

# **Tatar Identity: A United, Indivisible Nation?**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter examines the extent to which state policies can affect conceptions of ethnic identity. It shows how the Self-Determination Model that dominates Russian minority policy affects political contestation of ethnic identities at the local level. The 2002 Russian census focused the anxieties of local elites on the potential loss of territory or loss of majority status within an ethnic republic that could result from changes in the ethnic categories or in the categories that members of subgroups chose to identify with during the census. It also shows the extent to which a dominant ideology can affect the way in which ethnic categories and the dividing lines among them are conceived. In this case, the focus of Soviet ethnos theory on the progression of ethnic processes from numerous primitive tribes toward gradual consolidation into several culturally advanced nations has shaped attitudes toward the possibility of the establishment of new ethnic categories by dividing existing ethnic groups. Finally, it shows the relationship between census categories and the self-perception of individuals as members of ethnic groups. It explores the question of whether census categories are imposed or negotiated and the extent to which the identities declared on census forms have an impact on the behavior and perceptions of the people who are enumerated by the census.

I begin by discussing the concept of ethnic identity and its use in Western and Soviet/Russian social science. I then turn to the role of the state in shaping the Tatar ethnic category from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, focusing particularly on the impact of changes in how the state categorized its ethnic minority populations on the self-understandings of members of these groups. In the last section of the paper, I examine in more detail the impact of the 2002 Russian census on Tatar identity.

## **Conceptualizing ethnic identity**

The concept of identity has recently come under fire for being too ambiguous to be used in social science. (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) While I am sympathetic to the claim that the term ‘identity’ is often used imprecisely, students of ethnic politics cannot get away from the fact that individuals *identify* with certain groups and that these *identities* play a role in their political preferences and actions. This does not mean that

one should take group identities as a given, but it does mean that one should examine particular cases to see how local understandings of group belonging are shaped. Rather than stop using the term identity, scholars should endeavor to use the term more precisely. The state is only one of several forces that can shape group identities, but it is the force that will be the focus of this paper.

Brubaker and Cooper argue that while the establishment and promotion of census categories in the Soviet Union and Russia made “certain categories readily and legitimately available for the representation of social reality, the framing of political claims, and the organization of political action...,” it did not “entail that these categories [would] have a significant role in framing perception, orienting action, or shaping self-understanding in everyday life.” (2000, 27) They note that the extent to which official categorizations shape self-understandings is a question that can only be addressed empirically and counsel that “the language of ‘identity’ is more likely to hinder than to help the posing of such questions, for it blurs what needs to be kept distinct: external categorization and self-understanding, objective commonality and subjective groupness.” (2000, 27) In this paper, I seek to show that the language of identity, when used carefully, does not have to blur the line between external categorization and self-understanding. In fact, I would argue, one cannot discuss either phenomenon without using the term *identity*; either in the context of state efforts to impose an identity on some population, or the understanding of their identity among members of that population.<sup>1</sup> Instead of dismissing the term identity from my lexicon, I follow the path charted by the members of Harvard University’s “Treating Identity as a Variable” project. They define a collective identity as “a social category that varies along two dimensions – content and contestation.” (Abdelal et al 2003, 1) By separating these two dimensions, we can examine both the meanings of specific group identities for members of the group and the extent to which these meanings are accepted by group members and outsiders.

The concept of ethnic identity itself is one that is subject to contestation. Western and Russian scholars have very different ideas of what ethnic identity means. Western scholars often argue that Russian, and especially Soviet, conceptions of ethnic identity

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<sup>1</sup> One could, of course, use the terms suggested by Brubaker and Cooper. Yet I would argue that the use of terms such as *groupness* and *nationhood* is the beginning of descent into constructivist jargon and can only impede a reader’s understanding of the argument.

were mired in primordialism and resistant to the idea that ethnic identity is potentially malleable. This perception of the Soviet understanding of ethnic identity is then contrasted (unfavorably) with the now dominant Western view that ethnic identity is largely a construct of some array of forces, either through conscious manipulation by elites or as a result of structural and institutional factors that encourage individuals to identify in particular ways. While it is true that, with a few exceptions, Russian scholars are resistant to the idea that political entrepreneurs can construct ethnic identity, this does not mean that they believe that ethnic identity is a static category. Russian and Soviet scholars have traditionally focused on *ethnic processes*, a term that denotes the gradual change of ethnic identities due to economic, political, and social factors.<sup>2</sup> They recognized that ethnic identity was malleable, that it varied in salience depending on circumstances, and that individuals or even groups could shift from one ethnic identity to another over time. As V.I. Kozlov wrote in 1968, “Ethnic identity is not inborn; it is social, it develops in a certain environment, under the influence of certain socio-cultural conditions. Without such conditions it might not develop or may be very indistinct.” (Kozlov 1968, 108) While Marxism required Soviet scholars to emphasize that ethnic identity change occurred either as a result of economic conditions (natural assimilation) or because of government pressure (forced assimilation), these scholars universally recognized the socially constructed nature of ethnic identity.

Marxist thought on ethnicity came to be known as *ethnos* theory. Its followers argued that ethnic processes tend in the direction of consolidation of smaller ethnic groups into larger nations. These scholars are open to the idea of identity-shift, but only in the direction of further consolidation. V. I. Kozlov, who developed the main outlines of ethnos theory in the late 1960s, wrote that ethnic processes consist of processes of consolidation, assimilation, and division. Consolidation occurs when several linguistically and culturally similar groups merge into a single ethnic community, such as when several tribes combined to form the modern Russian ethnic group. Assimilation refers to the shift of individuals or subgroups from one already formed ethnic group to another. Finally, ethnic division occurs when an ethnic group divides into two or more

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<sup>2</sup> In Soviet and Russian social science, ethnic processes refer to the processes by which ethnic identities change over time.

groups and the members of each group then develop separate ethnic identities. While processes of consolidation and assimilation continue to occur at the present time, ethnic division was characteristic of primitive societies in ancient times, occurring largely when groups of people migrated to previously unoccupied land. Once humans occupied most of the planet, ethnic division became extremely rare, as migration now resulted in assimilation of one group by another rather than division into new groups. (Kozlov 1968, Kozlov 1969) The possibility that members of a “consolidated nation” such as the Tatars could develop ethnic identities that are separate from this group is therefore greeted with resistance not just because it is seen as contrary to the general path of historical processes, but also because ethnic groups that undergo processes of division are seen as more primitive than ones that have become immune to division by achieving full consolidation. (Cheshko 2000, 86) In this paper, I will show that ethnic division continues to occur and that it occurs because of incentives to identify in particular ways set up by the state.

