, in *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on the Role of Religions in the Turkic Culture held on September 9–11, 2015 in Budapest*, ed. É. Csáki et al. (Budapest: Péter Pázmány Catholic University, 2016), 277-85.

7.1 Introduction

Kräshens live predominantly in the territories of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Udmurtia and the Cheliabinsk province of the Russian Federation. Their precise number remains a subject of much speculation: figures range from 34,822 people in the whole country,¹ to more than 250,000 Kräshens in Tatarstan alone.² Neither is there a consensus on the origins of the Kräshens, their history or the language they speak. The discussion on these ethnicity-forming factors has been at the centre of the ongoing “Kräshen question” (*Kriashenskii vopros*), which revolves around whether Kräshens should be recognized as a distinct ethnic group or should continue to be listed as a subgroup under the umbrella term “Tatars”.

In this chapter I examine how, from the nineteenth century onward, the state has been managing an ethnic identity of this religious minority group, and how this identity has been re-enforced in the post-Soviet context against the background of growing ethnic nationalism and renewed religious affiliation. Here I focus on dominant tropes that construct Kräshen identity discursively;³ that is, my emphasis is on the interpretations of Kräshen ethnicity as offered by a variety of social and political players, including the Russian state, Tatar and Kräshen national elites, and Orthodox Christian missionaries.

The status of the Kräshen language plays an important role in this discussion. In works published in the 1970s, the Kräshen language is described and characterized as a dialect of Tatar; in fact, the researchers have argued that there is not one, but a set of sub-dialects (*govory*) that constitute Kräshen. The development and standardization of the Kräshen alphabet and grammar is attributed to Orthodox Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century who worked under the leadership of Nikolai Il’minskii.⁴ Today

¹ Census, “Chislennost’ i razmeshchenie”, *All-Russian Population Census 2010*, 2010 <http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm> (Accessed on 27 March 2018).

² R. Suleimanov, “Kriashenskii sviashchennik: ‘Stroitel’stvo nashikh tserkvei v Tatarstane koe-gde prosto sabotiruetsia’”, *Eurasia Daily*, 6 April 2016 <<https://eadaily.com/ru/news/20-16/04/06/kryashenskiy-svyashchennik-stroitelstvo-nashih-cerkvey-v-tatarstane-koe-gde-prosto-sabotiruetsya>> (Accessed on 28 March 2018).

³ See R. Wodak et al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006).

⁴ F.S. Baiazitova, *Tatarskie govory Nizhnego Prikam’ia* (Kandidat folologicheskikh nauk, Institut iazyka, literatury i istorii ANRT, 1973); Baiazitova, *Govory tatar-kriashen v sravnitel’nom osveshchenii*; Baiazitova, *Keräshennär: tel üzenchälekläre häm yola ijatı*. For specific characteristics of Kräshen in comparison with the literary Tatar language, see F.S. Nurieva, “Dialektnaia osnova knig na ‘kreshcheno-tatarskom’ iazyke vtoroi poloviny XIX veka,” *Ural-Altai Studies* 2:17 (2015), 67-73.

Kräshen is mostly used as a liturgical language in Orthodox Christian religious settings and as a spoken vernacular in some rural areas in Tatarstan. Although the majority of Kräshens identify Tatar as their native language (62.2%),⁵ in the Kräshen nationalist discourse, Kräshen is constructed as a marker of the distinct ethnic identity that should enjoy the status of a separate language, not a dialect of Tatar.

Since the 1990s, Kräshen activists have been in conflict with Tatar elites. These clashes, I argue, did not result from the state collapse of 1991 but are deeply rooted in Russia's imperial and Soviet past; therefore, the first section of the chapter provides a historical background. I start with a brief analysis of the state-supported missionary projects; efforts to encourage religious conversion to Orthodox Christianity among Turkic peoples in the Volga-Ural region led to the construction of a Kräshen religious identity. The focus of Section 7.2 then lies on the role played by Bible translation projects in reinforcing the "otherness" of Kräshens and their separation from the majority of Muslim Tatars. Then I will touch upon the Soviet approaches toward this religious minority: while in the early years of the USSR the state encouraged the transformation of Kräshen religious identity into a secular, ethnic self-identification, this process was later aborted and Kräshens were re-configured as a sub-group of Tatar nationality.

Section 7.3 of the chapter discusses the three discourses that dominate the public debate on Kräshen history, language and ethnicity in post-Soviet Tatarstan. Here I distinguish (1) the position of Tatar national elites, who are generally reluctant to recognize Kräshens as a separate ethnic group; (2) the position of pro-Tatar Kräshen leaders, who argue that cooperation with the Tatarstani authorities is the only possible way for Kräshens to survive as an ethnic group with a distinct culture; and finally (3) the standpoint of Kräshen nationalists, who advocate the separation of Kräshens from Tatars.

Section 7.4 examines the role being played by the ROC in the evolution of the "Kräshen issue" today. As seen in the previous chapter, under Patriarch Kirill the ROC embarked on a more active missionary policy, which includes promoting grassroots projects that try to revive imperial practices of Orthodox Christian mission among Russia's Muslim ethnic communities. The Kräshens have become a target group not only for assertive proselytism activists, like Sysoev and his followers; there have also been attempts to establish a new Kräshen missionary school in Tatarstan to support

⁵ Only 13% of Kräshen respondents reported that their native language is Kräshen, and 8,5% named Russian as their mother tongue. See T.A. Titova et al., "Ethno-Confessional Group of the Kryashens: Transformation of Identity and Modern Ethno-Cultural Processes," *Journal of Sustainable Development* 8:4 (2015), 260-67. Here p. 265.

Christian mission among ethnic Kräshens in the region. In parallel, the ROC also supported efforts to complete the translation of the Bible into Kräshen Tatar: throughout the 1990s-early 2000s, the newly-ordained Kräshen clergy and parishioners of restored Kräshen churches continued the translation projects that had been started by Orthodox missionaries in the nineteenth century (see also Section 8.2.3 of the next chapter).

Here I argue that in all three historical periods –Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet – the Kräshen language, religion and ethnicity have been categorized and controlled by the state in the same terms: standardization of the Kräshen language has often accompanied top-down efforts to construct ethnic and religious identity markers of the minority. At the same time, suppression of the Kräshen distinctiveness also involved downgrading the status of the Kräshen language. In late imperial Russia and in the post-Soviet period we observe that the interests of the state overlap with those of the ROC, which amplified the efforts to exercise influence over Kräshen self-identification. Under the Tsars, the Church-sponsored translation of the Bible became the catalyst for profound changes and development in the Kräshen language and culture, thereby contributing to Russia’s policies on integration of *inorodtsy* (minorities).⁶ Today, the ROC’s goal is to gain a stronger position in Russia’s Muslim-majority regions, which is also advantageous for the state, which is attempting to impose a rigid “vertical of power” to subordinate ethnic republics to the federal centre.

7.2 Constructing the Other: imperial and Soviet policies

Authorities in Tsarist Russia used religious affiliation and religious institutions as tools for governing the ethnically and religiously diverse empire. Catherine the Great (r. 1762-1796), and especially Alexander I (r. 1801-1825), constructed the system of administration that subordinated “foreign faiths” to state supervision, “even as it meant endowing their hierarchies with substantial spiritual authority within their respective communities”.⁷

The existing scholarship on this topic offers a detailed overview of how missionary projects in imperial Russia constituted new understandings of ethnic

⁶ For discussion on strategies of integrating minorities into the Russian empire, see, e.g., V. Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 23-46.

