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## Islam and the Creation of Sacred Space: The Mishar Tatars in Chuvashia\*

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In September 2002 the supreme mufti of Russia, Talgat Tadzhuiddin, paid an official visit to the Chuvash Republic<sup>1</sup> in the Middle Volga region of the Russian Federation. Accompanied by the local Muslim clergy and an official delegation of notables, Tadzhuiddin toured the Muslim sites of Chuvashia, met the Muslim faithful, celebrated the wedding of the local mufti and exchanged gifts and compliments with Nikolai Fedorov, the president of Chuvashia. The tour culminated in a visit to the newly constructed central mosque in the capital city of Cheboksary where the offices of the Chuvash Muslim Spiritual Administration were to be relocated (Vadimov, 2002, p. 1).

The mufti's visit represented a triumph of sorts for the main group of Muslim believers in Chuvashia, the Mishar Tatars. While small in numbers – the Mishars comprise only three per cent of the total population of the republic, which is predominantly made up of Orthodox Christians<sup>2</sup> – the group has carried out an energetic programme of cultural expansion in recent years in the face of significant obstacles. The construction of the mosque in Cheboksary, for example, was delayed and temporarily halted on several occasions by the city administration. The reception given to the mufti symbolised, at least in part, the recognition of the Mishar Tatars and their religion as a legitimate presence in the Chuvash Republic.<sup>3</sup>

The achievements of the Mishar Tatars can be traced in part to the conscious and purposeful creation of sacred space, a key element in any movement of national revival (Kendall, 1998). By endowing places with spiritual significance and ritual functions their activists delineate imagined boundaries, affirming ethnic rights to territory and strengthening emotional ties to the land.

In his groundbreaking work *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 11) proposes a model of dynamic interaction between different levels of space – the physical (nature), the mental (logical abstraction) and the social. The lived experience of space, he suggests, emerges out of a dialectic of the physical and the mental, generating the totality of social practices and symbolic representations through which a space is infused with meaning. But if social space is a product of the encounter

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between space perceived and space conceived, then its meaning cannot be considered stable or fixed. More recent anthropological studies have introduced the concepts of the multivocality and multilocality of space. Space as a social product must reflect the multiple meanings emanating from within a society. Places, as Margeret Rodman (1992, p. 205) puts it, are 'politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions'. Naturally, these multiple constructions of space will not always coexist in harmony. Spaces are often contested: 'geographic locations where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources and access to power' (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003, p. 18). Moreover, space as a socio-cultural construction can be transnational, refusing to conform to the established boundaries of nation-state and territory (Schiller *et al.*, 1992; Appadurai, 2003).

All these theoretical concepts are important for my investigation of the Mishar Tatars, whose national and religious revival hinges on their ability to create sacred space infused with their own vision of tradition and identity, legitimising in the process their political, ethnic and territorial claims. Recovery of an imagined past is central to the Mishars' endeavour. During the Soviet period of state-sponsored atheism, narratives and mythologies of sacred sites, often desacralised or even destroyed under Soviet rule, lived on in the collective memory of the local population, connecting them to their ancestral past and strengthening ethnic solidarity in the present. Writings of local historians and ethnographers also contributed to an imagined (non-physical) sacralisation of space – a process that was later given material expression in the 1990s in the physical demarcation of the territory with religious objects and symbols.

Thus for the Mishars the 'production of space' is integral to the articulation of religious and ethnic identity. But the space created in this process remains multivocal and contested, drawing together different religious and ethnic groups, each of which expresses its own historical interpretation and spiritual vision. In recent years the Chuvash as well as the Mishars have undergone processes of cultural revival. Chuvash nationalists have rediscovered the traditional pre-Christian Chuvash religion, which some see as a distant form of the ancient Zoroastrian religion.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Chuvash Christians have returned to the faith in large numbers, opening new churches, restoring monasteries and participating in all manner of pilgrimages and religious festivals. Many of the sites to which the Mishars have laid claim – burial grounds and archaeological sites seen as ancestral relics linked to the national past – are subject to alternative interpretations on the part of Chuvash groups. The success of the Mishars in upholding their claims has helped to shape the symbolic space of Chuvashia, legitimising the place of the Muslim population, defining the terms of their religious identity and their relations with other communities. By creating a clear and visible Islamic presence in the republic, the Mishars have taken on a role that belies their numbers. It is precisely the presence of Islam that serves as a key factor of differentiation, acting as a catalyst for the consolidation of ethnic identity and generating a perception of cultural distance from the neighbouring Chuvash population that transcends a common Turkic heritage.<sup>5</sup>