### **The state and Tatar identity**

While the state can shape ethnic identity in many ways, census categorization is one of the most significant determinants of ethnic group boundaries. Thus, after the United States government introduced the category “Hispanic” in the 1970 census, this category gained prominence among Spanish-speaking Americans, gradually subsuming previously separate identities such as Mexican-American, Chicano, or Puerto Rican. While these subcategories still exist among the population, they have largely lost political relevance. (Choldin 1986)

The Russian and Soviet governments have a long history of establishing and modifying categories for their ethnic minority populations. The Russian empire tended to categorize its population by estate, which was based on social status. In a time before mass education, when the government was not expected to provide social services to the population, the empire was primarily concerned with collecting income from its subjects and keeping track of its serfs. This income took the form of various taxes and tributes. Non-Russians were categorized into estates first on the basis of whether they were serfs, aliens (*inorodtsy*), servants of the state (*sluzhilye*), or members of the local elite who had

status equal to the Russian nobility. Serfs were then further divided into crown serfs and serfs who belonged to particular individuals. *Inorodtsy* were categorized on the basis of their rights to own land and the type of tribute (*yasak*) they paid to the state.

As part of its effort to centralize and rationalize its rule over a constantly growing empire, in the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries the Russian state divided the Turkic population of the Volga region into several estates. The vast majority of the settled Turkic-speaking peasants of the Volga region were serfs who belonged to the crown or the nobility. The descendants of the Kazan Khanate's nobility and the neighboring Bashkir elite were termed *tarkhany* and were freed from paying tribute.<sup>3</sup> (Ramazanova 2002, 47) The term *sluzhilye Tatary* referred to those Tatars who were in the service of the tsar. They were not serfs and did not have to pay tribute. Because of special privileges granted to the Bashkirs when they became subject to Russian rule, the term *Bashkir* referred both to a separate ethnic group and to a social estate. This estate was given exclusive landowning privileges in the Bashkir lands.<sup>4</sup> Over time, a large number of non-Bashkirs, both Turkic-speaking and Finno-Ugric, migrated to the Bashkir lands and became part of the Bashkir estate. (Ramazanova 2002, 75-6) The *Teptiar* estate consisted of non-Russians who were permitted (*pripushchenny*) to live on Bashkir lands. (Iskhakov 1979, 29) *Mishare* were a Tatar sub-ethnic group who were given estate status in the Bashkir lands. They formed a separate military estate (similar to the Bashkirs) and received certain land-owning privileges. (Iskhakov 1993, 99, 101) By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian state allotted variable amounts of land to these different categories, with Bashkirs receiving 40 *desiatiny* of land, Mishars, Teptiars, and Tatars receiving 30, and all other peasants receiving 15 *desiatiny* per person. (Ramazanova 2002, 79)

These social divisions had an impact on how individuals perceived their group identity during this period. Since ethnic categories were only beginning to be defined, many estate categories blurred with ethnic categories. Bashkirs, Teptiars, and Mishars were all considered both ethnic and estate identities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 1897 census measured ethnic identity indirectly, by comparing respondents' native language,

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<sup>3</sup> The Kazan Khanate was an independent Turkic state that was conquered by Ivan the Terrible in 1552. The Bashkirs were a largely nomadic group of tribes that paid tribute to the Kazan rulers. For more information on the early history of the Volga Tatars, see Rorlich (1986).

<sup>4</sup> These were the lands east of the Kazan Khanate up to and including the southern reaches of the Ural mountains.

estate, and religion. (Cadiot 2002) Given the relative importance of estate as an identity category during this period, a large percentage of the Turkic-speaking population sought to identify themselves as Bashkir (by language and estate) in this census, in an effort to either secure or confirm their status in the most privileged estate.

After the revolution, the new Soviet government began to ask respondents to state their nationality directly. Beginning with the 1920 census, census planners were concerned that respondents might not understand the term “nationality” properly. For this reason, the planners resolved to formulate a list of ethnic groups that would be considered acceptable answers to this question. Other answers were recoded on the basis of a dictionary of ethnonyms. This process was retained for all subsequent Soviet and post-Soviet censuses. Over time, individuals came to accept these labels and defined their ethnic identities largely according to the categories deemed acceptable by the state.

The 1926 census divided the Turkic population of the Volga-Ural region into a number of separate groups. These labels included Bashkir, Tatar, and several intermediate and sub-ethnic groups such as Mishar, Nagaibak, Kriashen, and Teptiar.<sup>5</sup> In addition, a number of Siberian Tatar groups were listed as separate categories. The 1920s turned out to be the period of maximal categorical division for this population. Already by the late 1920s, the government made a decision to stop considering the Kriashen as a separate ethnic group, since religion could not be a valid source of ethnic difference in an atheist state. Of the major Tatar sub-ethnic groups, only the Mishars were still listed separately in the 1937 census. After this census was suppressed, the number of allowed ethnic categories was drastically cut across the country. In the subsequent 1939 census, the Mishar category was eliminated. (Sokolovsky 2002)

The census category “Tatar” remained unchanged for the next 50 years. The main source of conflict during this period was the question of the Crimean Tatars. After their deportation to Central Asia in 1944, members of this group waged a long and relatively fruitless battle for the right to return to their homeland. During this period, they were

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<sup>5</sup> Tatars who had become Christian were called Kriashen. Teptiar were asked to state whether they belonged to some other ethnic group, and were only listed as Teptiar if they could not list another group. Most of them were listed as Tatar, although about a third chose Bashkir. Only about 27,400 people listed themselves as Teptiar in the 1926 census, versus 237,600 in 1920. Only 117,000 people listed Teptiar as their native language in 1897. The others listed either Tatar or Bashkir. (See Iskhakov 1979) For more on the Nagaibak group, see Iskhakov 2002a.

combined with other Tatars in census publications. By the time they were successful in having their cause recognized during perestroika, most observers believed they were a separate ethnic group and they were treated as such in the 1989 census. Interestingly, they had not been considered a separate group in the 1926 census, when they were treated as part of the Tatar group.

The perestroika period saw the activation of nationalist feelings not only among the recognized Soviet ethnic groups, but also among subgroups within these groups. The surge of nationalism led to a desire among some people to declare their allegiance to previously acceptable but no longer officially recognized ethnic categories, or even to develop entirely new categories. While few Teptiars and Mishars called for their ethnic identity to be recognized, such claims were made by representatives of Kriashen organizations and by Siberians Tatar groups. (Stepanov 2001) In addition, a number of residents of Tatarstan argued that the ethnonym Tatar should be changed to Bulgar, to reflect what they believed were the true ethnic origins of the Turkic population of the region. (Nurutdinov 1993) This argument led to a great deal of debate in the Tatarstan press in the late 1980s, culminating in the Soviet government's agreement to change individual passport labels to Bulgar upon an individual's request. Since most of this political agitation developed after planning for the 1989 census was already complete, this census left the Tatar ethnic group intact with the exception of the aforementioned separation of the Crimean Tatars.

