

Volga Tatars' Transition to Islam An Historical Overview (Part I)

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The Volga-Ural¹ region has been the habitat of Tatars² for over a thousand years. Prior to Tatars this region was the residence of a Pontic group of people³ the Bulgars (ancestors of Tatars) who made their appearance in the Pontic steppe around 5th century. But in 558 A.D. they succumbed to the Avars, also an Altaic people (Turkic is a sub-group of the Altaic linguistic family). By the second half of 7th century the Bulgars regained enough power to control a sizeable area north to the Sea of Azov. But within a short time they had split in two one horde occupying present day Bulgaria and the other migrating to the vicinity of the junction of Volga and Kama rivers where by the late 10th century they formed a semi-nomadic confederation. They had two important cities Bulgar and Suvar, which profited as transshipment points in the trade between the fur-selling Ugarians and Russians of the far north and the southern civilizations Byzantium, the Muslim Caliphate of Baghdad and Turkistan.

The region was crossed from the east to the west by the white and the black Huns who emerged from the depths of Siberia, and by traders who sought both goods and knowledge. From the most ancient times trade routes extended from north to south facilitating access to fur, silver and gold which abounded in the region⁴. In his account of Heracles and Gelonos, Herodotus mentions a wooden city, which was situated somewhere on the southern frontier of the Hyperborean lands. By some it is thought that this city stood near the mouth of the river Kama, which flows into the Volga where the city of Bulgar was later constructed. If this is correct, the territory of Volga-Bulgaria, the centre of Tatar civilization, would have been exposed to Greek culture as early as first century B.C.⁵. Geographically Volga-Ural region can

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be defined as stretching in the East from the borders of Turkey and the shores of Black Sea upto Kazakhstan in the West and in the north upto the steppes of Siberia and in the south upto the boundaries of Iran and Turkmenistan including some areas of western Turkistan, Dagestan, northern Qafqaz, Krimea and western districts of Siberia apart from the mainlands of Volga-Ural region. Historically this region includes the territories of modern republics of Tatarstan, Bashkortstan, Chuvashia, Mariel, Udmurita, Mordovia and the areas situated on Volga and in Ural. A number of important cities of Islamic culture and learning, such as Kazan, Astarakhan, Ufa, Orenburg and Trotsk are located in this region. A particular feature of this region is its historical experience in the multi-cultural co-existence of peoples from different religions and ethnic origins.

The region is fertile as a result of the abundance of water; the gigantic snow clad peaks of Pamirs enrich the water bodies throughout the year and an amalgam of both natural as well as human beauty renders the whole area as a replica of paradise. The whole region is full of mineral resources and abounding agricultural wealth. It is the leading oil and natural-gas producer and the starting point for a pipeline to Eastern Europe. There are also important deposits of brown coal, limestone, gypsum, dolomite, and marl in addition to platinum, iron, gold, silver, copper and diamonds. Lumbering and food, leather, oil refining and fur processing are major industries of the region. Manufactures include machinery, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. The Volga, Kama, Belaya and Vyatka rivers are important for both transportation and irrigation. There are also several hydroelectric stations. The region's natural resources are considered as the backbone of Russian economy. The forests and the flora of this region are equally matchless with bumper production of high quality fruits. The Uranium, that had made the erstwhile USSR a global menace, was mainly produced in this region.

The present paper is divided into two parts, in the first part we shall make an attempt to give an outline of Volga Tatars' transition to Islam and in the second part we will try to examine the place of Volga Tatars as a dominant political force among the Muslims of erstwhile Soviet Union. Needless to mention that the Tatars were the first non-Russian, Turkic speaking Muslims

with whose help the Muscovite state was able to extend its contacts with other Turkic and Muslim populations along the southern and eastern frontiers of their realm.

Although Islam spread in the territory of Russia⁶ about 1400 years ago, it appeared on the banks of Volga river at the beginning of 10th century. The Bulgars adopted Islam as an official religion in 922 A.D. when, under the leadership of Ibn Fadlan, the embassy of Caliph al-Muqtadar Billah (908-32 A.D.) arrived to the capital of the state of Bulgar⁷. Simultaneously, this event became the act of international recognition of the Volga-Bulgaria as an independent state. In this way the ancestors of Tatars at an early date, joined Islam the most advanced civilization of the contemporary period.

