

**Surviving on the Interface**

How Being Between Two Civilizations Paved the Path for a Relationship between the Estonians and the  
Maris and Why this Matters Today

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore the roots of the post-Soviet relationship between two small kindred Finno-Ugric peoples, the Estonians and the Maris. It posits that the real basis of this relationship lies less in modern historical factors than in the pool of common experience that the Estonians and Maris share by being situated on a great interface between two civilizations – the Estonians on the national interface between German and Russian civilizations as well as the religious interface between western Christianity and Orthodox Christianity, and the Maris on the national interface between Tatar and Russian civilizations and the religious interface between Christianity and Islam. This thesis attempts to offer a thorough and specific explanation as to how being situated on such an interface has increased the luck and opportunities for these two small people to avoid assimilating into the larger civilizations they have been in contact with and survive into modernity with their unique language and culture still intact. It is argued that being in contact with a merchant civilization (which tend to be characterized by tolerant, peaceable values) increased their prospects for survival. In order to put these small peoples in their greater context, the histories of five peoples are examined – Germans, Estonians, Russians, Maris and Tatars. The conclusion argues that, in the case of the Maris, being on this interface might be their best hope against the latest threat of assimilation in the centralizing age of Vladimir Putin's presidency and that the Estonians' relationship with the Maris could offer the key to making use of the opportunities that are opened up by being situated on this interface.



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## Preface and Acknowledgements

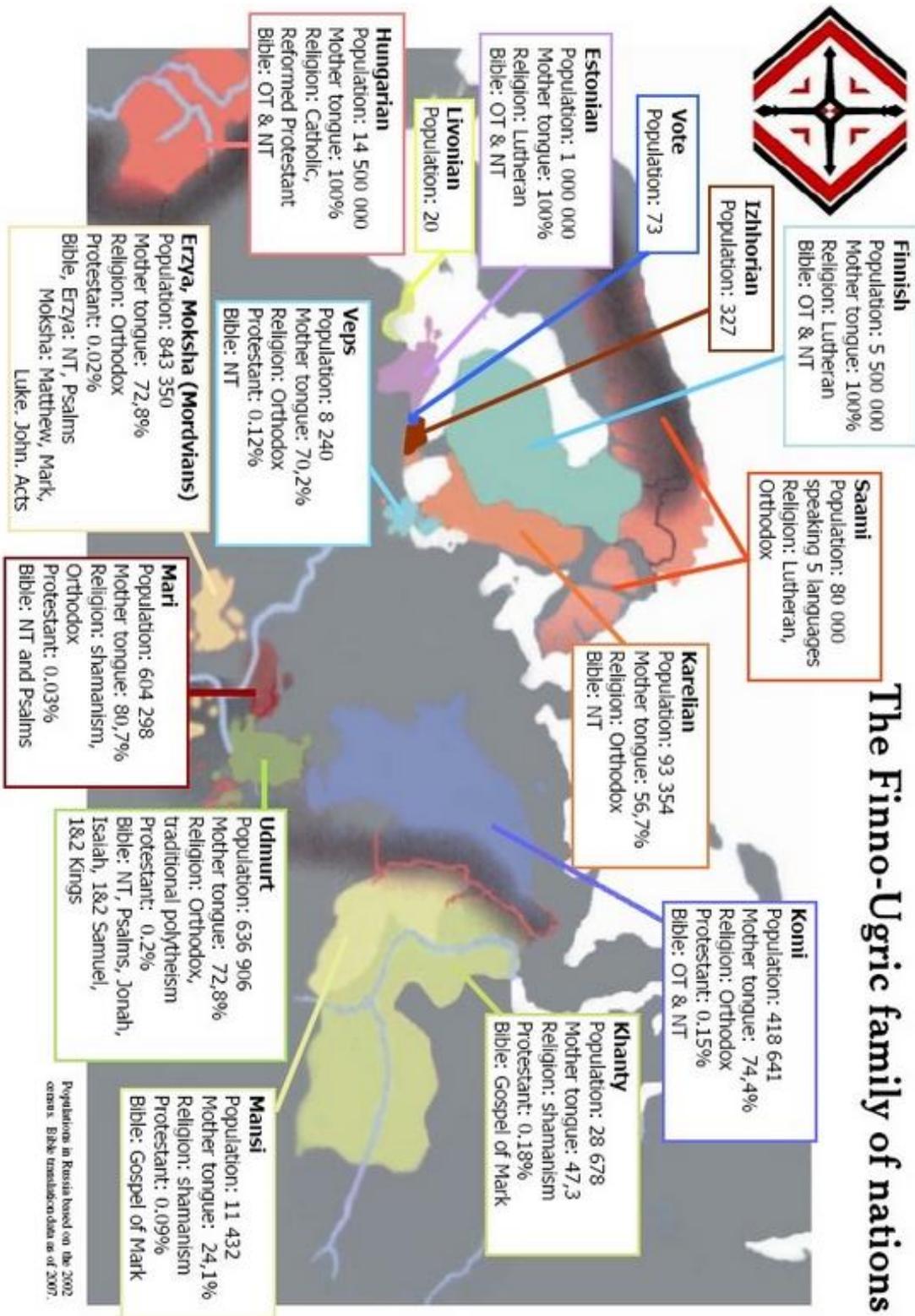
My interest in the Finno-Ugric peoples stems from my heritage as a dual American/Finnish citizen. In 2004-5, I spent a year abroad as an exchange student in Finland through the American Field Service, which left a deep impression on me. My struggle to learn the Finnish language gave me an appreciation for a language that is unrelated to the Indo-European based languages of Europe. Foxholes from the Second World War across the road from host family's house made history seem very close and awakened in me an enduring interest in the history of "the big neighbor", as the Finns sometimes refer to Russia. Russia has long held a spell on my imagination. A weekend visit to St. Petersburg at the end of my year abroad sealed my desire to learn about its history.

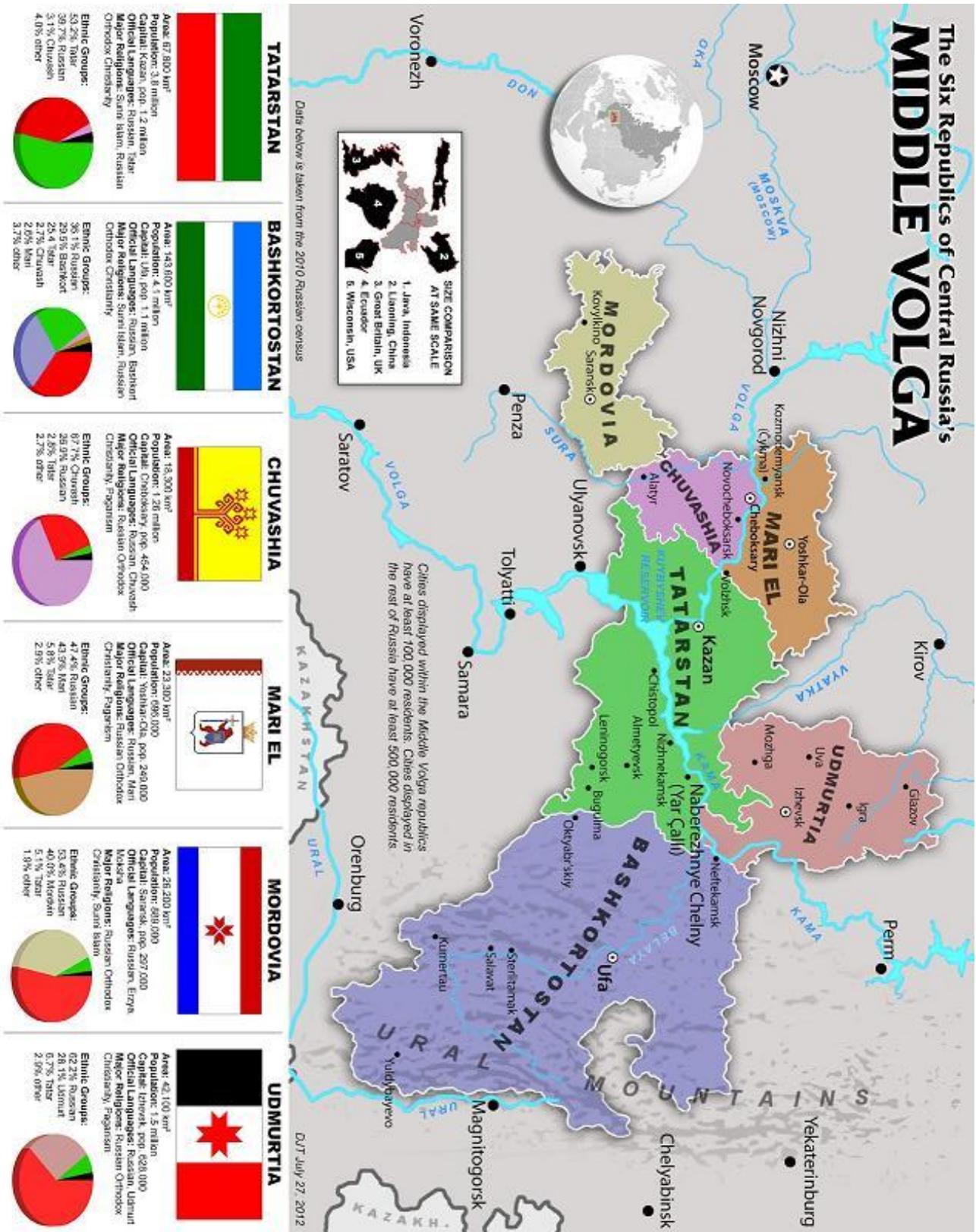
During my year in Finland I also learned about the Karelians who live across the border and speak a language very close to Finnish. It was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Finns rediscovered this "Orthodox twin" and Finnish nationalists drew heavy inspiration from Karelia as a land of unspoiled, ancient Finnishness. It fascinated me to learn that one can still visit Karelia and sound out Cyrillic signs to reveal Finnish words. This was my first exposure to Russia as a multinational state. Although I had heard the theory of the Uralic origins of the Finns, it was not until many years later that I learned that the Karelians are not the only kinfolk of the Finns in Russia. An article I read mentioned the Finno-Ugric Maris of the Volga region, east of Moscow. Eager to learn more about these neglected kinfolk, I scoured amazon.com and found Rein Taagepera's 1999 book The Finno-Ugric Republics and the Russian State. It was not cheap, but as the only English-language book covering the history of all the Finno-Ugric peoples, it was worth every penny. I was amazed to discover that the Finno-Ugric peoples inhabit an area extending east to western Siberia, north to the Arctic Ocean and south to the great bend in the Volga River.

I was able to contact the author, Dr. Rein Taagepera, who ran for the Estonian presidency in 1992 and is a professor of politics at both the University of Tartu in Estonia and University of California, Irvine, and arrange a meeting with him in the winter of 2012. He generously gave me six hours of his day to discuss aspects of Finno-Ugric history ranging from prehistoric times to the present day. I am deeply indebted to Taagepera for corresponding with me by email. I was able to meet him again in Tartu, Estonia last summer where he connected me with the ethnic Mari, Vasily Nikolaev. During that summer, I spent three months doing research in Russia, Finland, Estonia, Hungary and Latvia, but this time would not have been so productive without the help I received. In Helsinki I was able to connect with the Finno-Ugric scholars Niko Partanen, Alexandra Kellner, Norman Langerak and Sampsa Holopainen who welcomed me, connected me with the Castrén Society in Helsinki and assisted me in my journey to Yoshkar-Ola, the capital of Mari El. I am especially thankful for the help I received from these Finnish scholars when I attended the VI World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples in Siófok, Hungary. At the Congress I had the honor of meeting the foremost Finno-Ugric scholar, Dr. Seppo Lallukka. I would like to thank him for his encouragement and for giving me a copy of his invaluable book From Fugitive Peasant to Diaspora: The Eastern Mari in Tsarist and Federal Russia.

I owe a big thank you to my main adviser, Peter Kenez, who had enough confidence in me to agree to be my adviser. Without that, none of this would be been possible. Thanks are also due my secondary adviser, Jonathan Beecher, who pushed me along and went beyond his role of adviser by opening the door to his family. I had the pleasure of meeting with his Estonian wife, Merike Beecher, and his son, David Beecher, who had many helpful suggestions to offer. I would like to thank Maya Peterson who worked with me as an informal adviser and whose wealth of knowledge about Central Asia helped this thesis to transcend the bounds of European history and put in on a more worldly basis. Along my journey I met many people who helped and inspired me including, but not limited to, Jason Lavery, Alexander Sherstobitov, Kiva Silver, Marc Cioc, Edward Kehler, Michael Urban, Stephanie

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## The Estonians and the Maris – a Special Closeness despite a Long Distance

I begin this thesis with the story of Vladislav Zotin, the elected president of the Mari El Republic (reigned in 1991-7), who in May 1992, made a state visit to the newly independent Estonia where he was received with the full honor of a head of state. Slightly smaller than New Hampshire, Mari El is an ethnic territory subject to the Russian Federation located 515 miles east of Moscow on the great bend of the Volga River – one of the most ethnically rich regions in all of Russia. Here, the Maris live beside Udmurts, Mordvinians, Tatars, Chuvash, Bashkirs and Russians. The Mari people, numbering approximately 550,000, speak a language that belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family, which is unrelated to the Indo-European-based tongues spoken Europe and is represented in non-Russian Europe only by the Finns, the Estonians and the Hungarians, as well as the stateless Sami in the Arctic, and the almost extinct Livonians. The fourth state with a significant indigenous Finno-Ugric population is Russia. The eastern Finno-Ugric people (those native to Russia) inhabit an area spanning from the Karelia on the border with Finland, to the Hanti-Mansi region of western Siberia, and south to the great bend in the Volga River where the Maris live. Indeed, the Finno-Ugric peoples are the original inhabitants of the northern half of European Russia – the Russians arrived rather late, only about 1,500 years ago. What was significant about President Zotin was that he was the first elected ethnic Mari leader, the titular ethnic group of Mari El. President Zotin also held the rare distinction of being the only elected leader in all of Europe to be baptized in an animist faith. The Maris (and, to a lesser extent, the Udmurts) hold the title of Europe's last "pagans".<sup>1</sup> Mari El, which was upgraded to the status of an Autonomous Republic (ASSR) by Joseph Stalin in 1936, is a legacy of the Soviet Union, which had always

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<sup>1</sup> The word "pagan" is a pejorative term that refers to all non-Abrahamic religions. Animism refers to the specific belief that things in nature have spirits (i.e. are "animated").

been, in principle, a decentralized state.<sup>2</sup> The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, meant that for the first time, the Maris had a chance to finally achieve a meaningful degree of autonomy within the Russian Federation. In his power struggle against Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin had utilized the popular allure of federalism for Russia, inviting the regions to “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow.” President Zotin’s welcome reception in Estonia reflected the optimism many Estonians felt for the future of their Eastern Finno-Ugric kinfolk.

After being received as a head of state in Estonia, Zotin’s next stop was Finland, another kindred Finno-Ugric nation, where he was received as a private citizen. This was not entirely surprising, considering that Finland has a tradition of avoiding behavior that might be considered provocative by “the big neighbor”, Russia. This policy has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the Russian Empire’s seizure of Finland from the Swedish Empire as small change in the 1808 agreement of Tilsit between Napoleon Bonaparte and Tsar Alexander I. In order to buy the loyalty of the western borderlands, Finland was granted an unprecedented degree of autonomy within the Russian Empire. Whereas mere autonomy was not enough for the Poles who wanted outright independence and succeeded in losing all autonomy by rebelling in 1830 and 1863, the Finns were loyal subjects. The Finns minded their own business and were rewarded well, at least until the nationalist Tsar Alexander III came to the throne in 1883. Finland was granted independence by Vladimir Lenin in 1917, but after the Second World War (during which Finland fought two separate wars against the USSR), it seemed only a question of time before Finland would be subsumed, once again, into the Russian fold. Finland resumed a policy of neutrality, self-censorship and minding its own business, referred to disparagingly in the West as *finlandization*. The Finnish historian Max Jakobson offers a more fair interpretation by comparing Finland’s policy to a rafter: “Just as in shooting a rapid in order to steer one must keep rowing, however

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<sup>2</sup> In reality, the USSR was highly centralized. The Mari El Republic is one of twenty-one ethnic republics in the Russian Federation.

futile and absurd that may seem to someone watching from the shore, so have the Finns kept control over their own affairs, even at times when the current of events may have seemed irresistible.”<sup>3</sup> In short, thanks to their own diplomacy, the Finns succeeded in maintaining their independence, which was no small triumph in those iron times. Nevertheless, Finland’s diplomacy with the USSR during the Cold War left a lasting legacy. What was once a strategy for survival became second-nature.

The differences between Estonian and Finnish foreign policy with Russia are plain to see. Whereas Finland continues to exercise caution, Estonia has followed a course that may seem reckless considering Estonia’s small size (only one million Estonians live in Estonia, whereas Finland has a population of over five million). For the purposes of this thesis, the most notable aspect of this has been Estonia’s outspoken support for the Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia. Ever since Estonian independence was restored in 1991, Estonia has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to assisting their kindred Finno-Ugric peoples in their political and cultural development.<sup>4</sup> The Finns, too, have contributed substantially to this effort (mainly by contributing funds to help in the cultural sphere). The main difference is that Estonia shares little of the caution and self-censorship that the Finns are famed for.

Two years after President Zotin’s 1992 visit, the relationship between Estonia and Mari El was made official when a government-level treaty of cooperation was signed between Estonia’s Ministry of Culture and Education and Ministry of Culture and Mari El’s Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education. Of the four other Eastern Finno-Ugric republics, only the Komi Republic signed a similar treaty with Estonia. Five years later, in 1999, Estonia inaugurated its first Kindred Peoples Program (1999-2004) funded by the Estonian government which, among other things, provides scholarships for

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<sup>3</sup> Jakobson, Max. *Finnish Neutrality: A Study of Finnish Foreign Policy since the Second World War*. London: Hugh Evelyn Limited, 1968. Print, p. 1

<sup>4</sup> Estonian independence was restored, not achieved, in 1991 because, legally, Estonia did not cease to be an independent state during the years of Soviet occupation (1940-1, 1945-1991).

Eastern Finno-Ugric students to receive a higher education in Estonia. Between those years, the group that came to Estonia in the greatest numbers was the Maris. Out of a total of 99 Kindred Peoples Program scholarship holders in Estonia in 2000, there were 37 Maris, 24 Udmurts, 16 Komis, 7 Mordvinians, 3 Khanty, 5 Vepsians, 1 Ingrian, 1 Livonian, 1 Nenets and 1 Estonian living in the East. In his 1999 survey of eastern Finno-Ugric peoples, the Estonian political scientist Rein Taagepera predicted that, “if only one eastern Finno-Ugric nation were to achieve a modern national culture and full political autonomy, it would be the Maris”.<sup>56</sup> In 2005, after the tide of decentralization and federalism had been reversed by Vladimir Putin towards a “power vertical” and “dictatorship of the law” (to use Putin’s own words), it was the Estonian politician, Mart Laar, who took a leading role in bringing the Mari case before the EU and getting a resolution passed condemning the brutal physical attacks on several Mari cultural figures under the republican government of Leonid Markelov. In February 2013, Toomas Ilves, the president of Estonia, decorated Valerii Vershinin, a Mari linguist from Yoshkar-Ola, with the Marjamaa Cross for his contribution to Mari-Estonian relations. He was the fifth resident of Mari El to receive this high honor.<sup>7</sup>

The picture that emerges is that, in the post-Soviet world, a special closeness exists between the Estonians and the Maris. This does not mean that every Estonian knows who the Maris are, or can even distinguish between a Mari, an Udmurt and a Komi, but Rein Taagepera acknowledges that there is widespread popular sympathy for the Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples in Estonia. Evidently, Estonian sympathy is strong enough that Estonia is willing to imperil its own relations with Russia by providing

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<sup>5</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 198

<sup>6</sup> He had good reason to make this prediction. The Maris have the strongest national consciousness of all Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples, share a border with Tatarstan, the republic representing Russia’s largest minority, and have the most favorable demographic factors. Within their titular republic, 44% of the population is Mari, 6% is Tatar and, at 47%, Russians are not a majority.

<sup>7</sup> <http://mariuver.wordpress.com/2013/02/07/mari-est-ord>, <http://7x7-journal.ru/item/25112?r=mariel>

political assistance at the governmental level, which cannot be said for Finland.<sup>8</sup> Although Taagepera does not acknowledge a special affinity between Estonians and Maris, telling the author “people sometimes love other people, but nations don’t love other nations”, the suggestion of a special affinity is not to marginalize Estonia’s support for all Finno-Ugric peoples. The sense of closeness seems comparable to a person who is eager to help others. When someone accepts that help, a relationship naturally ensues. Estonian eagerness to help is abundantly evident in the stated goals of the I Kindred Peoples Program (1999-2004):

“Via the Finno-Ugrians of the Russian Federation, a positive opinion of Estonia should be molded. This would include sharing truthful information to the kindred peoples on the position of ethnic minorities in Estonia. Organizations and centers of Uralic indigenous peoples should be provided with video materials on Estonia. These should include copies of films made about Finno-Ugrian peoples as well as films on how Estonia gained independence, minorities in Estonia, Estonian economy and other films or television programs. Representatives of Estonia should be sent to various festivals and celebrations . . . both into the Russian Federation and to the Livonians and the Saami elsewhere . . . A book on Estonia in outline should be compiled as a part of the program and translated into the Russian, Karelian, Vepsian, Erzya, Moksha, Mari, Udmurt and

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<sup>8</sup> It would be unfair to suggest that Estonia is the instigator of these tensions. Estonian-Russian relations are already quite strained to begin with. Russian criticism of the treatment of ethnic Russians in Estonia (lack of automatic citizenship for Soviet-era immigrants, refusal to make Russian a second official language, etc.) opens the door for Estonia to point out Russia’s hypocrisy in their less-than-favorable treatment of the indigenous Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia.