During the 1990s, the trend toward division accelerated. The debate on the formulation of the 2002 list of nationalities has been described by a number of scholars, and will not be reviewed in detail here. (Sokolovsky 2000, Stepanov 2001) The important point for the purpose of this paper is that the census administration and the scholars of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology who were charged with formulating the list of ethnic groups were determined to liberalize the list. Some scholars called for the elimination of a list altogether, allowing individuals complete freedom to self-identify. The census administration rejected this approach, but agreed to a relatively large list of almost 200 ethnic groups, as compared to the list of 128 ethnic groups used in the 1989 census. This approach ensured that the final say over the recognition of ethnic identities in the Russian Federation remained with the government, rather than with the population.

It is within the context of this decision that the ensuing debate on the nature of Tatar identity and the motives of the census administration in “dividing” the Tatar nation into multiple subcategories took place. This debate is the focus of the rest of this paper.

### **Tatar identity and the 2002 census**

Many of the conflicts over Tatar identity came to a head in the run up to the 2002 Russian census. The three major areas of conflict included: 1) whether various ethnic categories that had previously been counted as part of the Tatar ethnic group would be listed separately in 2002, or would once again be amalgamated under the Tatar label, 2) whether potential members of groups such as the Kriashen would identify as such, or would declare themselves Tatar in order to, in the words of Tatar activists, “affirm the unity of the Tatar nation,” and 3) whether the Turkic population of northwestern Bashkortostan would identify themselves as Tatar or Bashkir. All of these conflicts revolved around the Self-Determination Model of identity formation. Tatar leaders were concerned about whether Tatars would achieve more than fifty percent of the population in Tatarstan. Similarly, Bashkir leaders sought to ensure that the number of Bashkirs in Bashkortostan exceeded the number of Tatars in the republic. Finally, Kriashen leaders hoped that by achieving official recognition of their status as a separate ethnic group, their group would receive increased funding for its cultural needs.

#### *Tatar perceptions of “the division of the Tatar nation”*

The 2002 census was seen by most Tatar leaders and intellectuals as a conscious effort on the part of Moscow to divide the Tatar nation. This conclusion was made on the basis of reports about the promulgation of a list of over 800 nationalities, including 45 types of Tatars.<sup>6</sup> The goal of this effort, according to Tatar scholars, was to ensure that Tatars did not reach a majority of the population in their territorial homeland. The list to which they referred was the alphabetical list of ethnic labels, also known as the dictionary of nationalities, which lists all potential answers to the census nationality question. A quick review of the list shows that there are in fact 45 kinds of Tatar listed, but only if

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<sup>6</sup> For a list of the ethnic groups listed in the dictionary, without the numeric codes, see the Demoscope website: [http://demoscope.ru/weekly/knigi/alfavit/alfavit\\_nacional.html](http://demoscope.ru/weekly/knigi/alfavit/alfavit_nacional.html)

one counts the five kinds of Bashkirs also as Tatars. Because Goskomstat feared that political fallout from decisions about how to group respondents according to their answers to the ethnicity question would negatively affect participation in the census, these decisions were deliberately postponed until after the census was completed. (Sokolovsky 2002) Based on the coding sequence, we can guess at the preliminary decisions made by Goskomstat about how these groups will be combined in published data. Tatars are given the numeric code “3,” as the second largest ethnic group (1 is reserved for total population and Russian is coded 2.). Bashkirs are of course coded separately, as 6. Three other groups are coded in a way that indicates that they might be listed separately in future publications. These are Siberian Tatars (112), Crimean Tatars (113), and Kriashen (159). All other subgroups of Tatars are given high numerical codes that indicate that they will almost certainly be combined with one of the groups listed above. There are four variations on Bashkir (including part of the Teptiar subgroup), two on Kriashen, 13 on Tatar, and 20 on Siberian Tatar. Groups such as Mishar and Astrakhan Tatars are listed in the part of the sequence with codes above 200, indicating that they will be amalgamated with Tatars. Other variations include different spellings of the same group (Mizher), or the same name written in the local language (Kazanly, Sibir Tatarlar). Ethnic subgroups are also listed, especially for the Siberian Tatars. (Goskomstat 2002) Finally, I should note that having a separate code in the dictionary does not mean that a group will be listed separately in census publications. Even if a group is listed in the low-numbered part of the list (such as Siberian Tatar or Kriashen), it could still be combined with Tatar in publications, or listed as a subgroup.<sup>7</sup>

The Moscow anthropologists who formulated the list argued that the list was a dictionary designed to capture and code all potential answers to the nationality question, but Tatar academics were convinced that it was part of a plot to divide the Tatars into multiple ethnic categories. Part of the problem stemmed from differences between the two groups in how ethnic identity was conceptualized. Moscow academics focused on self-identification as the basis for ethnic identity. For this reason, their main goal was to allow the census department to code the wide range of ethnonyms that were likely to

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<sup>7</sup> During the preparations for publication of the census results, Goskomstat quietly gave in to Tatar demands and agreed to list Kriashen as a Tatar subgroup.

appear on individual census forms. (Cheshko et al 2000) Some of these academics advocated an entirely open list, no pre-assigned codes for particular ethnonyms, but this argument was rejected by Goskomstat because of a combination of practical reasons and inertia. (Sokolovsky 2000, 92)

Tatar academics, on the other hand, based their conception of the nation on concrete factors such as history, culture, and, most importantly, language. In doing so, they sought to convince their audience that the Tatars had long ago consolidated as a single nation and that the creation of new ethnonyms for parts of this nation was an effort to artificially divide the group that went against the consolidating direction of ethnic processes in the modern era. This conception is made clear in the letter addressed to President Putin by scholars at the Institute of Language, Literature, and Art of the Tatarstan Academy of Sciences. The letter notes that the official list of nationalities ignores the fact that language is the main indicator of a nation and that groups are included based on inconsistent attributes such as place of origin, place of residence, dialect, or religion. The letter concludes with the statement that if this list is used in the census, it could result in the tragic splintering of the Tatar nation into a whole group of “ethnic units” that could no longer function as a unified nation. (Obrashchenie uchennykh 2002) A similar statement by the Tatarstan legislature notes that the authors of the list of nationalities are engaged in an effort to return the Tatars to a primitive tribal stage of development. (Obrashchenie Gossoveta 2002) Neither of these statements makes any reference to the provision of the Russian constitution that gives all inhabitants of the country the right to freely choose their ethnic identity. The one Tatar academic who notes that a particular characteristic or set of characteristics can only define a nation when it is perceived as definitive by the people, spends the rest of his article describing the specific factors that make all Tatar subgroups into a single nation, without considering the critical role of self-consciousness in this process. (Khasanov 2002) Tatar intellectuals generally rejected the view that census categories were politically negotiated and therefore open to debate, arguing instead that they were historically determined and therefore unchangeable.