⁷ P.W. Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia’s Volga-Kama Region, 1827-1905* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 3.

particularity among baptized peoples in the region.⁸ Robert Geraci and Paul Werth argue that by the 1860s, those Tatars who were baptized prior to the eighteenth century adopted the “Kräshen” label to differentiate themselves from Muslims and pagan peoples.⁹ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many Tatars had accepted Christianity only formally, and sought to re-join the Islamic community; at the same time, “a perhaps larger group, slowly abandoning the complex of Muslim and indigenous Turkic (‘pagan’) practices [...], constructed an indigenous Orthodox Christian Identity”.¹⁰ Agnès Kefeli also argues that by viewing Kräshens only as “Christianized crypto-Muslims”, we risk oversimplifying the real state of affairs. In her opinion, the community lived in a religiously hybrid milieu, where elements of Islam and Christianity were mixed within a mosaic, together with pagan practices of venerating local and ancestral spirits. Kefeli does not see the apostasies to Islam that took place among Kräshens in the nineteenth century as a mechanical “return” to Islam, but partially a result of missionary efforts by Muslim missionaries, who also aspired to “expand their community in Turkic and Finno-Ugric milieus”.¹¹

The large-scale “apostasy” in the second half of the nineteenth century – when at least 8,000 baptized Tatars in different districts of the Kazan province alone asked permission to return openly to the practice of Islam¹² – triggered the Church, as well as the state, to pay attention to conversion strategies. The Tsarist government not only looked for an effective way of communicating with its subjects, but also wished to create strategies of subjecting them into becoming docile citizens.¹³ At that time, Nikolai Il’minskii suggested that the emphasis should not be placed on “external” baptism but rather on a Christian upbringing. The essence of what was later called the “Il’minskii system” was the religious education of children in their native languages with the help of native missionaries, priests and teachers. This method was thought to promise better results in preventing apostasy than the traditional missionary work in the Russian

⁸ E.g., Geraci, *Window on the East*; Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy*; A. Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); R.R. Iskhakov, *Missionerskaia deiatel’nost’ Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi v otnoshenii musul’man Srednego Povolzh’ia v XIX-nachale XX vv.* (PhD thesis, Institut Istorii im. Sh. Mardzhani ANRT, 2008).

⁹ P.W. Werth, “From ‘Pagan’ Muslims to ‘Baptized’ Communists: Religious Conversion and Ethnic Particularity in Russia’s Eastern Provinces,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42:3 (2000), 497-523. Here p. 499.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

¹¹ Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia*, pp. 3-4.

¹² P.W. Werth, *Subjects for Empire: Orthodox Mission and Imperial Governance in the Volga-Kama Region, 1825-1881* (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1996), 389.

¹³ On similar practices in other European empires, see Robinson, *Translation and Empire*, p. 10.

language, which cared little for the local cultures and provoked misunderstandings and resistance.¹⁴

In this effort, one of the first tasks was to translate the fundamental Christian texts into what was coined as the Kräshen language, which was chosen to facilitate the Orthodox Christian education of Kräshens: “In order to serve effectually for the Christian enlightenment of the baptized Tatars”, Il’minskii wrote, “translations ought to be made in a language entirely comprehensible to them – that is in a conversational language”.¹⁵ Il’minskii held that “in instances when the vocabulary of such a dialect [of baptized Tatars] was too poor, [...], words would be introduced not from the literary Tatar language, but from Russian”.¹⁶ Il’minskii’s goal was, as Geraci argues, to prepare the Tatar children to learn Russian and make them “less vulnerable to Muslim written propaganda”.¹⁷

As a result, it was the missionaries who produced the first Kräshen vocabularies and grammars; they did so for practical purposes of Christian education but also to create a new group of religious leaders versed in that language. In this endeavour, the Cyrillic alphabet gradually replaced the Arabic script used by Tatars. Il’minskii’s colleagues, the missionaries and Orientalists Nikolai Ostroumov and Aleksei Voskresenskii, worked on the standardization of the Kräshen language and published Tatar-Russian (1892) and Russian-Tatar (1894) dictionaries.¹⁸ These dictionaries reflected “the Tatar speech as it is heard in the conversations of baptized Tatars predominantly of Kazan *gubernia* [a major administrative subdivision]”.¹⁹ Thereby, the missionaries documented and standardized the language of the Kräshen community at that time.

In addition to the translation of religious literature and the production of text books, the Orthodox missionaries also engaged in what scholars in postcolonial translation studies refer to as “cultural translation”.²⁰ It involves “a process of making

¹⁴ On the “Il’minskii system”, see I. Kreindler, *Educational Policies toward the Eastern Nationalities in Tsarist Russia: A Study of Il’minskii’s System* (PhD thesis, Columbia University 1969); Johnson, *Imperial Commission for Orthodox Mission*; Campbell, *The Muslim Question and Russian Imperial Governance*.

¹⁵ Quoted in S.K. Batalden, *Russian Bible Wars: Modern Scriptural Translation and Cultural Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 135.

¹⁶ Geraci, *Window on the East*, p. 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ N.P. Ostroumov, *Tatarsko-russkii slovar’* (Kazan: Tipografiia Imperatorskogo Universiteta, 1892); A. Voskresenskii, *Russko-tatarskii slovar’* (Kazan: Tipografiia Literaturnogo Universiteta, 1884).

¹⁹ Ostroumov, *Tatarsko-russkii slovar’*, p. 1.

²⁰ E.g., Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*; Robinson, *Translation and Empire*; Bassnett, “Postcolonialism and/as Translation”.

known the unknown, of distinguishing between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ native practices [...] to further the spread of God’s Word and consolidate its gains”.²¹ In this sense, the Christian missionary enterprise and Il’minskii’s educational programme contributed to the accommodation and Russification of the Kräshen community in imperial Russia. According to Charles Steinwedel, Il’minskii saw the primary reason for teaching in non-Russian as lying “not in the Russian language, but in the development of common human conceptions, moral principles and convictions, and Russian sympathies”; these sympathies “could take any linguistic form”.²² Among the most prominent users of Il’minskii’s method and programme was the Brotherhood of Bishop Gurii, a group of priests, officials and educators who took upon themselves the task of spreading Christian education among non-Russians.²³ The activities of Orthodox missionaries in imperial Russia thus support the argument that colonizers often translated texts in order to later use them for “translating” the people: that is, by making religious texts of the dominant culture available in vernaculars, the religious mission contributed to the transformation and incorporation of indigenous populations within the dominant culture.²⁴

In the context of nineteenth-century imperial Russia, the efforts of Orthodox missionaries contributed to the creation of a distinct religious and ethnic self-awareness among Kräshens, although Russians spoke of Tatar-speaking Christians as “baptized Tatars”;²⁵ inhabitants of Kräshen villages, however, refused to call themselves “baptized Tatars”, which they regarded as inaccurate and even offensive, and instead used the term “Kräshens” (lit. ‘Christened’). As Paul Werth argues, after the October revolution of 1917,²⁶ “some Kräshen activists even attempted to secularize this identity in order to claim status as a full-fledged *narodnost’* and/or *natsiia* and staffed a special *Kriashensektsiia* of the Tatar Republic’s communist party after 1922”.²⁷

²¹ Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, p. 106.

²² C.R. Steinwedel, *Threads of Empire: Loyalty and Tsarist Authority in Bashkiria, 1552–1917* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 136.

²³ P.W. Werth, “Big Candles and ‘Internal Conversion’: The Mari Animist Reformation and Its Russian Appropriations”, in *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia*, ed. R.P. Geraci and M. Khodarkovsky (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 144–72.