Komi languages . . . in order to strengthen the self-consciousness of Uralic indigenous peoples”.<sup>9</sup>

Even if not every Estonian is familiar with the Maris, Estonians empathize with their situation more easily than the Finns do. This can be attributed to a certain Estonian *Weltanschauung*, or world view. Just as Americans have a tendency to judge the rest of the world according to how much freedom and democracy they have, Estonians see the world through the lens of being Estonian. When Estonians look to Mari El, they see a small Finno-Ugric people struggling against Russian assimilation, which, inevitably, calls to mind their own history and struggle to become a modern nation. Estonians are aware that if history had unfolded slightly differently, they too could be just another Finno-Ugric ethnic group in Russia struggling for their indigenous rights. This makes it easy for Estonians to imagine Mari El as a distant Estonia. Furthermore, the Estonians are also able to look upon the Maris with a certain sense of admiration because the Maris have managed to hold onto their animist religion for almost five centuries under Russian rule and compete with the Udmurts for the title of Europe’s last “pagans”. Although most Estonians are proud Lutherans, Christianity seems to sit uneasily on the Estonians who have been regarded as Europe’s most “pagan” Christians. Since independence was restored in 1991, there has been a growing interest of Estonians in their native religion, or *maausk*. Thus, animism has more respectability in Estonia than in Finland. The Estonian native religion actually shares many striking similarities with the Mari religion. For example, both share the animist belief that all things in nature have a spirit (i.e. are “animated”) and both hold religious ceremonies at sacred natural shrines. Estonians who adhere to the native religion regard their history under foreign rule as a “Christian occupation”. Thus, the resurgence of the nature religion in post-Soviet Estonia has the nationalist

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<sup>9</sup> FennoUgria: Programme I. 1999-2004 [www.fennougria.ee/index.php?id=20173](http://www.fennougria.ee/index.php?id=20173) (accessed March 12, 2013)

undertone of Estonians returning to their authentic roots. This Estonian narrative of resistance to Christianity is quite apparent in the outline of the history of the Estonian native religion as presented by Maavaal (the organization of native Estonians):

“Christianity was brought into Estonia "with fire and sword" during the war in the 13th century. This war of independence that lasted more than 20 years, was for the indigenous people, war for their religion. An old chronicle tells us about the Estonian people who swore that "until there is a year-old or knee-high little boy alive in this country, we will not accept Christianity". Though *maarahvas* had finally to surrender to the prevailing German, Danish and Swedish armies, Christianity was still not accepted. In spite of the heavy fines, beating and even capital punishment established by the occupants, people buried their dead up to the 19th century in the village cemeteries near their homes. Until the 19th century shrines, sacred stones, [springs] and trees were found all over Estonia where people went to make sacrifices, to ask for help and get cured. Even nowadays more than 500 shrines and several thousands of other sacred places are known. Some adherents of the native religion were burnt alive by the Protestant inquisition as late as the middle of 17th century”.<sup>10</sup>

Finns, on the other hand, are less capable of seeing themselves in the *Maris*. Aside from the fact that Finland only experienced about one hundred years of Russian rule, compared to about 250 years for the Estonians, Finns have a very different history and their own path to nationhood was much easier.

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<sup>10</sup> “The Estonian Native Religion.” <http://www.maavaal.ee/eng/uudised.html?rubriik=50&id=253&op=lugu> (accessed March 12, 2013)

For example, unlike the Estonians who were reduced to serfdom by the local German nobility in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and kept in that status until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, serfdom was never introduced in Finland under the Swedish or Russian Empire. The Swedish nobility was very poor by European standards, which meant that there was a striking degree of egalitarianism in the Swedish Empire.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it was possible for a son of Finnish peasants to become the bishop of Finland.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the upper class Swedish-speaking population of Finland saw themselves as residents of Finland who happened to speak Swedish, the Baltic Germans saw themselves as Germans who happened to live in the Baltic provinces.<sup>13</sup> After Finland became a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire in 1809, young Swedish-speakers from Turku, the so-called Turku Romantics, were the first to take up the cause of Finnish nationalism, declaring “Swedes we are no longer, Russians we cannot be, therefore, let us be Finns.”<sup>14</sup> By contrast, it would have been unthinkable for the Baltic Germans to ever embrace an Estonian identity. These are some factors that gave the Finns advantages that the Estonians never had. Today, Finland serves as an out-of-reach success story, proving what great things a Finno-Ugric nation is capable of under favorable circumstances. Estonia, on the other hand, is able to offer a more down-to-earth success story that can serve as an example to the eastern Finno-Ugric peoples. One example of this is when the Estonian Finno-Ugric activist Jaak Prozes organized a Mari Song Festival in Mari El which was modeled after the Estonian Song Festival.<sup>15</sup> This centuries-old Estonian tradition of singing played an enormous role in bolstering Estonians’ sense of national solidarity which culminated in the so-called Singing Revolution and restoration of Estonian independence in 1991.<sup>16</sup> Having overcome obstacles on their path to

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<sup>11</sup> Frost, Robert I. *The Northern Wars: War, State, and Society in Northeastern Europe, 1558-1721*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000. Print, p. 119

<sup>12</sup> Taagepera (1993), p. 19

<sup>13</sup> Taagepera (1993), p.35

<sup>14</sup> Goss, Glenda Dawn. *Sibelius: A Composer's Life and the Awakening of Finland*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009. Print, p. 38

<sup>15</sup> “Mari Song Festival”. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GwKfBXtEH8> (accessed March 15, 2013)

<sup>16</sup> *The Singing Revolution*. Dir. James Tusty. NEW VIDEO GROUP DVD-INGR, 2009. DVD.

nationhood similar to those faced by the eastern Finno-Ugric peoples encourages the Estonians to feel sympathy for the Maris and strengthens their relationship.

In fact, the relationship between the Maris and Estonians has deeper historical roots that predate the fall of the Soviet Union. The Estonians first entered the Russian Empire in 1721 when Peter the Great annexed all of Estonian territory from the Swedish Empire. Belonging to the same Empire facilitated contacts between Estonian scholars and the other Finno-Ugric peoples of the Empire. At this time, the Finns were the leading proponents of Finno-Ugric kinship, and contacts between Finns and Estonians with the Maris were only scholarly. At the end of World War I, in that dramatic year, 1917, however, something changed. Finland had just achieved independence, Estonia would soon declare its independence (in 1918) and the Russian Empire was in revolution. In this exciting atmosphere, a Mari Congress was held in the town of Birska near the Urals. One Estonian, Aleksandr Perk, was present. At the congress, Perk gave a speech that lasted one and half hours about the history of the development of Estonian culture and elaborated on the similarities between the Estonians and the Maris. As Perk concluded his speech, there were shouts from the audience of “Long live the brothers Estonians! Long live the Mari people!”<sup>17</sup> It is very noteworthy that in 1917 at the moment that marked the birth of the political existence of the Maris, there was an Estonian present.

There are many more recent historical factors that contribute to Estonia’s desire to lend a helping hand to the Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples. In 1918, as Finland’s civil war was concluding, Estonia’s War for Independence (1918-1920) was just beginning. Hundreds of demobilized Finnish soldiers crossed the Gulf of Finland and fought for Estonia’s freedom. The number of Finns was not as significant as the moral boost that Finland, by lending a helping hand, gave the Estonians. By virtue of their easier road to nationhood, Finland has had a tradition of being a benevolent (though sometimes

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<sup>17</sup> Kolumba, Valentina. *Pervyi Vserossiiskii S’ezd Mari: Protokoly I Materialy*. Yoshkar-Ola: Tsentru-muzei Im, 2006. Print, pp. 52-53

condescending) “older brother” to the Estonians. Estonians have not forgotten the help Finns gave during their War for Independence. Many Estonians actually returned the favor and volunteered to fight for Finland during the Second World War. Finnish assistance in their time of need may help to explain why the Estonians understand the moral boost it can give when a more successful nation lends a helping hand to a smaller, struggling nation.

Another contributing factor is the legacy of the Second World War. In 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in a secret protocol, divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence between Nazi Germany and the USSR. Finland and Estonia both fell into the Soviet sphere of influence. Rather than grant the territory and military bases demanded by Stalin, Finland stood firm. The USSR launched an all-out invasion on November 30, 1939 and for 105 days, Finland resisted the weight of the USSR in a struggle of David vs. Goliath. Upon invading, the USSR established a communist government in Terijoki [Zelenogorsk], the first captured town, and cut off all communication with the legitimate government in Helsinki. Finnish resistance finally brought the USSR to the negotiating table with the legitimate Finnish government, and Finnish independence was saved.

Also in 1939, Stalin demanded military bases from Estonia and the other Baltic States (Latvia and Lithuania). Estonian politicians saw no choice but to grant this concession. After establishing military bases, the Soviet Union annexed the Baltic States outright in June 1940. The next year, 10,000 Estonians (including 6,640 arrested in a single night) – representing a full 1% of Estonia’s population – were arrested, loaded onto cattle cars and deported to remote slave labor camps and Siberian collective farms located deep in the USSR.<sup>18</sup> It is a testament to Soviet treatment of Estonians in that short time of Soviet rule that the Germans, Estonia’s historic oppressors, were welcomed as liberators in 1941. In 1945, the USSR “liberated” Estonia from the Nazis and reabsorbed Estonia into the USSR. A second

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<sup>18</sup> Taagepera (1993), p. 67

wave of deportations, to forestall resistance to collectivized farms, occurred in 1949, removing over 20,000 (or another 2%) of the population. To the Estonians, one tyranny was traded for another – a desperate situation that lasted until Estonian independence was restored in 1991.

People can endure great hardships and can even wear their victimhood like a badge of honor, but there is one fact about the Soviet takeover that the Estonians still struggle to come to terms with. Unlike the Finns who stood their ground in 1939, when the Soviet forces entered their land, the Estonian government did not even offer token resistance. To be sure, small Estonia stood practically no chance of winning such a lopsided war, but if they had only fought back, at least the myth among Russians might not continue to persist that their annexation had been consensual.<sup>19</sup> However much misery resisting the USSR would have brought could not compare to the misery that Estonia endured under communist rule. This is not entirely certain, considering the fate of the Crimean Tatars who were deported en masse in 1943. In any case, the perception exists that not resisting was regrettable, even cowardly. This amounts to little more than wishful thinking, but it is entirely understandable considering that the myth of Estonian consent has still not been relegated to the dustbin of history where it belongs. Today, one gets the impression that the Estonians have something to prove – even if it is only to prove to themselves that they are, in fact, an independent nation. There is certainly no lack of courage in Estonian support for the Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples.

Although these historical memories may lower Estonian inhibitions, the willingness of Estonians to help the stateless Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples cannot be attributed to modern history alone. This would be to ignore the Romantic bedrock of Finno-Ugric kinship. The introduction to Estonia's Kindred Peoples Program III (2010-2014) states, "the premise of this program is that Estonians belong to the Finno-Ugrians. Besides the European segment, our culture is also based on our old Finno-Ugrian folk

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<sup>19</sup> A great example of this was when Mikhail Gorbachev talked openly in 1989 and 1990 about the "marriage" between Estonia and the USSR, when the more accurate sexual metaphor would have been "rape".

culture having much in common with the cultures of other Uralic peoples”.<sup>20</sup> Although the program states that “it is the duty of the Estonian state and society to offer such assistance”, it is evident that there is something more than a sense of duty driving the Estonians. The Estonians take pride in their Finno-Ugric roots. The fact that every tribal society in the world has its own origin myth demonstrates that there is a universal need among human communities to ask the question “where do we come from?” The three western Finno-Ugric nations, who came from the east originally, have all struggled with this question in their own way. Hungarians, who stepped onto the European stage only 1100 years ago, tend to be ambivalent about their Finno-Ugric roots, despite the fact that any true linguist knows that the Hungarian language is, in fact, Finno-Ugric and most closely related to the Hanti-Mansi language of West Siberia.<sup>21</sup> Finnish nationalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century looked directly across the border to Karelia as the land where ancient Finnishness had been preserved and did not look much further. As one would expect, Estonians too have their own “eastern complex”, manifesting itself in a uniquely Estonian way. For the Estonians, it seems that encouraging relations with kindred peoples is inherently valuable because these peoples can speak to who the Estonians are as a nation.

This does not explain, however, why a closer relationship has emerged between the Estonians and the Maris in particular. A closer relationship cannot be explained by the more generic Finno-Ugric kinship alone. After all, the British and the Persians feel no special sense of closeness for speaking Indo-European languages. The numbers of Eastern Finno-Ugric students who came to Estonia under the Kindred Peoples Program shows that some Finno-Ugric Peoples were more ready, willing and able to make use of Estonia’s offer to help. If population size were the determining factor, the Mordvinians would top the list, as the 2002 census showed 843,000 Mordvinians compared with 604,000 Maris.

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<sup>20</sup> FennoUgria: Programme III 2010-2014. <http://www.fennougria.ee/index.php?id=21397> (accessed March 12, 2013)

<sup>21</sup> There is a widespread belief in Hungary that this designation was a Habsburg conspiracy intended to suggest they were “reindeer herders” so many find it preferable to be associated with the more warlike Turkic peoples. The Hungarian language does in fact have a strong Turkic substrate.

Likewise, some have suggested that Estonia's sense of special responsibility toward kindred peoples in Russia is merely a result of Estonia being annexed by the USSR in 1940. Sharing the common experience of belonging to the Soviet Union did bring the Estonians in closer contact with the Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples, helping Estonia to become a leading proponent of Finno-Ugric kinship after Estonian independence was restored. It also facilitated communication because more Estonians spoke Russian than Finns. Before the war, Finland had been the leading proponent of Finno-Ugric kinship. Nevertheless, such an explanation fails to explain why the relationship would be any closer between the Estonians and the Maris than with any of the other Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples. Evidently, whether it is based on opportunism or Romanticism, the affinity between these two peoples is coming from the Maris at least as much as it is coming from the Estonians. This is not surprising considering that the Maris have played a leading role among the eastern Finno-Ugric peoples in matters pertaining to Finno-Ugric cooperation.<sup>22</sup> The aforementioned 1994 treaty of cultural cooperation was a consequence of the Maris' own efforts to make foreign contacts. Furthermore, a respected Mari cultural figure told the author "Estonia is close, Finland is farther and Hungary is far".

A Mari affinity for the Estonians is not unprecedented. At the 1917 Mari Congress in Birska at which the Estonian, Aleksandr, Perk was present, it was decided that the Maris should send a greeting to their Estonian brothers. The chairman read the greeting, which read as follows:

"Comrades brothers Estonians! The First All-Russian Congress of the Mari greets the Estonian brothers. We, the Mari, in the first days of our free life are keenly looking around and are looking in the huge world of mankind for friends, with which we could

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<sup>22</sup> Taagepera (2001, p. 185) notes a list of 45 cooperative events from 1989 to 1993 compiled by Igor Sadovin. Mari El took the lead hosting 13 events, followed by 8 in Udmurtia. None occurred in Mordovia.

unite and share both sorrow and happiness. Only brothers by blood can be such friends. Comrades Estonians, you are our relatives by blood. Please, take a look on our language, our popular traditions, everyday life, morals and manners, and you will see how similar we are. You started to live earlier than we did. You are more developed and more cultured than we are. You cherish hopes for creating a national university, whereas we are so far just pondering about establishing national six-year school. However, we firmly believe that you did not become arrogant and we hope for your enlightened help in our efforts on the road to enlightenment. We do not look on you with envy but with tender happiness. When we look on you, we get a brilliant idea that we also will reach the same you have reached. We, the Mari, sincerely hope to be together with our brothers, the Estonians. We ask comrade Aleksandr Antonovich Perk to deliver our greeting to the Estonian brothers".<sup>23</sup>

In this thesis I will show that there is a deeper underlying reason for the relationship between the Estonians and the Maris, which is that both peoples are geographically situated on a great interface of civilizations. Being on an interface seems to enhance the ability of small peoples to survive, just as in nature how rich flora can be found in intermediate zones between two plant communities (called an ecotone). Rein Taagepera's article Albert, Martin, and Peter Too argues that Estonia would not be an independent nation today if not for the "unlucky luck" of being on the interface between Catholic-Protestant German civilization and Orthodox-Russian civilization.<sup>24</sup> This thesis will show that the same argument is applicable to the Maris, who are also on a great interface at least as profound as the division in Christianity. The Maris lie on the religious interface between Islam and Christianity, the

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<sup>23</sup> Kolumba, pp. 52-53

<sup>24</sup> Taagepera, Rein. "Albert, Martin, and Peter Too." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 42.2 (2011): 125-41. Print.

ethnic interface between Turkic and Slavic, the national interface between Russian and Tatar/Bashkir as well as the environmental interface between nomadic steppe and settled forest. Each of these has had a significant influence on the history of the Maris.

Although the Maris and the Estonians have very different histories and have only been in contact in the modern era, being on a great interface is something that increases their pool of common experience in a way that paved the path for the two to discover each other later on with the introduction of the concept of Finno-Ugric kinship. Sirkka Saarinen argues that language is not the uniting factor, but rather a commonly shared feeling of being “other”.<sup>25</sup> Taagepera agrees that the “myth” of Finno-Ugric kinship is based less on language than on the fact that all Finno-Ugric peoples have shared, to varying degrees, a common experience of Russian imperialism. Although speaking a related language does not necessarily indicate kinship by blood, language is important because there is a sense relief in finding distant people whose language shares similar grammatical features.<sup>26</sup> All Finno-Ugric peoples have felt a sense of isolation by being surrounded by Indo-European and Turkic peoples, who have often looked down on them condescendingly. For this reason, making a comparison between the Estonians and the Maris can be justified as something entirely in the spirit of imagined common experience. To say that something is imagined is only to say that it is the product of the mind and in no way diminishes its importance. The Finno-Ugric idea is a pan-national idea, and just as the nation, according to Benedict Anderson, is an imagined community, so too is Finno-Ugric kinship. The role of imagination in history should never be underestimated.

Because the Maris are less well known than the Estonians, the primary research of this thesis has been on the Maris. After showing how Estonia has benefitted from being on an interface, I will

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<sup>25</sup> Saarinen, Sirkka. "The Myth of a Finno-Ugric Community in Practice." *Nationalities Papers* 29.1 (2001): 41-52. Print.

<sup>26</sup> Taagepera, Rein. "Eastern Finno-Ugric Cooperation and Foreign Relations." *Nationalities Papers* 29.1 (2001): 181-99. Print, p. 181

describe the various ways that the Maris have benefitted from a similar dynamic over the course of their history. My final section will deal with how being on an interface continues to matter for the Maris today.

### Methodology

It is worth enumerating on some points of methodology used for understanding the histories of these two small peoples. First of all, just as no nation is an island, figuratively speaking, and is greatly influenced its neighbors, this is especially true of small peoples like the Estonians and the Maris. This means that their histories must be studied in the larger context of the peoples that they have come in contact with. Just as the Estonians must be understood in the context of being between the Germans and Russians, the Maris must be understood in the context of being between the Tatars and the Russians. Consequently, this is a five point thesis that considers the histories of the Germans, the Estonians, the Russians, the Maris and the Tatars. I draw comparisons between the Germans and the Tatars just as much as I compare the Estonians and Maris. This is not to imply that small peoples are the passive pawns of their larger neighbors. The Estonians and Maris have been very active participants in their history.

My second point of methodology is that, in order to understand the histories of these peoples, it is important, as much as possible, to enter their inner-world, rather than simply describing them from the outside. I draw much influence from the theorist of nationalism, Anthony Smith, who writes that one cannot understand nationalism without entering its inner-world with its “shared memories of golden ages, ancestors and great heroes and heroines”.<sup>27</sup> Smith’s ethno-symbolism school of nationalism places the emphasis of national studies on myths, symbols, memories, values and traditions. Although the conception of the community in terms of nationalism is a modern phenomenon, humans

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<sup>27</sup> Smith, Anthony. *Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print, p. 127

have formed communities from time immemorial. Charles Darwin argued that our sense of community is something that gave humans a biological edge. In that sense, forming communities is in our DNA. Therefore, rather than seeing the national community as something completely novel, it should be subordinated to the idea of human communities. Many of the arguments that have been made about national communities can be applied to human communities in general. This does not make me a primordialist, since I am not arguing that the national community is primordial. As Andreas Kappeler observes, prior to the age of national communities, with their emphasis on language and ethnicity, communities were centered on religious, regional, estate-based and dynastic identities.<sup>28</sup> To project nationalism onto pre-national ethnic groups is unhistorical. Due to the fact that the Estonians are on the interface between Western Christianity and Orthodoxy, and the Maris, who still practice their own animist faith, are on the interface between Orthodoxy and Islam, it is especially important for the purposes of this thesis to enter the inner-world of these religious communities which have their own bodies of myths and symbols.

My third point of methodology is that one can infer insights circumstantially by drawing comparisons between the different Finno-Ugric peoples. Thousands of years ago, the Finno-Ugric peoples probably spoke a common proto-Finno-Ugric language in a unified territory that may have been in the southern Urals. As the Finno-Ugric peoples split up and went their own separate ways, they were respectively influenced by their local environment and the peoples they came into contact with. This suggests that there is nothing inherently stronger about the Finno-Ugric people who resisted assimilation more successfully than others. Therefore, the factors that led to one people's success or lack thereof has implications for all the others.

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<sup>28</sup> Kappeler, Andreas. *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001. Print, p. 6

### Why Study Small Peoples?

There is no reason why small peoples should be of any less interest to scholars. The myth that small peoples are the passive pawns of their larger neighbors is not a fair assessment. John F. Kennedy once asked the Finnish diplomat Max Jakobson why the Soviet Union had allowed Finland to remain independent. His question was based on a false assumption that Finnish independence had nothing to do with the Finns themselves.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, rather than seeing small peoples as the objects of imperial power, it is important to give them credit for their active role in shaping the course of history. Studying the smaller ethnic groups of the multi-ethnic Russian state is important not only to avoid the pitfall of Russocentrism, but because it is essential to gain a more full and complete understanding of Russian history. One must not equate the history of Russia with Russian national history. Although maps may give the impression that Russia is a monolithic state, Russia is by far Europe's most ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse state. The 2002 census of the Russian Federation recognized 185 different ethnic groups. Russians, as a nationality, compose approximately 80% of the total population of the Russian Federation.

In their own way, every people has contributed to the world and if any one of them did not exist, the world would be a different place. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some very notable scientific innovations took place at Estonia's Tartu University. The first measurement to the distance of a star, for example, was carried out in 1837 by Frederich G. W. Struve (1793-1864). Other notable scientists born in Estonia include Karl Ernst Baer (1792-1876), who founded embryology, Karl Claus (1796-1864), who discovered the element ruthenium, Emil Lenz (1804-1856) who came up with the Lenz rule of electromagnetic induction, and several more.<sup>30</sup> Even the Maris had an effect on European civilization. The beekeeping Maris paid tribute in wax and honey to Moscow, who, in turn, traded it with Europe. This helped to give

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<sup>29</sup> Jakobson, 2

<sup>30</sup> Taagepera, Rein. *Estonia: Return to Independence*. Boulder: Westview, 1993. Print, pp. 7-8

Russia an international reputation in for its wax. Indirectly, the Maris helped to furnish the great cathedrals of the Catholic Church, Europe's biggest consumer of wax, with its candles.<sup>31</sup> It is even thought that beekeeping originated from the Volga Finns.

Studying small peoples can offer insights into questions that are of universal importance to humanity. For example, during the tense four years of political struggle before Estonian independence was restored, there was not a single politically motivated death in Estonia. Due to the large number of Russian colonists who moved to Estonia during the years of Soviet rule, Estonia had a population mix comparable to Algeria in the 1950's. To ask what it was in Estonian culture that prevented the violence that accompanied Algeria's anti-colonialism drive is a question that has universal sociological implications. Moreover, the Finno-Ugric peoples' different reactions to Russian imperialism can be seen as a laboratory of pre-national communities, yielding insights about what factors make a people more likely to survive. For this reason, this topic can be of universal interest to nationalist theorists. If one is still in doubt that a small people can be of universal interest to the world, it is worth remembering that ancient Athens was a small people, too.

A further reason to study small peoples is because there is inherent value in promoting global bio-cultural diversity. There is, for example, a direct correlation between linguistic diversity and biological diversity. It is not a coincidence that Europe has both the poorest linguistic and biological diversity, whereas Papua New Guinea, with over 820 indigenous languages, also has the world's richest biodiversity. Humans have a strong influence on their environment, such that all natural landscapes are also cultural landscapes. Languages encode specialized knowledge about the environment in which they develop. Linguistic diversity is especially valuable today because it increases the creativity of a society, which, in a post-industrial world, is an economic advantage. Lastly, studies show that children who

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<sup>31</sup> Vuorela, Toivo. *The Finno-Ugric Peoples*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1964. Print, p. 241

receive an early education in their own language can become literate in a second language more quickly and easily.<sup>32</sup> Promoting bio-cultural diversity is, therefore, important for both economic and environmental reasons.