Tatar academics involved in the study of ethnic processes tend to focus only on the past. Most follow Soviet *ethnos* theory, which as described before argues that changes

in ethnic identity have a progressive nature that culminates in the formation of a consolidated nation. Once such a nation is formed, no further ethnic processes take place. Some scholars believe that ethnic processes are continuing among some Tatars, particularly in northwestern Bashkortostan, where ethnic identity has not yet been firmly established. (Iskhakov 1993, 36) Yet even these scholars believe that ethnic processes only function in one direction; once a nation is consolidated, it is seen as unnatural for it to divide into multiple nations or separate ethnic communities. For example, M.Kh. Khasanov, after discussing at length the stages in the development and consolidation of the Tatar nation, argues that discussions of separate groups of Tatars are “artificially encouraged” by some scholars and politicians and are the result of Soviet efforts to weaken non-Russian minority groups. (Khasanov 2002, 18) Scholars discussing the list of nationalities argue that in Soviet censuses, members of all of these subgroups were listed as Tatars and were therefore part of a homogenous group. They dismiss the possibility that new groups might have emerged during the ethnic renaissance of the late 1980s and ignore the Soviet government’s elimination of numerous ethnic groups from its list of recognized nationalities.

Given this conceptual base, it is not surprising that Tatar academics and activists saw the dictionary of nationalities as an effort to artificially divide the Tatar nation into multiple parts in order to weaken it politically and to assimilate the “newly formed” smaller subgroups. This division and assimilation would be the first stage of a process that would culminate in the elimination of ethnic republics such as Tatarstan.

### *Kriashen “separatism”*

Kriashen identity has been a subject of dispute in Tatarstan for many decades. The Kriashen are a group of Orthodox Christian Tatars that have had a separate identity since at least the eighteenth century. They live primarily in eastern Tatarstan and northwestern Bashkortostan. Beginning with the 1937 census, they were counted in Soviet censuses as part of the Tatar ethnic group. For this reason, it was difficult to determine the exact number of Kriashens prior to the controversy that surrounded the 2002 census. Estimates of the number of Christian Tatars varied from 100,000 to 200,000, but it was not known how many would identify as Kriashen. The 1926 census recorded 120,700 Kriashen in

the Soviet Union as a whole, with about 99,000 of them living in Tatarstan. (Iskhakov 1993, 56; Ivanov 2002, 171)

Kriashen leaders argue that their ethnic group is a separate Turkic ethnic group, with its own religion, language, culture, and history. They also point to the almost complete lack of intermarriage between Kriashens and Muslim Tatars. (Iskhakov 1993, 50) In doing so, they seek to counter Tatar claims of national consolidation by showing that the Kriashens remained a distinct ethnic group throughout the imperial and Soviet periods. They reject the label Kreshchennye Tatars (literally, baptized Tatar) because they believe that the ethnonym Tatar implies belonging to the Muslim religion. (Beliakov 2002) The most radical proponents of separation argue that the ancestors of the Kriashen were pagans who converted to Christianity before the sixteenth century and were never Muslim. This view directly contradicts the commonly held view that the Christian Tatar community was formed in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries by Tatars who were converted (or were forced to convert) to Christianity by Russian rulers and missionaries. (Ivanov 2002) The radicals further argue that the Kriashen language is separate from Tatar, as it was developed as a written language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century using the Cyrillic alphabet, whereas Tatar was not written in Cyrillic until the Stalinist language reforms of the 1930s. (Makarov 2002, 179)

Members of the Kriashen community have long sought to establish themselves as a separate ethnic group. Activists convened an all-Russian Kriashen congress in 1920 to discuss their political future. Kriashen were recognized as a separate nationality by the Soviet authorities until the late 1920s, when ethnic differentiation solely on the basis of religion became impermissible. (Iskhakov 1994) Thereafter, Kriashen were considered to be part of the Tatar ethnic group. The next burst of mobilization for recognition as a separate group occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, most activists sought an increase in government funding for Kriashen cultural and religious needs, rather than pursuing recognition as a separate ethnic group. One Kriashen activist, speaking at the World Tatar Congress in 1992, argued that Kriashen should be allowed to determine themselves whether they are Tatar or not. If they were asked, he said, they would declare that they are one of the branches of the Tatar nation. At the same time, he called for the re-establishment of Kriashen newspapers, magazines, and theaters that were

closed in the 1920s and the reconstruction of Kriashen Orthodox churches where the service could be conducted in their native language. (Fokin 1992, 232-3) The same activist went into somewhat more detail on Kriashen views of their own identity at the Congress of Peoples of Tatarstan, held the same year. He noted that the Kriashen are not just Tatars with a different religion; they have a separate history and separate customs. (Fokin 1993, 87) This shows that even before Kriashen leaders began to openly advocate for recognition as a separate ethnic group, their rhetoric reflected their belief that they were not part of the Tatar nation.

The character of Kriashen demands changed in the late 1990s. Kriashen activists argued that as Islam became a more important part of their identity, Muslim Tatars were refusing to accept Kriashens as equal members of the Tatar community. At the same time, the government of the republic was refusing to provide Kriashen communities with cultural and religious facilities. Together, these factors drove Kriashen activists to begin a push for recognition as a separate ethnic group, which culminated in a national conference of Kriashen communities held in Kazan in October 2001. (Beliakov 2002) The final resolution of the conference noted that Kriashen villages are in worse shape than nearby Tatar villages, that Kriashen have not been able to open new schools or churches, and that Kriashens are excluded from positions of authority in Tatarstan. (Rezoliutsiia Kriashen 2002) The conference also adopted a declaration of Kriashen self-determination.