In this article I shall explore the process through which the Mishars were able to establish and defend their claims to sacred space. I shall start by looking at their activities within the Chuvash Republic itself – the construction of mosques and the establishment of sacred sites. How have the Mishars used these sacred spaces to express their ethnic identity and political goals? And how has the creation of a Muslim sacred topography intersected with the Chuvash vision of an imagined homeland and

historical legacy? The sacred sites through which these processes play out, however, are not limited to the Chuvash Republic: constructions of ethnic heritage extend into surrounding territory, bringing into play the phenomenon of transnational space. A key element in this relative success of the Mishars lies in their ability to align themselves with the broader Tatar ethnos and the legacy of the Volga Bolgar state to which both the Tatars and the Chuvash lay competing claims. Both the Mishar Tatars and the Chuvash consider the ancient cities of Bilyar and Bolgar, located in the Republic of Tatarstan, critical to their historical visions of lost heritage and statehood. The power of these cities as points of origin, centres of a historical homeland, is only accentuated by their geographical distance, which sets them apart as objects of particular knowledge and sentiment. And distance creates the conditions for pilgrimage, which exists alongside and becomes intertwined with tourism. The sacredness of space in this regard becomes an asset tied in with global processes of commercialisation. But how do the commercial interests of pilgrimage/tourism interact with the competing ethnic and religious narratives put forth by Chuvash and Tatar activists? The sites at Bilyar and Bolgar present two contrasting approaches to this problem, which I will explore in the pages that follow.

### Mosques in Chuvashia

The most obvious symbol of the Islamic presence in Chuvashia is the construction and restoration of mosques. For Muslims in Chuvashia, mosques serve as a territorial marker and a tool for consolidation. Practically every Mishar Tatar village has its mosque, and as the number of Muslims grows, so does the number of mosques. Since 1990 over 40 new mosques have been built, mainly in villages.<sup>6</sup> New mosques were also built in urban areas, in the largest cities of the republic, where they had not previously existed: in Kanash (1993) and in Cheboksary (2004).

Most of the mosques in the republic are concentrated in the southeastern region of the republic directly bordering on Tatarstan, where the majority of the Mishar Tatar settlements are located. The Chuvash Muslim Spiritual Administration under the leadership of the mufti, Al'bir-Khazrat Krganov, has its headquarters here in the village of Shygyrdany (Batyrevo *raion*), which is home to four Muslim parishes and a new central mosque with a *mektebe* (religious school).<sup>7</sup>

Other Islamic centres in the region include the village of Kainlyk with its newly opened *madrassah* (Muslim secondary school), where a four-year course of study is planned in the fundamentals of Islam. The presence of such schools is no accident. The mufti and his followers are seeking to shift Islam away from the realm of informal popular tradition toward a more structured set of practices through the creation of a coordinated system of religious education and the preparation of a trained clergy (Urazmanova and Cheshko, 2001, p. 435). One indicator of this process is the fact that the Muslim clergy among the Mishars are generally quite young. Unlike the older generation which grew up under Soviet rule, they were able to receive a Muslim education, either abroad or in Ufa, where the Muslim Central Spiritual Administration (*Tsentral'noye dukhovnoye upravleniye musul'man Rossii i yevropeiskikh stran Sodruzhestva nezavisimyykh gosudarstv*) chaired by Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin is located.<sup>8</sup>

As a symbol of identity, marking the ethnic status of a particular territory, the mosques undoubtedly facilitate the separation of the Mishar Tatars from surrounding ethnic groups and, at the same time, their consolidation on religious grounds with the larger Tatar ethnos. The most vivid expression of this process can be found in the

rural areas of mixed ethnicity where Chuvash, Kryashens<sup>9</sup> and Mishar Tatars live in separate villages whose identity is marked by the presence of a church or a mosque.

On a recent trip to the village of Kainlyk I asked Mishar inhabitants to identify themselves. Their responses showed how their Islamic identity tends to facilitate their identification with the Tatars while effacing their regional 'Mishar' identity. The majority of informants called themselves Tatars and only after specific questioning identified themselves as Mishar Tatars. The regional identity of the Mishar Tatars is manifested at the present time mainly on the level of differences in dialect with the Kazan' Tatars.<sup>10</sup> In the early twentieth century, however, many Mishar Tatars preserved their distinct ethnic identification. The ethnonym 'Mishar' appeared in the 1926 census and approximately 200,000 people chose to classify themselves under this category (Iskhakov, 1993, p. 25).<sup>11</sup>

If Islam draws the Mishars closer to a common Tatar identity (Iskhakov, 1993, p. 25) it also serves as a marker of ethnic division separating them from their neighbours, including the Kryashen Tatars, with whom they share a common language and culture. As one of my informants said, 'The Kryashens are not Tatars. They are baptised. They are not Muslims. They are only Tatars in their passports.'<sup>12</sup> The Mishar Tatars also separate themselves from the surrounding Chuvash population through territorial boundaries and an implicit taboo against intermarriage. In contrast, the Chuvash and the Kryashens, brought together by a common Orthodox faith and widespread bilingualism in the contact zone, maintain frequent contacts and a high level of intermarriage.<sup>13</sup> For example, in the Kryashen village of Bol'shoie Tyaberdino (Apastovsky *raion*, Tatarstan) the inhabitants distinguish themselves from the neighbouring Mishar Tatars of the villages Chuteyevo (in Tatarstan) and Tyaberdino (in Chuvashia), while at the same time maintaining close relations with Orthodox Chuvash in the neighbouring village of Stary Sundryr'.<sup>14</sup>

Differences can also be seen in the ways in which other groups have identified the Mishar Tatars. Russians have usually referred to the Mishars simply as Tatars, while Chuvash as well as Kazan' Tatars often call them Mishars. For the Russian population the Islamic and Turkic factor makes it possible to define Mishar Tatars as part of a single 'Tatar' ethnos, while regional and linguistic distinctions are of greater significance for the Tatars and Turkic-speaking Chuvash.

