

Tatars

Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 5,554,601 Tatars in the Russian Federation. Tatars are by far the largest minority in the Russian Federation. The greatest concentration of Tatars is found in Tatarstan (pop. 3,779,265: Tatars 52.9 per cent, Russians 39.5 per cent, Chuvash 3.4 per cent, others 4.2 per cent) and Bashkortostan (Tatars 990,702). The Tatar language belongs to the Turkic branch of the Uralo-Altaic language family.

Historical context

Tatars in the RF are descendants of the Golden Horde, the Turkic tribes led by the Mongols that subjugated Russia from 1237. The end of Tatar-Mongol rule in 1480 and the fall of the two Tatar khanates of Kazan (1552) and Astrakhan (1556) to Ivan IV marked a shift in power to the Russians and away from their former rulers. From this point, the various Tatar areas in the Russian Empire - Crimea, Siberia, and Lithuania - developed separately. By the twenty-first century, these communities retained only the most tenuous links.

In the Russian Empire, the Volga Tatar elite became the leaders of Russian Islam and was used to help incorporate other Muslim areas into the empire. This situation led to the emergence of a prosperous Tatar merchant class, high rates of urbanization, literacy and assimilation, and a mobilized diaspora throughout the empire. Harsh measures were employed against the mass of the Tatar population. Efforts to convert Tatars forcibly from Islam to Christianity were undertaken. Tatars were involved in a number of revolts against Russian domination.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Tatars were promised their own republic but the consolidation of Soviet power in the region after fierce fighting led only to the establishment of the Tatar ASSR in May 1920. The borders of the Bashkir and Tatar republics were drawn so that 75 per cent of the Tatar population was left outside the Tatar republic. The fact that Volga Tatars were not granted Union republic status caused resentment among them. During the Soviet years, fear of a 'Tatarization' of neighbouring peoples prompted official support for the languages and cultures of Bashkirs, Chuvash, Komis, Komi-Permiaks, Mordovans, Maris, and Udmurts.

Perestroika helped in the rebirth of Tatar nationalism, which had first flourished during the October Revolution. From the late 1980s, Tatarstan was at the forefront of the movement for regional autonomy. Tatarstan declared sovereignty on 30 August 1990. A referendum held on 21 March 1992 on the transformation of Tatarstan into an independent republic won wide support. The Tatarstan authorities refused to sign the Federation Treaty (March 1992). Particular efforts have been made to build links with the Tatar diaspora. The constitution of 1992 allowed for dual citizenship and for two state languages. In 1992-3 a number of organizations, including the Tatar Public Opinion Centre, demanded outright independence for the republic. The main nationalist drive was not, however, for full independence but rather for associative membership of the RF. The wide dispersal of Tatars - in 1989

only 32 per cent of Russia's 5.5 million Tatars lived in Tatarstan - prevented Kazan's campaign for power from turning into a struggle for ethno-national liberation. The Tatarstan authorities signed a historic power-sharing agreement with Moscow (15 February 1994) that granted the republic important rights of self-government, the right to retain a substantial share of federal taxes collected in Tatarstan and for republican legislation to supersede federal law in some cases. The treaty nonetheless fell short of recognizing Tatarstan as an independent entity in international law. President Putin suspended the treaty following Tatarstan's failure to comply with the June 2002 deadline for annulling treaties violating federal legislation and work began on the drafting of a new bilateral treaty. Ethnic issues proved an obstacle to the drafting of the new agreement, for instance whether the president of the republic should be a Tatar-speaker.

Since the Soviet collapse Tatars have consolidated their demographic position within the Republic of Tatarstan, forming an absolute majority for the first time in the 2002 census. Ethnic Tatars have generally been over-represented in Tatarstan's political institutions in the post-Soviet period. In the Tatar State Council elected in March 2004, Tatars accounted for 58 per cent of deputies, while Russians accounted for 40 per cent. The share of female deputies increased from 5 to 13 per cent.