²⁴ See Robinson, *Translation and Empire*, p. 84.

²⁵ Geraci, *Window on the East*, p. 30.

²⁶ On the eve of the Russian revolution we may already observe the development of a secular poetry in Kräshen, including works of the Kräshen poet Iakov Emelianov (1848–1893).

²⁷ P.W. Werth, “From Resistance to Subversion: Imperial Power, Indigenous Opposition, and Their Entanglement,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:1 (2000), 21–43. Here p. 37; also Werth, “From ‘Pagan’ Muslims to ‘Baptized’ Communists”.

Until the mid-1920s the Soviet authorities generally recognized the Kräshens as a separate ethnic group that deserved Soviet-style cultural autonomy. In the first all-Soviet census of 1926, the Kräshens were recorded as a *narodnost'* 'nationality'²⁸ encompassing 101,466 people.²⁹ As Werth observed, the Kräshens gradually began to transcend the predominantly confessional foundations of their identity and to transform into a secular community.³⁰ Yet by the end of the 1920s, the state demanded the consolidation of smaller peoples into larger ethnic units, thus ending the proliferation of entities with nationality status that had begun shortly after the revolution. In the second half of the 1920s, the project of introducing the Latin (Roman) alphabet for Soviet minority populations offered the opportunity for what was perceived as "a painless merge" of Kräshens with Tatars, as both groups were about to start using the New Tatar Alphabet (Janalif).³¹ Although the Latin alphabet for Tatar and other Turkic languages of the USSR was soon replaced by a Cyrillic alphabet (1938), the latter was still different from the script introduced by Il'minskii. Throughout the Soviet Union, the Kräshens continued to be educated in the literary Tatar language and in Russian.

The official Soviet discourse on the status of the Kräshen minority was subject to frequent change, which reflected uneasy relations of the Soviet authorities with Russia's imperial past. While in 1922 a special party commission had concluded that it was the Tsarist missionary policy that "artificially" segregated Kräshens from other Tatars,³² the Soviet Encyclopedia of 1952 recognized Il'minskii's positive contribution to the enlightenment (*prosveshchenie*) of non-Russians.³³ At the same time, Soviet authorities also actively supported the creation of national histories with a clearly definable

²⁸ The concept refers to what in Western scholarship is usually defined as "ethnicity", that is, "the sense of belonging to a community of presumed descent based on the subjectively-determined saliency of such cultural markers as language, religion, and custom"; see D. Arel, "Demography and Politics in the First Post-Soviet Censuses: Mistrusted State, Contested Identities," *Population* 57:6 (2002), 801-27. Here p. 811.

²⁹ A. Sakurama, "Ethnicity and Imperial Memory: N.I. Il'minskii in the Identity of Contemporary Tatars and Kriashens," Paper presented at *Central Eurasian Studies Society: Fifth Regional Conference* (Kazan, Russia; 2016), 1-18. Here p. 9.

³⁰ Werth, "From 'Pagan' Muslims to 'Baptized' Communists", p. 497.

³¹ A.A. Sal'nikova and D.M. Galiullina, "Tatarskie bukvari na kirillitse: ot bukvaria N. I. Il'minskogo do sovetskikh uchebnikov kontsa 1930-1950," *Otechestvennaia i zarubezhnaia pedagogika* 13:4 (2013), 102-20. Here p. 104.

³² Werth, "From 'Pagan' Muslims to 'Baptized' Communists", p. 512.

³³ Sakurama, "Ethnicity and Imperial Memory: N.I. Il'minskii in the Identity of Contemporary Tatars and Kriashens", p. 9.

trajectory leading back to the past, no matter whether this could be proven by scholarly evidence or not.

As Werth argues, the autonomy and the national history of Tatars came at the expense of smaller groups like Kräshens, who were “deemed too insignificant to warrant the trappings of nationhood”.³⁴ According to Kefeli, the post-war trend in Soviet historiography to ground Tatar ethnogenesis primarily in the Volga Bulgars of the tenth century, and not in the “Tatars” of the Golden Horde, also contributed to the further marginalization of the Orthodox Christian identity of the Kräshens.³⁵

7.3 Kräshen ethnic identity in the post-Soviet period

In the post-Soviet period, Kräshen identity has been constructed around three ethno-differentiating factors: (1) the origin of the minority; (2) the status of their language; and (3) their religious affiliation. The way these factors are interpreted and combined gives room for a broad spectrum of ideas. One extreme is the view that the Kräshens constitute a distinct ethnic group that historically and linguistically developed in parallel with the majority of Muslim Tatars, with little to no Islamic influence on Kräshen language and traditions. On the other side of the spectrum are those who argue that the present-day Kräshens are descendants of a group of Muslim Tatars who were baptized and segregated from the latter by imperial Russification policies targeting the indigenous peoples of the Volga-Ural region. In this section I will examine two dominant discourses that represent each side of the spectrum, as well as the middle way that attempts to reconcile ideas of both extremes.

Of importance for the discussion is the first post-Soviet Russian population census of 2002, which increased the number of recognized nationalities in comparison with the last Soviet census (of 1989) from 143 to 176. The dictionary of nationalities for this census was prepared by the Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences; it listed Kräshens apart from Tatars but as speakers of the Tatar language.³⁶ In a letter to the Russian Duma, the Institute initially advised that recognition of Kräshens as an ethnic group detached from Tatars “would not be wise”,

³⁴ Werth, “From ‘Pagan’ Muslims to ‘Baptized’ Communists”, p. 515.

³⁵ A. Kefeli, “Baptized Tatars”, in *The Supplement to the Modern Encyclopedia of Russian, Soviet, and Eurasian History*, ed. E.J. Lazzerini (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 2001), 199-204. Here p. 202. On the “Bulghar identity”, see A.J. Frank, *Islamic Historiography and ‘Bulghar’ Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

³⁶ S.V. Sokolovskii, “‘Tatarskaia problema’ vo vserossiiskoi perepisi naseleniia,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2002), 207-34. Here p. 226.

but by late 2001 it endorsed the separation, arguing that there was strong evidence that many people in Tatarstan wanted to be counted as Kräshens.³⁷ This move was justified as a “liberalization” of the population census that emphasizes the people’s right of self-identification.³⁸ The view on the “Kräshen issue” was certainly shaped by Soviet historian and ethnographer Valerii Tishkov (b. 1941), who headed the Institute at that time. Tishkov’s ideas about ethnicity, as Paul Kolstø argues, have been influenced by the Western schools of modernism and constructivism. For Tishkov, an ethnic group is not a naturally determined entity; its defining elements can be “invented”, and once “an ethnic group has been established, it can lay a foundation for political demands”.³⁹

7.3.1 Tatar nationalist discourse

Tatar national elites explained the origin of the Kräshens as the result of Russification and assimilation policies by Tsarist authorities, when groups of Muslims and pagans who lived in the Volga-Kama region were forcefully baptized and separated from other neighbouring peoples from the sixteenth century onward.⁴⁰ Advocates of this version generally refuse to recognize the Kräshens as an independent ethnic group, seeing them as an Orthodox Christian subgroup within the Tatar nation. The language that the Kräshens speak is subsequently classified as one of the many Tatar dialects.⁴¹

This standpoint gained prominence in the 1980s, when ethnic mobilization among Tatars and Kräshens was still a relatively joint movement. The vanguard of the national movement was the All-Tatar Public Centre (*Vsetatarskii obshchestvennyi tsentr*, established in 1988), which promoted the ethnic and cultural consolidation of the Tatars. In the process, Islam came to be seen as one of the core factors unifying the Tatars over the huge territories where they had settled, because, as Tatar historian of Islam, Rafik Mukhametshin, explains, “Russian colonial rule strengthened the Tatar’s

³⁷ Arel, “Demography and Politics in the First Post-Soviet Censuses”, pp. 817-18.