As a relatively small group surrounded by other ethnicities, it is important for the Mishar Tatars not only to identify themselves with the larger Tatar community, but also to affirm through the discovery of local monuments and artefacts an unbroken link with Islamic ancestors and hence their historical right to the territory. Artefacts from the era of the Volga Bolgar state (tenth to thirteenth centuries), as ancient relics of Islamic culture, serve for the Mishar Tatars in Chuvashia as evidence of their deep historical roots in the region and their status as heirs to the legacy of a formerly great state.

### **Archaeological Artefacts of Volga Bolgaria in the Chuvash Republic**

In the period from the eighth to the tenth centuries Bolgar tribes settled in the southern and southeastern regions of Chuvashia.<sup>15</sup> Altogether in this region approximately 70 Bolgar sites have been located – forts, settlements, cemeteries (Ivanov, 1998, p. 43; Fedotov, 2000, pp. 5–25; Khakimzyanov, 1987; Yusupov, 1960). Many Bolgar settlements on the territory of Chuvashia were destroyed or abandoned during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, probably as a consequence of raids by the Golden

Horde and Russian princes (Chuvashi, 2000, p. 38). A major centre of Bolgar culture in this region was the Tigashevo fort, which was an administrative centre in the tenth to the twelfth centuries (Chuvashi, 2000, p. 20). Excavations have revealed that the fort included a shrine with a boundary fence and a prayer column (known in Chuvash as a *yupa*) which was reconstructed in the 1950s by the archaeologist G. A. Fedorov-Davydov (1968, pp. 9–10). Chuvash scholars suggest that Tigashevo in this early period was a centre of religious life and a fortress for Bolgar tribes who did not wish to adopt Islam, which by this time was the official religion of the Bolgar state (Fedorov-Davydov, 1968, p. 14). The absence of Islamic relics cleared the way for the identification of the Tigashevo fortress with a specifically Chuvash historical tradition. To this day, the site is infused with sacred significance – it serves as a destination for pilgrims associated with the Chuvash National Congress. Young people considering themselves to be *Chan Chavash* ('true Chuvash' who have not adopted Christianity or Islam) pay tribute to their ancestors at the site of the Tigashevo fort in the ritual forms of the ancient Chuvash faith. But the Mishar Tatars also claim a connection with the historical events of this period, and Tigashevo is located quite close to the large Mishar settlements of Polevyve Bikshiki and Shygyrdany. How do the Mishar Tatars express their historical memory connected with this site?

Not far from the fort, on the outskirts of the Chuvash village of Imenevo, the Mishar Tatars have recently constructed their own pilgrimage site, a *mazar* (Muslim cemetery) as a symbol of Islamic culture also tracing its roots back to the era of Volga Bulgaria. The site is located in a pine grove with a newly constructed brick gate at the entrance. Inside the grove is a smaller enclosure with two pedestals. On one, fragments of gravestones with epitaphs in Arabic script are placed together; on the other stands a contemporary monument with an inscription in the Tatar language dedicated to the later burials. An explanatory plaque on the brick entrance gate presents the site as a memorial to the heroes of the entire Tatar nation, saying that 'Here are the burials of the Islamic ancestors of the Tatar people from the period of the Bolgar state'. A chronology on the plaque dates the earliest graves to the time of the Tigashevo fortress in the twelfth century (1170), although Bolgar epitaphs of the type on display are generally not associated with such an early date and most of them belong to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Subsequent burials are dated from the sixteenth (1550), seventeenth (1694) and eighteenth (1754) centuries, passing over entirely the period of the Golden Horde (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries) and the Kazan' Khanate (fifteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries). The presentation of the burial site shows clearly the aspiration of the Mishar Tatars to depict themselves as direct descendents of the Bolgar inhabitants of the Tigashevo fort, who, they imply, were undoubtedly Muslim. This would position the Mishar Tatars as the 'indigenous' population of this region of Chuvashia – an interpretation that most specialists in the history and archaeology of the region would find questionable.<sup>16</sup> In addition to reinforcing their local roots, the reconstructed Bolgar burial site strengthens the connection between the Mishar Tatars and the Tatar nation on the basis of a common cultural heritage as descendants of the Muslim Bolgars.<sup>17</sup> The Mishar Tatars are no longer seen as an extraterritorial group formed relatively late (in the sixteenth century) beyond the boundaries of the core Tatar territory, but as an internal element that took part in the formation of the Tatar nation.