Despite the push for separation among Kriashen intellectuals, there is a wide range of opinion among the Kriashen population on whether the Kriashen are part of the Tatar nation or not. Some members of the group see themselves simply as Tatars who belong to a different religion (Ivanov 2002). A second group believes that they are an ethnic subgroup of the Tatar nation. A third group believes that they are an entirely separate ethnic group not only because of their religion, but also due to cultural and linguistic differences between themselves and Tatars. A final segment of the population believe that Kriashen have been driven to become a separate group as the result of being treated as second-class citizens by Muslim Tatars. As one Kriashen activist told me, “The Tatar nation had to choose between two formulas – one nation and one religion, or one nation and two religions. Most Tatars have chosen the first path, and they keep reminding

us of this.” (Gorenburg 2002) Kriashen leaders emphasize the importance of choice in the selection of an ethnic identity by an individual. They want to be given the right to identify themselves as members of a separate group, while recognizing that at least some portion of the people they consider Kriashen would choose to identify themselves as Tatar during the census.

Kriashen leaders feel that Tatars only want to include them as part of the Tatar nation in order to increase the total Tatar population. They believe that the leadership of Tatarstan was afraid that if Kriashen were listed as a separate category in the results of the 2002 census, then the Tatars would make up less than 50 percent of the population of Tatarstan, which would weaken the current leadership’s position in its effort to maintain the republic’s sovereign status within the Russian Federation. They point to the lack of Kriashen representation in the recently held World Congress of Tatars as evidence that Tatar leaders do not want to listen to Kriashen points of view. (Shabalin 2002) Tatar activists feed this perception when they argue that the Kriashen identity project is a plot directed by Moscow to ensure that Tatars remain weak and divided.

Some Kriashen activists, however, argue that Kriashen cultural survival is only possible within the Tatar nation, since the Kriashen do not have the financial and human resources to develop their own culture. They argue that if Kriashen become a separate ethnic group, they are likely to become assimilated within the Russian community in a relatively short period of time. They are concerned that young Kriashens who move to urban areas easily become a part of Russian society because of their Russian names and Orthodox religion. (Makarov 2002, 177, 182)

The views of Kriashen identity among Tatar writers are almost as varied. There are many examples of anti-Kriashen articles by Tatar writers. A particularly strident example is a 1994 article by Fanis Baltach, entitled “Should the Kriashen be proud or ashamed?” Baltach argues that attempts to show that Kriashen conversions predate the Russian conquest of Kazan are nothing more than the effort to excuse the Russification policies of the conquerors. He blames the Kriashen for weakening the Kazan Khanate and thus hastening its downfall. For this “betrayal of Islam,” they were given privileges by the Russian state. He says that the Kriashen have maintained their language and culture only because they live among Muslim Tatars – otherwise they would have long ago been

Russified. To Baltach, all efforts to promote the Kriashen as a separate people are the manifestation of a “conscious effort to destroy the unity of the long-suffering Bulgar-Tatar nation.” Efforts to establish separate theaters, newspapers, and even churches for the Kriashen are provocations. Baltach believes that Kriashen calls to be proud of their religion are part of an effort to show that Christianity is superior to Islam. Instead, they should feel shame about the actions of their ancestors and take measures to gradually return to Islam as an act of “moral and spiritual cleansing.” In the end, he believes, the division of a nation between two religions can only lead to conflict. (Baltach 1994) Given this sort of rhetoric, it is not surprising that many Kriashen activists feel that they are being driven out of the Tatar nation.

Less strident critiques of the Kriashen national project argue that the Kriashen are simply an ethnic subgroup of the Tatar nation. There is a scholarly consensus that the Kriashen do not have their own language, but speak a version of Tatar that lacks Arabic or Persian loan words; Tatar activists seize on this point, arguing that a group cannot be a separate ethnic group if it does not have a separate language. (Iskhakov 1993, 50)

Perhaps the most sophisticated point of view has been put forth by the Tatar academic Damir Iskhakov. In works written in the early 1990s, Iskhakov discussed the tendency among both Tatars and Kriashen at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to see the Kriashen group as separate from the Tatars. (Iskhakov 1993, 94-99) He argued that the Kriashens had also not been fully absorbed into the Tatar nation during the Soviet period, especially given that ethnic identity had become connected to a resurgence of religiosity in the 1980s and early 1990s. (Iskhakov 1993, 99; Iskhakov, 1994, 42) Given this situation, he commended the platform of the Tatar Public Center, which stated that “Tatar-Kriashens” must themselves determine the path of their further spiritual development.” (Cited in Iskhakov 1993, 99 ftn 104)

In more recent works that are, perhaps, driven by the desire to assure the unity of the Tatar nation for the census, Iskhakov is more reluctant to allow the Kriashen to maintain a separate identity. He admits that neglect of Kriashen issues by Tatar leaders and the Tatarstan government is to blame for the Kriashen drive for a separate identity. (Iskhakov 2002c) But, he argues, the Kriashen will always be dependent on the local government to finance their cultural needs, since Moscow is too distant and too

preoccupied with other problems. Therefore, the Kriashen community would be best served if Kriashen leaders came to an understanding with the government of Tatarstan and Tatar leaders about ways of ensuring that Kriashen cultural needs are met. The best recipe, he argues, is to pass a law on the Kriashen population that would address these needs while ensuring that the Kriashen remain a subgroup of a united Tatar nation. (Iskhakov 2002b) Another author argues that Tatars have to de-emphasize the Islamic aspect of their identity if they want to retain the Kriashen as part of the Tatar nation. (Gibadullin 2002)

The range of opinion found among Kriashen leaders was reflected in the choices individuals made in filling out their census forms. In a meeting at a school in one Kriashen village near Kazan, I was told by all of the teachers that they would declare themselves Tatar on their census forms, while several Kriashen leaders in Kazan were equally firm in stating that they would insist that census-takers record them as Kriashen. A number of people listed their nationality as “Kreschennyi Tatar,” a choice that was not found among the options in the coding manual and was most likely coded as Tatar. (Gorenburg 2002) In Bashkortostan, evidence collected during fieldwork indicates that older Kriashen tended to identify as Tatar while the younger generation usually listed themselves as Kriashen. (Gabdrafikov 2003)

In response to the publicity surrounding Kriashen efforts to separate from the Tatar nation, President Shaimiev met with Kriashen leaders in April 2002 to discuss how the government of Tatarstan could assist their cultural and spiritual development. Shaimiev promised that the government would pay more attention to Kriashen demands in these areas and would also look into the possibility of Kriashen representation in local and republic government. (Sokolovsky 2002)

Prior to the census, Kriashen leaders were quite concerned that the Tatarstan government would take measures to ensure that the vast majority of Kriashen were recorded as Tatar in the census forms. During the course of the census, regional hotlines received a number of complaints from Kriashen who said they were either prevented from listing their nationality as Kriashen or had pressure exerted on them to list themselves as Tatar. Kriashen leaders suspected that those who listed their nationality as “Kreschennyi Tatar” would simply be coded as Tatar, reducing the total number of

Kriashen recorded in the census. The complaints resulted in the dispatch of an official Goskomstat commission of inquiry to several rural districts of Tatarstan, where the majority of the Kriashen live. Although newspapers initially reported widespread violations of the census law in these districts, upon the commission's return to Kazan, it was officially announced that there were few actual violations and most complaints were the result of family disagreements about how to declare their nationality. The rapid change of tone, combined with the local Goskomstat's refusal to meet with me to discuss the conduct of the census, could lead to suspicions that Goskomstat did not want to report anything that might undermine the perception that the census was being conducted in an honest and efficient manner. However, I have not found any evidence that there were more than the 20-30 violations officially registered by the regional census hotline. (Gorenburg 2002) Other analysts have also reported that the feared mass campaign to force Kriashen to identify as Tatars during the census did not occur (Abrakhmanov 2002a).