Finally, the bio-cultural diversity of the world can be seen a spiritual resource. Languages are entirely the creation of humans, originating in the mists of prehistory and embodying the mystery of who we are as humans. Therefore, when a language dies, all of humanity loses a part of its collective human heritage. When the Taliban destroyed the Buddha statues in Afghanistan in 2001, the world was outraged because those statues were a part of our human heritage, transcending national and religious boundaries. The death of a language is equally tragic.

#### Is this Thesis Anti-Russian?

It is worth making a special note against potential charges that this thesis is anti-Russian. Russian civilization has graced the world with so many brilliant authors and exceptional cultural treasures that one must be cautious to avoid painting the Russians in one-dimensional terms. Just as the Maris and Estonians have been enriched by being on a cultural interface, Russia itself is uniquely situated at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, which has given Russians the ability to draw influence from many different cultures. Every civilization has aspects that are worthy of admiration and other aspects that are less so. Russia is no different. The fact that Russia is Europe's most multinational state means that coming to terms with this fact has been a perennial question throughout the course of

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<sup>32</sup> See Thomas, Wayne P. and Collier, Virginia P. (2002) A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students' Long Term Academic Achievement Report. George Mason University, CREDE [http://www.crede.ucsc.edu/research/llaa/1.1\\_final.html](http://www.crede.ucsc.edu/research/llaa/1.1_final.html) and Ramirez, J. David (1991) Longitudinal study of structured English immersion strategy, early-exit and late-exit transitional bilingual education programs for language minority children (Vols. 1-2) San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International.

Russian history. It would be overly simplistic and downright inaccurate to paint a picture of Russia's ethnic relations in terms of Russians versus non-Russians. Instead, it is better to highlight two opposing tendencies in Russian history. On the one hand, there is what one could label the "local tendency". As Orlando Figes shows, Russian administrators in ethnic regions often ended up embracing the local culture in a way that one sees much less frequently with other European overseas empires.<sup>33</sup> In addition, ethnic Russians living in ethnic regions often acquired a special respect for the indigenous culture. After all, Russians and non-Russians were both under the same imperial yoke for most of their history. Nobody in the Russian Empire had a lower status than the Russian peasant. Moreover, many of these Russians share some ancestry with the indigenous population. Napoleon was not far off when he said "scratch a Russian and you'll find a Tatar." Lastly, it is worth pointing out that much of our knowledge of Finno-Ugric peoples comes from Russian scholars. On the other hand, there is what one could label the "Moscow-imperial tendency". Beginning with Ivan the Terrible's conquest of Kazan in 1552, an imperial ideology of the centralized state was born which, in different forms, has shown up throughout the course of subsequent Russian history. This tendency has represented a reoccurring threat to the survival of Russia's smaller nationalities.

#### Is this Thesis Nationalistic?

Today, it seems the word "nationalism" is often frowned upon. Inevitably, it calls to mind some of the worst crimes and excesses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The conflicts in the Balkans have been blamed on nationalism, as if to suggest that over one thousand years of history can be summed up in one word. But, as the Jewish-Finnish historian Max Jakobson points out, those who condemn nationalism rarely

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<sup>33</sup> Figes, Orlando. *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*. New York: Metropolitan, 2002. Print. See chapter "Sons of Genghis Khan".

mention the Baltic States as an example of a non-violent, democratic national struggle that helped to free three small nations from the grip of an empire.<sup>34</sup> It is important, therefore, to avoid thinking of nationalism in black and white terms. It is true that nationalism taken to an illogical extreme can be harmful, but the same can be said of *any* idea taken to an illogical extreme. The real enemy, therefore, should be seen as extremism, not nationalism.

Because different minority groups seek different goals, it is important not to equate nationalism with exaggerated ethnic chauvinism. As Lallukka shows, minority groups can be divided into four categories: pluralistic, assimilationist, secessionist and militant.<sup>35</sup> Militant national movements seek domination over others. No eastern Finno-Ugric groups fit this category vis-à-vis Russia. The category of secessionist, meaning the minority group seeks full political independence, applies to no Finno-Ugric group either. Only the categories pluralistic, meaning that the “minority seeks to keep its identity and to gain toleration of its distinctiveness from others, including the dominant group” and assimilationist who “desire absorption into the larger society and the treatment of its members simply as individuals” apply to Russia’s Finno-Ugric minority groups.

In the case of the Maris, this thesis advocates no positions outside of the norms of group rights established under international law that Russia has agreed to uphold, including UN standards, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), in addition to Council of Europe standards, such as the European Convention of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), ratified by Russia in 1998. Neither does it advocate anything outside of the ethnic rights enumerated in the constitution of the Russian Federation which protects the right of everyone to participate in cultural life (article 44).

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<sup>34</sup> Jakobson, Max. *Finland in the New Europe*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998. Print. See chapter “Nationalism”, p. 10

<sup>35</sup> Lallukka, Seppo. “Finno-Ugrians of Russia: Vanishing Cultural Communities?” *Nationalities Papers* 29.1 (2001): 9-39. Print.

Human rights, which traditionally protect the rights of individuals, are different in the case of minorities which are subject to special protections on a group basis in the protection of their particular identities, characteristics and traditions.<sup>36</sup> This thesis does not seek to over-romanticize small peoples, but, rather, to give all national groups fair treatment in order to fill in gaps of knowledge and give readers a fairer and more rounded picture of history. The guiding principle of this thesis is the idea that global understanding can serve as the foundation for a more peaceful world. This thesis rejects the suppression of the national strivings of indigenous ethnic groups who seek the pluralistic goal of preserving their language and way of life and who pose hardly any threat to Russia's integrity. Such suppression is not only an unlawful imperial act, but is something more likely to sow the seeds of resentment and compromise the goal of peaceful coexistence. Therefore, rather than labeling this thesis as nationalistic, it should be seen as pro-diversity.

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<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed discussion of legal rights applicable to the Maris, see: *Russian Federation: The Human Rights Situation of the Mari Minority of the Republic of Mari El*. Rep. Vienna: Joint Report: International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and Moscow Helsinki Group, 2006. Print, pp. 19-27



### How Being on an Interface Benefitted Estonia

Today, Estonia is the smallest continental independent nation in the world with its own standardized language of culture. Estonia is probably Europe's most unlikely state. Rein Taagepera's article Albert, Martin, and Peter Too, shows how being on a hotly contested "windy land" on the interface of German and Russian civilizations was the vital factor that helped the Estonian language survive and paved the way for Estonian nationhood.<sup>37</sup> A great deal of luck was involved, which often came disguised as misfortune, but Estonia's luck was made possible by being situated on a great interface. As Napoleon once said, mastering luck is the secret to success, and good fortune has certainly favored the Estonians.

The Estonians have lived in their present homeland for at least 5,000 years. Approximately 1,500 years ago, the Slavic language area began to expand north into lands populated by Baltic and Finno-Ugric peoples. When the Slavs came into contact with the Varangians (Vikings), the first East Slavic state, Kievan Rus was founded. With the inflow of Slavs, the Estonian language area stabilized at the natural eastern boundary of Lake Peipsi. Estonian military resistance and the natural barrier of Peipsi bought the Estonians time from being overwhelmed and assimilated by the expanding Slavs. The Latvians, who lack such a natural barrier, came close to being assimilated. What saved the Estonians and Latvians from assimilation was a foreign invasion.

Around 1000 AD, the Germans began to expand to the east into lands populated by Slavic and Baltic peoples. This *Drang nach Osten* (striving towards the east) was halted by Lithuanian resistance. By 1200, all of non-Russian Europe had converted to Christianity except for a pagan strip down the middle of Europe in present day Finland, Estonia and Latvia. German knights, after being defeated by

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<sup>37</sup> In the course of its history, the present-day territory of Estonia has experienced foreign rule from Danes, Germans, Swedes, Poles, Russians, Nazis and Soviets. Finland, by contrast, has experienced foreign rule from only Sweden and Russia.

Saladin in the Holy Land, decided to launch a new Crusade against an easier target – the Baltic pagans. Bypassing the Lithuanians through the Baltic Sea, Germans and Danes conquered the Estonians and Latvians and founded the feudal state of Livonia. Under their new masters, the Estonians were gradually reduced to serfdom. The last major Estonian uprising was crushed in 1343.

Certainly this was a disaster for the formerly free Estonians, but, for the Estonian language, there was a silver lining. If the Germans had not conquered Estonia, the most likely alternative would have been conquest by the Russians. Had the Russians conquered, Russian peasants would have followed and settled in Estonia. In this case, it would have been only a question of time before the numerically inferior Estonians would have been assimilated, as was the case of the Finno-Ugric Votes to the east of Livonia. Not only was Russian peasant settlement prevented, but thanks to the militarily strong Lithuanians, German peasant settlement did not occur either. The Germans failed to create a dry land connection between Prussia and Livonia, so that only a thin upper class of Germans ruled over the Estonians. If German peasants had migrated to Estonia, this would have accelerated the assimilation of the Estonians. The migration of German peasants into Prussia was fatal to the Baltic Prussian language. The Baltic German nobles were motivated primarily by economic incentives. They were interested in exploiting and enserfing the Estonians and had little interest in Germanizing them. Indeed, keeping the Estonians separate served this exploitation. Although serfdom in Livonia was comparable to the worst excesses of American slavery, the conquest by the Germans had the fortunate side effect of preserving the local languages.

Although the Estonian language survived, this did not mean that the Estonians would develop a standardized language, which is an essential precondition for building a modern nation. This only came about because of the Protestant Reformation. Because the Baltic Germans maintained their German identity, the historical events that affected the Germans also entered Estonia. Thanks to the Protestant

Reformation, Rein Taagepera argues that Martin Luther may be the most important figure in paving the path for Estonian nationhood. Martin Luther preached the doctrine of “salvation through faith alone” which opened the door for laypeople to worship in their own vernacular. Although Luther had the Germans in mind, in order to avoid contradicting themselves, the Protestant reformers in Livonia applied this doctrine to the vernacular peasant languages of Livonia. Thus, only eighty years after the Gutenberg Bible, the Estonians had their first written word. The consequences of translating religious texts into Estonian were enormous. Due to the complexity of the concepts contained in the bible, the Estonian vocabulary was expanded considerably. Furthermore, it brought a greater unity to Estonian dialects. The North Estonian dialect was the first to have a complete translation of the bible, which helped it to prevail over South Estonian and eventually become a common literary language uniting all Estonians. This was no small feat, considering that there are considerable differences between these two dialects.

Another motivating factor to translate the Bible into Estonian was that most of Latvia and part of southern Estonia were under Catholic Polish-Lithuanian rule. To reverse the tide of Protestantism, Jesuit preachers began to make use of vernacular languages. The Baltic Germans generally despised their non-German or *undeutsch* subjects, but the Catholic competition gave them an incentive to keep the Estonians in the Protestant fold. For the first time, the ruling elites found their souls valuable enough to be worth competing for. Consequently, the prestige of the Estonian language was elevated, preventing a language shift to German the way that the Irish shifted to English 200 years ago.

The survival of the Estonian language was still not guaranteed. The next major historical event that had hidden benefits for the Estonians was the Russian conquest of Livonia by Peter the Great in 1721. If this conquest had occurred earlier, the Western heritage of the Germans would not have taken root as firmly. Historians have good reason to say that of all foreign dominations “the Russian turned

out to be the unhappiest”.<sup>38</sup> Many Estonians died as a result of the war and the feudal privileges of the Baltic Germans were enhanced with Russian rule. In the long run, however, the Russian conquest put a political barrier between the Estonians and the German world. The trend in Europe in the modern era was towards political centralization and cultural uniformity which could have been fatal to the vulnerable Estonian language. Furthermore, the Russian conquest brought about the longest period of peace for the Estonians since the Middle Ages, which allowed the Estonian population to recover.

Although Estonia was cut off politically from the German world, the cultural currents of the Germans continued to flow into Estonia through the Baltic Germans. One threat to the Estonian language was that Estonians who managed to obtain upward mobility had to abandon their peasant language and adopt the language of culture, German, becoming so-called “Juniper Germans” (who still smelled of the smoke of their ancestral hearths). Romanticism was the next major European intellectual event that helped to reverse this trend and pave the way for Estonia to become a modern nation. The foremost figure, Johann Gottfried Herder, saw great value in the despised folk poetry of the peasants. German romanticists founded the Estonian Learned Society to study this folk culture of the past before it vanished. Through this, the Estonian Kreutzwald was able to compile the *Kalevipoeg*, an epic poem created from Estonian folk poetry and inspired by the great Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*. What the Germans did not expect was the Estonian peasants would begin to “believe Herder’s spin about the value of their poetry . . . and use it as a basis for *future* cultural development”.<sup>39</sup>

The unification of Germany in 1871 was the next major historical event to have consequences for the Estonians. The Russian tsars, who had previously let the Baltic Germans run the show in Estonia, now saw the German presence in the Baltic as an exposed flank. Russification became the order of the day. The Russians prevented German clergy from coming to Estonia and Baltic German culture suffered

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<sup>38</sup> Rej, August. *The Drama of the Baltic Peoples*. [Stockholm]: Kirjastus Vaba Eesti, 1970. Print, p. 24

<sup>39</sup> Taagepera (2010), p. 137

greatly. Fortunately, the leading circles of Russians saw the Germans as their main adversary and did not imagine the peasant languages could be a challenge – not until it was too late. Thus, the Estonians found themselves in a zone of competition between two civilizations. Before this time, the enserfed Estonian peasants were aware of only one language of culture – German. The Russian government’s attempt to impose the Russian language on the Baltic region helped to raise the Estonians’ awareness of the fact that there are other languages of culture in the world, which helped Estonians to ask why Estonian could not be a language of culture too. In addition, the Estonian language benefitted from the tsarist attempts to impose Russian Orthodoxy on the Estonians. Although there were conversions to Orthodoxy, the competition with Lutheranism for the souls of the Estonians meant that the Russian Orthodox Church “made concessions to the Estonian language that the Finnic peoples further east could only dream of.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, being on the interface between German civilization and Russian civilization helped to preserve the Estonian language, unify its many dialects into a standardized literary language, and raise the national consciousness of the Estonians. Much luck was involved, but being on the interface enhanced this luck. Similar opportunities did befall those small peoples on the Celtic fringe of France and Great Britain, for example, who were not on such an interface. There is a saying that God helps those who help themselves. Luck tends to favor those who seize the opportunities that arise. Thus, when the opportunity to achieve independence came with the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Estonians had the national consciousness and self-confidence to seize that opportunity.

All Baltic Germans left Estonia for Germany in 1940, and the Estonians thereby inherited the full legacy of that civilization. The legacy of the Baltic Germans gave the Estonians an identity of belonging to the west, encouraging a deep sense that, under Soviet occupation, something valuable had been lost.

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<sup>40</sup> Taagepera (2010), p. 137

“This sense was anchored in a Protestant work ethic that was much more deeply rooted than Lutheranism itself and was felt to be part of the besieged national culture. Renewed Western contacts helped to maintain this sense of loss”.<sup>41</sup> If not for this, the Estonians might not have had the self-confidence to defy the Soviet occupation in the late 1980s, launching a non-violent “Singing Revolution” which contributed significantly to the downfall of the Soviet Union and brought about the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991. By helping themselves, the Estonians got help not only from God, but from the United States, NATO and the European Union.

### Why German Civilization Mattered

Although being on an interface benefitted the Estonians, if not for German civilization itself – specifically North German civilization, the Estonians may not have derived the benefits that they did. A closer look at the Germans shows how being under the influence of a merchant civilization increases the prospects of survival for a small people. This thesis has described the events in German history that benefitted the Estonians but has not entered the German world to understand the nature of German civilization. Understanding the Germans sheds light on Estonian history because, although the Germans had imposed a politically conservative feudal order on the Estonians, they continued to identify as Germans. The term “Baltic German” signifies more about geography than identity. Consequently, all the cultural currents and historical events of North Germany had almost immediate repercussions for the Estonians.

Geography matters. Being located in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea put the Italian peninsula in an advantageous trade position which helped to make Rome the center of the ancient

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<sup>41</sup> Taagepera (1993), p. 108

Roman civilization. Roman civilization came to encompass much of southern Europe, leaving behind a Latin political and cultural legacy. After the fall of Rome, Latin influence reasserted itself in Europe through the Catholic Church.

Something similar happened in Northern Europe. Just as the Romans were in a central trade position on the Mediterranean, the North Germans were in a central trade position on the North and Baltic Seas. This was bolstered by the fact that Germany lies further south, and therefore has a higher population density. Thus, as trading towns sprang up across the Baltic, German mercantile influence spread throughout the Baltic. This paved the way for the Hanseatic League, a trade organization reaching from England to Novgorod and extending deep into North Germany, which had profound cultural repercussions for Northern Europe. Baltic trade from Novgorod to Bruges passed through Lübeck in North Germany, which came to be the capital of the Hanseatic League in not only an economic sense, but in a political and legal sense, too.

The power of the market gave the Hansa the power to put enormous pressure on the towns of the Baltic to open up to free trade. Towns that tried to impose taxes on their ports were brought to their knees by Hansa trade boycotts. This happened to Bruges and Kalmar, Sweden, in the late 1200's when they were ultimately forced to concede all trade privileges that the Hansa required.<sup>42</sup> Starting in 1356, general meetings were held in Lübeck that included other towns of the Hansa. Towns and merchants that ignored the decisions of the Hansa were threatened with expulsion.<sup>43</sup> Thus, a legal uniformity emerged.

The growing economic prosperity of the Hansa not only helped to impose an internal legal uniformity, but also gave the Hansa power externally. Towns were able to convert their economic

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<sup>42</sup> Schildhauer, Johannes. *The Hansa: History and Culture*. [S.l.]: Dorset, 1988. Print, p. 41

<sup>43</sup> Schildhauer, p. 43

power into political freedom by buying their independence from feudal lords. Thus, money triumphed over military might. As argued by Max Weber, this was nothing short of the birth of capitalism. The Hansa towns avoided war at all costs because it interrupted trade and jeopardized profits. Merchant civilizations generally tend to be more peace-loving, and this is one reason why. Increased exposure to foreign cultures and ideas contributes greatly to this tendency. Nevertheless, war could not be avoided with the Danes, the greatest rival of the Hansa, in 1361. This brought about the first political alliance between the Hansa towns in order to counter the Danes. The Peace of Stralsund in 1370 “entered the history books, not merely as a significant victory for the Hansa, but, indeed, as one of the most important victories by the German bourgeois over the feudal powers”.<sup>44</sup>

The victory of the German bourgeois merchants over feudalism was significant for a number of reasons. Ever since the reign of the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I (r. 936-973), the Roman Catholic Church and feudalism had been allies. European kings ruled by “divine right”, giving the entire feudal social structure a basis in Christianity. The Church held great power over not only the spiritual affairs of Europe, but held great political clout as well. The pope held the power to excommunicate any king who stepped out of line. The Church held a monopoly on the truth itself, with the power to decide on the “correct” interpretation of the Bible. The Holy Inquisition shows that the consequences for asserting one’s freedom of conscience could be deadly. The survival of the Hansa, outside the political influence of feudalism and the Catholic Church, meant that in Northern Europe, an alternative civilization was able to emerge.

This was an alternative civilization based on a merchant culture in which “town air is freedom” was the legal principle. Merchants generally held the most autonomy of all medieval professions, and this rising bourgeois class was the dominant class of the Hansa. Thus, free trade fostered humanistic

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<sup>44</sup> Schildhauer, p. 48

values. Although this civilization still belonged to the Catholic fold, Middle Low German became a lingua franca of the Baltic Sea, gaining an upper hand over Latin.<sup>45</sup> Hansa merchants learned the languages of the peoples they traded with. Some even learned Estonian.<sup>46</sup> Education, which was originally determined by the Church, was gradually infused with the more practical, everyday skills that trading required.<sup>47</sup> Hanseatic Universities became centers of scholarship. Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish students came to the University of Rostock, which gained the nickname “the beacon of the North”.<sup>48</sup> Thus, bourgeois institutions replaced those formerly monopolized by conservative clergymen.<sup>49</sup> In this civilization, women played an active role too, helping their merchant husbands and achieving an impressive degree of emancipation. Tolerance was taken to such a degree that even prostitution was grudgingly permitted.<sup>50</sup>

These conditions where concern for business and profit were foremost had profound cultural consequences. The merchant symbolized a new social force to be reckoned with – one that would be able to “confront the princes and lords, and even foreign kings”.<sup>51</sup> The merchant could succeed on the basis of his own knowledge and strength. What this also meant was strengthening of individualism – a trend that was encouraged by its convergence with the humanistic ideas of the Renaissance from the south. “Hanseatic burghers were becoming more aware of the value of individual personality.”<sup>52</sup> A new literary genre, the autobiography, reflects this growth of individualism. Some of the most interesting examples of autobiographies come from Hansa towns.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Schildhauer, p. 177

<sup>46</sup> Schildhauer, p. 104

<sup>47</sup> Schildhauer, p. 104

<sup>48</sup> Schildhauer, p. 179

<sup>49</sup> Schildhauer, p. 169

<sup>50</sup> Schildhauer, p. 166

<sup>51</sup> Schildhauer, p. 108

<sup>52</sup> Schildhauer, p. 232

<sup>53</sup> Schildhauer, p. 232

This flourishing culture of tolerance, humanism and individualism created fertile soil for Reformation ideas in Northern Europe. New attitudes towards religion can be seen in the choirless hall churches that sprang up in Hansa towns, which had “no distinction between clergy and layfolk, uniting all believers in a single community”.<sup>54</sup> Martin Luther’s message of “salvation through faith alone”, stressing the individual’s relationship with God and cutting out the Church as a middleman, was able to take root in this Northern European culture of freedom and individualism. Of course there were other factors for the Reformation such as the lowered prestige of the Church and the advent of the printing press, but without these cultural preconditions, the Reformation might not have taken root.

These cultural developments of Northern Europe are very relevant in the case of the Estonians. Despite the fact that the Baltic German nobility had reduced the Estonians to a conservative feudal order, they continued to identify with this flourishing, humanistic merchant culture in Northern Germany. In short, they were hypocrites, not unlike the southern plantation owners in the United States, who derived their sense of legitimacy from the superiority of their culture. This hypocrisy, however, was a blessing in disguise for the Estonians, as there was no guarantee that the Germans would translate the Bible into Estonian. Thanks in part to the Germans’ hypocrisy and concern about their legitimacy being based on their cultural superiority, they did.

Just as the Reformation was a German-led rebellion against the universal pretensions of the Catholic Church, Romanticism was a rebellion against the universal pretensions of the Enlightenment, and a rebellion, as argued by Isaiah Berlin, of German culture against French culture. Following the Reformation, religious wars engulfed Europe, culminating in the Thirty Years’ War, which brought such death and destruction to the Protestant North Germans as to rival the age of Genghis Khan. This had profound consequences for the North German culture which transformed from a shining beacon of

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<sup>54</sup> Schildhauer, p. 72

progress and prosperity into a much more introspective and gloomy backwater. The Pietist movement in Northern Germany was a branch of Lutheranism that stressed the individual relationship with God above “earthly attachments . . . [which] are as nothing before love of God”.<sup>55</sup> Berlin argues that Romanticism was an outgrowth of this introspective, mystical strand of Lutheranism, meaning that Romanticism was ultimately based on the cultural legacy of the merchant civilization of the North Germans. Because the Germans remained politically divided and relatively weak, this fostered resentment of France, that “brilliant glittering State which had managed to crush and humiliate them, [that] great country which dominated the sciences and the arts, and all provinces of human life, with a kind of arrogance and success unexampled hitherto”.<sup>56</sup>

The Enlightenment was largely a French phenomenon, stressing the universality of science and reason. German romantics such as Johann Gottfried Herder resented the idea of anything being universally applicable to all humanity. “The Portuguese cannot understand the inwardness of a German song and a German cannot understand the inwardness of a Portuguese song”.<sup>57</sup> Thus, every nation and language contains something that is special and unique and worth preserving. “If there is anything which Herder dislikes, it is the elimination of one culture by another . . . he disliked every form of violence, coercion and the swallowing of one culture by another, because he [wanted] everything to be what it is as much as it possibly can . . . natives should remain as native as possible”.<sup>58</sup> Thus, it was German Romanticists such as Herder who, in rebelling against the universal pretensions of the Enlightenment, paved the way for Germans in the Baltic to found the Learned Estonian Society and significantly raise the prestige of the Estonian language, culture and mythology.