Contact with the Tatar diaspora abroad has also increased. In 2004 the Russian and Tatar Education ministries signed an agreement allowing for 70-80 students from the Tatar diaspora in foreign states to study at universities in Kazan annually.

In 1998 Russia's first official Islamic university opened in Kazan, the Russian Islamic University. The addition of secular subjects to the university's curriculum invited controversy in its early years, however.

Current issues

After President Putin's accession to power Moscow reasserted itself in its relations with Tatarstan. Republican legislation contradicting federal law was abolished, fiscal discipline imposed and the ethnic composition of the republic's legislature altered to the detriment of Tatars. In April 2005 the issue of which legal authority - federal or republican - would regulate the definition of the Tatar language's status stalled the work of the group responsible for re-drafting Tatarstan's power-sharing treaty. Federal legislators sought to prevent the language's status being regulated at republican level for fear that Tatar legislators would again introduce a Latin script reform for Tatar, an initiative previously halted by federal law. In May a number of Tatar civic and intellectual groups issued an appeal to the Tatar people for support in their struggle to retain control over language legislation. The new power-sharing treaty was finally signed in November 2005; it reportedly trimmed some of the privileges enjoyed by Tatarstan under President Yeltsin, but still preserved an individual relationship between Tatarstan and Moscow.

Tatars expressed concern regarding the treatment of Tatars outside of Tatarstan. Particularly in neighbouring Bashkortostan, long-standing debates over the language rights of Tatars intensified. Members of the National-Cultural Autonomy association of Tatars in Bashkortostan demanded in June 2005 that Tatar be made an official language in Bashkortostan alongside Russian and Bashkir, and threatened to promote the idea of unifying Bashkortostan with Chelyabinsk oblast or another federal entity if their interests were not considered. Underlying Tatar concerns in Bashkortostan is the fact that the 2002 census revealed a fall in the number of Tatars there compared to Bashkirs (in 2003 inconclusive allegations were made that large numbers of Tatars in Bashkortostan had been recorded as Bashkirs in the 2002 census).

On 16 November 2004 the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation rejected a claim by Tatarstan's parliament seeking to replace the use of the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin alphabet for the Tatar

language. The court ruled that only federal-level legislators have the right to decide such linguistic matters, and that by introducing its own linguistic reform without special permission from federal legislative bodies, Tatarstan risked threatening the linguistic integrity of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, Latin orthography is increasingly used in Tatarstan.

On 24 June 2005 the largest mosque in Russia opened in Kazan, capital of the Republic of Tatarstan and situated on the great river Volga, as part of festivities marking the city's 1,000th anniversary. The rebuilding of the Qol Sharif Mosque began in the mid-1990s. It has been built on the site where the old Qol Sharif Mosque once stood. That mosque was destroyed, as were hundreds of other mosques in the region, after Ivan the Terrible's conquest of Kazan in 1552. The new Qol Sharif Mosque stands opposite, and is much larger than, an Orthodox cathedral. It has become the symbol of Tatars all over Russia.

Tatarstan's relations with Moscow have been strained by debates over possible future mergers of ethnic republics with other federal entities and discussion of a bill to define Russian national identity. Following the onset of a series of referenda on unifying ethnic regions with other federal units in 2004 a wide range of proposed mergers has been discussed. In 2006 a plan reportedly prepared by the think-tank the Council for the Study of Productive Resources proposed another series of mergers, including the merger of Tatarstan with Ulyanovsk Oblast to create a 'Volga-Kama Province'. Tatars voiced opposition to any such initiative.

But in 2007, the State Duma endorsed a Kremlin-backed agreement which paves the way for the Tatar authorities to have stronger control over economic, environmental, cultural and other issues. According to the Moscow Times, the measures in the deal still amounted to less autonomy than that enjoyed by Tatarstan prior to Putin's reforms. However, the republic's President Shaimiyev hailed the agreement as very 'substantial' and said it was a 'first' in Russian history.