While Goskomstat has so far only published the ethnic breakdown of the population according to the census for the largest ethnic groups, initial reports on some smaller groups and on the ethnic breakdown of the population in some regions have been published in the local press. Preliminary census results indicate that only about 25,000 people throughout the Russian Federation identified as Kriashen, including less than 13,000 in Tatarstan. Given pre-census estimates of 200-300 thousand Christian Tatars living in Russia, including over 100,000 in Tatarstan, the campaign by Kriashen leaders to persuade Christian Tatars to identify as Kriashen was largely unsuccessful. Tatar leaders also achieved their political aim, as Tatars comprised approximately 53 percent of the total population of Tatarstan.<sup>8</sup> (RFE/RL Tatar/Bashkir Report, 3 October 2003 and 6 November 2003)

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<sup>8</sup> The number of Kriashen and the percentage of Tatars in Tatarstan were originally reported by *Zvezda Povolzhya*, 2 October 2003. The total number of Kriashen in the Russian Federation were originally reported by *Vostochnyi Ekspres*, 6 November 2003.

### *Tatars or Bashkirs?*<sup>9</sup>

The origin and identity of the Turkic population of northwestern Bashkortostan has been a source of conflict between Tatar and Bashkir intellectuals for many years. Much of this conflict has revolved around the relative number of Tatars and Bashkirs living in the republic. Although the exact figures have varied over time, for most of the Soviet and post-Soviet period, Bashkirs comprised only 20-25 percent of the republic's population, while the Tatar share of the population ranged from 25 to 30 percent, with Russians making up an additional 40 percent. Bashkir leaders have been concerned that Bashkir control of their own republic was undermined by these demographic factors, particularly because Bashkirs were not even the largest non-Russian group on their own territory. As with the Tatar-Kriashen conflict, fears of loss of control of territory have led politicians and intellectual leaders to seek to influence the content of identity categories and the choices made by individuals when declaring their ethnic identity for the public record.

The identity conflict in this case begins with the origin of the population in question. Tatar scholars consider the population of northwestern Bashkortostan either as having been Tatars all along or as a mixed population that belonged to the Bashkir estate through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but spoke Tatar and joined the dominant group once estates were dissolved after the revolution. (Gabdullin 2002, 214-15) This position allows the scholars to claim that the present-day Tatar and Tatar-speaking population of this region is indigenous to the region. Most Bashkir scholars, on the other hand, argue that this population was made up of ethnic Bashkirs who were either assimilated by Tatars or retained a Bashkir identity but came to believe the language they spoke was Tatar. These authors usually do not acknowledge that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ethnonym Bashkir referred to both an ethnic group and an estate category. (Mazhitov 2002) In some cases, they do mention this issue, but note that it was virtually impossible for non-ethnic Bashkirs to be admitted to the Bashkir estate. (Ganeeva 1992, 64; Kulsharipov 2002, 7-9)

There is a separate debate between Tatar and Bashkir linguists about the nature of the language of this population, with Tatar linguists insisting that the entire Turkic

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<sup>9</sup> For more detail on historical patterns of identity change in northwestern Bashkortostan, see Gorenburg (1999).

population of the region speaks a variant of the middle dialect of Tatar, while Bashkir linguists argue that language spoken by local Bashkirs is actually the northwestern dialect of the Bashkir language, which has changed to resemble Tatar over time because of the Tatar language education in place in the region since the 1930s. (Ramazanova 2002, 25; Mirzhanova 1976; Mirzhanova 1989)

These politically charged scholarly debates neglect the reality of identity in the region. In truth, it is virtually impossible to separate Tatars and Bashkirs in northwestern Bashkortostan according to cultural or linguistic factors. Not only are ethnic categories difficult to distinguish for outsiders, but also the local inhabitants themselves frequently use them interchangeably, either in accordance with local political conditions, or depending on the particular situational context. (Gabdrafiqov 2002b) Nevertheless, neither side in the conflict is willing to allow that the people living in this region have multiple or indistinct ethnic identities – both sides argue from the assumption that each individual can have no more than a single ethnic identity.

Given this context, it is not surprising that the region's dominant ethnic identity becomes a hot political issue during censuses. Until the 1980s, Bashkir leaders used their political power to induce local inhabitants to identify as Bashkirs in order to increase the overall percentage of Bashkirs in the republic and thus both justify their control of the republic and increase the amount of resources that would flow to Bashkir cultural institutions. This goal was accomplished by initiating propaganda campaigns arguing that ethnic identity was independent of native language, forcing local administrators to produce a 'quota' of Bashkirs, and requiring enumerators to pressure individuals to identify as Bashkir. Such tactics were used in the 1959 and 1979 censuses to produce decreases in the republic's Tatar population compared to the previous census, while the Bashkir population increased by 1 percent/year and 0.5 percent/year, respectively. (Gorenburg 1999, 570-2) Despite these efforts, Tatars outnumbered Bashkirs in the republic in all Soviet censuses.

At the same time, Bashkir intellectuals, who feared further Tatar assimilation among the Bashkir population of the region, sought to reduce the Tatar cultural imprint in the republic. This was accomplished by the removal of the Tatar language from the list of

the republic's official languages in 1978 and the subsequent reduction in Tatar language education and publishing. (Gorenburg 1999, 572-3).