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<sup>55</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, and Henry Hardy. *The Roots of Romanticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999. Print, p. 37

<sup>56</sup> Berlin, p. 35

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<sup>58</sup> Berlin, p. 64

The North German ideology shifted once again with the German unification and declaration of the German Empire in 1871. Due to their questionable legitimacy, empires have a tendency to be especially conservative. German unification was achieved by “iron and blood” and an abandonment of the liberal principles that had characterized the earlier attempt at unification in 1848. Thankfully for the Estonians, the effect of this shift in German culture was minimized by the Russification policies that began in the Baltic after German unification. The interface dynamic served the Estonians once again.

### The Maris on the Interface

Of all the Finno-Ugric peoples, the Maris have had the closest contacts with Islam and Turkic peoples. Both Seppo Lallukka and Rein Taagepera acknowledge that being on this interface has played a significant role in the history of the Maris but have not offered a thorough and specific explanation as to how this dynamic has helped the Maris to survive almost five centuries of Russian rule. Just as Taagepera has argued the case that the Estonians would not have survived if not for being between two civilizations, the same basic argument can be made about the Maris who are also situated on a great interface of civilizations. The Maris are on the religious interface between Islam and Orthodoxy, the ethnic interface between Turkic and Slavic, the national interface between Russian and Tatar, as well as the environmental interface between forest and steppe.

The Maris may have inhabited their present homeland for 8,000 years, although they used to inhabit a considerably larger area than today. Being settled forest people on the border between forest and steppe put them in contact with the different nomad peoples of the steppe from early times, contributing to the richness of their culture. In the sixth century, the Maris assimilated Iranian peoples who retreated north from the steppes. In the eighth century, southern Maris may have been ruled by the Iranian Khazars.<sup>59</sup> The largest influx of steppe people came with the Turkic Bolgars in the seventh and eighth centuries after the nomadic Bolgars were split in two by the Khazars. One half migrated west to the Balkans and founded Bulgaria, and the other half migrated north into the land of the Finno-Ugric Maris. The great bend on the Volga River prevented the Mari language from being completely overwhelmed. To the north of the Volga, the Mari language prevailed, and to the south of the Volga, the Turkic language prevailed. In the process, considerable population mixing and cultural borrowing took place. Thus, the Mari language picked up many Turkic loanwords. The El in Mari El is a Turkic

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<sup>59</sup> Taagepera, Rein. *The Finno-Ugric Republics and the Russian State*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print. 201

word, translating as “land”. As in Turkic, the stress in the Mari language falls on the last syllable.<sup>60</sup> The Bolgars, in turn, were influenced by the Maris as they adopted beekeeping and shifted from a nomadic lifestyle to a settled agricultural lifestyle in the forested steppe zone.

Peoples living on the border of steppe and forest were generally in an excellent position to be middlemen of trade. Central Asian trade goes back millennia at least to the time of the Great Silk Road. Trade between India, Iran, China, Mesopotamia and Byzantium all passed through Central Asia. Central Asia was regarded by medieval observers as a land marginal to civilization, but “modern historians now see it as ‘heartland’ or ‘pivot’ of Eurasian history because it produced the largest empires of pre-modern times”.<sup>61</sup> The nomadic peoples of the steppe had rich cultural traditions steeped in poetry, song and music. Life on the steppe was harsh and dangerous, so nomadic peoples had to be fierce horse-mounted warriors to survive. Nomads generally saw their way of life as superior to that of settled peoples “who spent a lifetime in backbreaking labor on the soil”.<sup>62</sup>

Although they despised the settled people of the city-states, it was, ironically, the nomads who opened up trade between the cities of the steppe. The steppe can be seen as a vast sea of open grassland full of dangerous nomads, just as the Baltic was a vast watery sea with the ever-present danger of pirates. City-states, those islands of civilization in this grassy sea, were beginning to accumulate great wealth and needed the nomads to facilitate their trade and to protect them from other nomads.<sup>63</sup> Whereas on the Baltic Sea, it was trade boycotts that forced cities to open up to trade, on the steppe, it was the cities’ need for protection that opened them up to trade by requiring them to recruit nomadic protection. This provided the links between cities, which paved the way for steppe empires to arise. The effect was the same – a rich trade network flourished on the steppe where

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<sup>60</sup> Finno-Ugric languages without such Turkic influence generally have the first syllable stressed.

<sup>61</sup> Golden, Peter B. *Central Asia in World History*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. Print, p. 1

<sup>62</sup> Golden, p. 6

<sup>63</sup> Golden, p. 20

merchant values could flower and both goods and ideas flowed freely. Thus, a great literary tradition was born in these Central Asian cities.<sup>64</sup> As in Hansa towns, women enjoyed a striking degree of equality.<sup>65</sup> Another striking similarity is that Turkic became a lingua franca of the steppe, similar to how German became the lingua franca of the Baltic. Turkic was used by even non-Turkic peoples who engaged in trade.<sup>66</sup> It can be deduced that trade accounts for some of the Turkic influence on the Mari language.

After moving north into Mari territory, the Bolgars maintained contact with the south, and a merchant civilization emerged that was probably based on the preexisting trade of the Maris with the south.<sup>67</sup> Being on the interface of forest and steppe, the Bolgars were able to supply the south with many rare and valuable commodities such as furs, wax, honey, falcons and leather goods.<sup>68</sup> The Bolgars were very skilled at crafting leather, and their leather, known as Bulgari, gained far-reaching recognition.<sup>69</sup> The Volga River connected the Bolgars directly with the great civilizations to the south including Persia and India. In return, this brought luxury items to the Bolgars such as spices, precious stones, rugs, gold and silver.<sup>70</sup> Just as the merchant civilization of the Hanseatic League fostered culture and tolerance, the merchant civilization of Great Bolgar did too. In the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Bolgars developed a high level of urban civilization.<sup>71</sup> The Bolgars “cast iron, built cities with water systems, and also developed science, arts and literature. The poem Kol Gali ‘Qyissa-I Yussuf’

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<sup>64</sup> Golden, p. 54

<sup>65</sup> Golden, p. 24

<sup>66</sup> Golden, p. 73

<sup>67</sup> Daulet, Shafiga. Kazan and Moscow: Five Centuries of Crippling Coexistence under Russian Imperialism, 1552-2002. Hudson, NH: Kase, 2003. Print, p. 363

<sup>68</sup> Daulet, p. 363

<sup>69</sup> Rorlich, Azade-Ayse. *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, Stanford University, 1986. Print, p. 13

<sup>70</sup> Rorlich, p. 15

<sup>71</sup> Daulet, p. 362

about Joseph and his brothers completed in 1233 is referred to as a classical work of Tatar literature, which extended its influence to all Oriental literature”.<sup>72</sup>

### The Bolgars and Islam

In 922, the Bolgars converted to Islam. Islam was not brought to these northern frontiers, which were often portrayed by Muslims as an area of unceasing jihad, by the sword. Instead, it was brought by mystic Sufi missionaries, who were often viewed by orthodox Muslims with suspicion.<sup>73</sup> “The Islam that came to the steppe was basically Sunni, but blended, to varying degrees, with local usages that did not fully distinguish it from earlier shamanistic and other practices, such as ancestor worship or the use of dance and chanting to produce ecstatic trances by which shamans entered the spirit world. As with the implantation of any new faith, the implementation of religious orthodoxy took many generations and was often uneven”.<sup>74</sup> By being distant from the centers of Islamic civilization in the south, the Bolgars were in a space where they could remain aloof from political matters such as military alliances, but, because the lively trade continued, they received the full benefit of intellectual and cultural currents from the Islamic world of the south. This is similar to the North Germans who enjoyed more political and religious autonomy due to their distance from Rome.

It is important to establish that there is nothing inherently intolerant about the Islamic faith. In fact, a tradition of tolerance and humanism in Islam is the norm rather than the exception. As the Islamic scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl points out, “Tolerance, known in Arabic as *tasamuh*, is a well-established Islamic value that has been debated at length for over a thousand years. Indeed, a whole

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<sup>72</sup> Daulet, p. 364

<sup>73</sup> Golden, p. 69

<sup>74</sup> Golden, p. 70

category of Qur'anic verses pertaining to tolerance – known as *ayat al-tasa-muh* – ignited one of the richest debates in human history regarding the moral value of tolerance”.<sup>75</sup> Divine sanction for the tolerance of human diversity can be found in the Holy Qur'an itself which states “O humankind, God has created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may come to know each other” (al-Hujurat 49:13). The Qur'an also states “If thy Lord had willed, He would have made humankind into a single nation” (Verse 11:118). Puritanical Islam is a more modern phenomenon based on the Western-rejecting Wahhabi and Salafi interpretations dating from the eighteenth century. Puritanical Islam rejects free interpretation of the Qur'an and is based on the Qur'anic interpretations of Islamic jurists who declared certain verses of the Qur'an to abrogate others. This doctrine of abrogation reached absurd proportions when some jurists declared a single Qur'anic verse, which advocated the fighting of unbelievers, to abrogate 124 verses advocating tolerance and peace.<sup>76</sup>

By being connected to the Islamic world to the south, the Bulgars were connected to Islamic civilization during the time of the Islamic Golden Age – a time when most of Europe lingered in the Dark Ages.<sup>77</sup> The Islamic Empire, which expanded outward from Arabia in the seventh century following the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632, grew to be twice the size of the Roman Empire, extending from India in the east to Spain in the west. Its success can be partly attributed to the fact that conquered peoples were ruled with a light hand and their existing social structures remained intact. Because all Muslims were required to make the journey to Mecca once in their lifetime, known as the hajj, knowledge from every corner of the Islamic world converged in Mecca. This meant that an invention in Samarkand could be known within the year in Cordoba. This also gave Muslims a sense of

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<sup>75</sup> El Fadl, Khaled Abou. *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*. Boston: Beacon, 2002. Print, p. 99

<sup>76</sup> El Fadl, p. 101

<sup>77</sup> *Islam: Empire of Faith*. Dir. Robert Gardner. PBS, 2000. DVD.

belonging to a much larger community. In fact, the word *umma* translates as the “community of believers”.

This was an empire built by faith, but what kept it united was trade. The most important export was textiles. Because Europeans bought these, it is not unusual to see the Arabic inscription on holy Christian icons painted on canvas from the Middle Ages “There is no god but Allah and Mohammad is his messenger”. Although Weber argues that capitalism was born in Northern Europe, many capitalist innovations were born in the Islamic world. The most revolutionary of these was the check. The check is a concept based on faith and trust because it assumes that somebody is going to honor it. Not having to carry money greatly facilitated the ability of Islamic merchants to travel.

The location of Baghdad in the center of the east-west trade route between China and Europe helped Baghdad to emerge as the cultural heart of the Islamic world. Islamic scholars embraced the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, whose teachings the Roman Catholic Church considered heretical at the time, in addition to the classical texts of the Persia and India. In this crucible, ideas were born that built the modern world including the scientific process, germ theory, algebra, trigonometry, engineering and astronomy. All of this scholarship was written down and stored in great libraries. Books were bought and sold as a business at a time when a European monastery would be lucky to have five or ten books. Because of this flourishing scholarship, it would be fair to say that the European Renaissance began in Baghdad. This Islamic Golden Age, however, was brought to an untimely end in the thirteenth century. This was brought about not by the crusaders from the west (who were mainly a nuisance), but by the Mongol invasion from the east, when Baghdad was sacked and the great mosques and libraries were put to the torch.

The synchronistic nature of the Bolgars’ Islamic faith and the merchant values which characterized the Great Bolgar civilization helps to shed light on why the animist faith of the Maris was

tolerated by the Islamic Bolgars. Rather than the souls of the Maris, the Bolgars were interested more in taxes in the form of furs, honey and wax. As Stanley Kurtz notes, “in matters religious, the contents of sacred texts are frequently less important than the social and historical settings in which those texts are interpreted”.<sup>78</sup> Being in such close contact with the Islamic Bolgar civilization, however, surely raised the self-consciousness of the Maris of their animist faith, which, in the pre-national era, formed the backbone of the Mari community. Evident from the fact that the word for “hello” in the Mari language is the Islamic greeting “salaam” (Arabic for “peace”), there is little doubt that the Islamic influence was strong. The Maris distinguished themselves from the Bolgars by the fact that they went to holy groves to pray rather than to mosques. It is a well noted phenomenon in the field of nationalism that nations often define their identity against another nation which they are decidedly not. Being so close to the Muslim “other” required the Maris to *reject* Islam. This was a major benefit of being on this interface because it meant that the Maris were better prepared to reject Orthodox Christianity when it was brought to their doorstep by the Russians.

### The Russians and Christianity

Christian civilization has historically tended to be particularly intolerant towards peoples who practice nature-based religions, and this may have some basis in Christianity as a religion. The late scholar of mythology, Joseph Campbell, observes how, unlike most world religions, which are based on nature and the harmonization of humans with the forces of nature, the Christian tradition tends to view nature as a corrupting force. In the Christian Bible, humanity’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden is precipitated by the serpent (symbolizing nature) who tempts Eve to taste the forbidden fruit. Moreover, in the Christian tradition, God, as the supernatural being, is portrayed not as a force that belongs to

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<sup>78</sup> El Fadl, p. 51

nature, but as a force above nature. Campbell expounds on how this has affected Christian civilization: “Our story of the Fall in the Garden sees nature as corrupt; and that myth corrupts the whole world for us. Because nature is thought of as corrupt, every spontaneous act is sinful and must not be yielded to. You get a totally different civilization and a totally different way of living according to whether your myth presents nature as fallen or whether nature is in itself a manifestation of divinity, and the spirit is the revelation of the divinity that is inherent in nature”.<sup>79</sup> Although Western Christianity has historically been more active in suppressing non-Christian beliefs than Orthodox Christianity, this examination of the underlying myths of Christianity helps to shed light on why the Russian church and state have concerned themselves so deeply with the suppression of an animist people, who, like all eastern Finno-Ugric peoples, present no existential threat to Russia.<sup>80</sup> This seems to be based in part on a superiority complex that has its roots in Christianity and, perhaps, as Stanisław Lem’s science-fiction novel Solaris (1961) suggests, even deeper roots in a fundamental flaw in human nature that drives us to destroy the things we find “alien”.

Russians first made contact with the Maris in the twelfth century. Coming from Novgorod, these Russian marauders were interested above all in extorting tribute from the rich Volga region. The most notable Russian campaigns against the Bolgars took place in 1120, 1160, 1164, 1172, 1183, 1186, and 1220.<sup>81</sup> This aggression intensified after the fortress city of Nizhni Novgorod was founded in 1221 on the upper Volga by Prince Iurii Vsevolodvich, who was returning from a campaign against the Bolgars. Founded on Finno-Ugric Muromian territory, Nizhni Novgorod greatly accelerated the demise of the Muromian people, who disappear from sources in the fourteenth century.<sup>82</sup> As this time, the Maris in the west were in close contact with Russians, the Maris in the east remained subject to the Bolgar

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<sup>79</sup> *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*. PBS, 2010. DVD.

<sup>80</sup> Although the Maris did resist Russian rule during Cheremis Wars in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they have presented no existential threat for the last 300-400 years.

<sup>81</sup> Rorlich, p. 12

<sup>82</sup> Kappeler, p. 15

kingdom, and those in the middle were in a zone of ambiguity. Thus, with the arrival of the Russians in the twelfth century, the Maris found themselves on the religious interface between Christianity and Islam.

### Mongols and Tatars

The threat from Russian marauders was gradually increasing, but, just as a foreign invasion from the Germans knights saved the Estonians from Russian settlement in Estonia, a foreign invasion from the steppe halted Russian expansion into the Middle Volga region for at least three centuries. In the 1230's, Mongol invaders swept up from the steppe into the Volga and ultimately reduced all Russian principalities, aside from Novgorod, to tributary status. Although the Mongols were famed for their ruthlessness in battle, once their authority had been established without challenge, Mongol rule was surprisingly light. Luckily for the Maris, the Mongols showed a striking degree of religious tolerance over their conquered subjects.

This Mongol invasion nearly demolished the Bolgar civilization completely. Many Bolgars pushed further north away from the Golden Horde into Mari territory and further population mixing took place. The city of Kazan, founded on ancient Mari territory, rose from the ashes as a new center of Bolgar civilization and became the capital of a new state, the Kazan Khanate, in 1438. There is a lot of misunderstanding about the Kazan Khanate. The Mongols ruled a state called the Golden Horde with its capital in Sarai. The Golden Horde disintegrated into smaller states and the Kazan Khanate is often seen as a successor state to the Golden Horde. In fact, the Kazan Khanate is not a successor state to the Golden Horde. The Bolgar Kingdom was never occupied or ruled directly by the Golden Horde and was under the same Mongol Yoke, or tributary status, as the Russians.<sup>83</sup> In 1438, the dissident khan, Ulug Muhammad, who was a direct descendant of Genghis Khan and had been overthrown in Sarai and sent

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<sup>83</sup> Daulet, p. 367

into exile, ended up in Kazan, where he was welcomed to rule the Bolgars. Evidently, the sedentary Bolgars, who were much better merchants than fighters, hoped that rule by a khan from the steppes would help them to defend their land against Russian incursions. Ulug Mohammad obliged them and thus a foreign dynasty was established to rule the Kazan Khanate. The state was called the Kazan Khanate for purposes of legitimacy, as it was important for ruling dynasties to show their descent from the dynasty of Genghis Khan.

A misunderstanding still persists that the Bolgars as a people vanished from the face of the earth, or were “eclipsed” by Tatars with the devastating invasion of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. The Mongols used subject Turkic people known as Tatars as shock troops in their military campaigns and all descendants of the Golden Horde came to be known as Tatars, but calling the Bolgars Tatars is one of history’s biggest misnomers. In fact “there is incontrovertible evidence based on findings of archaeological artifacts, native literary and cultural works (including a few manuscripts) together with poetry, songs, folklore, legends and oral traditions, and foremost, the living Kazanian language and culture, that the people of the Khanate of Kazan and the present-day Kazan-Tatars of the upper Volga basin are the descendants of these original Bolgars”.<sup>84</sup> The Austrian diplomat Herberstein noted of the Kazan Khanate in the sixteenth century “these Tatars are more human than the others, live in houses, till the soil, engage in trade, and seldom go to war”.<sup>85</sup> Projecting the name “Tatar” onto the Bolgar population was primarily a rhetorical strategy used by Ivan the Terrible to direct the hatred of the Russian people against them and it was only in the age of pan-Turkism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that they finally accepted the name that had been imposed on them from the outside. Prior to then, they identified simply as “Muslim” and the name “Tatar” had a similar connotation as the word “barbarian”. As late as 1923, Soviet census-takers received the complaint, “We are Bolgars – we are the people of

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<sup>84</sup> Daulet, p. 370

<sup>85</sup> Kappeler, p. 24

Kazan or at least, call us just Muslims, but not ‘Tatars’ – they are evil, they destroyed our forefathers and their city of Great Bolgar”.<sup>86</sup>

As subsequent foreign khans came from the steppe to rule the Kazan Khanate, they brought a retinue of Tatars along with them. There were many tensions and conflicts of interest between the Tatar nobility and Bolgar aristocracy. Bolgars had long been accustomed to a more sedentary lifestyle and the Tatars brought their military and nomadic traditions from the steppe and had little appreciation for the peaceful way of life of the Bolgars. Many of these traditions of the Tatars were necessary for survival on the dangerous steppe, but some traditions, such as capturing slaves and collecting booty, were out of place in this more civilized, settled region. Like the North Germans, the merchant Bolgars understood that the prosperity of their civilization depended on peaceful relations with their neighbors. Thus, the Bolgars looked down on the nomadic traditions of the Tatars. Furthermore, because the Tatars converted to Islam only in the thirteenth century, the Bolgars, who had converted much earlier in 922, also looked down on their less-than-orthodox Islamic practices.<sup>87</sup>

The Kazan Khanate was essentially a Turkic-Finnic polity. The majority of the rural population was non-Turkic. The Maris paid taxes in kind to the Khanate, in return for which they enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and home rule. More peripheral were Udmurts and Mordvinians. The Maris also supplied a large percentage of the soldiers to the Khanate. According to Taagepera, the Tatars were the brains of the army and the Maris were the muscle. The Maris gained a reputation among the Russians for being fearsome warriors. A Russian expression “from one side the Maris, from the other, beware” was roughly the equivalent of the saying “between a rock and a hard place”.<sup>88</sup> Although the relationship

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<sup>86</sup> Daulet, p. 378

<sup>87</sup> Daulet, p. 382

<sup>88</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 203

was somewhat exploitative, most Maris were very loyal to Kazan and fought for the Khanate until the bitter end.

### The Fall of Kazan and its Aftermath

For most of its existence, the Kazan Khanate was a political pawn in a larger struggle for hegemony between Moscow and the Crimean Khanate. Tensions between the Kazan Khante and Moscow finally culminated in the conquest of Kazan by Tsar Ivan IV (r. 1547-1584) (better known as Ivan the Terrible) in 1552. The conquest of Kazan was one of the most defining events in all of Russian history because it represented a break from past policies and set the tone for future empire building. In 1480, Ivan III had formally thrown off the Tatar Yoke. By the time of Ivan III's reign, Moscow had, in less than two centuries, gone from being an insignificant principality to the largest state in Europe as a result of a process known as "the gathering of the lands of Rus".<sup>89</sup> In the process, Moscow gained control over not only the Russian people, but also many Finno-Ugric peoples, including Karelians, Saami, Mordvinians, Komis and Udmurts.<sup>90</sup> The conquest of the Kazan Khanate in 1552, however, was the first time that Moscow conquered an independent state which "possessed a historical tradition, dynastic legitimacy, and an upper class which not only spoke a different language, but also belonged to a different world religion and civilization, Islam".<sup>91</sup> Whereas "the gathering of the lands of Rus" could be justified on dynastic, historical and religious grounds, the conquest of Kazan had no such legitimacy. One of the main motivations for conquering Kazan was the allure of material gain. By controlling the length of the Volga, Moscow hoped to control the rich Volga trade route to the south. Consequently, this conquest marks the beginning of Russia as an imperial power. Furthermore, it can be seen as the

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<sup>89</sup> Kappeler, p. 18

<sup>90</sup> Kappeler, p. 16

<sup>91</sup> Kappeler, p. 14

point at which Russia broke from the European pattern of nation-building. The “gathering of the lands of Rus” period was consistent with other European states which went through their own “gathering” period. Eventually, however, a balance-of-power system emerged in Europe, preventing any one power from establishing hegemonic control over the continent. Henry Kissinger argues that the balance-of-power system that emerged in Europe was a historic anomaly and empire is the world norm.<sup>92</sup> Russia, which was not even considered a European state until the time of Peter the Great, can therefore be regarded as a regional hegemony consistent with the world norm of empire.