³⁸ Sokolovskii, “Tatarskaia problema”.

³⁹ See P. Kolstø, “Values and State ideology in Post-Communist Russia”, in *Nation-Building and Common Values in Russia*, ed. P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub Incorporated, 2005), 327-39. Here pp. 328-29.

⁴⁰ E.g., D.M. Iskhakov, “Kriasheny: istoriko-etnograficheskii ocherk,” *Idel’ 7* (2002), 58-62; R.R. Iskhakov, *Missionerstvo i musul'mane Volgo-Kam'ia* (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2011); R.R. Iskhakov, “Khristianskoe prosveshchenie i religioznye dvizheniia (reislamizatsiia) kreshchenykh tatar Volgo-Kam'ia v XIX - nachale XX vv.”, in *Iz istorii i kul'tury narodov srednego povolzh'ia*, ed. I.K. Zagidullin et al. (Kazan: Ikhlas, 2011), 109-30.

⁴¹ Baiazitova, *Govory tatar-kriashen v sravnitel'nom osveshchenii*; Baiazitova, *Keräshennär: tel üzenchäleklärä häm yola ijatı*.

adherence to their pre-colonial spiritual and, especially, religious traditions, which became symbols of their former independence".⁴²

The standpoint of Tatar nationalists reveals what has been referred to as "nationalist/nativist assimilation of colonial myths".⁴³ In the interest of constructing a unified Tatar national identity that challenges the influence of the dominant Russian culture, the discourse of nationalism suppresses difference, heterogeneity and hybridity.⁴⁴ Nativism, in general, advocates a return to lost origins,⁴⁵ and in the Tatar case, this imagined pre-colonial purity was centred on religion and on getting rid of elements brought by Russians, including influences on Tatar culture and language.⁴⁶ The Russian regime and the Orthodox missionary policies were regarded as methods of suppressing the Tatar ethnos, and any resistance to these methods was depicted as contributing to the national liberation movement. In this view, Kräshens were a constant reminder of the colonial past, and it is no wonder that a few Tatar public figures insisted on the Kräshens' "immediate return" to their roots: they demanded that Kräshens embrace Islam and abandon any traditions inspired by Christianity and paganism.⁴⁷

A specific feature of Tatarstan is that the republic's institutional structures were established during the Soviet era and remained to some degree intact in the post-Soviet period. These structures prioritize Tatar ethnicity above the interests of other non-Russian ethnic groups in the republic. As the titular minority, the Tatars enjoy more privileges in terms of cultural promotion policies and, informally, better access to education and jobs, which results in the overrepresentation of Muslim Tatars in the state structures in Tatarstan.⁴⁸ The Kräshens lack these privileges and are especially vulnerable to assimilation within either Muslim Tatar or ethnic Russian groups.

In the asymmetrical power relations between Moscow and Kazan, the Tatar national elites see Kräshens as an instrument of the federal centre to strengthen the

⁴² R. Mukhametshin, "Islamic Discourse in the Volga Urals Region", in *Radical Islam in the former Soviet Union*, ed. G. Yemelianova (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 31-61. Here p. 34.

⁴³ Robinson, *Translation and Empire*, p. 91.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context*, p. 166.

⁴⁶ Wertheim, "Language ideologies and the 'purification' of post-Soviet Tatar".

⁴⁷ E.g., F. Baltach, "Gordit'sia ili stydit'sia dolzhny kriasheny?," *Idel' 6* (1994), 61-65; A. Akhunov, "Zvezdnyi chas kriashen: segodnia kriashenam vygodno byt' ugetennym narodom," *Vostochnyi ekspres* 8 (2000), 8.

⁴⁸ A.C. White and I.A.-L. Saikkonen, "More Than a Name? Variation in Electoral Mobilisation of Titular and Non-Titular Ethnic Minorities in Russian National Elections," *Ethnopolitics* 16:5 (2017), 450-70. Here pp. 453-54.

Kremlin's control over the republic. When the Moscow-based Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology marked Kräshens as a separate ethnic group in the dictionary of nationalities, Tatars in Tatarstan perceived this as an attack on the sovereignty of the republic. If Kräshens are counted separately, the number of Tatars in the republic decreases, which undermines the status of Tatars as the largest ethnic group and hence as the Muslim majority in Tatarstan (where Tatars had only a slight majority of about 52 % of the population, according to the census of 2002 and also of 2010).⁴⁹ The discussion on which ethnic categories should be used in the 2002 population census was taken to the federal level and involved meetings between Russia's presidential administration and political leaders of Tatarstan, higher Orthodox clergy and Muslim authorities, State Duma deputies, scholars of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Sciences of Tatarstan, as well as Kräshen movement activists in Tatarstan and Udmurtia, all of which together contributed to the further politicization of the "Kräshen issue".⁵⁰ Moreover, some Russian public figures, such as Egor Kholmogorov – who is known for his Russian nationalist agenda (see also Section 2.3.1) – poured even more oil on the fire; Kholmogorov defined Kräshens as a necessary counterbalance against the Tatar national elites and even claimed that "if there were no Kräshens, they should have been invented".⁵¹

7.3.2 Pro-Tatarstani Kräshen group

Since the First Congress of the Peoples of Tatarstan, held in 1992, Kräshens have been persistent in pressing the Tatarstani authorities to accept the following demands: 1) to establish a department of Kräshen studies within the Tatarstan Academy of Sciences; 2) to create and finance Kräshen media outlets; 3) to revive the Kräshen

⁴⁹Census, "Natsional'nyi sostav i vladenie iazykami, grazhdanstvo", *The official website of the All-Russian population census of 2002*, 2002 <<http://www.perepis2002.ru/index.html?id=17>> (Accessed on 18 July 2018); Census, "Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia po sub'ektam Rossiiskoi Federatsii", *The official website of the All-Russian population census of 2010*, 2010 <http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/results2.html> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

⁵⁰ On the discussion, see Sokolovskii, "Tatarskaia problema"; D.M. Iskhakov, "Vzgliad na vserossiiskuiu perepis' iz Tatarstana," *Ab Imperio* 4 (2002), 235-49; A. Sakurama, "Varied Perceptions of Ethnicity in Contemporary Russia: The Case of Tatarstan in the All Russian Census of 2010," *Annals of the Japanese Association for Russian and East European Studies* 40 (2011), 34-39.