In the late 1980s, democratization and changes in republic leadership both eliminated ethnically-based privileges and made government campaigns to persuade individuals to declare themselves Bashkir more difficult. At a 1987 plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Central Committee secretary Egor Ligachev publicly condemned the campaign of forced Bashkirization of Tatars that was undertaken by the republic's Brezhnev-era leadership. (Mazhitov 2002, 63) As a result of these factors, and in reaction to the linguistic Bashkirization campaign of the early 1980s, a large percentage of people in northwestern Bashkortostan who had previously identified as Bashkir declared themselves Tatar in the 1989 census. This backlash resulted in an eight percent reduction in the republic's Bashkir population and a simultaneous 19 percent increase in its Tatar population. Tatar activists used these results to demand that the Tatar language once again be given official status in the republic. (Valeev and Gabdrafiqov 2001)

Bashkir scholars deny that there was any kind of Bashkirization campaign in the early 1980s. They argue that the statement to this effect made at the 1987 Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee was "a terrible lie that should be considered as a political provocation toward the entire Bashkir nation." This statement is described as a signal to launch an anti-Bashkir campaign that included the elimination of Bashkir language education in the region.<sup>10</sup> (Mazhitov 2002, 63) They also see the 1989 census as an aberration that was caused by a campaign of forced Tatarization of Bashkirs in northwestern Bashkortostan, carried out by the republic's "ultra-radical" and "anti-Bashkir" Communist leaders together with Tatar nationalists, both local and from Tatarstan. The chairman of the executive committee of the World Bashkir Congress (WBC) argued that extremists among the Tatar population took the preparation and conduct of the 1989 census under their control. According to him, local administrators, who created an atmosphere of fear in the region by having opponents fired from their jobs, supported them in this endeavor. (Mazhitov 2002, 63)

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<sup>10</sup> Bashkir nationalists neglect to mention that Bashkir language education had been introduced less than 10 years earlier and had resulted in a great deal of controversy.

The executive committee of the World Bashkir Congress, meeting in October 2001, argued that the violations of the right to freely choose one's nationality that occurred during the conduct of the 1989 census required the Bashkir community to adopt a coordinated set of measures to ensure that the 2002 census did not produce a similar result. These measures included the holding of meetings in each village in northwestern Bashkortostan to explain the importance of the census and the criteria that define ethnic identity and to counter Tatar propaganda designed to distort the state of ethnic relations in the region. The Congress also resolved to publish the results of previous censuses in each region, called for the end of uncontrolled migration to the region from former Soviet republics, and sought permission for the presence of observers during the conduct of the census, the coding process, and the compilation of results. (Rezoliutsiia VKB 2002)

The World Bashkir Congress sought to enlist the Russian government in its effort to oppose the perceived Tatar threat. To this end, organizers of a conference entitled "Against the falsification of the history of Bashkortostan" produced a letter to President Putin. This letter argued that Tatar leaders were conducting an organized anti-Bashkir campaign as part of an effort to assimilate the Turkic peoples of the Volga and turn Kazan into the center of the Volga-Ural region. It noted that:

the strengthening of the demographic potential of the Bashkir nation objectively corresponds to the political interests of both the Russian (Rossiiskoe) state and the Russian (Russkoe) nation, because Bashkirs are the necessary counterbalance for the ongoing Tatar expansion in the Volga-Ural region. The creation of a Tatar belt stretching through the entire Volga-Ural region to the Kazakhstan steppes, which is the dream of Tatar extremists, cannot correspond to the long-term geopolitical interests of Moscow. (Gabdrafikov 2002a)

In this letter, Bashkir leaders appealed to Russian fears of a Muslim belt linking the Russian heartland with Central Asia in order to ensure support from Moscow in their effort to increase the percentage of Bashkirs in Bashkortostan.

As the date of the census approached, the WBC conducted many of the propaganda measures called for in its resolution, including the publication of pamphlets with titles such as "Tragic Demography," which describes the various calamities that have befallen the Bashkir people since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the assimilative pressures they have faced from both Tatars and Russians. This brochure calls for immediate measures to be taken to ensure that Bashkir youth in northwestern Bashkortostan is

educated in their “native language.” (Kulsharipov 2002) Other propaganda measures included public meetings where Bashkir academics and musicians made efforts to explain to the local population that they should declare themselves Bashkir to ensure that the republic maintains its sovereignty and the publication of newspaper articles that sought to explain that the spoken language of the region is the western dialect of Bashkir that has been assimilated by Tatar and that therefore the speakers of this language are ethnic Bashkirs. (Gabdrafikov 2003)

Resentment of perceived anti-Tatar activities in Bashkortostan had been bubbling up well before the census. Local Tatar activists had long claimed that the republic government was neglecting Tatar cultural needs and reducing Tatar language education. The republic government had for years refused to register a Tatar Writers’ Union and would only allow 2-3 Tatar books to be published annually. It also neglected to import Tatar language books and teaching materials that were published in Tatarstan. Individuals routinely had to travel to Kazan to purchase Tatar literature and textbooks for local schools. Furthermore, these activists complained that Tatars in Bashkortostan were being shut out of government jobs and were discriminated against in university admissions. At the same time, it was commonly accepted that Tatars who switched their ethnic identification to Bashkir could quickly acquire a prestigious job or gain admission to Bashkir State University. (Iazyk 2001)

Tensions between Tatar and Bashkir groups within Bashkortostan have, perhaps inevitably, complicated relations between the leaders of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. These inter-republican tensions became public as preparations for the 2002 census intensified. The first blow was struck at the III World Tatar Congress, held in Kazan in August 2002. After the closing of the congress, a special meeting was held between Congress delegates and President Putin. During this meeting, an unofficial delegate from Bashkortostan was given the floor and spoke, in the presence of both President Putin and Bashkortostan President Rakhimov, about the discrimination faced by Bashkortostan’s Tatars. (RFE/RL Tatar-Bashkir Report, 2 September 2002) Several days later, while on a visit to Cheliabinsk Oblast, Tatarstan President Shaimiev declared that the Tatars of that region live better than those who live in Bashkortostan. (Gabdrafikov 2002c) While top Bashkortostan leaders did not react publicly to these statements, Bashkortostani

newspapers printed a large number of letters condemning the leadership of Tatarstan from Bashkortostani public figures representing various ethnic groups. The republic leadership also cancelled a concert tour of Bashkortostan by the Tatarstan State Song and Dance Ensemble. Tatarstani public figures, in turn, used this action to condemn the government of Bashkortostan again for discriminating against Tatar culture.