In conquering Kazan, the Russians formally incorporated not only the Islamic Turks, but a considerable population of other non-Russians, including the animist Finno-Ugric peoples, (the Mordvinians, Maris and Udmurts), the animist Turkic Chuvash, the settled Islamic Turkic Bolgars (who will be subsequently referred to as Tatars), as well as the semi-nomadic Islamic Bashkirs in the southern Urals. The Middle Volga was, and still is, one of the most densely populated regions in Russia. Since 1552 to the present day, Russian history has dealt with the perennial question of how to incorporate this mass of non-Russian peoples who had technological and agricultural parity with the Russians and, therefore, had nothing to gain by assimilating. Indeed, because nobody in the Russian Empire had a lower status than the Russian serf, assimilation entailed a demotion in status.

The beginning of Russia as an empire in 1552 accompanied the birth of an imperial ideology. Due to their lack of legitimacy, empires generally tend to be conservative. Without worldly legitimacy, religion can provide an otherworldly legitimacy which was certainly the case for Ivan the Terrible. To be sure, the Church held an exalted role prior to Ivan’s reign. After Constantinople fell to the Islamic Ottoman Turks in 1453, with Kiev under the rule of Catholic Poland and Lithuania, it seemed that Moscow was the only Orthodox metropolitan left capable of leading eastern Christendom. The alliance

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<sup>92</sup> Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994. Print, pp. 20-21

made by the Byzantines with the Catholic Church at the Council of Florence in 1438-9 was seen by Moscow as a betrayal of the Orthodox faith. Because the fall of Constantinople coincided with Moscow's finally throwing off the "Mongol Yoke" it seemed that God himself had chosen Moscow for this leading role. The claim that Moscow's imperialism was based on the pretense of being the "third Rome" after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 has been disputed, but there is no disputing that Ivan the Terrible's imperial pretensions had a religious dimension of messianic proportions. "Ivan's 'charismatic authority' – his ceremonial presentation of power, authority, and influence – was based now in Orthodox religious imagery borrowed from the Byzantine Empire."<sup>93</sup> In describing the state ideology of Moscow, Romaniello argues that the Byzantine Orthodox religious and cultural legacy was combined with the political legacy of the Mongols, who demanded absolute obedience from their subjects.<sup>94</sup> This Orthodox symbolism surrounding the figure of the Tsar would later become the hallmark of the Romanov dynasty. This imperial ideology of the centralized state, beginning with Ivan the Terrible, would become a recurring theme in this newly inaugurated ethnic Empire that would appear in different forms for the next five hundred years.

The political alliance of the Tsar with the Orthodox Church had its precedent in the Byzantine Empire, in which there was no separation between church and crown. There were even deeper roots in Orthodox Christianity itself, which sees the divine nature and human nature of Christ as inseparable.<sup>95</sup> The tsarist alliance with the Orthodox Church represented a final victory of the Possessors over the Non-Possessors, who had very different visions of what role the Orthodox Church should play.<sup>96</sup> The Non-Possessors' vision of the Church was based on the teachings of St. Nilus of Sora (1433-1508), who

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<sup>93</sup> Romaniello, Matthew P. *The Elusive Empire: Kazan and the Creation of Russia, 1552-1671*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2012. Print, p. 26

<sup>94</sup> Romaniello, p. 23

<sup>95</sup> Unlike the western Christian tradition in which Christ is believed to be part divine and part human, in the Orthodox tradition, Christ is seen as 100% divine and 100% human.

<sup>96</sup> Ware, Timothy. *The Orthodox Church*. London, England: Penguin, 1993. Print, pp. 102-108

thought the Church should not possess property because monks should only be aloof from worldly concerns. The role of monks was to pray for people's souls and set an example. Nilus preached a tolerant form of Orthodoxy that opposed the use of force against heretics. The Possessors' vision of the Church, based on the teachings of St. Joseph (1439-1515), took the opposing views that monasteries should possess land because they needed to be able to make money and that heretics should be punished and burned if necessary. These two visions could have co-existed (after all, both Nilus and Nikon were canonized), but when the Non-Possessors criticized the divorce of Tsar Basil III in 1525-6, the leading Non-Possessors were imprisoned and after that time, the influence of the Non-Possessors fell in decline. Because the Possessors believed in a worldly role for the Orthodox Church, the victory of the Possessors over the Non-Possessors resulted in the close alliance between the Church and the Tsar that was brought to great symbolic heights during Ivan IV's reign.

The conquest of Kazan was portrayed as the first victory of Christianity over Islam since the fall of Constantinople. Thus, it had the dimensions of a religious crusade, with all its concomitant brutality. After capturing Kazan, Ivan the Terrible had the entire male population of this city of about 20,000 killed, and the rest of the population was banished from the city, soon to be replaced by Russians. The military conquest of Kazan was followed by a second conquest, this time religious, when the archbishop Gurii arrived in Kazan 1555 with a great show of public ceremony, intended to connect Kazan symbolically with Moscow.<sup>97</sup> Orthodox churches were built in the place of mosques that had been burned to the ground. A whole Orthodox Christian mythology grew around Kazan, and the city came to be regarded as the third most holy city in Orthodox Christendom (after Kiev and Moscow). It was hoped that the local population would be so awed that they would be inspired to convert. Miracle cults of Kazan, such as the "Life of Gurii and Varsonofii" and the "Tale of the Appearance of Kazan Icon of the

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<sup>97</sup> Romaniello, p. 33

Mother of God” propagated this triumphant Christian narrative. A close look at these miracle tales is revealing – all men are obedient to the state, all women are married, and all characters are Orthodox, thus leaving the impression that Islam and animism had simply ceased to exist in this frontier region.<sup>98</sup>

It seemed this might be the end of this great Islamic civilization on the Middle Volga, bringing an end to the interface dynamic for the Maris, but as early as 1555, a more pragmatic policy began to emerge. The strongest advocate of mass conversion was the Church, but, for pragmatic reasons, the government decided to prohibit conversion by force, and missionary activity came to a standstill in the Middle Volga for over a century.<sup>99</sup> The reasons for this had to do both with the logistical problems of incorporating such a large state and with the fact that the newly conquered peoples rose up in revolt after the Russian soldiers had left. Especially prominent in these revolts were the Maris, who rose up several times during the so-called Cheremis Wars. The last major Mari uprising was suppressed fifty years after the fall of Kazan. Another major obstacle for incorporating the region was financial. Moscow had very finite resources and the hoped-for wealth from the conquest was elusive.

As a consequence, although Moscow continued a victorious rhetoric of conquest, the reality on the ground was very different. To rule this vast region, the Russians had to co-opt the native Tatar elites and, to a lesser extent, Mari religious elders. The former territory of the Kazan Khanate was governed from a separate department in Moscow, the *Prikaz Kazanskogo Dvortsa*, which held a special status.<sup>100</sup> Within a generation, Muslim Tatars were again in control, having simply switched their allegiance from the khan to the tsar.<sup>101</sup> Working within this framework, these local elites were able to pursue their own agendas, so long as they did not openly challenge Moscow’s narrative of victory. Paul Werth notes that there is no intrinsic reason to assume that the Tatars identified with the empire any less than the

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<sup>98</sup> Romaniello, p. 135

<sup>99</sup> Kappeler, p. 27

<sup>100</sup> Kappeler, p. 2

<sup>101</sup> Romaniello, p. 120

Russians.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the tsar's power in the Middle Volga was indirect and largely symbolic. Integration of the region was incremental, and the Russian state did not really gain the upper hand until the time of Tsar Peter the Great over a century later. Even then, the Tatar elites could still hold important positions of power, provided that they converted to Orthodoxy. Interestingly, the Tatars exerted a profound influence on Russian culture, and from the fifteenth until the seventeenth centuries it was fashionable in the court of Moscow to adopt Turkic names. It was only the Westernizing legacy of Peter the Great that reversed this trend.<sup>103</sup>

For the Maris, the Russian conquest of Kazan was a disaster, but, like the Russian conquest of Estonia, there was some silver lining. After the fall of Kazan, the Maris were now required to pay to Moscow the tribute that they used to pay to Kazan. Based on the fact that the Maris fought so tenaciously for the survival of Kazan, the Maris seemed to understand that Russian rule presented a grave threat to their animist religious traditions. It is notable that of all conquered Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples, the Maris put up the strongest and most immediate resistance. The first Mari uprising broke out only a couple weeks after Ivan the Terrible had left Kazan in 1552 and lasted until 1557.<sup>104</sup> Several more revolts followed. Although Tatars, Udmurts, Bashkirs and even Khanti participated, the Maris played a central role, giving these uprisings the name the Cheremis Wars (the Maris are known as Cheremis in Russian historiography). There is no denying the genocidal nature of these wars. Villages were burned to the ground, the male inhabitants were massacred, and women and children were captured and deported.<sup>105</sup> As the Maris retreated into the countryside, it devolved into guerilla warfare. The Russians founded fortresses on Mari villages and banished the Mari population from the vicinity. One purpose of these fortresses was to block Mari access to the Volga. Because the Maris were

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<sup>102</sup> Werth, p. 39

<sup>103</sup> Figes, p. 363

<sup>104</sup> Lallukka, p. 84

<sup>105</sup> Lallukka, p. 84

banished from their towns, they retreated deeper into the forest. An inaccurate stereotype still persists that the Maris are, by nature, a civilization-shunning “forest people”. Ultimately, the Mari population was reduced by half. The silver lining was that after 1552, the Maris were no longer under Tatar command but were now fighting for their own freedom, thereby helping to raise their self-consciousness as a community. Toivo Vuorela notes that the traumatic events of the Cheremis Wars seemed to cause the Maris to turn inwards, no longer drawing cultural influences from the outside, but, as will be shown, being on the interface continued to have great significance.<sup>106</sup>

Being so close to the core area of the Kazan Khanate meant that that Maris belonged to a larger bloc of non-Russian peoples, which bought the Maris crucial time by delaying the integration of the Middle Volga region. Andreas Kappeler notes that the Russians proceeded more cautiously in those regions prone to revolt. It is worth making a comparison with the Mordvinians to infer what could have been the fate of the Maris. The Mordvinians are located further to the west than the Maris, are more exposed geographically than the Maris, and were in much closer contact with the Russians prior to the Mongol conquest. The Mordvinians practiced an animist faith similar to the Maris. After the fall of Kazan, the Russians began extensive colonization of their land. This involved taking advantage of their inability to speak the official language in order to cheat them out of their land “in a formally ‘legal’ way”.<sup>107</sup> Colonization and heavy tax burdens caused many to flee. In 1655, the first major Christianization campaign among the Mordvinians began on the initiative of the archbishop of Riazan and Tambov.<sup>108</sup> Many Mordvinians resisted, and the archbishop was killed. Many Mordvinians were forcibly resettled to the south along new fortification lines on the steppe. These dispersal factors were so strong that most Mordvinians now live outside of their ancestral homeland. The long-term

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<sup>106</sup> Vuorela, p. 248

<sup>107</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 159

<sup>108</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 160

consequence was their structural assimilation into the dominant Russian culture. An 1829 investigation indicated the Mordvinians to be the only “good Christians” of the baptized animists.<sup>109</sup>

### Peter the Great – the Tyrant Reformer and His Legacy

Although local resistance and the sheer enormity of the task delayed the incorporation of the Middle Volga region, this situation was bound to change. By the time that the strong-willed Tsar Peter I (r. 1682-1725), or Peter the Great, came to the throne in 1682, the balance of power in the Middle Volga region had turned in favor of the Russians. Peter I’s reign represented a departure from pragmatic flexibility and a renewal of the Moscow- imperial ideology that had been inaugurated by Ivan the Terrible. Peter has been justifiably called “the tyrant reformer”. After touring Europe as a young man, Peter the Great wished to fundamentally transform Russia into a “systemized, regulated and uniform absolute state on the western European model, [leaving] no room for the rights and traditions of non-Russians that had been respected in the past”.<sup>110</sup> Peter’s ruling philosophy seems to have been influenced by the absolutist French king Louis XIV, who famously declared “I am the state”. Peter’s reign was marked by several imperial acquisitions, including Estonia and parts of Finland. By taking the title of the Russian Empire, Peter’s victory over the Swedish Empire in 1721 represented the first time the Russian state came to see itself explicitly as an empire.

Prior to Peter’s reign, the Maris had held a special tax status, paying on a collective basis, but between 1718 and 1724, Peter introduced the head tax on all subject peoples, meaning that taxes would henceforth be paid on an individual basis. It is estimated that the tax burden increased for the

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<sup>109</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 166

<sup>110</sup> Kappeler, p. 31

Maris by a factor of four.<sup>111</sup> To ensure that the Maris paid their taxes, the state began an official policy of hostage-taking, which was not abolished until the reign of Catherine the Great.<sup>112</sup> Peter the Great's reign was also characterized by a renewal of Christianization efforts. Peter the Great established the Holy Synod which subordinated the Orthodox Church to the Tsar. It would be difficult to understate the political motives of conversion policies. The purpose of conversion was primarily to increase the state's authority in foreign regions and to promote their complete integration.<sup>113</sup> Consistent with other European monarchies, the fifth commandment (to love and obey one's parents) was used by the Russian monarchy to increase their authority by the implication that the paternal monarch is a larger extension of the familial hierarchy.<sup>114</sup> Conversion efforts may have been somewhat mitigated for the Maris because Islam was seen as the primary threat and animists were only of secondary concern. Nevertheless, a conversion campaign was launched among the Maris in 1700.<sup>115</sup> Material incentives were used to encourage conversion, including temporary exemption from taxes and military duty.<sup>116</sup> Although about 3,600 animists were formally converted, these conversions tended to be superficial and converted Maris soon returned to their traditional faith.<sup>117</sup>

The centralizing reign of Peter the Great resulted in a major exodus of Maris from their homeland to the east towards Bashkiria in the southern Urals. Although Bashkiria had been formally incorporated after the fall of Kazan, the state's authority remained weak there.<sup>118</sup> The Bashkirs are a semi-nomadic Islamic people who are closely related to the Tatars and share the same Bolgar heritage

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<sup>111</sup> Lallukka, p. 144

<sup>112</sup> Lallukka, p. 123

<sup>113</sup> Lallukka, p. 126

<sup>114</sup> Crews, Robert D. *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006. Print, pp. 143-144

<sup>115</sup> Lallukka, p. 126

<sup>116</sup> The morality of using of material incentives to encourage baptism was for a long time a controversial issue. As Paul Werth notes, "in some cases, new converts returned several times in order to maximize their receipts" (Werth, 22)

<sup>117</sup> Lallukka, p. 126

<sup>118</sup> Armed Bashkir rebellions against Russian settlement took place well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

as the Tatars. The Maris were not alone in fleeing from Peter's tyranny. It is estimated that over 200,000 peasants ran away between 1719 and 1726 alone.<sup>119</sup> The exodus of Maris towards the east had originally begun during the time of the Cheremis Wars, but now the scale was greatly increased. The economic pressure of Peter's crushing taxes was the main driving force behind this exodus, but religious pressure played an important role, too. Maris were lured to the east by the prospect of available land, but there also seemed to be a recognition that they would be better able to preserve their traditions among the Islamic Bashkirs. Because of this, the Maris who migrated to the east held onto their traditions more successfully than those who stayed behind and still tend to view themselves as the "true Maris".<sup>120</sup> Incidentally, those who migrated to a region where there was more cultural diversity maintained their traditions more successfully than those who ended up in regions settled mainly by Russians, thereby providing a case-study-in-miniature to support the claim that the interface dynamic helps protect a small peoples from being assimilated.<sup>121</sup> This diaspora community of Maris who migrated to the east form their own subcategory as Eastern Maris and constitute a full quarter of the total Mari population. As the most ethnically conscious Maris, these Eastern Maris would later play a prominent role in the political awakening of the Maris at the time of the Russian Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union. To be able to escape to the east and preserve their traditions among the Islamic Bashkirs was an opportunity made possible by being on the religious interface between Islam and Christianity.

Peter I left a powerful legacy and Christianization efforts continued beyond his reign. In 1740, Empress Anna (r. 1730-40) launched an even more zealous Christianization campaign with the goal to close the gap between Russians and non-Russians. Intermarriage with Russians was encouraged and

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<sup>119</sup> Lallukka, p. 123

<sup>120</sup> Lallukka, p. 373

<sup>121</sup> Lallukka, p. 376

converted animists were to be resettled in Russian communities. Although Anna's policies were to be carried out without coercion, in practice there were many abuses. Whole villages were forcibly baptized and those who resisted faced corporal punishment, confiscation of property and demotion to serf status.<sup>122</sup> Despite the efforts of the state, conversion remained superficial. One clerical authority admitted "the results, although significant, were more quantitative than qualitative".<sup>123</sup>

Anna's conversion campaign took on an especially aggressive character with the Islamic Tatars. Out of 536 mosques in the region of Kazan, 418 were burned to the ground.<sup>124</sup> Conversion efforts among the Islamic Tatars brought few converts to Orthodoxy, but did succeed in arousing significant Tatar resistance. Islam was beginning to be perceived as a particular threat because of the danger of the "Islamicization" and "Tatarization" of the animist peoples between Islam and Orthodoxy. This competition for the souls of the Maris may have mitigated the violence of the Empire's conversion efforts. The conversion efforts of the Khanti people in western Siberia helps illustrate this point. There, Russian rule was comparable to the worst excesses of European colonialism.<sup>125</sup>

### Catherine the Great and the Enlightenment

Tatar resistance helped bring about a dramatic reversal of the state religious policy, starting with Empress Elizabeth (r. 1741-1762) and culminating with the reign of Catherine II (r. 1762-1796), or Catherine the Great. Elizabeth took a wider view of the Orthodox community as a whole and recognized that the destruction of mosques risked Muslim retaliation against Orthodox people living under

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<sup>122</sup> Lallukka, p. 127

<sup>123</sup> Lallukka, p. 129

<sup>124</sup> Kappeler, p. 32

<sup>125</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 352

Ottoman rule.<sup>126</sup> Catherine II was influenced by the humanistic values of the Enlightenment, and Catherine's reign marked the beginning of an official policy of tolerance of major religions including Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, but not animism. Official tolerance was a far cry from freedom of conscience. In establishing the Holy Synod, Peter the Great had formally subordinated the Orthodox Church to the state, and Catherine II did for Islam what Peter I had done for the Russian Orthodox Church by establishing the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly in 1788.<sup>127</sup> Although the purpose of the Assembly was to bring the Muslims of the Empire under greater autocratic control, establishing the Assembly can be seen as a victory for Islam because it required officially recognizing that the Tatars could not be converted to Orthodoxy and thereby departing from the official narrative of "Holy Russia" and Orthodox Christianity's victory over Islam. For the Maris, this meant the Muslim-Christian interface would continue to remain intact.

Bringing Islam into an institutionalized legal framework was a task of enormous magnitude. The goal of co-opting Islam presented major logistical challenges due to the fact that Islam does not have a clerical hierarchy like Christianity. In order to do this, the state had to re-imagine Islam as a religion similar to Christianity. Both are monotheistic Abrahamic religions with a sacred book. Further similarities, such as Islam having a "clergy" and an emphasis on "sin", had to be superimposed on Islam.<sup>128</sup> Thus, the state created a "composite institution, drawn first from the model of the contemporary Orthodox Church, but also from the supposed guardians of the Islamic tradition, the Ottomans".<sup>129</sup> The result was that "Muslim men and women came to imagine the imperial state as a potential instrument of God's will".<sup>130</sup> Muslims began to use tsarist institutions, including courts and the

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<sup>126</sup> Crew, p. 39

<sup>127</sup> In many ways, the Enlightenment and autocracy were complementary. Both shared the same central concerns of reorganizing society on a more rational basis.

<sup>128</sup> Crew, p. 48

<sup>129</sup> Crew, p. 50

<sup>130</sup> Crew, p. 20

police, for their own aims, and thereby to engage civically with the state. Consequently “rather than merely subordinating Muslims to the empire, [the Assembly] created interdependence”.<sup>131</sup>

The social consequences of the institutionalization of Islam extended beyond Muslim elites to average laypeople, both males and females, who made use of state institutions and “drew the state into the mosque”.<sup>132</sup> The state saw the laypeople as a check on abuses by Muslim clerics and therefore encouraged them to file complaints at the appellate level. Laypeople were permitted to devise their own novel arguments about the nature of Islamic law. This opened the door for Islamic men and women to openly debate their understanding of Islamic law. Women in particular studied and memorized Turkish, Tatar and Persian legal texts. This active participation of Muslim laypeople caused them to become ever more conscious of their legal status in the Empire.

#### The 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the Renewal of Missionary Efforts

The growing discussion in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century among the Muslim population of the Empire regarding their legal status seems to have had a wider influence on the Middle Volga region. This is not surprising, considering that Tatar was a lingua franca among the indigenous inhabitants of the region.<sup>133</sup> The Maris had plenty of reason to be concerned about their legal status. Although the Russian Empire scaled down its efforts to convert non-Orthodox peoples after Catharine II, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by large-scale efforts to enforce against apostasy by *novokreshchenye* (newly baptized) from Orthodoxy. It was the law of the Empire that anyone who converted to Orthodoxy could not undo their conversion. A large percentage of Maris had been formally converted to Christianity in the 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Crew, p. 34

<sup>132</sup> Crew, p. 94

<sup>133</sup> Werth, p. 36

century but these conversions were highly superficial which became all too apparent in the great apostasy of 1827. In 1827, during a season of agricultural crisis, about four thousand baptized and unbaptized Maris gathered from distant provinces to offer prayers and sacrifices to their animist spirits. Several more gatherings followed, prompting official investigations into this large-scale apostasy.<sup>134</sup> Consequently, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the state determined to make genuine Christians out of the converted Maris.

The Maris resisted on legal grounds. An 1828 decree from the Holy Synod contained an order from Emperor Nicolas I (r. 1825-1855) that the Maris “should in no way be persecuted and they should be handled with extreme care”.<sup>135</sup> This was a far cry from tolerance. Rather, as stated in the decree, it was “out of condescension for their simplicity”.<sup>136</sup> Nicolas saw apostasy as a matter of “ignorance” and greatly underestimated the Maris’ determination to maintain their traditions. Copies of Nicolas’ decree were sold by Russian clerks to the Maris who interpreted it “liberally, as constituting permission for them to remain animists”.<sup>137</sup> The Maris were helped by Old Believers who were hostile to Orthodox authority and encouraged Maris to stand firm against the missionaries. State officials also had an interest in the Maris upholding their religion, if only to extract bribes from them. This fails to explain, however, why the Maris were so receptive to the idea of fighting for their religion on legal grounds and why the Emperor’s decree was interpreted in a way that was completely at odds with its original purpose. It is likely that the growing legal consciousness and self-confidence of the Tatars about their status as Muslims played a role in raising the legal consciousness of the Middle Volga region.