Along with the introduction of Islamic tenets came a sharp increase in literacy. It gave a push to the rapid development of education, culture, science and society as a whole. These factors greatly improved the trade relations of Volga-Bulgaria with the rest of the Islamic world⁸. The region now became part of the cultural sphere embraced by the more advanced civilizations of Khwarazm, Persia, the Arab Middle East and Spain. So far the Turks had played a minor role in the Islamic world, and Volga-Bulgaria might be considered one of the first Turkic states having all the components and potential of a highly developed urban culture⁹. The formation of the Mongolian empire and then the Golden Horde, did not change the position of Islam in the Volga region. According to the *Yassa* (code of laws) of Chengiz Khan, all religions were admitted as equal, exempted from taxes and the oppression of any existing church and the clergy was considered a crime subject to punishment, therefore, both Islam and Christianity developed freely in the Golden Horde era. Even when, in the year 1312 the Uzbek Khan declared Islam as the state religion, it did not touch the Russian princedoms that remained orthodox. "Khan was very tolerant towards his Christian subjects, who were left undisturbed in the exercise of their religion and even allowed them to pursue their missionary labours in his territory"¹⁰. Already in the middle ages, tolerance was implanted in the culture of the Tatars and it found continuity in the next centuries¹¹. One of the most remarkable documents of Muhammadan tolerance in the Golden Horde era is the charter

that Uzbek Khan granted to the Metropolitan Peter in 1313: *“By the will and power, the greatness and mercy of the Most High! Uzbek to all our princes, great and small, let no man insult the metropolitan church, of which Peter is the head, or his servants or his church men; let no man seize their property, goods or people. Let no man meddle with the affairs of the metropolitan church, since they are divine. Whoever shall meddle therein and transgress our edict, will be guilty before God and feel His wrath and be punished by us with death. Let the metropolitan dwell in the path of safety and rejoice, with a just and upright heart let him (or his deputy) decide and regulate all ecclesiastical matters. We solemnly declare that neither we nor our children nor the princes of our realm nor the governors of our provinces will in any way interfere with the affairs of the Church and the metropolitan, or in their towns, districts, villages, chases and fisheries, their hives, lands, meadows, forests, towns and places under their bailiffs, their vineyards, mills, winter quarters for cattle, or any of the properties and goods of the church. Let the mind of the metropolitan be always at peace and free from trouble, with uprightness of heart let him pray to God for us, our children and our nation. Whoever, shall lay hands on anything that is sacred, shall be held guilty, he shall incur the wrath of God and the penalty of death, that others may be dismayed at his fate. When the tribute or other dues, such as custom duties, ploughtax, tolls or relays are levied, or when we wish to raise troops among our subjects, let nothing be exacted from the cathedral churches under the metropolitan Peter, or from any of his clergy ... Whatever may be exacted from the clergy, shall be returned threefold... Their laws, their churches, their monasteries and chapels shall be respected; whoever condemns or blames their religion, shall not be allowed to excuse himself under any pretext, but shall be punished with death. The brothers and sons of priests and deacons, living at the same table and in the same house, shall enjoy the same privileges¹²”*.

Volga-Bulgaria produced a galaxy of towering personalities of versatile scholarship and learning. Prominent among them are the 11th century theologian of Volga-Bulgaria, Ibn N'uman (1022-1086) who was also the *Qadi* of the city and a prolific historian from whose work the famous

Andalusian traveler Abu Hâmid al-Garnati (1080-1169) the author of *Tuhfat al-Albab* (who visited the city of Bulgar several times between 1135 and 1151 A.D. and made extensive use of local historical sources) has frequently benefited. Another prominent scholar was (Hoja) Khwaja Ahmad al-Bulgari who, according to some sources was also engaged as tutor by Mahmud Ghaznavi (907-1030 A.D.). Other names include Abul 'Ala Hamid bin Idris al-Bulgari who flourished at the beginning of 12th century; the scholars and poets Sulaiman bin Dâ'ud, Burhan al-din Ibrahim al-Bulgari (d. 1204 A.D.) and Taj al-din bin Yunus al-Bulgari. All these scholars lived and worked in the cities of Volga-Bulgaria such as Bulgar the great, Suwar, Saksin and Juketau. One of the first classical Turkish poets whose influence has persisted over the centuries was the sufi Hoja (Khwaja) Ahmad Yasavi (d. 1166 A.D.). He was born to a family of Sheikhs, studied at Bukhara and later became the founder of his own sufi order the Yasaviya. His verse played an important role in spreading not only his own brand of mysticism but Islamic ideology in general to all corners of *Dashti-Kipchak*¹³. The literary figures and poets of undeniable worth and stature emerged in this region as great patriots of Tatar culture and Islamic civilization in the aftermath of the Mongol onslaught. The national poet of Tatars, Qul 'Ali (Kol Gali) (1183-1236) whose long poem *Kitab-i-Yûsuf* or *Qissa-i-Yûsuf* was probably completed in 1233 A.D. / 630 A.H. and is considered the first great master piece of Tatar verse:

Kol gali is thy servants name, oh, lord benign;
 With four and twenty syllables he made each line;
 Forgive thy slave; upon him shed thy grace divine;
 May He send me His Mercy, which I hope for now.