⁵¹ E. Kholmogorov, "Kriashenskii kliuch", *Spetsnaz Rossii*, 8 August 2002 <<http://www.global-rus.ru/comments/66212/>> (Accessed on 13 February 2018).

national theatre/musical ensemble; and 4) to return the building⁵² of the Central Kräshen-Tatar school in Kazan, built in 1871.⁵³

In April 2002, in the midst of the debates about the position of the Kräshens in the upcoming census, then President of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev (b. 1937), met with a selected group of Kräshen leaders who repeated these demands. If these requests were met, the Kräshen leaders promised to strive for preserving the “unity of the Tatar nation”, that is, to downplay their claims to be listed separately from Tatars in the census questionnaires. As a result of this meeting, Shaimiev signed a protocol containing instructions to responsible bodies and departments in the government.⁵⁴

Following the negotiations with Shaimiev, on 3 October 2002 – a week prior to the census – a richly illustrated newspaper “Tuganaylar” (Congeners), published by the city administration of Naberezhnye Chelny,⁵⁵ began to circulate in both the Tatar and Russian languages.⁵⁶ Later, on 25 May 2007, a new state-supported body, the Public Organization of Kräshens (*Obshchestvennaia organizatsiia kriashen*, hereafter: OOK), was created with the intention of being the only legitimate body to protect and represent interests of the Kräshens in the republic. Kräshen Ivan Egorov became chair of the OOK; as of 2018, Egorov also occupies the director’s chair of the republic’s major holding company “Ak Bars”, and is a deputy of the State Council, the parliament of Tatarstan.

OOK’s leaders recognized and respected the agreements adopted at the meeting with the President of Tatarstan in 2002; in the all-Russian population censuses of 2002 and 2010 their official standpoint was that Kräshens do indeed constitute a sub-ethnos within the Tatar nation, yet this sub-ethnos has a distinct religion (Orthodox Christianity) and customs that differ from those of Muslim Tatars. It is noteworthy that the OOK-edited newspaper *Tuganaylar* uses standard literary Tatar. Moreover, the

⁵² In 1871-1928 the building hosted pedagogical courses and served as a cultural centre for Kräshens. See L. Belousova, “Kereshen: pravo na samobytnost”, *Tatarskii Mir*, 2003 <<http://www.tat-world.ru/article.shtml?article=47>> (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

⁵³ E. Rylova, “Sindrom ‘starshego brata’, ili pochemu kriasheny ne khotiat nazyvat’sia tatarami”, *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 21 February 2002 <<https://www.pravenc.ru/text/428815.html>> (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

⁵⁴ A. Fokin, “Kriasheny kak ob’ekt natsional’noi politiki”, *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, 2 April 2014 <http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2014/04/02/kryasheny_kak_obekt_nacionalnoj_politiki/> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

⁵⁵ In 2008 the newspaper became part of the “Tatmedia” agency for press and mass communications of the Republic of Tatarstan.

⁵⁶ At first, one of the Kräshen leaders, Liudmila Belousova, denounced the “Tuganaylar” for being “not a Kräshen newspaper, but a newspaper for Kräshens”, a media outlet that “the colonial administrations [would] create for the colonized peoples”; see Belousova, “Kereshen: pravo na samobytnost”. In 2008 Belousova became the main editor of the newspaper.

OOK insisted on keeping the historical endonym “Kräshens”, instead of using the term “baptized Tatars”.

The OOK leaders defended their decision to cooperate with the Tatarstani authorities by citing the need to preserve the cultural heritage of the Kräshens: the latter’s survival as an ethnic group with distinct traditions is only possible within the Tatar nation, since the Kräshens themselves lack the financial and human resources to invest in research and the preservation and transmission of their cultural heritage. If the Kräshens become a separate ethnic group, according to OOK, they are more likely to become assimilated with Russians; young Kräshens who move to urban areas are already prone to amalgamate with the dominant ethnic group because of their Russian given names and Orthodox religion.⁵⁷ Commenting on their political stand, in 2013 the OOK board openly states that:

“It is no secret that many Kräshens are dissatisfied; [these are] mostly those who stood at the origin of the Kräshen ethno-cultural movement in the early 1990s. It is clear that some of [their] goals have not been reached in the [past] twenty years, but we should not forget that the society [in Tatarstan] has undergone changes, and [our] priorities have [also] changed. Therefore, we have to turn a blind eye to some things, and just forget about other [things], as [utopian ideas]”.⁵⁸

Tatarstan, in turn, attempted to meet other demands of the Kräshens. In 2008 the Kräshen folk ensemble “Bermianchek” (‘Willow’) was allowed to stage its first performances,⁵⁹ and the same year saw the establishment of the new Research Centre for History and Culture of Baptized Tatars and Nagaibaks⁶⁰ at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences in Tatarstan.⁶¹ After much contestation about the official title of the Centre, the expression “Baptized Tatars” was replaced by “Tatar Kräshens”. Since 2015 the Centre publishes a subject-specific academic journal, *The Kräshen*

⁵⁷ D. Gorenburg, “Tatar Identity: A United, Indivisible Nation?,” Paper presented at *Emerging Meso-Areas in the Former Socialist Countries: Histories Revived or Improvised?* (University of Hokkaido, Japan; 2004), 1-31. Here p. 15.

⁵⁸ I. Mullina, “Nezvanyi gost’ khuzhe tatarina!”, *Tuganailar*, 27 March 2013 <<http://www.tuganaylar.ru/tt/2014-09-25-12-53-26/item/872-nezvanyiy-gost-huzhe-tatarina.html?tmpl=component&print=1>> (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

⁵⁹ The ensemble today promotes the cultural heritage of the Kräshens by performing folk songs and dances, using traditional musical instruments. See OOK RT, “Obshchestvennaia organizatsiia kriashen RT”, 2018 <<http://krshn.addnt.ru/about/>> (Accessed on 27 March 2018).

⁶⁰ The term ‘Nagaibaks’ refers to descendants of the Nogais, who were converted to Christianity (around the eighteenth century) and speak a dialect of Tatar. See Akiner, *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union: A Historical and Statistical Handbook*, p. 100.

⁶¹ In the 1990s there was already a scholarly group with a similar research agenda, which was affiliated with the Institute of History, but it ceased its activity in 1998.

Historical Review (Kriashenskoe istoricheskoe obozrenie). The Kräshen nationalists have repeatedly criticized the Centre for promoting a pro-Tatar standpoint in academic research and an ethnic bias in appointing its staff members – ethnic Muslim Tatars are by far the majority among its affiliated members.⁶²

7.3.3 *Kräshen nationalists*

Finally, there is the group of Kräshen nationalists, who denounce cooperation with the Tatarstani officials and promote self-identification of the Kräshens as a separate minority, independent from Muslim Tatars. This group was formed around several key figures, in particular Arkadii Fokin (b. 1938, the founder and chair of the Council of Veterans of the Kräshen movement in Kazan) and Maxim Glukhov (1937-2003, one of the leaders of the Ethnographic Society of the Kräshens), who disapproved of the works by Tatar historians and instead presented their own readings of Kräshen history.⁶³

Their main argument is that the Kräshens are not just Tatars of another faith; they have a separate history, distinct language and unique customs. Fokin, following Glukhov, defends the standpoint that Kräshens professed Orthodox Christianity prior to the conquest of the Kazan Khanate by the Muscovite army in 1552. This view runs counter to commonplace historiography, and is difficult to sustain with evidence. They argue that this Christian minority had little to no relation to Muslim Tatars, and they portray Kräshens' cultural heritage and language as devoid of Islamic influence.⁶⁴

These claims for recognition of Kräshens as an independent ethnic group have been supported by several secular and Orthodox Christian research institutes at the federal level.⁶⁵ In addition, the so-called "Islam-critical experts", who are known for

⁶² Regnum, "'Ruchnye kriasheny' planiruiut ostat'sia 'vnutri tatar', no ne nazyvat'sia kreshchenymi tatarami", *Regnum*, 8 May 2014 <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1799940.html>> (Accessed on 12 June 2018); A. Fokin and N. Mamakov, "Doktorskaia dissertatsiia ili ideologicheskii zakaz?", *Russkiiia Narodnaia Liniia*, 8 June 2018 <http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2018/06/08/doktorskaya_dissertaci-ya_ili_ideologicheskij_zakaz/> (Accessed on 15 June 2018).