To gain a better understanding of why the Maris resisted, it is worth taking a closer look at their religion. Religions such as Christianity and Buddhism are known as “credo” religions because they

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<sup>134</sup> Werth, pp. 56-57

<sup>135</sup> Werth, p. 64

<sup>136</sup> Werth, p. 106

<sup>137</sup> Werth, p. 65

require the believer to affirmatively say “I believe”. Other religions such as Judaism and Hinduism are not – one is simply born a Jew, Hindu, etc. The latter seems to best describe the religion of the animist Maris. “Religious practice for animists was not a matter of individual discretion but instead served as the basis for defining and sustaining community. At least until the mid-[19<sup>th</sup>]-century or so, definitions of community that might appear ethnic or linguistic are better understood in religious terms”.<sup>138</sup> The Maris referred to their own religion as the “Mari faith” and Maris called those who abandoned the practices of their faith in favor of Orthodoxy “Russian-believers”.<sup>139</sup> This shows that by defining themselves against the Russian “other”, the Maris had a striking degree of proto-national consciousness. While being on the interface had benefits for the Maris, without their sense of community and stubborn willingness to fight for their traditions they would have been more vulnerable to assimilation.

Not all religions have a jealous God like Christianity, and the Maris did not see Christianity as a false religion. Being on the interface allowed the Maris to draw spiritual inspiration from Christianity and Islam and incorporate elements of these religions into their own traditions.<sup>140</sup> Converted Maris had no pangs of conscience because it meant simply calling their supreme God, Kugo Yumo, the name of the Christian God. “He was the same entity, but now with a son and a new colleague – the Holy Spirit”.<sup>141</sup> The Maris showed a high degree of awareness of the Christian Bible by presenting their faith to Russian officials as a religion of the Old Testament. Theirs was a “faith of Adam” or “faith of Abraham”. Although the Russian officials were not impressed by this argument, it had the effect of raising their own self-confidence by giving them a way to “invest their traditions with a Biblical sanction without submitting to Orthodox authority”.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Werth, p. 29

<sup>139</sup> Werth, pp. 29-30

<sup>140</sup> Werth, p. 82

<sup>141</sup> Werth, p. 115

<sup>142</sup> Werth, p. 105

Where missionaries ran into the most difficulties was when they attempted to enforce Christian practices and to force the Maris to abandon their un-Christian practices and traditions. The Maris resisted because of a genuine fear that the spirits of nature (known as *keremets*), if not venerated properly, could bring disaster to their community.<sup>143</sup> Thanks to Tsar Nicholas' underestimation of the Maris' determination to maintain their traditions, Nicolas forbade the involvement of secular officials in the enforcement against apostasy. If secular officials had been involved, the religious policies among the Maris could have taken on a more violent character. Without secular help, religious authorities found it almost impossible to enforce their will on the Maris. One effective tactic that the Maris used to resist missionaries took place when missionaries came to their villages and gathered the Mari population. The Maris would listen attentively as the missionaries admonished their religious traditions. "Suddenly", and usually "with shouting", the Maris would stand up, run away, and hide wherever they could. The missionaries had no choice but to move on to the next village.<sup>144</sup> On other occasions, missionaries were treated with outright hostility – especially if they tried to interfere during an animist ritual. Thus, during the reign of Nicolas I, missionary intervention among the Maris remained quite limited.

#### Jadidism – an Age of Religious and National Revival of the Tatars

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century, the Tatars had become nationally conscious as a result of a religious revival known as jadidism. Jadidism, interpreted as "renewal" or "reawakening", was important not only for the Tatars, but was an important event in the history of Islam overall. Jadidism was based on a recognition that Islam had to be reconciled with Western progress if the Tatars were to survive as a people. The Kazan-Tatar Shihabeddin Marjani (1818-1889) is generally recognized as the founder of the jadid movement. Marjani was influenced by the great medieval Islamic scholar, Al-Ghazali, and urged

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<sup>143</sup> Werth, p. 29

<sup>144</sup> Werth, p. 107

Tatars not to blindly follow Islamic dogma, but to go to the sources and to interpret sharia law for themselves.<sup>145</sup> He also argued that science and Islam were compatible by pointing to a passage in the Qur'an that says one should "seek knowledge as a sacred duty".<sup>146</sup> Although many conservative Muslim clerics opposed him, Marjani was held in great esteem by the Tatar population.<sup>147</sup>

It is an irony that many of the forward-looking theologians involved in the jadid movement had received their education in the dogmatic, conservative centers of Islamic scholarship in Central Asia – Samarkand and Bukhara. This may have helped them to reject blind Islamic dogmatism. One major early figure, Ghabdulnasir Kursavi (1770-1814), actually had to flee from Bukhara to avoid being executed for his unorthodox ideas. Many jadid ideas were indeed quite revolutionary. Musa Jarulla Bigi (1870-1949) not only advocated, but worked on translating the Qur'an into the vernacular Tatar language in order to facilitate the ability of the Tatars to understand and interpret it for themselves. Just as Latin was the lingua franca of the Catholic Church, it was prescribed that the Qur'an always be written and understood in Arabic. That such revolutionary ideas were accepted by the Tatar population speaks volumes about the tolerant merchant values embedded in Tatar society. It also shows that the Tatars were still connected to the Islamic world and were not drawing their ideas primarily from the West, as is sometimes mistakenly believed.

The northern location of the Tatars put them in a space where they could draw influence from different sources of Islamic scholarship and draw their own conclusions. This explains why more puritanical forms of Islam such as Wahhabism did not make headway in Tatar society. Although puritanical forms of Islam are often seen as being directed against other faiths, its proponents tend to be concerned, above all, with imposing their vision of the "straight path" on their fellow Muslims. This

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<sup>145</sup> Daulet, p. 405

<sup>146</sup> Rorlich, p. 107

<sup>147</sup> Daulet, p. 409

desire to impose a dogmatic doctrine on their fellow Muslims is the Islamic equivalent of the Catholic Church's imposition of their rigid interpretation of the Bible. Puritanical Muslims were unable to impose their dogma on the Tatars and tended to be marginalized by Tatar society. The Tatars came to be seen by other Muslims as the "European Muslims". Whereas Wahhabism was based on a rejection of all things Western, jadidism was exactly the opposite. It was based on a desire to find compatibility with the West. It would be false, however, to suggest that the Islam practiced by the Tatars was in any way "less" Islamic. To make such a value judgment would say more about one's own notions of what Islam is or should be. The Islam of the Tatars was based on the Islamic tradition of *ijtihad*, which allows individual Muslims to interpret the doctrines of the faith for themselves, and a rejection of *taqlid*, which is the blind, unquestioning acceptance of religious dogma. The basis for this was in Sufi Islam. Because Islam originally came to the northern frontiers by Sufi mystics in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Sufi influence remained a part of the Tatar religious heritage. The jadid drew influence from classical Sufi scholars such as Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), who opposed blind dogmatism and thought people should use their God-given faculties to interpret the faith for themselves. The main contribution of Al-Ghazali was to reconcile Sufism with orthodox Islam.<sup>148</sup> This sanctioning of the individual's free interpretation of the texts and sources of Islam is the Islamic equivalent of Christian Protestantism. Just as Protestants rejected blind acceptance of the dogma of the Catholic Church, Sufis rejected blind acceptance of dogmatic interpretations of the Qur'an and sharia law. Because the Tatar jadidists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew their inspiration from these Sufi scholars, jadidism was in no way antithetical to Islam.

While the jadid movement was an age of religious questioning, it was also closely connected with the rise of Tatar nationalism. Marjani was an important figure not only in the jadid movement, but also in the Tatar national awakening. Marjani urged Tatars to embrace the name that had been

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<sup>148</sup> Daulet, p. 399

imposed on them. Before this time, the Tatars had identified simply as Muslims, but in an age of rising nationalism, such a generic self-identification would not do. The name Bolgar would have been preferable, but it had already been claimed by the Bulgarians in the Balkans. Marjani challenged his countrymen, “some have regarded being a Tatar a shortcoming, hated it, and insisted ‘we are not Tatars, we are Muslims’ . . . If you are not a Tatar, an Arab, Tajik, Nogay, Chinese, Russian, French . . . then who are you?”.<sup>149</sup> Thus, the Tatars finally came to accept the name that everyone else already called them, and had become, in a sense, a *fait accompli*. Accepting the name Tatar served a secondary purpose. The name recalled the feared Tatar warriors of the steppe, and with the rise of pan-Turkism, this served to give the appearance of Turkic unity in their resistance to Moscow.

The University of Kazan, founded in 1804, played an important role in this national awakening. Although it was a Russian university taught in Russian and favoring Russian students for admission, it featured an Oriental Institute, where Tatars could study their own heritage, history, literature, religion, and traditions.<sup>150</sup> Islamic institutions of higher education called *medreses* were becoming increasingly important too. *Medreses* were established by progressive Tatar clergy and merchants and were completely financed by the Tatars themselves.<sup>151</sup> In *medreses*, students could study Qur’anic science, Islamic history, Arabic languages and literature, Turkish language and literature, Russian, natural sciences and geography. Muslims students from all across the Empire came to the *medreses* in Kazan to study.<sup>152</sup> The growing education of Tatar society encouraged a greater national consciousness. Tatars were becoming more literate than Russians. In 1844 a foreign professor teaching at Kazan University, Karl Fuchs, noted that “any visitor, no doubt, will be surprised to find in the Kazan-Tatars a nation, generally speaking, more educated than other nations, even those of Europe. A Tatar who does not

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<sup>149</sup> Rorlich, p. 4

<sup>150</sup> Daulet, p. 404

<sup>151</sup> Daulet, p. 418

<sup>152</sup> Daulet, p. 420

know how to read and write is despised by his fellow countrymen and is not respected by others as citizens".<sup>153</sup>

### Pan-Slavism

A more threatening age of internal colonialism was inaugurated in the time of the Great Reforms in the 1860s. The humiliating defeat of Russia by France and England in the Crimean War in 1855 caused the Russians to realize that Russia was not as strong as they had thought and was in urgent need of modernization. This was the age of the nation-state in Europe, based on the principle that a nation should correspond with its political boundaries. As summed up by the Italian nationalist, Giuseppe Mazzini, "every nation a state, only one state for the entire nation." Thus, the non-Russian population of the Russian Empire was called into question, and a greater distinction was drawn between the core and periphery. National minorities came to be seen as colonial subjects, while the Russians came to see themselves as the ruling population. Although Russian elites previously held certain privileges, this was the first time it came to be viewed on an explicitly ethnic basis. The historian Stepan Eshevskii concluded in 1857 that "each step forward of the Russian *narodnost'* (people) at the expense of other tribes is a victory for Europe".<sup>154</sup>

This messianic glorification of the Slavic race was part of the rise of an intellectual trend known as Pan-Slavism, which Hans Kohn sums up as "pride based upon the idealization of a hardly explored past, the overestimation of an insufficiently analyzed present strength, and the hopeful glorification of an unknown future".<sup>155</sup> At its root, Pan-Slavism was a rejection of liberalism and the Westernizing legacy of Peter the Great. The great irony of Pan-Slavism was that it was based on Western Romanticism and was used to reject the West. Unlike European Romanticism, Pan-Slavism was much

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<sup>153</sup> Daulet, p. 404

<sup>154</sup> S. V. Eshevskii, "Missionerstvo v Rossii," in *Sochineniia S. V. Eshevskogo* (Moscow 1870), 3:670

<sup>155</sup> Kohn, Hans. *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1960. Print, p. 136

more based on fear – fear that Russians would be outnumbered by their colonial subjects and would lose their dominance over them. All non-Russians of the Russian Empire came to be seen as a fundamental threat to the Russian state and Russian people.<sup>156</sup> Due to its basis in fear and notions of the superiority of the Slavic race, pan-Slavism was a precursor of some of the darker ideologies that would emerge in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Aside from its racial basis, Pan-Slavism was based on the myth of “Holy Russia”. Pan-Slavism, therefore, can be seen as a reassertion of the Moscow-imperial ideology begun by Ivan the Terrible. Pan-Slavist ideologists saw Russia, above all, as a Christian Empire, and an empire with a messianic mission.<sup>157</sup> Whereas Christianity had come to the West by the sword of Roman and Teuton conquest, the Slavs had accepted Christianity peacefully. “The Russian Church alone realized the identity of liberty and unity and thereby true society. Catholicism sacrificed liberty to unity and led to despotism; Protestantism sacrificed unity to liberty and led to anarchy”.<sup>158</sup> Thus, the West lacked faith and unity and was destined to fall. The Russian Slavs, however, were a great unified patriarchal family – a universal empire ruled by a universal faith.<sup>159</sup> This was, of course, to deny the fact that Russia was anything but a uniform Christian/Slavic state. This new ideology of Pan-Slavism could only portend bad things to come for those peoples who did not fit into this deluded model.

The change in the Russians’ image of themselves corresponded with an explicit policy of Russification of the minorities of the Russian Empire. Educational reforms had this goal in mind. The curator of Kazan stated in 1869 that “the final goal of the education of all *inorodtsy*, living within the borders of our fatherland, should without argument be [their] *obrusenie* (Russification) and fusion with

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<sup>156</sup> Slocum, John W. "Who, and When, Were the Inorodtsy? The Evolution of the Category of "Aliens" in Imperial Russia." *Russian Review* 57.2 (1998): 173-90. Print, p. 184

<sup>157</sup> Kohn, p. 152

<sup>158</sup> Kohn, p. 149

<sup>159</sup> Kohn, p. 151

the Russian people".<sup>160</sup> The new school system meant that the emphasis of integration of non-Russians shifted from religion to language. Orthodox missionaries, however, continued to play an important role. Missionaries now began to argue that Christianization's main purpose was to contribute to the larger processes of assimilation and civilizing. The most important missionary of the Middle Volga region, Nikolai Il'minski, stated that "as soon as an *inordets* (non-Russian) has internalized Orthodoxy consciously and with conviction, with his mind and heart, he has already become Russified".<sup>161</sup> Christianization in itself was no longer sufficient. When some Maris created their own Orthodox monastery in the 1860s, it actually encountered opposition from Russian officials because the Maris were Christianizing on their own terms. A Russian official, Rufimskii, expressed concern that it would not achieve the goal of "the weakening among [Maris] of the peculiarity of their alien character and their merging with the Russian population".<sup>162</sup>

### Political Awakening

Just as the Crimean War had profound political and cultural repercussions for the Russians, this war against the Islamic Ottoman Empire had a politicizing effect on the Muslim population of the Empire as well. Ismail Bay Gaspirali (1851-1914) was a Crimean Tatar who is credited as the founder of pan-Turkism, a movement intended to unite all Turkic people against the Russian oppressor. Gaspirali politicized Muslims through his newspaper, *Terjuman* (the "Translator"), and advocated the adoption of a common pan-Turkic language. Pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic ideas did make some headway among the Kazan-Tatars, but those who embraced such ideas did so primarily as a means to strengthen their national movement. With their well-developed literary tradition, Tatars would be hard pressed to

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<sup>160</sup> Werth, p. 133

<sup>161</sup> Werth, p. 142

<sup>162</sup> Werth, p. 220

abandon their language in favor of a unified pan-Turkic language. Thus, they were Kazan patriots first and pan-Turkists second, but their connection with these larger Turkic and Islamic trends amplified the significance of the interface on which the Maris were situated.

The rise of Tatar nationalism certainly gave the Russian missionaries cause for worry. Islam was seen as a threat in the Middle Volga region, principally due to the animist population who were vulnerable to “Islamicization” and “Tatarization”. After all, the Russian state was supposed to hold a monopoly on proselytism. Consequently, Islam came to be feared and vilified by the Russian state which regarded Islam as “intractably alien, inassimilable, and ultimately hostile to Christianity and the Russian state”.<sup>163</sup> The Tatar threat was something that had to be contained. This meant that if the Russians were going to keep the Maris in the Orthodox fold, they would have to compete with Islam for their souls. Consequently, the first Russians to show a keen interest in the Maris and their culture were Orthodox clergymen. This development was a direct consequence of jadidism and the national awakening of the Tatars.

This new compromising spirit is best exemplified by Nikolai Il'minski (1822-1891) who was the inventor of a new scheme to make good Christian subjects of the animist and Muslim apostates. Il'minsky believed that the neglect of native languages was the reason why Christianization remained incomplete among the *inorodtsy* because, by his logic, only the vernacular was capable of penetrating the depths of their consciousness.<sup>164 165</sup> According to his vision, elementary education would be taught in the vernacular and Russian would be introduced, with the ultimate goal to fully integrate and Russify the *inorodtsy*. This concession to the vernacular languages would prove to be extremely important in

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<sup>163</sup> Werth, p. 140

<sup>164</sup> This idea was not without precedent. An effort had been made in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to translate Christian texts into the vernacular, but because there was no unified literary language, it was not very successful. “Holy Spirit”, for example, translated into Mari as “Holy Smell”. (Werth, 115)

<sup>165</sup> Werth, p. 144

the long run. In order to train native teachers, Il'minsky opened the Kazan Teacher's Seminary in 1872. This opened, for the first time, a path of professional upward mobility for Maris that did not require them to abandon their ethnicity.<sup>166</sup> By 1919, 128 Maris had graduated from the seminary. It was thanks to the Il'minsky system that the Maris had an educated native elite who were able to seize the opportunities of the Russian Revolution after 1917. Furthermore, because eighty books were published in Mari in the years 1867-1905 (mostly regarding missionary and pedagogical matters), this meant that the written language of the Maris was more developed which enabled them to use mass media and mobilize as a nation.

The politicization of the Maris began with the 1905 Revolution and was, to a large extent, a consequence of the political awakening of the Tatars. Tsar Nicolas II's October Manifesto promised civil rights and inaugurated a new age of participatory politics in the Russian Empire. Especially receptive to these opportunities were the Kazan-Tatars, who were already quite politicized to begin with. Tatar nationalists demanded more rights, freedoms and equality with the Russians.<sup>167</sup> Some began to demand full independence and a state that would include the Bashkirs, Chuvash and Finno-Ugric Maris, Udmurts and Mordvinians, who were seen as being under the "Tatar umbrella".<sup>168</sup> The Mari students of the Kazan Teacher's Seminary were right in the center of this political awakening and were highly aware of the politicization of the Tatars. This was facilitated by the fact that many Maris were fluent in Tatar. Thus, the Tatars provided the Maris with a model they could emulate. The Maris began to express dissent in ethnic terms, and the word "autonomy" entered the Mari discourse for the first time.<sup>169</sup> Mari intellectuals attempted to bring national awakening to the Mari masses. Radical students distributed leaflets in Mari villages. The *Marla kalendar'* was the first Mari periodical which operated between 1907

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<sup>166</sup> Lallukka, p. 147

<sup>167</sup> Daulet, p. 427

<sup>168</sup> Daulet, p. 428

<sup>169</sup> Lallukka, p. 149

and 1913. One major goal of the Marla kalendar' was to create a standardized literary language which could be understood by all Maris. This represented a breakthrough in Mari national consciousness because it shows that the editors considered the Maris to be one national community. The interface was significant in this process because the Maris' national awakening emanated from Kazan. Kazan was an urban center in such close proximity to the Mari homeland that Mari intellectuals were able to carve out their own space there and effectively make it a Mari urban center. Having an urban culture is an essential precondition for bringing an ethnic group into modernity and national consciousness, and for the Maris, who remained a non-urbanized "forest people" in their homeland, Kazan could fill this surrogate role.

#### The Soviet Union – from Decentralization to State Genocide

Kazan also had significance to a young law student who would lead Russia into its next frontier – Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924). Lenin came from Simbirsk on the Middle Volga and earned his law degree at the University of Kazan. One quarter Kalmyk himself, Lenin's background in the Middle Volga region gave him a keen awareness of the multi-national aspect of the Russian Empire. Lenin despised Russian chauvinism and regarded the Russian Empire as a "prison-house of nations". Lenin's "federal compromise" after the Russian Revolution of October 1917 resulted, eventually, in the division of the Soviet Union along ethnic lines. This was contradictory since, as a Bolshevik, Lenin also believed the Soviet Union must be a centralized state ruled by a "dictatorship of the proletariat". Federalism was a means of giving legitimacy to the Soviet Union as a successor state to the Russian Empire, making the USSR "a mythical confederation of nation-states within a unitary political system".<sup>170</sup> It was also hoped that by satisfying national demands, the focus of the population would shift from national struggle to

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<sup>170</sup> Lallukka, p. 160

class struggle. This was one reason why Lenin granted Finland independence in 1917. The territorialization of ethnicity in the USSR, however, had an unexpected effect: “Many of Russia’s peoples did not perceive the autonomous territorial units merely as empty containers in which their Sovietization would take place. In fact, territorial autonomy was to make an enormous contribution to their consolidation. In this process, the autonomous unit became an integral part of identity; ethnicity obtained a legally sanctioned territorial base and the various territorial units began to function as vessels of self-awareness”.<sup>171</sup>

The Russian Revolution opened many opportunities for Russia’s nationalities, but those with a higher level of national consciousness were better prepared to seize those opportunities. Thus, it was the Maris who had the most active autonomy movement of all the Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples.<sup>172</sup> The Eastern Maris in Bashkortostan were at the forefront. In March, 1917 Mari soldiers and non-commissioned officers in Ufa formed the first Mari Ushem (Mari Union). The First Mari Congress was held in Birsk, Bashkortostan (15-25 July 1917). At this point, autonomy itself was not on the agenda. The discussion revolved mostly around how to improve the conditions of the Maris in regards to education, medical care, religious life, administration, land use, etc.<sup>173</sup> The Maris sought different goals than the Tatars and Bashkirs who proclaimed a Tatar-Bashkir state in the autumn of 1917. Fearing Tatar and Bashkir domination, the Maris joined with other ethnic groups to form the Society of the Small Peoples of the Volga in order to defend their own interests.<sup>174</sup> This illustrates the ambivalent attitude felt by Maris towards the Tatars. Because the Eastern Maris, one quarter of the Mari community, live in Bashkortostan, the Maris were concerned that a Tatar-Bashkir state would preclude the Maris from

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<sup>171</sup> Lallukka, p. 160

<sup>172</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 217

<sup>173</sup> Lallukka, p. 156

<sup>174</sup> Lallukka, p. 155

unifying as a single nation.<sup>175</sup> It was mainly in reaction to Tatar-Bashkir developments that the idea of Mari statehood entered the agenda.<sup>176</sup> The Maris were divided on the question of whether they should be part of the Tatar-Bashkir state and whether Mari rights would be protected under it. The second All-Russia Congress of the Mari People, held at the Kazan Teachers' Seminary, discussed this matter and resolved to form an autonomous unit, or oblast. The main concern of the Maris was cultural autonomy, and the resolution to form their own territorial unit was a means to protect this against the perceived outside threat of Tatar domination.<sup>177</sup> Because the Bolshevik government was very weak at this point, these matters were discussed without interference. At this congress, the Maris also resolved to abstain from unconditional support of Soviet power. Although peasants formed the majority of delegates, this decision, purportedly made by "a small group of petty bourgeois intellectuals", would later come back to haunt them.

In 1920, the Cheremis Autonomous Oblast was created. Mari and Russian were proclaimed as official state languages in 1923. In 1927, the capital city Tsarevokokshaisk was renamed Yoshkar-Ola (Mari for Red City), the name which it still holds today. With their newly acquired autonomy, the Maris enjoyed a time of cultural and educational blossoming in the 1920's. Literature and other media were printed in a Mari publishing house established in 1925. Sergei Chavain (1888-1937), the most highly esteemed Mari author, published poems, short stories and plays. In 1931, the Mari Pedagogical Institute was the first institute of higher learning to be opened in the home territory of the Maris.