The Chuvash, however, also make claims on the heritage of the Bolgars, based in part on the evidence of the gravestone epitaphs. For while the gravestones, with inscriptions in Arabic script, provide evidence of the Islamic identity of the Bolgars, the language in which they are written is most closely related to Chuvash.<sup>18</sup>

Why, then, are the Chuvash not Muslims? In fact, evidence can be found in traditional Chuvash religion and language to suggest that the early Chuvash were exposed to Islamic culture (Fedotov, 1995, p. 125; 2000, pp. 13–14; Vovina, 2002, pp. 42–44). However, many Chuvash scholars downplay this influence. For the most part, the Chuvash interpret the Bolgar heritage within the framework of pagan culture, emphasising the resistance of the main enclave of the proto-Chuvash population of Bulgaria to the forced spread of Islam. It was precisely forced conversion to Islam in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, they argue, that caused the migration of the Bolgar-Chuvash (known as the Suvaz) to northern parts of their current territory. Genuine Chuvash did not adopt the alien religion, but remained pagans. Some linguists consider that the name ‘Suvaz’ itself means ‘pagan’ and that this name was given to them in the thirteenth century because of their refusal to adopt Islam (Yegorov, 1989; Shnirelman, 1997, p. 35).

Another sacred site was created by Mishar Tatars on the outskirts of the Chuvash village of Novo-Buyanovo (Shemurshinsky *raion*) at a Muslim cemetery known as the ‘*Misher Masar*’ (Mishar Cemetery). Unlike the site near the Tigashevo fortress, this cemetery has long been recognised as an artefact of Islamic heritage and a place of pilgrimage for the local Muslim population. The site contains several white stone grave markers with traces of ancient inscriptions in Arabic script. In Soviet times the cemetery was placed under state protection as a historical site. Today the space has been reconstructed as a local Islamic centre and a place of pilgrimage, not only for the faithful inside Chuvashia, but also for visiting political leaders and religious dignitaries. When the supreme mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin came to Chuvashia in 2002 he visited not only the mosques but also the ‘ancestral graves on holy soil’ (Vadimov, 2002, p. 1).

The activities of the Mishar Tatars in southern Chuvashia provide a clear example of how the creation of sacred sites can serve to sharpen the lines of separation between ethnic and religious groups. But this is not always the case. Certain sites that share a pre-Islamic and a pre-Muslim foundation can create a common ground on which the different cultures can come together in separate but concurrent religious observances.

### **Bilyar: Coexistence and Contrast**

Chuvash and Tatars, as a general rule, rarely carried out joint religious ceremonies. But some exceptions were possible in cases where the separate rituals of the two cultures intersected. One such case involved pilgrimage sites preserving their pre-Muslim (and pre-Christian) foundation but bearing the names of Muslim saints. At these sites both Chuvash and Tatar Muslims prayed together and appealed to the saints for assistance, for success in business, for relief from ailments and infertility (Denisov, 1959, p. 63; Mukhamedova, 1972, p. 185). The cult of saints, as a common element of religious belief among Tatars and Chuvash, is connected with the veneration of ancestors. Among the pre-Muslim Bulgars, saints, it is thought, could have been the clan elders, *alyps* (mythical heroes), religious leaders and, possibly, people who had been sacrificed to *Tengri*, the chief god of the ancient Turks, master of the skies, whose name appears later in Bolgar epitaphs of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. With the adoption and the spread of Islam, cults of saints embodying local beliefs took on Muslim form in a manifestation of religious syncretism. The veneration of sacred sites named after Muslim saints by Chuvash and other non-Muslim (Finno-Ugrian) peoples of the region reflects simultaneously the influence of Islam on their religious consciousness and the preservation of a layer of

pre-Islamic beliefs and rituals connected with traditional sites of worship (Vovina, 2002, pp. 43–44). Many sacred groves (*kiremet*) were named after Bolgar Khans, sheiks and Islamic teachers and located on their supposed burial sites.<sup>19</sup>

Today such places again attract the attention of believers of various confessions who bring their prayers to the same sacred objects but in different ways.<sup>20</sup> One of the most significant of these sites is the grave of the Bolgar holy man Valem-Khuza located on a hill near the city of Bilyar in the territory of Tatarstan.

For hundreds of years, and up to the present day, numerous pilgrims of different ethnicities – Russians, Tatars and Chuvash – have visited the sites associated with Valem-Khuza (Davletshin, 1990, p. 68). In the Chuvash national revival Valem-Khuza is seen as a great prophet and teacher, not of Islam but of a religion that ‘stood between Islam and Christianity, but at the same time had many elements of the ancient Chuvash religion’ (Yukhma, 1998, p. 119). On the supposed site of a Bolgar pre-Islamic shrine at Bilyar representatives of the Chuvash National Congress have erected a memorial column (*iupa*), where annual prayers are held with offerings to the *kiremet* (a god in the Chuvash ancient pantheon who is embodied in the sacred grove). Nearby, Muslim Tatars carry out their prayers at a specially appointed place.<sup>21</sup>

Today the grave of Valem-Khuza is located on the territory of a park known as the Bilyar State Historical and Archaeological Museum and Nature Reserve recently constructed with the help of the oil industry of Tatarstan. There a diverse public – tourists, worshippers, wedding parties, businessmen and government delegations – combine eco-tourism and relaxation with religious pilgrimages, ritual bathing, collective prayers and feasts.