⁶³ See, e.g., M.S. Glukhov, *Tatarica* (Kazan: Vatan, 1997); A. Fokin, *Est' takoi narod – kriasheny: Problemy etnokontsional'noi identifikatsii kriashen* (Kazan: Kriashenskii prikhod goroda Kazani; Sovet veteranov kriashenskogo dvizheniia goroda Kazani, 2011); A. Fokin, "Kriashenskaia dukhovnaia missiia v Tatarstane: prednaznachenie i perspektivy", *APN*, 12 February 2016 <<http://www.apn.ru/publications/article34679.htm>> (Accessed on 7 March 2018).

⁶⁴ Gorenburg, "Tatar Identity: A United, Indivisible Nation?", p. 14.

⁶⁵ See publications by the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, e.g., Sokolovskii, "'Tatarskaia problema'"; V.A. Tishkov, "O Vserossiiskoi perepisi naseleniia 2010 goda: raz'iasneniia dlia retrogradov i natsionalistov i preduprezhdeniia dlia chinovnikov i politikov", in

their regular attacks on the Islamic establishment in Russia, have actively endorsed the discourse of the Kräshen nationalists since the early 2000s. As Kristina Kovalskaya argues, these “experts” rose to prominence in the post-Soviet period due to the increased cooperation between the ROC and the state; in Tatarstan, particularly Rais Suleimanov (b. 1984) became notorious for his publications denouncing the secular and Islamic leaders of the republic for breeding Islamic extremism.⁶⁶ For several years Suleimanov was based at the Kazan branch of the Russian Institute for Strategy Studies (*Rossiiskii institut strategicheskikh issledovaniï*), which consistently claims that Tatarstani leaders rhetorically promote a balance between Russian/Orthodox and Tatar/Muslim interests but, in fact, favour Tatars and Islam on all accounts.⁶⁷ In 2011–2013, the Institute hosted a number of conferences and issued publications that promoted the Kräshen nationalists’ standpoints;⁶⁸ yet in the mainstream discourse in Tatarstan, these publications remain marginal.

7.4 Alternative Christianity

7.4.1 *The new Kräshen mission*

The Kräshen nationalist discourse also receives moderate support from the renewed Orthodox mission among Kräshens. In 1989, a group of ethnic Kräshen priests established the first parish in late-Soviet Kazan, where they conducted services in the Kräshen language. Initially the parish was located in the Cathedral of St. Nicholas; in

Etnologicheskii Monitoring Perepisi Naseleniia, ed. V.V. Stepanov (Moscow: IEA RAN, 2011), 15–130; also O.E. Kaz'mina, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' i novaia religioznaia situatsiia v Rossii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 2009); V.V. Ilizarova, *Kriasheny: faktory formirovaniia etnokul'turnoi identichnosti* (PhD thesis, Moscow State University, 2013); A.V. Zhuravskii, “Sovremennoe tserkovnoe kraevedenie i ego rol' v vossozdanii tserkovno-istoricheskoi nauki,” Paper presented at *IX-X Rozhdestvenskie Chteniia* (Moscow, Russia; 2001).

⁶⁶ See K. Kovalskaya, “Nationalism and Religion in the Discourse of Russia’s ‘Critical Experts of Islam,’” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28:2 (2017), 146–61. To name just few works by Suleimanov: R. Suleimanov, “Vakhkhabizm v Tatarstane v postsovetskii period v svete vliianiia vneshnikh faktorov”, *APN*, 26 February 2014 <<http://www.apn.ru/index.php?newsid=31137>> (Accessed on 28 March 2018); R. Suleimanov, “Musul'mane Povolzh'ia v riadakh Talibana i IGIL: masshtab problemy, mekhanizm verbovki, posledstviia”, *APN*, 8 November 2015 <<http://www.apn.ru/index.php?newsid=34174>> (Accessed on 28 March 2018); Suleimanov, “Kriashenskii sviashchennik”.

⁶⁷ Kovalskaya, “Nationalism and Religion in the Discourse of Russia’s ‘Critical Experts of Islam’”, p. 149.

⁶⁸ See, e.g., A. Fokin and R. Suleimanov, *Natsional'noe samoopredelenie kriashen: istoriia i sovremennost': materialy tret'ikh publichnykh chtenii pamiati uchonogo-kriashenoveda M.S.Glukhova, posviashchennykh ego 75-letiiu (23 noiabria 2012 g.)* (Kazan: Aventa, 2013); *Nikolai Il'minskii i kriashenskoe natsional'noe dvizhenie: materialy nauchnoi konferentsii (27 dekabria 2011 g.)* (Kazan: Aventa, 2013); also the academic journal *Kriashenovedenie: nauchnyi al'manakh*, edited by Arkadii Fokin and Rais Suleimanov.

1995 it moved into the reconstructed Tikhvin Church in Staraiia Tatarskaia Sloboda (the 'Old Tatar quarter') in the centre of Kazan. As of September 2017, the Tatarstan archdiocese of the ROC (*Tatarstanskaia mitropoliia*) oversees in total fifteen Kräshen parishes, in nine of which liturgical services are conducted in Kräshen, while in six the liturgy is held in Church Slavonic.⁶⁹

Like the Kräshen nationalist camp, the Kräshen clergy who work with the community today have a positive view of the strategies of the Orthodox Christian mission practised in the imperial period. Missionary Il'minskii, who fell into oblivion during the USSR, has been promoted as the "apostle of the Kräshens", and there are voices that call for his official canonization by the ROC. The contemporary mission also draws on Il'minskii's strategies of translating Christian religious texts: in 2005 the Kazan parish together with the Russian Bible Society (RBO) completed the translation of the parts that had not been translated in the imperial period and published the first full version of the NT in Kräshen. The strategies behind these translations will be analysed in Chapter 8.

The NT in Kräshen was intended to facilitate the ongoing "in-churching" in Kräshen villages, where the situation, as the Orthodox Christian missionaries see it, is similar to the state of affairs in the nineteenth century: many Kräshens are "in danger" of apostasy to Islam and of "Tartarization". Yet the present-day Orthodox Christian mission among Kräshens is experiencing a severe lack of clergy: even decades after the relaxation of state policies on religious practice, there is still an urgent need for priests who can perform services in the Kräshen language.

In their research on ethnic and religious identities among Kräshens in Tatarstan, Tatiana Titova et al. observed that 96.6% of the interviewees identify themselves as Orthodox Christians, and half of them consider it important to conduct religious services in Kräshen. The vernacular is seen as the minority's liturgical language and should enjoy a status similar to that of Church Slavonic within the ROC.⁷⁰

Until the mid-2010s, Orthodox missionaries who tried to revive Kräshen parishes did not receive any official support from the ROC;⁷¹ the Church was reluctant to get involved, fearing that it would jeopardize the relationship with the political leadership in Tatarstan. The situation changed in 2013, when several Kräshen churches were set

⁶⁹ I. Alekseev, "Dukhovno-religioznoe razvitie kriashen mezhdu II i III Forumami pravoslavnoi obshchestvennosti Respubliki Tatarstan", *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, 27 January 2017 <http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2017/12/27/duhovnoreligioznoe_razvitie_kryashen_mezhdu_ii_i_iii_forum_ami_pravoslavnoj_obwestvennosti_respubliki_tatarstan/> (Accessed on 21 February 2018).