(Gabdrafikov 2002c)

According to fieldwork conducted in the region during the census, Bashkir propaganda calling on the Turkic inhabitants of northwestern Bashkortostan to identify as Bashkir has not had the desired effect. Instead, most local inhabitants blame heavy-handed Bashkir propaganda efforts for exacerbating inter-ethnic tensions in the republic and in the region. Many local inhabitants consider themselves both Tatar and Bashkir and would prefer to not have to choose between the two identities. They fear that Bashkir propaganda and the recent introduction of the Bashkir language as a required subject in schools was the first step in a new Bashkirization program that would culminate in the introduction of Bashkir-language education and the shift of the language of local newspapers from Tatar to Bashkir. As the editor of one local newspaper put it, the introduction of Bashkir as a government language is causing a negative reaction to that language among the local population. “Tatars do not need to study the Bashkir language. They can understand it anyway.” (Maris Nazirov, editor in chief of the local newspaper, cited in Gabdrafikov 2003) The head of the local Tatar Public Center branch argues that Tatars want equality; since they are more numerous in the republic than Bashkirs, their language should also be an official language. (Fanil Mudarisov, cited in Gabdrafikov 2003)

During census preparations, Tatar activists warned repeatedly that the Bashkortostan authorities were planning to falsify census results on a mass scale by requiring enumerators to fill in the nationality question on census blanks with a pencil or to leave it blank altogether, thus allowing for changes to be made after the fact. They argued that local administrators had been given quotas by the central government for the minimum number of Bashkirs to be registered in each district. (RFE/RL Tatar-Bashkir Report, 20 September 2002) Interviews with local officials, conducted during the census by Ildar Gabdrafikov and Xavier le Torrivelec, showed that such concerns, while not

completely misplaced, were to some extent exaggerated. R.A. Ziiakaev, the head of the Ufa city census commission, noted that the deputy chair of the Russian Goskomstat had written a letter to the chair of the Bashkortostan Goskomstat requiring that the census law be followed to the letter. Furthermore, the Russian Goskomstat sent a commission to ensure that there were no problems during the census. At the same time, enumerators in Ufa and northwest Bashkortostan reported that they were required to submit summaries of the number of Bashkirs they enumerated at the end of each working day. The only attempt at falsification encountered by the research team occurred in Ufa. There, one enumerator noted that the head instructor of her precinct privately asked enumerators to leave the nationality entry blank in certain cases so as to allow officials to fill in Bashkir at a later time. The enumerator reported that this request elicited a uniformly negative reaction and that all enumerators filled in nationality at the time of the interview. Ildar Gabdrafiqov notes that despite these issues, his team noted no major violations during the conduct of the census in either the capital city or in northwestern Bashkortostan. (Gabdrafiqov 2003)

The census results published so far do not include ethnic breakdowns at the regional level. However, aggregate data for the Russian Federation indicate that the balance between Tatars and Bashkirs in Bashkortostan is likely to have shifted significantly. The total number of Tatars according to the 2002 census is 5,558,000, which is only 14,700 greater than the total number of Tatars according to the 1989 census. Meanwhile, the total number of Bashkirs is 1,673,800, an increase of about 330,000 compared to the 1989 data. (Smoliakova 2003) Given relatively similar birth, death, and migration rates, it seems likely that most of the difference in rates of population growth for the two ethnic groups comes from changes in ethnic identification among the population of northwest Bashkortostan. Given the lack of major violations detected during the conduct of the census, the changes in identification most likely indicate the success of the republic government's campaign to persuade the population of the region to register as Bashkir rather than Tatar. It is also possible, however, that the relative number of Tatars and Bashkirs was changed during the coding and aggregation process, which took place in Bashkortostan rather than in Moscow. In either case, the extent of the conflict over the ethnic identity of the population of northwestern

Bashkortostan shows the importance attached to numerical dominance by the leaders of both the Bashkir and Tatar ethnic groups.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have shown that the state plays an important role in influencing ethnic identities. The census is one of the most important mechanisms used by the state to shape these identities. The Soviet and Russian states developed lists of officially recognized ethnic groups, which were used for the publication of census materials. These categories were then transferred to other venues, such as the nationality listing in individual identity documents. Over time, individuals internalized the officially recognized identity labels while de-emphasizing labels that were no longer recognized. In many cases, individuals remained aware that their ancestors had considered themselves to be part of a different group, but believed that those groups were subgroups of the recognized group to which they now assigned themselves. As a result, when presented with the opportunity to identify themselves as members of these previously unrecognized groups, many people chose to remain a part of the larger group to which they had “belonged” all of their lives.

At the same time, the status of various ethnic categories and the boundaries between these categories became subject to political contestation. The main goal in these contests was to maximize the number of people who assigned themselves to particular ethnic groups. For this reason, the governments of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan fought over the ethnic identity of the Turkic population of northwestern Bashkortostan. Similarly, the government of Tatarstan sought to ensure that Kriashen identified as Tatar during the census in order to maintain a Tatar majority within the republic. In both cases, leaders feared that a reduction in the proportion of the dominant ethnic group within the republic’s total population would potentially result in the loss of control over the republic’s political life by members of that group.

A second aspect of political contestation over the status of identities resulted from the dominance of Soviet thinking about ethnic identities, with its emphasis on the progressive nature of ethnic processes. Both academics and political leaders believed in an implicit hierarchy of ethnic groups, with “consolidated nations” at the top and “tribes”

at the bottom. Groups that were at the top of the hierarchy were seen as having higher status than lesser groups. This contributed to the politicization of the question of whether the Tatars were a single ethnic group or a set of loosely related groups that were “artificially” united under a single ethnonym by Soviet authorities. The resolution of this question had ramifications that went beyond status, since Tatar activists feared that an “artificial” group might lose its republic status and see its cultural funding diverted to splinter groups.

The extent to which the declaration of a particular identity on the census had an impact on everyday perceptions of one’s ethnic identity varied. For all but the oldest Kriashen, the 2002 census was the first opportunity to take a stand on whether they believed themselves to be part of the Tatar nation. This type of symbolic act may have a significant impact on individual self-perception long after the census has passed. On the other hand, the Tatar-Bashkir population of northwestern Bashkortostan has a long history of distinguishing between the ethnic identity presented to the public and the actual self-perception of a particular individual. Furthermore, many people in this region consider themselves to belong to both groups and choose the identity they declare on the census on the basis of external factors such as the political situation and the intentions of their neighbors. At the same time, the potential impact of the aggregation of these choices on the local population can be quite significant. As occurred after the 1979 census, if an entire village declares itself ethnically Bashkir, Tatar-language education and cultural activities might be eliminated. Thus, while the symbolic impact of identifying with a particular group in this region may be limited, the practical impact is likely to be quite important.

All of these examples show that state efforts to categorize and count citizens are inherently political. Census results cannot be regarded as an objective assessment of demographic trends. Instead, scholars must be cognizant of the politics that determine the categories that are used in census publications. Even when a census measures ethnic identity through self-reporting by respondents, the numbers of people counted as belonging to particular ethnic groups are determined as much by the decisions of the agency planning the census as by the self-categorizations of responding individuals.

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