With its understated signs and annotations devoid of any specific religious references – ‘To the Monument’; ‘Central Prayer Ground’; ‘Place for the Slaughter of Livestock’; ‘Place for Eating Meals’, the Bilyar park presents the sacred site as a kind of blank slate, the content of which is to be filled in by the individual worshipper. National sentiments are expressed in the feeling of attachment to this site and the rituals associated with it, which are performed in accordance with the identity of the pilgrims themselves. The multivalent flexible symbolism lessens contradictions that might otherwise arise in a more homogenous ethnic space, while facilitating the manifestation of ethnic and confessional identity, generating and maintaining the boundaries and distinctions between ethnic groups. In the absence of a set historical and religious context, meaning is created through the strategies, motives and behaviour of the visitors themselves. All endow the site with their own significance through rituals whose historical authenticity is a matter of minor significance in the present day.

How can we explain the significance of the Bilyar site for the communities of Mishar Tatars and the Chuvash? What meanings do they attach to this site? For the Chuvash, Bilyar is a sacred space venerated as a symbol of their historical heritage but located beyond the boundaries of their politically defined territory. For them it represents an ‘imagined past’, strengthening their national identity in the present. In the newly created, official version of Chuvash history, recently published as a textbook, Bilyar is presented as an important site of the ‘Bolgar-Chuvash civilisation’ and the capital city of Volga Bolgaria, while the Chuvash people are portrayed as the direct descendants of the Bolgars (Tafayev, 2001, pp. 3–4). Evidence for such claims is found in Chuvash oral traditions purportedly describing the migration of the ancestors from the Bilyar region to central and northern Chuvashia. The numerous sacred groves (*kiremet*) on the territory of Chuvashia bearing the name of Valem-Khuza (as in Bilyar) are seen by Chuvash scholars as a proof of connection with their lost powerful state.

Most Chuvash scholars would deny that the Mishar Tatars (or any Tatars for that matter) are connected with the Bolgars since they appeared much later, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But today the Chuvash are in no position to impose an exclusive symbolic interpretation on the existing site. Not only it is located outside their republic, it is also marked with the main symbol of Islamic faith, a mosque, the ruins of which were discovered on the site of the ancient city of Bilyar, about a mile away from the park.<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that the Bilyar complex has produced archaeological artefacts ranging over a broad time span, from the Bronze Age (long before the rise of Islam) to the late Middle Ages, the presence of the mosque virtually ensures a Muslim, and hence Tatar, identity for the Bilyar complex.

For Tatars living in Tatarstan it is not necessary to reclaim their own ethnic territory: located well within the bounds of their republic, Bilyar is their undisputed treasure, connected with the major Muslim sacred and historical site at Bolgar.<sup>23</sup> For the Mishar Tatars who live in Chuvashia the spiritual connection with Bilyar is important since it integrates them with the larger Tatar nation and lessens their local 'Mishar' identity. The marking of sacred sites in Chuvashia with specifically Tatar and Muslim symbols connected with the Bolgar legacy allows the Mishar Tatars to overcome their marginal status by asserting an age-old bond to the territory on the basis of their adherence to the universal tradition of Islam.

Despite these differences the site in Bilyar is largely free from conflicting ethnic and religious claims. The designers of the park were able to create a space infused with spirituality yet open to all. Chuvash and Muslims alike venerate the 'grave of the saint' while believers of all faiths draw strength and inspiration from the 'sacred springs'. The 'spirit of capitalism' plays a more important role in unifying different ethnicities than 'spirits' of various religions, which divide people across ethnic lines (Kendall, 1996, pp. 512–27). The multivocal meaning of the recreated sacred site goes well with its status as a commercial venture – selling to the visitors a connection with a glorious past available to all ethnicities. Even Orthodox Christians consider the waters from the spring at Bilyar to have sacred healing powers. Among the groups we encountered during my visit to Bilyar with colleagues from the Chuvash National Museum were local Tatars celebrating a wedding, a large Chuvash family with whom we shared food, Muslim visitors who came to pray at the sacred spring, and a delegation of Chuvash and Tatar government officials.

As Arjun Appadurai has pointed out, it is common to find a carefully maintained distance between 'the promiscuous spaces of tourism and free trade, where national disciplines are often relaxed, and the spaces of national, security and ideological reproduction, which may be increasingly nativized, authenticated and culturally marked'. The state itself (in this case the Tatar Republic) may promote this distinction, encouraging cultural flexibility in some spaces while energetically maintaining the national character of other spaces seen as important for preserving national development and memory (Appadurai, 2003, p. 341). This distinction is vividly illustrated in the contrast between the park at Bilyar and the site of the ancient city of Bolgar to which we will now turn our attention.

### **Bolgar: Laying Claim to the Past**

Bolgar, an ancient city on the banks on the Volga River, was the site of the capital of the Volga Bolgar state from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. Here the conflicting ethnic and religious claims of the Chuvash and Tatars are clearly manifested (Urazmanova and Cheshko, 2001, pp. 520–22). The ruins of the medieval city have

been incorporated into a State Historical Museum and Park. Visitors to Bolgar are immediately presented with a direct visual expression of the confrontation of religious traditions. The central area of the museum is dominated by two large adjacent structures: the eighteenth-century Church of the Assumption and the newly restored minaret of the central mosque which towers over the ruins. A closer examination reveals a long history of confrontation: clearly visible around the perimeter of the church are Bolgar gravestones with Arabic inscriptions used as foundation stones when the church was built. But at the present time the church performs no religious function. The building is used to house the museum exhibits which introduce visitors to the 'Bolgarist' Tatar version of the history of the site. Visiting Christians (Chuvash and Russians alike) often ask when the church will be restored.