⁷⁰ Titova et al., "Ethno-Confessional Group of the Kryashens", p. 264.

⁷¹ Personal interview with D. Sizov, 18 July 2016.

on fire; the community members sent a letter to the Patriarch of the ROC asking for protection. This led to new negotiations on the rights of the minority between the federal authorities and the government of Tatarstan. The Church accused the Tatar national elites of discriminating against Christians and of sheltering radical Muslim movements in the republic, which the ROC identified as the circles behind the arson attacks. At the same time, the Tatarstan Archbishop Anastasii (Metkin, b. 1944), who had occupied the office for a quarter of a century, was implicated in a sexual abuse scandal and was forced to step down. The choice of Feofan (Ashurkov, b. 1947) as his successor in the office of Archbishop was seen by many as a strategic move: before his appointment Feofan had served as the deputy to the Patriarch in Moscow, and had risen to prominence through work in predominantly Muslim regions, such as the Caucasus, Syria and Egypt. Feofan is seen as a powerful and assertive figure, able to promote the interests of the ROC in Tatarstan.⁷²

In 2016, Feofan successfully organized a long-postponed visit of Patriarch Kirill to Tatarstan. Kirill did not shy away from openly explicating the ROC interests in the region: by performing a sermon, partially in the Kräshen language, he recognized the community as part of the ROC, and thus as subject to ROC protection. The Patriarch also laid the foundation stone for a new cathedral in the centre of Kazan, which was intended to redress the imbalance and put Christianity on an equal footing with Islam in Tatarstan, after Muslims “received” an Islamic Academy in Bolghar. Equally noteworthy is that shortly before the Patriarch’s visit, the Kazan Theological Seminary – the successor of the eighteenth-century institution for training Christian missionaries – re-launched its Chair of Islamic studies;⁷³ obviously intended as a revival of the chair of *anti*-Islamic studies that the Academy housed before 1917. The media immediately interpreted the ROC’s assertive presence in the region as an attempt to restore imperial practices: the newspaper headlines described Kirill’s visit as “a [second] conquest of Kazan”, and a return of the “imperial spirit”.⁷⁴ In the opinion of some journalists, after the arson cases the Tatarstani authorities had been forced to make these concessions in

⁷²E.g., K. Antonov, “Mitropolit Anastasii Kazan’ sdal”, *Kommersant*, 17 July 2015 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2769390>> (Accessed on 20 June 2018).

⁷³I. Vasil’ev, “V Kazanskoi seminarii dolzhna byt’ sozdana sobstvennaia islamovedcheskaia shkola”, *Russkaia Narodnaia Linii*, 9 August 2016 <http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2016/08/09/v_kazanskoj_seminarii_dolzhna_byt_sozdana_sobstvennaya_islamovedcheskaya_shkola/> (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

⁷⁴V. Mal’tsev, “Novyi mitropolit prines v Kazan’ ‘imperskii dukh’”, *NG Religii*, 5 August 2015 <http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2015-08-05/4_kazan.html> (Accessed on 13 February 2018); Antonov, “RPTS vziala Kazan”.

order to maintain the long-cherished image of the republic as an oasis of tolerance and peaceful Islamo-Christian coexistence.⁷⁵

7.4.2 The community of baptized Tatars

The ROC already supported initiatives of Orthodox Christian mission among Tatars before the mid-2010s, when it eventually seized the opportunity to strengthen its presence in Tatarstan and tighten its grip over the Kräshen community there. Moreover, as seen in Chapter 6 of this thesis, in the early 2000s the missionary Daniil Sysoev established his own community of baptized Tatars in Moscow. While Orthodox Christian clergy who provide pastoral care for Kräshens in Tatarstan claim to restrict their mission to inhabitants of traditionally Kräshen villages, or Kräshen settlements within mixed villages,⁷⁶ Sysoev and his followers primarily understood mission as an effort to convert Muslims to Christianity, and therefore targeted primarily Muslim-dominated settlements: in 2007-2009, Sysoev headed a mission trip to Kräshen villages and the town of Zainsk in Tatarstan, and also to Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia.⁷⁷

After Sysoev's assassination in 2009, his community of baptized Tatars dropped out of sight; but since the Tatarstani arson cases of 2013, two baptized Tatars, Evgenii Bukharov and his wife Dinara Bukharova from Moscow, took the lead in bringing the community back into the media spotlight. In November 2016, Dinara Bukharova sent an open letter on behalf of all Tatars of Russia to US President-elect Donald Trump in which she requested the abolition of the 1959 US law on "Captive Nations". This Cold War law classifies the nations of the Volga-Ural region as subjects under the control of a non-democratic government. Bukharova's letter states that this law "destroys our country [Russia] and the integrity of the Russian nation", and that the Tatars have never regarded themselves as a "captive" nation but rather as an important part of Russian society.⁷⁸ With this initiative, Bukharova drew criticism from both Tatar and Kräshen national elites; the former accused her of "distorting the history of Tatars" and supporting Russian assimilation policies,⁷⁹ while the latter argued that her letter

⁷⁵ Antonov, "RPTS vziala Kazan".

⁷⁶ Personal interview with D. Sizov, 18 July 2016.

⁷⁷ Vladimirtsev, "Nekotorye aspekty missii sredi inovertsev na primere o. Daniila Sysoeva".

⁷⁸ Regnum, "Pravoslavnye tatory prosiat Trampa otmenit' 'Zakon o poraboshchennykh natsiiakh'", *Regnum*, 17 November 2016 <<https://regnum.ru/news/2206462.html>> (Accessed on 28 March 2018).

⁷⁹ B. Timerova et al., "Chukngan tatar neofitning Trampka möräjägate tatar jämägatchelegendä rizasızlık uyattı", *Azatlıq Radiosi*, 18 November 2016 <<https://www.azatliq.org/a/28126521.html>> (Accessed on 15 June 2018).

downplayed the Kräshen quest for recognition as an ethnic group independent from the Tatars.

The media attention increased the tensions between Sysoev's community of baptized Tatars and the Kräshens in Tatarstan. The Kräshens resented their struggle for liberation and recognition in the republic becoming associated with aggressive Orthodox Christian mission coming from Moscow: Sysoev and his followers repeatedly stated that a union of Kräshens and the newly baptized Tatars had a chance to become "the avant-garde in the Christianization of the Muslims of Russia" and, in particular, of Muslim Tatars.⁸⁰ Despite their disagreements with the Kräshens in Tatarstan, the community of baptized Tatars continues to make claims to Kräshen history, language and traditions, and regularly conducts church services in the Kräshen language. Sysoev's followers go so far as to suggest that Kräshens trace their roots back to the seventh century. In December 2017, the St. Thomas's Church that Sysoev had established in Moscow hosted a memorial service for the family of Khan Kubrat (c. 635-c. 650/665); the community of baptized Tatars even venerated Khan Kubrat as the founder of Great Bulgaria, the proto-state of Volga Tatars, and as a ruler who converted to Orthodox Christianity in the region prior to the baptism of Rus' in 998.⁸¹

The 2017 Christmas Readings – an annual event of the ROC that formulates the Church agenda for the coming year – for the first time included a special section on Orthodox Tatars. Sysoev's community was allocated a place in the Christmas Readings of the Patriarchate and its representatives gave reports on behalf of Kräshens and newly baptized Tatars. They argued that Christian Tatars are an inherent part of the "bi-religious" Tatar nation, adding that the Tatars are the second largest ethnic group in Russia and that the Christian part of it is a significant congregation within the ROC. They demanded the canonization of Golden Horde Khan Sartaq (d. 1256), who was supposedly killed by his uncle for professing Christianity, as well as the canonization of Nikolai Il'minskii and Daniil Sysoev.⁸²

⁸⁰ A. Priimak, "Kriashenami pozhertovali radi missionerov", *NG Religii*, 15 February 2017 <http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2017-02-15/14_415_kryashens.html> (Accessed on 9 February 2018).