Meanwhile, the rise of Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), a Georgian man who identified with Ivan the Terrible, portended a reassertion of centralization, imperialism and Great Russian chauvinism. The first arrest of a Bolshevik Party member was that of the Kazan-Tatar, Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev (1892-1940) in

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<sup>175</sup> Lallukka, p. 161

<sup>176</sup> Lallukka, p. 162

<sup>177</sup> Lallukka, p. 166

1923. The Bolsheviks were not very fond of his argument that the Tatars were a nation of proletarians by virtue of centuries of Russian oppression. Terror hit the Maris in 1937, the year of the Great Purges which engulfed the Soviet Union in its entirety and one year after Stalin elevated Mari El to the federal status of autonomous republic. In Finland some extreme-right nationalists advocated the concept “pan-Finnism” and creating a “Greater Finland” stretching from the Baltic to the Urals and embracing all Finno-Ugric peoples.<sup>178</sup> A look at a map reveals how completely absurd such ideas were, but their existence played right into the hands of the Soviet security force, the NKVD. One Mari, V. A Mukhin, was told by his interrogator “I know your kind, all you nationalities, Finno-Ugrians or Turks and suchlike. You all want to deprive the Russians of their land and leave them nothing but Tula Province. Well, you won’t get away with it.”<sup>179</sup> On the night of August 4-5 1937, 164 arrested Mari writers (Sergei Chavain included), teachers, scholars, artists and physicians were shot in the back of the neck. In total, 2,000 educated Maris were murdered during the purges. This was the worst disaster to hit the Maris since the genocidal Cheremis Wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and one that still looms large in the Maris’ historical memory.<sup>180</sup> Hans Kohn argues that Stalin’s reign at the time of the Second World War was the high-water mark of Pan-Slavism. At this time, whole peoples were deported on a purely ethnic basis and the charade of the USSR being a multi-national state was finally abandoned. At a banquet of Red Army commanders on May 24, 1945, Stalin openly exalted the Russian people in a toast, proclaiming “I should like to drink to the health of our Soviet people . . . and first of all to the health of the Russian people. I drink first of all to the Russian people because it is the most outstanding nation of all the nations

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<sup>178</sup> 661 Sanukov, Ksenofont. “Stalinist Terror in the Mari Republic: The Attack on Finno-Ugrian Bourgeois Nationalism.” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 74.4 (1996): 658-682. Print, p. 661

<sup>179</sup> Sanukov, p. 670

<sup>180</sup> “[One] consequence of the terror was that it left the word ‘nationalism’ hanging over non-Russian peoples as a constant threat, which is activated even today as soon as anyone expresses concern about the future of our national culture, traditions and language, or the appointment of Maris to responsible posts.” Sanukov, p. 681

forming the USSR".<sup>181</sup> Russians were still equal, but, as the designated "big brother" nationality, they were just *more* equal.

State genocide was relaxed under Nikita Khrushchev, but the remaining years of the Soviet Union were a bleak time for Mari cultural life. The atheist ideology of the Soviet Union was especially menacing to animist peoples, due to animism's nationalist tinge. Holy groves were cut down and giving Mari names to children was prohibited. The military industry in Yoshkar-Ola drew Russians in, and the Maris became a minority in their own homeland for the first time (from 51 percent in 1926 to 43 percent in 1989). A look at the experience of the shamanistic Khanti people in western Siberia, however, suggests that the Maris avoided a worse fate. This comparison is important to make because peoples who practiced a more alien religion such as the Maris and Khantis were more targeted by the state. The Khantis did not experience a relaxation of state terror after Stalin's death. Most disturbingly, children were forcibly taken from their families as early as the age of one and raised in a system of boarding schools. They would return to their families aged fifteen to seventeen, lacking any knowledge of their native language and culture.<sup>182</sup> Such policies would have been more difficult to implement in the ethnically diverse Middle Volga region. Thus, being on the interface meant that the Maris were somewhat less isolated and less vulnerable.

#### National Mobilization in the Russian Federation

Ultimately, the years of the Soviet Union brought far greater destruction to the USSR's non-Russian population than the tsarist years. The Soviet Union, however, left a twin legacy, since the cultural autonomy of its early years enabled the greatest national awakening in the history of the Maris.

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<sup>181</sup> Kohn, p. 297

<sup>182</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 362

Mari national consciousness was not extinguished, and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was an event just as world-shaking as the Russian Revolution of 1917, brought about renewed opportunities for the Maris to achieve autonomy. Just as in 1917, the Maris had the most active autonomy movement of all the Eastern Finno-Ugric peoples. Also, just as in 1917, the Eastern Maris played a leading role in the ethnic mobilization of the Maris.

Although the Maris had the strongest autonomy movement of the Finno-Ugric people, it was the Tatars, Russia's largest minority (who, diaspora included, number over five million), who had the strongest autonomy movement during this period. With their history as the inheritors of two great civilizations, it is not surprising that the Tatars have been the most keen to assert their autonomy. The Central Asian states, with no such history of independent statehood, achieved full independence automatically with the collapse of the Soviet Union due to their federal status as Union Republics (one notch in the federal hierarchy above the Autonomous Republic status of Tataria and Mari El). The Tatars were not eligible to become a Union Republic under the Soviet Union, due to the fact that one of the criteria to become one is to border a non-Soviet state.

Although the Soviet Union was, in principle, a decentralized federation, the birth of the Russian Federation in 1991 was the first time in Russia's history that Russia became a democratic, federal state. Federalism, by definition, means that power is shared between center and regions. Boris Yeltsin, speaking in Kazan, encouraged Russia's ethnic republics to "take as much sovereignty as you can swallow." This encouragement seemed somewhat meaningless, but when Russia declared its own sovereignty from the Soviet Union in June 1990, the Tatars saw their chance. It was shortly thereafter in June 1990 that Tatarstan proclaimed its own autonomy. The Tatarstan Declaration of Autonomy is a short document taking full advantage of the fact that "sovereignty" is a very ambiguous word. Tatarstan claimed to possess state sovereignty, yet to be contained within the parameters of the existing system

of Soviet ethno-federalism. In other words, Tatarstan made no overt claims to independence outside of Russia and both Tatar and Russian were named as official languages. In 1992, Tatarstan and Chechnya were the only two ethnic republics to abstain from signing Yeltsin's Russian Federal Treaty. It was only in 1994 that Tatarstan voluntarily joined Russia for the first time after almost five centuries of Russian rule, but it should be noted that this meant Tatarstan delegated powers to Moscow and not the other way around.

Under the leadership of Mintimer Shaimiyev (r. 1991-2010), the first ever elected Tatar leader, Tatarstan made incredible advances. Although Tatarstan did not achieve independence, Tatarstan behaved like an independent state. This has involved efforts both symbolic and substantive. Symbolic efforts included creating a new Tatar national flag, renaming the republic with a more Islamic name, Tatarstan (it was previously Tataria), and reclaiming Kazan as a Tatar urban space. The Tatars looked to Barcelona for inspiration as a city of a stateless nation that is globally respected and worthy of a European capital. The Kazan Kremlin was developed as a cultural center of Kazan. The Museum of National Culture, as the centerpiece, displays a 200 foot statue called "Khurriyat", meaning "freedom", which replaced a statue of Lenin and symbolizes the rebirth of the Tatar people. In 1998, the Kazan Kremlin achieved recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Symbolic efforts are important, but Shaimiev recognized that, in order to have legitimacy and support, it is important to actually improve the lives of citizens. Tatarstan was able to reject Yeltsin's disastrous "shock therapy" economic plan and maintain control of its oil revenues. With these revenues, Tatarstan demolished the unsightly Soviet bloc apartment buildings in Kazan and built modern apartments in their place. For this, Moscow presented Tatarstan with a "Creator of the Year" award.<sup>183</sup> Thus, Shaimiyev delivered on his goal to improve the peoples' lives. Tatarstan, with an economy larger than all three Baltic States combined,

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<sup>183</sup> Graney, Katherine E. *Of Khans and Kremains: Tatarstan and the Future of Ethno-federalism in Russia*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009. Print, p. 61

achieved a minimum wage twice the Russian average and an unemployment level half that of Russia.<sup>184</sup> In the mid-1990s the famous financier George Soros called Tatarstan “the only region in Russia worthy of investment.”<sup>185</sup> One might expect that the ethnic Russian population of Tatarstan would find these developments troubling, but, with the improvement in their quality of life, they have had nothing to complain about and have thus shown their support passively. As Shaimiev has openly stated, “People live better here in Tatarstan, and this is mainly a result of Tatarstan’s sovereignty”.<sup>186</sup>

Critiques of Tatarstan’s sovereignty have been mostly negative. The main criticisms have been that sovereignty projects like Tatarstan’s are a breeding ground for ethnic nationalism and authoritarianism, threatening Russia’s transition to democracy.<sup>187</sup> On closer inspection, these criticisms are unfounded. Tatar autonomy is not a threat to Russia’s integrity, but in fact is the essence of federalism. Struggle between the center and regions are beneficial to Russia by forcing compromise which helps to institutionalize federalism. Shared power should not be seen as a zero-sum game. Tatarstan’s autonomy does not come at the expense of Moscow, but in fact makes Russia a stronger as a state and brings benefits to all Russian citizens. Furthermore, it is normal in any federation for citizens to have multiple levels of loyalty. One can indentify, for example, as both a Californian and an American. In order for federalism to work, however, it is crucial that Tatarstan actively demonstrate its commitment to Russia as a whole. Tatarstan has done this by never declaring absolute independence from Russia or by pushing aspects of state sovereignty that Moscow would find unacceptable, such as the creation of an army. Tatarstan’s demands have always been limited, flexible and open to compromise.

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<sup>184</sup> Graney, p. 64

<sup>185</sup> Bukharaev, Ravil. *The Model of Tatarstan*. St. Martin’s Press, 1999, p 209

<sup>186</sup> *ITAR-TASS* May 30, 1995; *Respublika Tatarstan* August 30, 1995, p. 1; *Segodnya* August 25, 1995, p. 3

<sup>187</sup> Graney, p. 29

The criticism that Tatarstan has encouraged ethnic-nationalism is not fair, either. It is true that Tatars hold a special role in the republic since Tatarstan, after all, is the cultural heart of the Tatar people, but Tatarstan has demonstrated a strong commitment to building an all-inclusive civic concept of nationhood. For example, all official ceremonies and public displays in Tatarstan include representatives from all nationalities living in Tatarstan.<sup>188</sup> To ensure that Tatarstan's ethnic groups are treated justly, president Shaimiyev established the Department of Inter-Ethnic Affairs, responsible for ensuring the national and cultural development of all ethnic groups of Tatarstan. The Law on Languages of the Peoples of Tatarstan guarantees freedom of language use for all citizens of Tatarstan, bans discrimination based on language and commits Tatarstan to protecting each citizen's right to use and develop their own native language.<sup>189</sup> Furthermore, Tatarstan has demonstrated an enlightened commitment to religious pluralism, for instance, by returning a synagogue to the Jewish community, as well as returning a Lutheran church to the Lutheran community.

The remarkable project of nation-building in Tatarstan was part of a larger process of ethnic mobilization in Russia in the 1990s known as the "parade of sovereignty". In April 1990, a Constituent Congress of Mari Ushem was held in Yoshkar-Ola, with over 500 participants. The Mari Ushem, or Mari Union, which had originated in the first phase of Mari national mobilization 1917, was resurrected in 1990. At the congress, the Maris deliberated on the purpose of the Mari Ushem. It was defined as "an interregional citizenly association 'based on mutual interests in the study of the history, culture, and language, as well as the revival of the Mari people'".<sup>190</sup> It was decided that the Mari Ushem represented the interests of all ethnic Maris, and the Mari El Republic should be responsible for the welfare of all Maris. The resolutions of the congress were directed mainly towards the goal of enhancing Mari ethnic

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<sup>188</sup> Graney, p. 91

<sup>189</sup> Graney, p. 95

<sup>190</sup> Lallukka, p. 278

awareness and modernizing the national culture. Although most delegates opted for the Mari Ushem to be a cultural rather than political organization, the Mari Ushem participated in the drafting of the sovereignty declaration enacted on October 22, 1990.<sup>191</sup>

In December 1991, the ethnic Mari candidate, Vladislav Zotin, won the presidential election in Mari El. In ethnic matters, Zotin's presidency was extremely moderate and restrained. Zotin held radical Mari nationalism in check and assured the Russians that Mari organizations would not have any executive or legislative power.<sup>192</sup> Although national activity was on the rise in 1992, such moderation was characteristic of ethnic activity at this time. At a meeting of representatives of ethnic groups, the playwright Nikolai Rybakov, as keynote speaker, assured the non-Maris in the audience that the Maris needed special support because their cultural survival was at stake, but the Maris had no wish to violate the interests of other peoples. Thus, like Tatarstan, the Maris demonstrated a commitment to multiculturalism and civic nation building in the 1990s. These assurances did not prevent growing Russian anxiety about ethnic tensions and "Baltic" type extremism. The differences between Tatarstan's and Mari El's state of ethnic relations had much to do with economic factors. Whereas Tatarstan was able to forge an autonomous economic policy, Mari El did not and suffered accordingly under Yeltsin's disastrous economic policies. The post-Soviet transition to capitalism was highly unsettling for Russians to begin with, and ethnic relations added another layer to these anxieties. Many blamed Zotin for not standing up to the federal economic policy, and Zotin was voted out of office in 1996. The new president, Viacheslav Kislitsyn, was an ethnic Russian from Mari El originally. This caused concern from Maris in the national movement, who saw the Zotin administration as their "own" government. Such

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<sup>191</sup> This was nothing out of the ordinary. Most of the twenty one ethnic republics issued sovereignty declarations at this time. Indeed, Yeltsin encouraged this. It is worth reiterating that sovereignty and full political independence are very different things. A separatist Mari agenda would be inconceivable.

<sup>192</sup> Lallukka, p. 281

worries were unfounded, however, and the Kislitsyn administration continued the ethnic policies of Zotin's presidency.

The example of Kislitsyn illustrates an important point by showing how ethnic Russians from ethnic regions often do not harbor antipathy towards indigenous populations. After all, having a titular indigenous ethnic group is something that gives them a pretext to seek greater autonomy from Moscow. Ethnic Russians have the same interest as ethnic groups in having autonomy from Moscow, which is why Russian federalism should not be seen as a purely ethnic matter but rather as a matter lying at the very heart of Russia politics.<sup>193</sup> “Democracy in a multinational state is inextricably linked with autonomy for ethnically distinct indigenous minorities”.<sup>194</sup> Every federal state in the world contradicts the idea that regional autonomy weakens the state. For this reason, Taagepera argues that the more vulnerable Finno-Ugric republics should be watched closely by the world as a “litmus test”, to gauge the health of democracy and the rule of law in the Russian Federation.<sup>195</sup>

### The Age of Putin and Centralization

Russia's chaotic transition to democracy and capitalism caused many Russians to feel a sense of nostalgia for Soviet times. The Yeltsin years were a time of great social and economic insecurity, regarded by Vladimir Putin as “legal anarchy”. This helps to explain why Putin, a former spy for the KGB, came to power with a great deal of popular support in 1999. Public opinion polls at this time showed a

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<sup>193</sup> After the fall of the USSR, there were even concerns of separatism from ethnically Russian regions in the Far East such as Primorskii Krai and Sakhalin whose economies are much more closely connected with the Pacific Rim economy than with Europe (Evangelista, 113). Kaliningrad, too, as an ethnically Russian exclave, has shown interest in becoming a fourth Baltic state.

<sup>194</sup> Taagepera (1999), 411

<sup>195</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 1

widespread willingness to sacrifice freedom for order.<sup>196</sup> The lucky coincidence of Putin's assumption of the presidency was that it coincided with a significant rise in the price of oil on the world market (from \$18 a barrel to a peak of \$147 in 2008), providing Russians with a sense of economic stability and boosting Putin's popularity. Oil accounts for two-thirds of Russia's exports, and, although even Putin's most fervent supporters cannot credit him for the increased revenues, it has helped him remain in power.<sup>197</sup> Although Russia is just one of fifteen states succeeding the breakup of the Soviet Union (Russia, too, declared its independence from the USSR in 1990), Putin's presidency has been marked by a reclaiming of the legacy of the Soviet Union. This has included reinstating the national anthem of the Soviet Union in 2000 (with new lyrics from the same man who penned the original Soviet national anthem).<sup>198</sup>

Putin's rise has had grave implications for Russia's short-lived experiment with federalism. Putin spoke of the need to "streamline" Russia by establishing a "power vertical" and ending the "parade of sovereignty". Part of this streamlining effort has involved enlarging regions. For example, in a 2005 referendum in the Permian Komi Autonomous District, the only Finno-Ugric ethnic territory in which the titular people held a majority was merged with the ethnically Russian Perm Krai. Although there were various reasons for this, it raised concerns. Ethnic rights continued to be legally protected, but questions have been raised about whether later leaders will be sensitive to issues of the ethnic development of the Komi-Perm people. A more worrisome issue is whether such a referendum could be held in ethnic republics where the indigenous group is not a majority. To do away with ethnic territories would seriously jeopardize the special rights that are legally protected in the republics. In the long term, this could mean a return to tsarist ethnic policies when ethnic groups had almost no legal protections.

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<sup>196</sup> Evangelista, p. 132

<sup>197</sup> Evangelista, p. 87

<sup>198</sup> Warren, Marcus. "Putin Revives Soviet National Anthem." *The Telegraph*. N.p., 9 Dec. 2000.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/1377685/Putin-revives-Soviet-national-anthem.html> (accessed March 12, 2013)

Another worrisome development under Putin's presidency has been the pressure to end agreements between ethnic territories and the outside world. Shortly after Putin came to power, the agreement of cultural cooperation between Mari El and Estonia was ended – its aims and provisions having been declared fulfilled. This trend reached a paranoid fervor reminiscent of Stalin's years in the summer of 2012, when a law was passed labeling any political organization that receives funding from abroad as a "foreign agent".<sup>199</sup>

Putin's presidency was inaugurated in blood with the Second Chechen War against the separatist Chechens.<sup>200</sup> Unlike the First Chechen War (1994-1996) fought under Yeltsin's leadership, the Second Chechen War, begun in 1999, had a lot of popular support. There was a widespread (though largely unfounded) concern at this time that Russia might break up into its constituent parts, in a way similar to how the USSR had disintegrated. Chechnya, it was feared, could become to the Russian Federation what Estonia had been to the USSR. Thus, the pretext for Putin's ruthless policy against the Chechens was to prevent a "brushfire of independence". The war crimes committed against the Chechens are too numerous to list here, but they included using fuel-air explosives which can "clear out buildings and basements with high temperatures and shock waves more commonly associated with nuclear weapons" (though without the stigma attached to nuclear weapons), indiscriminately against civilian targets in the Chechen capital of Grozny.<sup>201</sup> Although this war was fought to preserve Russia's integrity, Mathew Evangelista argues that "if [Putin] managed to preserve the Russian Federation from further disintegration, it was despite rather than because of his policy in Chechnya".<sup>202</sup> To illustrate the

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<sup>199</sup> Ostroukh, Andrey. "Russia's Putin Signs NGO "foreign Agents" Law." *Reuters*. N.p., 21 July 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/21/us-russia-putin-ngos-idUSBRE86K05M20120721> (accessed March 12, 2013)

<sup>200</sup> Unlike the Tatars, the Chechens were conquered only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and have a history of violently resisting Russian rule. The Chechens have also been more influenced by anti-western strands of Islam such as Wahhabism. Furthermore, Stalin's forcible deportation of the Chechens in 1944 left many smoldering grievances.

<sup>201</sup> Evangelista, p. 149

<sup>202</sup> Evangelista, p. 65

poisonous effects of this conflict, during the First Chechen War leaders of several Middle Volga republics met in 1995 in Cheboksary, the capital of Chuvashia, to condemn the Russian invasion.<sup>203</sup>

Although the Chechen Wars were appalling from a human rights standpoint, Putin's rhetoric surrounding the war was especially worrisome. With a messianic flair, Putin spoke about his "historical mission" of "resolving the situation in the North Caucasus".<sup>204</sup> Basing his policies on a "historical mission" outside worldly legitimacy suggests a deep imperial conservatism. The lack of separation between Church and state is the mark of this and has been one of the most controversial aspects of Putin's presidency. The head patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Archbishop Kirill, has called Putin's presidency "a gift from God". This can be interpreted as a reassertion of the religious-based imperial ideology of tsarist times, which can be traced back to Ivan the Terrible, and as a means of avoiding questions of Russia's legal legitimacy by basing it on an otherworldly, and therefore unquestionable, foundation.<sup>205</sup> Ever since the Possessors prevailed over the Non-Possessors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship between Church and State in Russia was never entirely an inward spiritual matter, but rather something with very worldly imperial implications.

In terms of ethno-federalism, Putin's presidency can be divided into two periods: the first period between 2000-2004, marked by Putin's "Federal Package", and the post-Beslan period after 2004. Putin's "Federal Package" involved creating a new layer of federal bureaucracy by dividing Russia into seven "federal districts". The purpose of this was primarily to intimidate local elites. Moscow named Nizhny Novgorod as the capital of the Volga Federal District. The symbolism of this choice was

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<sup>203</sup> Evangelista, p. 89

<sup>204</sup> Evangelista, pp. 64-65

<sup>205</sup> For a federation to have legal legitimacy, it is necessary that nationalities be joined to it on a voluntary basis. If nationalities are joined by force, this is antithetical to all federal principles. Such a state is not a genuine federation, but an ethnic empire. For nationalities to be joined on a voluntary basis requires compromise, which is the underlying legal bedrock of any federation. It is worth mentioning that even Joseph Stalin went to great pains to give the Soviet Union the image of a voluntary federation. This was why Union Republics were given a legal (though mythical) right to secede.

obvious – Nizhny Novgorod was historically the launching point for the conquering of the Middle Volga region. History seemed to be repeating itself – just as Ivan the Terrible conquered the Tatars to control the wealth of the Volga, Putin was now launching an assault against the Tatars to control the wealth of Tatar oil revenues. Putin also sought to make the Federal Council more obedient by depriving regional governors of their automatic seats and replacing them with full-time appointed representatives chosen for their loyalty to Moscow. Furthermore, Putin used the Russian Federal Constitutional Court to “harmonize” the republican constitutions with the federal constitution. Tatarstan was forced to rephrase its 1992 constitution, which stated that Tatarstan is a “sovereign state and subject of international law associated with the Russian Federation on the basis of a mutual delegation of powers.” The new constitution states that Tatarstan is “united” with Russia and a “subject of the Russian Federation”, but retains for itself “all sovereign powers that are not explicitly given to the Russian Federation.” This change of wording did not change Tatarstan’s status in any meaningful way, but it showed that Tatarstan was willing to compromise, and Putin publicly thanked Tatarstan for “harmonizing”.<sup>206</sup>

The second phase of Putin’s attack on republican sovereignty began after the 2004 terrorist attacks in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, which resulted in the deaths of over 385 people, most of whom were schoolchildren. The new rhetoric from Putin was that the terrorists sought nothing less than the “disintegration of the country, the breakup of the state and the collapse of Russia.” Not for the first time in history, a terrorist attack was used as a pretext to rein in political freedoms. Putin’s “September Theses” ended regional elections by popular vote, instead having regional governors and presidents nominated by Putin and elected by regional parliaments (in effect, more of a “confirmation”

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<sup>206</sup> Graney, p. 130

than an election).<sup>207</sup> This aspect brought strong criticism from both inside and outside of Russia, due to the fact that it violates the constitutional voting rights of Russian citizens. It also raised fears that it would provoke even more resentment and separatism from the ethnic regions.<sup>208</sup> In other words, it was a cure more harmful than the disease.