Unlike Bilyar, Bolgar is unequivocally marked as a Muslim holy place, a 'northern Mecca', attracting pilgrimages and serving as the site of major religious events such as the 1100th anniversary of the Volga Bolgars' conversion to Islam, and international congresses of Tatars.<sup>24</sup> Every year the Central Muslim Spiritual Administration organises prayers at Bolgar for all Muslim believers followed by meetings with the Muslim clergy. Religious and social organisations of Muslims in Chuvashia regularly participate in these events.

Bolgar is also central to the Chuvash vision of national history and identity. The city is venerated through frequent pilgrimages and through the works of Chuvash poets, playwrights, artists, filmmakers and historians. The Chuvash National Congress includes Bolgar as the starting point in its annual tour of the 'Golden Ring' of Volga-Kama Bulgaria (Aktash, 2000). Just outside the gates of the museum park, on a high bank overlooking the Volga, participants perform pre-Christian Chuvash rituals honouring the ancestors at a stone monument specially installed for this purpose. Yet despite the significance of Bolgar for the Chuvash, their name does not appear in the museum displays, including exhibits of gravestone epitaphs. The role of the Chuvash language in the deciphering of these inscriptions is not mentioned at all.

The exclusion of the Chuvash from the museum displays at Bolgar is hardly an oversight. Perhaps it was precisely because the heritage of the Volga Bolgars has been the object of fierce dispute for over a century that the museum was established as a homogeneous interpretive space, literally fencing out alternative views of the Bolgar identity and legacy.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the museum serves as a medium through which the Tatar 'Bolgarists' put forth their narrative of the national past. Conferences are held at the museum on a regular basis, bringing scholars together with politicians, journalists, public activists and visitors from other republics, often in commemoration of major dates in the history of the Bolgars.<sup>26</sup> At these events and in their scholarly writings and journalism Tatar activists articulate their vision of a direct continuity of Bolgar identity from the ninth century to the present day. They call for an overthrow of the 'Tatar yoke', protest against their 'illegitimate' and 'imposed' contemporary ethnonym and advocate a return to the historical name of 'Bolgar'.<sup>27</sup>

In recent years, to be sure, the Bolgarist position has been shaken somewhat by the emergence of an alternative group of intellectuals who argue that Tatars should take pride in the legacy of the Golden Horde (Urazmanova and Cheshko, 2001, pp. 520–21). Today these debates have not only scholarly but also political connotations. Some proponents of 'Tatarism' have even suggested that 'Bulgarism' is an attempt to split the 'Tatar nation' into subgroups such as Mishar, Kryashen, Siberian and Astrakhan' Tatars (Tsviklinsky, 2003, p. 385). For Mishars themselves, however, such apprehensions are misplaced. It is precisely the Islamic legacy of the Bolgars that

provides the grounds for their consolidation with the larger Tatar ethnos which in turn lends weight to their efforts to imprint a Muslim identity on Bolgar sites in Chuvashia. Identification with the Golden Horde, as proposed by the 'Tatarists', on the other hand, would bring to light serious historical contradictions, since evidence suggests that the ancestors of the Mishars actually fought against the Golden Horde and its successors in the service of the Muscovite state (Mukhamedova, 1972, pp. 18, 31).

Chuvash intellectuals have responded to the Bolgarist polemics in kind, expressing as an alternative a primordialist vision of an unbroken Chuvash historical and chronological connection with a Volga Bulgaria stripped of its Islamic identity. Islamisation, they argue, was a superficial phenomenon touching only the upper levels of Bolgar society. The mass of the population resisted Islam and preserved their indigenous language and religion which they passed on to their Chuvash descendants. The true capital of the medieval state should be considered not Bolgar, which they claim was built during the 'Tatar-Mongol' period, but Bilyar, where the fundamental archaeological elements of Volga Bulgaria can be traced, and where the Islamic presence is not as clearly expressed (Alekseyev, 2002).

The sacred sites beyond the borders of the Chuvash Republic to which the Chuvash and Mishars lay claim through pilgrimages and the creation of historical narratives form the symbolic boundaries of the national consciousness in both the geographical and historical dimensions. Though these symbolic boundaries of Volga Bulgaria exist in the realm of the imagination, they have, nonetheless, very real connotations as forces for national consolidation and the inculcation of visions of nationhood. Such visions lend support to a range of political programmes and aspirations, from the legitimisation of existing authority to the radical dreams of Tatar Bolgarists who propose an 'Idel'-Ural Republic' uniting all of the peoples of the Middle Volga in a revival of the Volga Bolgar state at its height. Thus history lives on as an indispensable tool in the ethno-political rivalries of the Middle Volga region in the present day. Yet history can also serve as a means to contain and mitigate potential conflicts.