⁸¹ Pravoslavie.ru, "V khrame Apostola Fomy na Kantemirovskoi proidet moleben na tatarskom i tserkovnoslavianskom iazykakh", *Pravoslavie.ru*, 18 December 2017 <<http://pravoslavie.ru/109269.html>> (Accessed on 28 March 2018).

⁸² The full title of the section was "Orthodox Tatars (baptized Tatars, Kräshens, Nagaibaks). History. Mission. The future of Orthodoxy among the Tatar people". See Priimak, "Kriashenami pozhertovali radi missionerov"; also Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia, "Tret'ia pravoslavnaia tatarskaia konferentsiia", *Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia*, 8 February 2018 <http://ruskline.ru/opp/2018/fevral/8/tretya_ppravoslavna-ya_tatarskaya_konferenciya_tatarskaya_sekciya_rozhdestvenskih_chtenij_v_formate_kruglogo_stola_ppravosla_vnye_ta/> (Accessed on 20 June 2018).

Paradoxically, the arguments of the community of baptized Tatars resonate with the position of Russia's Islamic leaders. The baptized Tatars and Islamic authorities embrace the dominant state rhetoric, according to which the coherence of Russia's multinational society is based on a shared religiosity and traditional values; both rely on the ambiguity of the definition what "Russia's nation" is, to construct Tatars as Russia's indigenous and loyal subjects. Both present post-Soviet Russia as a successor to the great states of the past: Great Bulgaria, the Golden Horde and Tsarist Russia, emphasizing that Tatars have always been supportive of the Russian rulers. Sysoev's community claims that Tatars have always been faithful to the Russian state and defended its interests, not as a "captive" nation but as a voluntary actor; hence their conversion to Christianity also came about by volition, not by coercion. DUM RF Mufti Ravil' Gainutdin and his deputy Damir Mukhetdinov (see Section 3.4.3) make similar references to distant history, arguing that Russia owes its greatness to the Golden Horde, and that Tatars often defended Russia's independence, for instance by contributing to the Russian struggle against the Polish invasion in 1611.⁸³ Yet they differ in their goals: for the Islamic authorities, such interpretations of Tatar history help to present Islam as Russia's truly "traditional" religion, which should entitle Muslims to all the benefits that come with this status (Chapter 3); while for Sysoev's community, the historical references serve to transform their marginal community into an essential partner of the ROC in managing Turkic communities of (new) Christian converts.

7.5 Conclusion

As the analysis of this chapter shows, religion and language are the identity markers believed by Kräshens to distinguish them from the Muslim (majority) Tatars. Orthodox mission and the translation of the Bible (which will be analysed in the next chapter) contributed to the formulation of markers of "otherness", which in the Soviet era turned into a foundation for secular ethnic identity. Yet Soviet nation-building practices also turned this Kräshen "otherness" into a "deviant" difference, in an attempt to blur the differences among ethnic groups in order to construct a homogeneous Tatar nation. The legacies of Soviet policies are still present. Throughout the 1980s-90s, the Tatar national elites campaigned to reverse the decline of the Tatar language and Tatar cultural knowledge, denouncing the centuries of Russian cultural and political domination. Because of the Tatars' status of a minority – although the largest in Russia – they perceive their culture as being dominated by the majority group; in their attempt

⁸³ Sibgatullina and Kemper, "The Imperial Paradox".

to counter linguistic and cultural amalgamation, Tatars seek “to distance themselves from the Russian nation while following Russian ideas on ethnic identity and ethnic categorization”,⁸⁴ which involves downplaying the differences between Kräshens and Muslim Tatars.

When we look at the development of the Kräshen vernacular, a paradoxical trend is to be observed. Initially, the Orthodox Christian missionaries who developed its alphabet and described its grammar, placed an emphasis on comprehensibility of the liturgical language: it was supposed to be more understandable and “closer” to languages spoken by ordinary people, compared with the literary Tatar of that time. In the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, Kräshen was maintained primarily in religious settings, as the majority of Kräshens received their secular education in either Russian or Tatar. During these decades the emphasis in using Kräshen has been shifting from comprehensibility to sacredness: the pre-revolutionary script and archaic grammatical forms that are still used in Kräshen religious literature and rituals suggest that the language today enjoys the status of being sacral (similar to Church Slavonic); the use of Kräshen in liturgies meets the primary purpose of “enabling the linguistic performance of a religious act in a way which is reverent and mystical and a perpetuation of a sacred tradition”,⁸⁵ whereas the level of comprehensibility of this language to parishioners continues to decrease.⁸⁶

The politicization of the “Kräshen question” occurred in parallel to the public debates about ethnic Russian converts to Islam, as analysed in Chapter 4 of this thesis. The two communities mirror each other in several aspects. First of all, they are religious minorities that are having to define themselves in the use of language and in opposition to the ethnic majority. The converts promote the idea that Orthodox Christianity is not a defining feature of Russianness, and it is possible to be both Russian and Muslim; the Kräshens argue that they differ from the Muslim-majority group of Tatars by being Orthodox Christians and by speaking a language that – due to its use in Church settings – has developed into a separate vernacular and not a dialect of Tatar.

In contrast to the “new” Russian Muslims, the Kräshens’ ethnic identity question traces back to the imperial past. Yet despite this difference in historical development, the two communities identify similar problems in the contemporary religion-

⁸⁴ D. Gorenburg, “Tatars as Meso-Nation”, in *Emerging Meso-Areas in the Former Socialist Countries: Histories Revived or Improvised?*, ed. K. Matsuzato (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, University of Hokkaido, 2005), 83-89. Here p. 87.

⁸⁵ Liddicoat, “Language Planning as an Element of Religious Practice”, p. 124.

⁸⁶ Titova et al., “Ethno-Confessional Group of the Kryashens”, p. 265.

nationality discourse: lack of social recognition and mobility of the community members, little to no financial and political support from the authorities, discrimination by the majority group(s). The leader of NORM, Vadim Kharun Sidorov, stated that the discussion on the rights of Kräshens in Tatarstan “has a precedent significance for us, Russian Muslims, who are in many ways in a similar position”. At the same time, he notes, the Kräshens have already been granted the rights that ethnic Russian converts to Islam can only wish for; the Christian minority in Tatarstan is “recognized and represented in the government bodies of the republic” and has its “ethnic-confessional” infrastructure.⁸⁷

In both cases, we find communities being pressed “in-between” the big confessional blocks. Both Kräshens and Russian Muslims navigate the discursive constructions of religious, linguistic and ethnic identities, and define themselves through what they share with the major religious and ethnic groups, while at the same time insisting on their difference.

The following chapter will take a closer look at linguistic features of the Kräshen language by analysing the Kräshen translation of the New Testament. However, in the early 2000s several NT translations in literary Tatar also began to circulate alongside the Kräshen version, which marked the advent of new Christian churches among Tatars.

⁸⁷ V. Sidorov, “Kriasheny i russkie musul’mane: sravnitel’noe polozhenie”, *LiveJournal*, 11 December 2013 <<https://v-sidorov.livejournal.com/310165.html>> (Accessed on 4 March 2018).

