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BALTIC WORLDS

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Special section: Bakhtinian Theory

The postcolonial
& postsocialist
perspective

Sweden's
indigenous
people,
the Sami:

Telling their own story

also in this issue

Illustration: Tomas Colbengtson

MACEDONIAN ART / e-ESTONIA / BORDERING POMERANIA / FATHERHOOD IN RUSSIA / BELARUS PROTESTS

editorial

The culture of opposites

In this issue, we devote a special section to Bakhtinian theory. A culture in which tensions between opposites can be dissolved by laughter, comedy, and the staging of roles, reversing “we” and “them” in order to create chaos, and finally resulting in new order: this is a simple description of the theories of the Russian twentieth-century thinker Michael Bakhtin concerning the importance of a dialogue in which the relation between opposing poles creates new meaning, using such means as laughter. In Per-Arne Bodin’s article on the witch trials in Northern Sweden during the 1600s, it is shown that the culture of opposites can also result in violence: ridicule can transform to brutality. Viktoriya Sukovata in her turn investigates the Ukrainian TV comedies. Carnivalization is a way to negotiate, she argues. It is a tool to dissolve the differences between the actors of the shows and the political elite.

It strikes me that Bakhtinian theory can be applied right here and now, in this time of increasing polarization, when antidemocratic forces are dividing Europe and the values that have been borne by Europe has borne since the Enlightenment, and when the antidemocratic forces seek to sow distrust between groups to create antagonism, chaos, fear, and collapse, in order to appear themselves as the speakers of truth, the keepers of order, with the right to single out scapegoats and make decisions that are contrary to, or change, constitutions established democratically.

Dialogue is too often absent – a dialogue that can permit differences to thrive, to encounter each other in a belief that there are values that endure and can be created by building bridges,

not walls. It is precisely that dialogue that Central European University (CEU) has in fact been able to create – the very CEU that now has been a target of the Hungarian government’s attempt to silence and shut down free speech, free thought, and transnational academic exchange. Perhaps it is fear that should be combated the most, in this upside-down world, in order to find balance and negotiate a culture strong enough to encompass oppositions?

MEANWHILE, *Baltic Worlds* will continue to contribute to the publication of multidisciplinary research within and about our expanded, transborder, post-1989 Europe. In this rich double issue, we offer a cavalcade of topics: the fight against repression by the Nordic Sami indigenous population; models for sustainable food production; analysis of e-Estonia’s faith in a digital order; Belarusian protest movements; and much more. *Baltic Worlds* takes pleasure in this rich, chaotic mixture of subjects and narrative voices and hopes to nurture new perspectives and approaches. ❌

Ninna Mörner

in this issue



Sweden is stepping out of the colonial closet

“ Art, theater, film, and music — we use them more and more to increase the knowledge of our Sami culture, of our history, of our pain.

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Fatherly emotions in Soviet Russia

A discourse that emerged strongly in *Sem'ia i shkola* in the mid-1970s is the importance of the father as a role model, especially to his sons.

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colophon

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An innovative guidebook to St. Petersburg. Breaking through the invisibility of Muslim history and culture

Renat Bekkin and Almira Tagirdzhanova, Musulmanskii St. Peterburg. Istoricheskii putevoditel.

[Muslim St. Petersburg: Historical Guidebook; The Life of Muslims in St. Petersburg and Its Suburbs] Renat Bekkin and Almira Tagirdzhanova. Moscow and St. Petersburg, 2016, 639 pages.

St. Petersburg has always been one of the most popular Russian cities for tourists. The inhabitants of different parts of Russia and thousands of foreign tourists come annually to visit the former tsar's palace – the Hermitage – as well as to enjoy the canals, museums, shops and, not least, the magnificent cathedrals. Known as the “cradle of the revolution” during the Soviet period, nowadays the city is usually presented to tourists as the capital of the Russian Empire and “the most European” of Russian cities.