We have seen how the Mishar Tatars have made effective use of the production of sacred space in order to articulate and legitimate their presence within the Chuvash Republic. At a time when images of terrorism and radical fundamentalism have dominated perceptions of Islam throughout the Russian Federation on the levels of both state policy and popular consciousness, this is no small achievement. In fact, Muslim leaders in Chuvashia, by emphasising their historical roots and ties to the land through the creation of sacred sites, have found a way to distinguish themselves sharply as a legitimate indigenous Islamic presence from the alien 'Wahhabi' interlopers who have gradually been making inroads into the region (Baranchayev, 1999). The official visit of the supreme mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin to Chuvashia in 2002 enacted in ritual form the integration of the Muslim community into a reconstructed landscape of the republic, thereby illustrating its legitimate status and rights alongside the neighbouring ethnic and religious groups. The route of the mufti as he toured the 'Muslim sites of Chuvashia' included many of the major locations restored by the Mishar Tatars: 'the Shygyrdan mosques, the graves near the village of Karabai Shemursha, the Tigashevo fortress and the mosques in the Tatar villages of Tokayevo and Tatarskiye Surguty' (Vadimov, 2002, p. 1). Thus, through the creation of sacred space, the Mishar Tatars define their place in the complex multiethnic tapestry of postsoviet Chuvashia.

## Postscript

Over the past year, since the research for this article was completed, billboards have appeared in the city of Cheboksary depicting the president of Chuvashia along with the Orthodox metropolitan Varnava and the mufti of Chuvashia Al'bir Krganov over the slogan 'New Chuvashia – Unity in Diversity'.

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## Notes

- 1 The Chuvash Autonomous Region was formed in 1920 and five years later attained the status of an Autonomous Republic. In 1992 it was renamed as the Chuvash Republic. Today it is a territorial unit within the Russian Federation.
- 2 Chuvash make up 67.8 per cent of the population of the republic, Russians 25.7 per cent and others 6.5 per cent, including approximately three per cent Mishar Tatars, or approximately 35,700 people (Ivanov, 1999, p. 9). Kazan' Tatars as an indigenous ethnic group live only in small numbers in Kozlovsky *raion* in Chuvashia (Ivanov, 1997, p. 30).
- 3 The spread of Islam in the Middle Volga region goes back to the period of the Volga Bolgar state in the tenth to thirteenth centuries, where it was adopted as the state religion in 922. Today the Muslim population of the region is made up mainly of the Volga-Ural Tatars, a group which encompasses both the Mishar Tatars and the Kazan' Tatars. The Chuvash, who are the titular nation of the Chuvash Republic, are mainly Orthodox Christians.
- 4 For a detailed discussion of the organisations involved in the movement for the creation of a national religion in Chuvashia see Vovina, 2000.
- 5 It should be noted that both the Chuvash and Tatar languages belong to the larger group of Turkic languages, but that the Chuvash language is the only representative of the Bolgar subgroup. The Tatar language fits into the Kypchak subgroup of the Western Hunnish branch (Kondrat'yev, 1991, p. 11; Baskakov, 1981, p. 20).
- 6 The majority of mosques were destroyed after the 1920s during the period of collectivisation and antireligious agitation. Of all the mosques previously functioning in Chuvashia only two remained (Braslavsky, 1997, pp. 79–89). According to 2001 data, 13 Muslim religious organisations had been formally registered in Chuvashia, although the Chuvash Muslim Spiritual Administration says that more than 40 Muslim parishes fall under its jurisdiction (Atlas, 2005, pp. 363–64).
- 7 There are around 50,000 Muslims living in Chuvashia, and 10,000 in Cheboksary (Atlas, 2005, pp. 363–64).
- 8 The institutional structure of Muslim organisations in Russia is very complex and includes several competing centres. More information can be found in: Islam, 2001, pp. 260–69; Hunter, 2004, pp. 46–64.
- 9 Kryashens are a group of Orthodox Christian Tatars who identify themselves as a distinct group on the basis of their religious identity. The question of their relationship with the