Putin's post-Beslan reforms seemed to be the last nail in the coffin of Russian ethno-federalism, but Tatarstan, under Shaimiev's leadership, was not about to surrender its sovereign rights. Above all, Tatarstan objected to the provision that its parliament would be disbanded if it failed two consecutive times to conform to Putin's candidate. President Shaimiev, who was flexible in most matters, stood firm, stating that "Tatarstan will never agree to the dismissal of the State Council of Tatarstan – it is elected by and is the voice of the people." Putin had little choice but to retreat from his hard line and concede that he had gone too far. At the State Council in Kaliningrad, Putin admitted that the de-regionalization policy was not workable and that he was transferring over 100 additional powers to the regions – all powers which do not infringe on Russia's wholeness.<sup>209</sup> In 2005, Kazan celebrated its millennium. Putin called it a "holiday not only for all Russia, but for the whole world" and consigned 50 billion rubles to the celebrations. Shaimiev took the opportunity while sharing the stage with Putin during the celebrations to chastise him for his lack of trust in the regions, urging him to "trust them more" since they have "great potential to solve the many questions that can only be solved there".<sup>210</sup> The resilience of Tatarstan was crowned in 2009 when Kazan officially took the symbolic title of "Russia's Third Capital" (after Moscow and St. Petersburg).<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Graney, p. 134

<sup>208</sup> Graney, p. 135

<sup>209</sup> Graney, p. 140

<sup>210</sup> Graney, p. 143

<sup>211</sup> "Kazan Officially Becomes Russia's Third Capital." Apr. 2009. <http://english.pravda.ru/history/03-04-2009/107354-kazan-0/> (accessed 10 Mar. 2013)

While Tatarstan managed to stand up to Putin's centralizing reforms and maintain a meaningful degree of political, cultural and economic autonomy within the Russian Federation, Mari El has fared much worse during the years of Putin's presidency. In 2001, a Moscow-born ethnic Russian, Leonid Markelov, won the presidency of Mari El. Markelov began his political career in Vladimir Zhirinovski's extreme right (and grossly misnamed) Liberal Democratic Party.<sup>212</sup> For someone who is openly contemptuous of democracy, it is not surprisingly that Markelov's presidency has been disastrous for the Mari national movement. The nature of Markelov's nationalities policy became clear right from the start, as he attacked the republic's law on languages and the status of the Mari languages in schools. Throughout 2001, institutions supporting the Mari language and culture came under siege. This included the closing of the department for national schools within the Ministry of Education, as well as closing Mari-language theaters in Yoshkar-Ola. Moreover, Markelov established a virtual monopoly over the mass media, using it to propagate against the Mari national movement. The air time of Mari-language television programs has been reduced to almost nothing, and with the vital importance of mass media in raising the national consciousness of Maris, this has been perhaps the most devastating development. Also worrisome have been the wave of physical attacks against Mari activists and intellectuals, beginning in 2001. These have typically involved one or more perpetrator approaching an unsuspecting person from behind and beating them in the head with metal pipe-like objects. Such attacks have occurred in the center of Yoshkar-Ola and have caused life-threatening injuries and the deaths of several Maris.<sup>213</sup> Although President Markelov has denied involvement in these attacks, he has certainly made a low priority of opening thorough investigations into them. If the goal of these

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<sup>212</sup> Zhirinovski made a name for himself in post-Soviet Russia with his extremist authoritarian rhetoric drawing from the vein of 19<sup>th</sup> century pan-Slavic chauvinism. Incidentally, Zhirinovski's expansionist rhetoric caused enough concern in Kazakhstan for the Kazakh president Nazarbaev to relocate to a capital city farther north (from Almaty to Astana) in 1997.

<sup>213</sup> Parkkonen, Mika. "In Mari Political Dissidents Are Beaten with Iron Pipes." *Helsingin Sanomat*. N.p., 1 Mar. 2005. <http://www.hs.fi/english/article/In+Mari+political+dissidents+are+beaten+with+iron+pipes/1101978763658> (accessed March 12, 2013). See also *Russian Federation: The Human Rights Situation of the Mari Minority of the Republic of Mari El*, pp. 52-53

attacks was for Mari activists and cultural figures to live under fear of random violence, they have succeeded with flying colors. Such developments under Markelov's presidency have raised concern in the West, and in 2005, the European Union condemned the numerous human rights violations against the Maris. A 2005 petition in support of the Maris got thousands of signatures. In February 2006, the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights published a 56-page report entitled "Russian Federation: The Human Rights Situation of the Mari Minority of the Republic of Mari El." The international spotlight has had some positive effect, and violent attacks became less commonplace after 2005. Nevertheless, the strangulation of Mari culture and education continues. Putin's 2005 post-Beslan reforms allowing for the direct appointment of regional leaders has allowed Markelov to keep his presidency beyond the end of his 2009 term, and the Russification and assimilation of the Mari people continues today at an alarming rate.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> In the 1989 census, 643 thousand identified as Mari. In the 2002 census, 605 thousand identified as Mari. If this trend were to continue on the same trajectory, in 2093 there will be only 393 thousand who identify as Mari. Judging by the 2010 census which recorded 548 thousand Maris, the trend has continued.



## A Tale of Two Cities

Today, if one visits Russia's Middle Volga region, one can behold two cities under construction that symbolize the current political situation of their respective titular nationalities: Kazan and Yoshkar-Ola. Under Markelov's presidency, Yoshkar-Ola is undergoing a "renaissance". Major construction projects in Yoshkar-Ola have included a new city center built in a pseudo-Italian architectural style, and, nearby, there is a new Kremlin and at least five Russian Orthodox churches. Statues and monuments have sprung up across the city, including a statue of Prince Rainier of Monaco. During Soviet times, Yoshkar-Ola was a gray and unremarkable capital city in an impoverished region, so it would seem that this facelift would be a welcome development.

A two-and-a-half hour bus ride from Yoshkar-Ola, another city is under construction – Kazan. Construction projects in Kazan have included the restoration of the historic Kazan Kremlin and the building of modern apartment buildings which have been built in the place of the notoriously unattractive Soviet-era bloc apartment buildings. These are only some of the most notable achievements –the whole city of Kazan is full of construction projects. Statues, monuments, mosques, and even the local McDonald's have been built in a style that draws from ancient Tatar themes. In Kazan, one has a strong sense that one is in the most modern city in all of Russia. Kazan leaves a very different impression on a visitor than Yoshkar-Ola. In Kazan one is overwhelmed by the sense that one is in the midst of a civilization being resurrected, while in Yoshkar-Ola, one gets the sense that one is in the midst of a civilization being buried.

This is a matter of much greater consequence than mere symbolism. By reclaiming their urban space, the Tatars have raised the prestige of the Tatar ethnicity. The inability of the Maris to reclaim their urban space, conversely, has prevented the Maris from raising the prestige of the Mari ethnicity. It is well-noted that the prestige connected with a language and ethnicity has a direct effect on the

survival of that language and ethnicity. Ethnic identity is very fluid and can be seen in terms of economics – a person weighs the pros and cons of identifying with one ethnicity versus another.<sup>215</sup> In Tatarstan, a Tatar can achieve upward mobility without abandoning his or her Tatar ethnicity. In Mari El, however, upward mobility generally entails an abandonment of one's Mari ethnicity. As the focal points of upward mobility and opportunity, these identity shifts occur primarily in cities. Because Russian is the language of opportunity in Yoshkar-Ola, it is completely common for two parents who speak Mari fluently to raise children who speak only Russian. Children are the future, and when the children no longer learn a language, its prospects for survival are reduced significantly.

The Darwinist notion that languages die because they are somehow less fit to survive is not true. The death of a language most commonly is the result of deliberate policies determined by the ruling power, which can be referred to as linguistic genocide.<sup>216</sup> What is happening in Yoshkar-Ola is precisely that. The construction projects in Yoshkar-Ola today can be seen as the Russians claiming the city as a Russian urban space. One of the most striking images is that of a Russian Orthodox church designed in a centuries-old style being erected with a crane. The church and the crane make for a striking juxtaposition of the past with modernity. This church is just one of about five churches in the same vicinity. Considering the ancient animist faith of the Maris and the role it has played in their conception of community, it is not difficult to understand why the state would make a special point of establishing Christianity in Yoshkar-Ola. Building churches in an old-fashioned style is a means of making Christianity seem well-established in Mari El. It is the same reason the British and Hungarians built their Parliament buildings in a much older Gothic style. One might disagree with this assessment by pointing to some token nods to the titular ethnicity. There is, for example, a statue of three Mari musicians in traditional

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<sup>215</sup> This is not to say that it is superficial. As Judith Nagata (1981) argues, identity is based both on primordial factors and situational factors.

<sup>216</sup> Genocide may seem like a strong word, but if the main criterion of genocide is that a group's very existence is put in jeopardy, it is appropriate.

dress. There is also a museum of national culture. The only problem is that these things are past-oriented and not future-oriented. One only has to look at the government policies to dispel any illusion that the government has the interest of the Mari language in mind. In sum, the statue of Mari musicians might as well be a tombstone.

#### To Survive or not to Survive

Today, the future of the Maris as a people hangs in the balance. The question thus arises what hope the Maris have of long-term survival. There are many ethnic groups in the world that silently fade into oblivion. It is estimated that a language dies every two weeks. The Maris, however, will not fade away so silently because the Maris have made common cause with their fellow kindred Finno-Ugric peoples. Every four years, a World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples is held, to which all Finno-Ugric peoples send their representatives and where the most pressing issues are discussed. Speeches made by the presidents of the three independent Finno-Ugric nations significantly raise the status and prestige of this event. Thanks to the idea of Finno-Ugric kinship, the Maris are not alone. The most valuable connection the Maris have is with the three independent Western Finno-Ugric states, and, of these, the most valuable is Estonia. Ever since Estonian independence was restored in 1991, Estonia has, and will continue to, advocate for the interests of the Maris. Because the Maris have Estonia on their side, their prospects for survival are improved.

Unfortunately, despite the best intentions, there are many limits to what Estonia can do. Estonia can offer educational opportunities to the Maris and criticize Russia's violations of international law. Estonia can also provide an example to the Maris through their own history and unlikely path to nationhood. For example, there is much discussion about "ethno-futurism" as a way of imagining a future-oriented ethnicity, in order to reverse the trend of equating upward mobility with Russification. Ethno-futurism is an entirely Estonian concept that made a big difference for Estonia. Although these

things can certainly help, the assimilation of the Maris continues at an alarming pace. It seems that the Estonians and the Finno-Ugric movement overall need to open up to new possibilities, outside of solutions that amount to little more than the Finno-Ugric peoples pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps.

One thing that may be the Maris' best hope for long-term survival has, remarkably, eluded discussion – how being on the interface could benefit them. The resolution of the VI World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples, which took place in Siófok, Hungary in September 2012, makes a whole list of suggestions, but nowhere on the list is any mention of Tatarstan to be found. Whereas Chechnya can be seen as the greatest failure of ethno-federalism in post-Soviet Russia, Tatarstan has been its greatest success story. Tatarstan can be seen as the central battleground for the future of Russian ethno-federalism. Despite Vladimir Putin's attempts to centralize Russia and establish a "power vertical", under the presidency of Mintimer Shaimiev, Tatarstan was able cause Putin to back down and concede that he had gone too far and thereby maintain a meaningful degree of republican autonomy. Looking at the history of the relationship between Moscow and Kazan, it becomes apparent that this is not the first time that the Tatars have caused Moscow to reconsider its hard line and adopt a more pragmatic policy. The story of Putin and Shaimiev is only the latest incarnation of a story that can be traced back to the reign of Ivan the Terrible. Because of the vital importance of the survival of Russian ethno-federalism, the Finno-Ugric movement should be watching the power struggle between Moscow and Kazan very closely.

The Finno-Ugric people have a direct stake in the survival of Russian ethno-federalism, but the Maris have the most potential to benefit from being situated on a great interface. Each time the Tatars have caused Moscow to retreat from its hard line, it has brought hidden benefits to the Maris. The endurance of the Tatars as a people and as a civilization has meant that the Maris have continued to

remain situated on a great interface which has been the vital factor in their survival for almost five centuries under Moscow's rule. This interface dynamic holds the potential to benefit the Maris once again against the latest threat of assimilation by the centralized state. Therefore, the most important question that the Finno-Ugric movement should be asking in regard to the Maris is how the interface dynamic can serve the Maris today.

In order for the Maris to forge closer ties with the Tatars, there are certain obstacles that have to be overcome. Thankfully, these obstacles are more internal than external – they are to be found within the hearts and minds of the Estonians and the Maris. Although being on the interface has been the key factor in the survival of the Maris, this does not mean that the Maris have much awareness or appreciation of this fact. The Maris and Tatars hold many stereotypes about each other. This is not surprising, considering that the Maris have historically defined their sense of identity against the Tatar “other”. This is comparable to Finnish attitudes towards the Swedes. Finns historically defined their identity against the Swedish “other”, and although Finland owes a lot to Sweden for being an independent nation today, the Finns see themselves as rivals with the Swedes. Similarly, the Maris harbor a lot of distrust of the Tatars. According to Taagepera, there is a belief that the Tatars look down on the Maris as “half-Tatars”. According to Lallukka, the Maris commonly think they cannot rely too much on a Tatar. The Maris will admit, however, that the Tatars are ready to help – provided that they have an opportunity to show their wealth or superiority. Unfortunately, these perceptions prevent a full rapprochement between the Maris and Tatars and also play directly into the age-old imperial tactic of “divide and rule”. Despite this, some government-level cooperation between Mari El and Tatarstan did take place in the 1990s. For example, in 1992, the republics signed some economic agreements, as well as an agreement to coordinate their actions regarding the Mari and Tatar diaspora communities living in

their territories.<sup>217</sup> Since 2001, however, the Maris are no longer in control of their titular territory, which precludes government-level cooperation between Mari El and Tatarstan. Therefore, it is not possible to emulate the Baltic States, which, despite their very different histories and identities, were able to put their differences aside and cooperate when the circumstances demanded it. A common interest against Moscow's assault against republican sovereignty would hypothetically open up this possibility, but, since 2001, it is simply not viable. This means that the only hope for Mari El benefitting from being on the interface depends on the initiative of the Tatars themselves.

It may seem that Tatarstan would have nothing to gain from helping the Maris. After all, Tatarstan has a thriving economy larger than all three Baltic States combined, and Mari El is an economic backwater. In truth, however, the Tatars have a lot of interest in helping the Maris. Even when completely self-serving, a common interest is a common interest. Simply put, the Tatars have a direct stake in the survival of ethno-federalism in Russia. A comparison can be made with Finland. During the Cold War, Finland was considered a model UN member by offering a disproportionate amount of peacekeeping forces. Finland did so not out of altruism but out of self-interest because of the awareness that it had a direct stake in the maintenance of world peace. In the event of nuclear war, Finland would have likely perished as an innocent bystander.<sup>218</sup> Likewise, Tatarstan is aware that it has a stake in the survival of Russian federalism. While sharing the stage with Putin in 2005, Shaimiev did not chastise Putin for his assault on Tatar sovereignty, but for his assault on Russian federalism overall. The Tatars have yet another reason to be concerned about the assimilation of the Maris. If the Maris were to become completely assimilated and Russified, the Tatars would be much more surrounded by Russians. Tatarstan benefits from being situated in one of the most ethnically rich regions of Russia.

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<sup>217</sup> Lallukka, p. 307

<sup>218</sup> Jakobson, Max. *Finland, Myth and Reality*. Helsinki: Otava Pub., 1987. Print, p. 140

This is comparable to Sweden's interest in the survival of Finland, if only as a buffer between Sweden and the USSR.

Having established that the Tatars have an interest in helping the Maris, the next question is how to make it a reality. Generally speaking, getting help requires asking for it. Attaining the help of the Tatars will require an act of courting the Tatars. In light of their historic distrust of the Tatars, it is unlikely that this will come from Mari initiative. This is the crucial place where Finno-Ugric activists can intervene – especially the Estonians, who have shown the strongest commitment to helping the Maris. Just as there is a World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples held every four years, there is a World Congress of Tatars held every five years. Because Tatars have such a large diaspora, they face many challenges similar to those faced by the Finno-Ugric peoples regarding the maintenance of their culture and traditions. These congresses are open events, giving Finno-Ugric activists the opportunity to establish a Finno-Ugric presence there. Another possibility would be to break from the tradition of holding all World Finno-Ugric Congresses in the territory of Finno-Ugric peoples and holding a Congress in the city of Kazan. This would be a way of getting the attention of the Tatars and showing the Tatars appreciation for being a friend of the Finno-Ugric peoples by their exemplary treatment of the Finno-Ugric diaspora living in Tatarstan. Estonian history puts Estonia in a unique position to be the broker of this reconciliation.

Unfortunately, Estonians seem to dismiss the possibility of Mari-Tatar cooperation. Rein Taagepera writes “though natural on geographical grounds, Mari El's cooperation with its Turkic neighbors is likely to remain limited, with the possible exception of Chuvashia. Tatarstan and Bashkortostan are looking south, towards fellow-Islamic countries, and the Tatars have yet to overcome

a superiority complex towards nations formerly subject to Kazan”.<sup>219 220</sup> Moreover, the absence of any mention of Tatarstan in the resolution of the VI World Congress of Finno-Ugric People is glaring. For previously stated reasons, it is understandable that the Maris would be distrustful of the Tatars, but why Estonians share this distrust is less clear. Tatarstan, under Shaimiev’s presidency, has made a point of civic nation building. Thanks to this commitment, the Mari diaspora living in Tatarstan is better off in many ways than the Maris in their own republic. This should be sufficient evidence to dispel notions that the Tatars see the Maris as “half-Tatars” and are eager to fully “Tatarize” them.

It seems that Estonian distrust of the Tatars may have a deeper basis. Estonia belongs to the West, with all the positive and the negative things that the Western heritage entails. Belonging to the West, unfortunately, means sharing Western ideas of Orientalism and a deep-seated distrust of Islam. Distrust of Islam runs deep in the Western consciousness. The Crusades were largely responsible for the creation of a European identity, and this Western identity was defined against the Islamic “other”. Edward Said talks extensively about the myth of a clash of civilizations.<sup>221</sup> This is a destructive myth that claims that the West and Islam are somehow incompatible and destined to clash. This myth is especially destructive due to the fact that violence almost always holds a central place in this narrative.

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<sup>219</sup> Taagepera (1999), p. 251

<sup>220</sup> To his credit, Taagepera agrees that Mari-Tatar cooperation would be possible in theory. Nevertheless, his deep reservations are all too apparent: “Tatarstan is looking south, towards the Muslim world, and the Finno-Ugric nations will have to become much stronger before they are taken seriously by the Tatars, except as junior partners. The Tatars may have little sympathy with the Finno-Ugrians except as potential converts to Muslim Tatar culture and expedient minor allies in the struggle against Moscow. The eastern Finno-Ugric nations must be on their guard against too close an alliance with either side, for fear of becoming small change in a Kazan-Moscow compromise. But if they skillfully allow themselves to be wooed by both sides, they could profit from the Muslim-Orthodox interface somewhat in the way that the Estonians unintentionally profited from the Protestant-Orthodox interface.” (Taagepera, 1999, pp.407-408)

<sup>221</sup> “The Myth of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’. Edward Said.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPS-pONiEG8> (accessed March 12, 2013)

Furthermore, it mistakenly paints all of Islam with the same paintbrush. Just like Christianity, Islam is by no means a monolithic religion.

It is important, therefore, to take a closer look at the version of Islam practiced by the Tatars. The Islam of the Tatars is completely unique to the Tatars. A study of Tatar history proves that Tatarstan's commitment to a vision of all-inclusive civic nation-building should not be seen as novel or surprising. It is born out of the deep-rooted culture of tolerance based on the Tatars' ancient heritage as merchants. This legacy goes back to the time of the Great Bolgar civilization over one thousand years ago. The influence of Sufi Islam on the Tatars encouraged a very tolerant version of Islam, making the Tatars the Protestants of the Islamic world. Although the Mongol invasion demolished the Great Bolgar civilization, the population was not annihilated, and there is direct cultural and linguistic continuity between the Great Bolgar civilization and the Kazan Khanate. By being geographically situated to the north, the Tatars found themselves in a space where they could be politically independent from the Islamic world, avoiding military alliances, for example, while also receiving, through their lively trade, all the intellectual and cultural currents from the Islamic world of the south. Furthermore, the strength of their merchant values and their northern location prevented more modern, puritanical forms of Islam, such as Wahhabism, from making headway in Tatar society. Contrary to Wahhabism, which was based on a rejection of all things Western, the 19<sup>th</sup> century jadid movement was based on a desire to find common cause with the West. The legacy of jadidism makes the Tatars, as a people, a unique bridge between the Western world and the Islamic world and falsifies the destructive myth of the clash of civilizations. As the descendants of merchants, the Tatars are not only a tolerant people, but wear it as a point of pride. Comparisons with the Dutch, another merchant civilization, inevitably come to mind. This is beautifully exemplified in the All Religions Temple or Temple of the Universe that a Tatar, Ildar Khanov, built in Kazan, which features a temple to sixteen major world religions. There is no doubt that

the enlightened governmental policies begun by president Shaimiev, in fact, rest on the foundation of the humanistic values of the Tatars as a people.

Although Rein Taagepera acknowledges that the Maris benefitted from being on the interface between Tatar and Russian civilization, he does not acknowledge the full extent of how the Maris benefitted from this. The main benefit Taagepera notes is that, during the time of the Kazan Khanate, the Tatars did not forcibly convert the Maris to Islam. This is merely to say that Islamic civilization was kinder to the Maris than Russian civilization and does little justice to who the Tatars are as a people. Taagepera claims that, unlike the “Estonians [who] have survived because they happened to live at the interface between the Catholic/Protestant West and the Orthodox East . . . since the demise of Muslim Kazan, no eastern Finno-Ugrians have lived at a cultural interface (with the partial exception of the Karelians); they seem to be deep in Russia’s backyard”.<sup>222</sup> To be fair, Taagepera’s views about Tatar history only exemplify the many commonly held misunderstandings about the Tatars. This thesis shows that, while Moscow built a great myth of itself around the conquest of Kazan, the reality on the ground was very different, and the civilization of the Tatars has been incredibly resilient and dynamic. This thesis corrects these misunderstandings and proves that the interface dynamic continued to serve the Maris beyond the fall of the Kazan Khanate and has the potential to serve the Maris, once again, in the present day.

In conclusion, the argument made by Taagepera about Estonia surviving on the interface is entirely applicable to the case of the Maris. Being on the interface is the main factor that accounts for why the Maris have been able to maintain their language, religion and traditions for almost five centuries under Moscow’s hegemony and to emerge today, in the words of Jaak Prozes, as “the flagship

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<sup>222</sup> Taagepera (1999), pp. 97-98

of the eastern Finno-Ugric nations".<sup>223</sup> The Estonians and the Maris share a pool of common experience because both have survived on the interface between Russian civilization and another merchant civilization. This is the key factor that paved the path for the Estonians and Maris to discover each other with the introduction of the idea of Finno-Ugric kinship in the modern age. Just as in nature how rich flora can be found in the intermediate zone between two plant communities, being on the interface between two civilizations enhances the luck and opportunities for a small people to survive and to bestow their unique language and culture as a gift to our collective human heritage, continually enriching us and offering insights into the greatest mystery of all – what it means to be human.

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<sup>223</sup> Prozes, Jaak. *Student Ilysh* no. 2, 1995



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