The guidebook under review, however, surprises its readers with a quite different story about the city. Instead of the usual sites, it invites us to visit the city's main historic mosque (whose construction was started in 1913 and finished after the revolution) and indicates houses where Muslim philosophers, poets, politicians and historians lived or those they visited. The guidebook also commemorates places connected to the memory of strong opponents of Russian imperial rule, such as Imam Shamil, the Caucasian religious leader, politician, and hero of the Caucasian war (who visited St. Petersburg in 1859), or Batyrsha, leader of the 18th century Tatar-Bashkir uprising against Russian colonization. Tourists following this guide through the streets of St. Petersburg, or just doing a virtual tour while reading the book, can learn a lot about the contradictory history of this imperial city and the life of Muslim subjects of the empire in St. Petersburg and its surroundings. The guidebook consists of quite detailed and well illustrated descriptions of shops, graveyards, restaurants, and places for religious celebrations and charitable activities that played important role in the life of the Muslim population of the city. The guidebook genre does not require precise explanation of all the historical facts or complete references to historical sources (some stories can be presented as historical anecdotes), but in most cases, the authors carefully provide the sources of quotations and dates. For additional information, most of the names of important historical personalities are accompanied by short biographies and a brief glossary explaining specific terms of Islamic tradition and Muslim culture is placed at the end.

All these features makes this guidebook a very special publication that could be described as a combination of biographical dictionary, itineraries and popular history reader, reviewing and subverting the well-established historical narrative on St. Petersburg from the perspective of Muslim, primarily Tatar, minority.

Such a publication requires a lot of innovation and obviously poses many challenges. In the following, I will discuss those that seem to me particularly important.

Some of the problems are closely connected to the guidebook as a genre. While the geographical organization of the material (by districts or itineraries) facilitates walks through the city, it makes it more difficult to understand the place that Muslims had in the city's history during the different periods of its development. Although several names, like that of the Tatar writer Musa Jalil (1906–1944), or Gataulla Bayazitov, the religious thinker of the late 19th – early 20th centuries, appear in the book quite fre-

quently, it is not easy to distinguish how the life of Tatars in the city in the late 19th century was different from that in the 1930s, for example. One suggestion might be to complement the geographical organization of the information with a short general overview on historical changes: number of Muslim inhabitants, their status and patterns of everyday life in the city.

HOWEVER, SOME OTHER obvious problems of the book are of a more conceptual kind. One of them is connected to the dilemma of naming and composing such an alternative guidebook: what is “Muslim St. Petersburg”; whose history should be included and why?

The authors make it clear at the beginning of the book that they wanted to avoid a purely ethnic focus – Tatars were among the first inhabitants of the city and constituted the biggest group of its Muslim inhabitants during most of its history – and the guidebook's title invites us into a “Muslim St. Petersburg”. At the same time, the authors themselves note (p. 19) that while the term “Muslim” in the title has a cultural, rather than a purely religious meaning, it is not always easy to separate the religious component from the simple identification with the ethnic culture of the various predominantly Muslim nations.

The problem of hybridity and ambivalence in connection to the identities of those included in the book requires even more reflection, in my opinion. This problem has been thoroughly explored in postcolonial studies¹ and many parts of the book dealing with the historical personalities and institutions of the imperial period would benefit from these perspectives, such as the depiction of Kutlu-Muhammed Tevkelev – colonel in the Russian imperial army, a participant in the Russian-Turkish war 1877–78 and the head of the Muslim fraction in the state Duma from 1906 (107–108), or the section on the Caucasian Squadron, founded in St. Petersburg in 1828. The Squadron offered some of the nobility from the Caucasian mountains the chance to become part of the imperial elite (153–158). However, the Squadron can be also described as complicit in politics of imperial domination, including fighting against the Polish uprising of 1830. The most ambivalent historical personality discussed in the guidebook is probably Dimitrie Cantemir (1673–1723), a

Moldovan Orthodox ruler of Crimean Tatar lineage, a nobleman, writer, translator and Orientalist, who spent several of his younger years as a hostage (later envoy) in Istanbul. Cantemir was one of those who contributed to the establishment of the Russian control over Moldova. He also became a part of the Russian nobility.