- Muslim Tatar ethnicity is the subject of ongoing political and scholarly debate (see Sokolovsky, 2002, pp. 207–33).
- 10 See Urazmanova and Cheshko, 2001, p. 20; Mukhamedova, 1972, pp. 7–17. The question of the relationship between the Mishar Tatars and the dominant Kazan' Tatar population continues to evoke controversy. A number of scholars consider the Mishars a distinct ethnic group that has only recently begun to identify itself as Tatar (Bashkortostan, 1996, p. 404). Other scholars, however, maintain that the Mishar Tatars have always been part of a single ethnos along with the other Tatars of the Volga-Ural region (Iskhakov, 1997–98, p. 9).
  - 11 Use of the term 'Mishar' as a self-definition, while widespread throughout most of the nineteenth century, has become less common in recent decades, although some urban intellectuals continue to identify themselves by the term. In some rural areas, however, the name 'Mishar' is viewed as mildly derogatory (see Zakiiyev *et al.*, 1993, pp. 128–29; Magnitsky, 1898, pp. 37–50).
  - 12 Interview, summer 2003, Kainlyk, Chuvash Republic.
  - 13 Some scholars suggest that the Kryashens are in fact Chuvash who were subjected to linguistic and cultural assimilation by the Tatars. This thesis is supported by parallels in folklore genres, the festival-ceremonial cycle, preservation of certain pre-Christian religious practices including the veneration of the *kiremet* (sacred grove), and the close resemblance of women's costumes. Opposing views are expressed by scholars who define Kryashens as a subconfessional group within the Tatar ethnos (Iskhakov, 2002, p. 242).
  - 14 In this context it should be noted that in the past this particular group of Kryashens (the Mol'keyev Kryashens) were identified by the neighbouring Muslim Mishars as 'Chuvash' (*Kyrbash Chuvash*, *Terbit Chuvash*) on the basis of the similarities in religion and material culture with the Chuvash population (Magnitsky, 1896, pp. 245–57). Some scholars suggest a dual component to the ethnic composition of the Mol'keyev Kryashens, combining Chuvash and Mishar Tatar elements in the process of their consolidation as an ethnic group (Iskhakov, 1980, pp. 25–38).
  - 15 In the northern regions of Chuvash settlement on the Volga, the Bulgar population did not dominate. The settlement of these regions by the Turkic ancestors of the Chuvash (commonly thought to be of Bolgar origin) took place significantly later, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
  - 16 It should be noted that a consensus has not been achieved on the role of the ancient Bolgars in the formation of the Mishari Tatar group, and many questions remain. For example, A. Kh. Khalikov and other scholars connect the Mishari with the Burtas, a Volga people mentioned in medieval sources, downplaying the role of the Kypchaks in the process of the Turkic assimilation of the Burtas, as well as the significance of the Kypchak cultural legacy from the time of the Golden Horde in the formation of the Volga Tatar group as a whole (see Kuzeyev, 1992, pp. 240, 245). At the present time, the origin of the Mishari is connected with the general problem of the origins of the Kazan' Tatars, which often evokes extreme (nationalistic) interpretations. Along with the neo-Bolgarists, who uphold the concept of a direct line of ethnic continuity between the Bolgars and the Kazan' Tatars, there is also a faction that connects the formation of the Tatar nationality with the period of the 'political and economic greatness of the Golden Horde' in the fourteenth century. In the latter interpretation, the Mishari are seen as an 'extraterritorial' group which took shape in the sixteenth century 'beyond the boundaries of the core state in which the Tatar nationality was formed' (Islam, 2001, p. 133). On the historical dynamics underlying the establishment of the Tatar nation and Tatar national identity see Iskhakov, 2001, pp. 101–52 and Schamiloglu, 1990.
  - 17 The debates in modern Tatar historiography between two parties, the 'Bulgarists' and the 'Tatarists', in connection with the changing political context have been the subject of several studies (see Shnirelman, 2002, pp. 128–47; Tsviklinsky, 2003, pp. 361–92).
  - 18 The linguistic connection between the language of the epitaphs on the grave monuments and the Chuvash language has been demonstrated by turkologists (see Fedotov, 1972, pp. 108–14 and Fedotov, 2000).

- 19 Many researchers have compared the cult of the *kiremet* to the sacralisation of political power in the guise of the veneration by the Chuvash of Bolgar khans and sheikhs (Denisov, 1959, p. 68; Fedotov, 1998, pp. 2–5; Vovina, 2002, pp. 43–44).
- 20 As we have seen, the custom of honouring the burial places of Muslim holy men (*izgeler*) and the visiting of ancient cemeteries (*iske mazar*) is widespread among the Mishar Tatars (Mukhamedova, 1972, p. 185). Formally the creation of such rituals evokes an ambivalent reaction from the Tatar Muslim clergy, who view it as a deviation from the norms of the sharia (Mukhametshin, 2000, p. 146).
- 21 According to legend, at the summit of the hill a fortified stone building was located at which were buried ‘seven or nine Mohammedan maidens’ who had heroically defended the structure against the enemies. Later the stone building was dismantled and the stones used to build churches in Spassky *uyezd*. Today at this place a monument has been erected in the form of the remains of the stone structure surrounded by gravestones. The monument is without annotation, but can be symbolically connected with the Islamic period of Volga Bulgaria and the history of the Bolgar city of Bilyar. On this site see Kazarinov, 1884, pp. 124–27.
- 22 It should be noted that the present-day park at Bilyar is some distance from the site of the city of Bilyar, where mosques would have been located. The visible ruins of Bilyar had been destroyed by the nineteenth century; however, visitors in the eighteenth century reported seeing a tall column which they assumed to be a minaret (Semenov, 1998, p. 366).
- 23 See the website *Historical Ensembles and Complexes: the Republic of Tatarstan.*, where the site of Bilyar is presented as part of the Bolgar Architectural and Archaeological Complex: <http://www.tatar.ru/english/append91.html>.
- 24 For information about Bolgar see <http://www.tatar.ru/english/append91.html>.
- 25 On the controversy over the Bolgar heritage see: Shnirelman, 1997, pp. 22–35; Geraci, 2001, pp. 180–94.
- 26 The most recent conference commemorated the 280th anniversary of the publication of Peter the Great’s decree on the preservation of Bolgar antiquity.
- 27 The programme of the ‘Bolgarist’ party corresponds in many respects to that of the ‘Council of Volga Bolgar Muslims’ which existed from 1862 to 1922 and set as its goal the resurrection of Volga Bulgaria within the boundaries of the ‘Idel’-Ural Republic’ proclaimed in 1917 (Khalil, 2003). On the contemporary activities of the Bolgarists see: Uyama, 2002, pp. 169–90; Tsviklinsky, 2003, pp. 361–91.

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