The authors of the guidebook decided to end their story in the 1930s, mostly ignoring the most contradictory, but also extremely rich, period in the history of St. Petersburg's “Muslim minority”. Was this because of the problematic issue of defining and including or excluding historical institutions and personalities? Although the authors give a short overview of Soviet and post-Soviet developments at the end of the guidebook – including Muslim workers getting several days of official leave during the Muslim holidays up to the mid-1930s, prayers at the Muslim cemetery while mosques were closed down, post war celebrations of the summer festival, Sabantuy, and the national revival under perestroika – the period after the 1930s still seems to require much more attention. The 1920s and 1930s, for example, were the years when many could declare themselves to be supporters of the new (atheist) system of power. At the same time, as my own research shows, even the “new Soviet people” were frequently reminded of their “origins”, including their belonging to the “backward nations”, as many Muslim nations were called by the Bolshevik center. How was Muslim identity preserved, displayed and dealt with during the Soviet years?

Another particularly important topic for discussion would be the issue of Soviet repressions against Tatar and Muslim intellectuals during the Great Terror. It would be also interesting to read about the urban geography of the Soviet cultural revolution, to explore the destinies of Muslims during the siege (1941–1944) and to read about postwar students from Central Asian and Caucasian republics and their life in the city. How were the relations between “old Muslim” inhabitants of St. Petersburg and “new” migrants from the Muslim parts of the country during the late socialist period? And what about students and visitors from the “Third world's” Muslim countries?

On the other hand, probably due to its aim of discussing life of Muslims and not Islam in St. Petersburg, the guidebook does not give much information about Islamic religious institutions per se, neither the celebrations nor the everyday life of Muslims in a city dominated by Orthodox churches and cathedrals. Paradoxically, the influential Jadid movement – also known as the Islamic modernism of the early 20th century² is practically absent from the book.

Obviously, one guidebook cannot include descriptions of all the ethnic groups from the Russian Empire/Soviet Union or foreign countries who can be seen as Muslims and who had some connection with the city. At the same time, some visitors or groups – such as Central Asians (with exception of the Emir of Bukhara's visit), Arabs or Africans – seem to be rather invisible, while the description of the relationships between different

groups of Muslims sometimes lacks a critical approach. One of the most remarkable cases is the description of the amusement park and “African village” (386–389) that were opened in St. Petersburg by a Tatar merchant, Habibulla Yalyshev in the early 1900s. The African village seems to have been a typical colonial establishment of the time, where the “Other”, the “savage” (in this case the Somalis), was the object of the gaze of the “cultured Russian European”. The fact that the organizer of such a “human zoo” was a Tatar obviously does not make it a less racist enterprise than those organized by British, French or Russian entrepreneurs.

CONCLUDING MY SHORT REVIEW, I want to stress again the importance of such a publication in helping to break through the “invisibility” of St. Petersburg's Muslim history and culture and in doing it in such an innovative way. This important project of alternative history – the history of Muslim St. Petersburg – can be developed further in different directions. In addition to the above-mentioned description of Soviet St. Petersburg, the geographical structure of the guidebook could be complemented by short thematic and chronological overviews explaining the general changes in imperial politics towards the Muslims, the most important developments in Muslim society inside and outside the Russian empire as well as continuities, similarities and differences in the observation of national and religious traditions by different inhabitants of St. Petersburg who could be defined as “Muslims”. On the other hand, the project could sharpen its critique of imperial politics and pay more attention to St. Petersburg's special place in the Russian Empire, the place from which several million Muslims were governed, but also exploited, humiliated and dominated. ❌

Yulia Gradskova

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references

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- 2 Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940, A Source Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).