In the year six-hundred and thirty was this complete;
 The thirtieth day of Rajab did my labours greet;
 I made this shining vault of verse and poetry sweet;
 And I received the grace of the Creator now¹⁴.

Preachers from this region extended their efforts and influence into

Siberian region and as a result Islam was professed by all the Tatar tribes of Siberia. In this way the whole vast area of Volga-Ural became a powerful cultural entity from the fringes of Siberia to the heart of Central Asia united under the banner of Islam. According to one estimate, this region had a population of three and a half crore Muslims on the eve of Socialist Revolution¹⁵.

During the 11th and 12th centuries, before the Mongol invasion, which began in earnest in 1236 A.D., Volga-Bulgaria appears to have been prosperous in both material and cultural terms. Tatars of the Volga region have been referred to as possessors of an ancient and splendid civilization. We may judge the achievements of that period through both archeological findings and written works composed in the Middle East and other parts of the world.

The strong influences of the reference group culture of Iran and Central Asia and the emergence of Sufi *silsilas*, orders' therein and the great force of Muslim character together with the growing international trade, that offered sufficient opportunities for Tatars to improve their economic prosperity, are the main factors that attracted them towards Islam and within a short span of time made the Volga-Ural region another centre of Islamic culture perhaps less unequal to Bukhara, Samarqand and other metropolises of Islamic empire. The Tatar Muslim elite showed an advanced zeal in further disseminating the faith of Islam among the Mongols and Russians. After the promulgation of the edict of religious toleration in 1905 throughout the Russian empire and the active Muslim propaganda that followed it, cases were observed of Russians getting converted to Islam partly because of the strong attraction of the material help offered by the Tatars to such converts and partly by the influence of the moral strength of the Muslims themselves. It is reported that the Greek and Italian populations of Crimean peninsula were absorbed into their community by Tatars themselves. A seventeenth century traveler reports that the Tatars of the Crimea tried to induce their slaves to become Muslims and won many of them to this faith by promising them their liberty if they would be persuaded. Even after the proclamation of religious liberty in 1905, Islam was an attraction and a voluntary choice of

the Crimean Tatars¹⁶

The Tatar groups who migrated from Volga region into Lithuania since the early part of 15th century have dwelled in the midst of a Christian population and have preserved their faith. They had been in the habit of marrying Lithuanian and Polish women, whose children were always brought up as Muslims, whereas no Muslim girl was permitted to marry a Christian. The grand dukes of Lithuania, in the 15th century, encouraged the marriage of Christian women with their Tatars troops, on whom they bestowed grants of land and other privileges¹⁷.

Though it seems surprising yet it is a fact that the conversion to Islam of Kirghiz of Central Asia was mainly due to the missionary activities of the Tatar *mullas*, who preached Islam among them in the 18th century, as emissaries of the Russian government. The latter was even upto the last decades of 19th century, under the delusion that Kirghiz were ethnographically the same as the Tatars of Volga¹⁸.

The harsh policies of Russification in second half of 18th century and first quarter of 19th century did not stop the missionary zeal of Volga Tatars and they struck fast to their faith. Even those Tatars who were baptized during the rule of Catherine II proved to have been Christian only in name, and soon began to try to escape from the propagandist efforts of the orthodox church and abandoned Christianity for Islam, their so-called conversion merely serving as a stepping stone to their entrance into the faith of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS).¹⁹

At the beginning of the 19th century many of the Kirghiz dwelling in the vast plains stretching southwards from the district of Tobolsk towards Turkistan were still heathen and Russian government, considering them too wild and savage to be accessible to the gospel, ignored any missionary activity among the Kirghiz. But Volga Tatars, benefiting from this situation and fulfilling their zeal for the faith, occupied this field and won the whole of the Kirghiz tribe to the faith of Islam²⁰.

Following the conquest of Kazan by the Russians in the sixteenth century, both the Russian police and civil authorities were bent upon baptizing the heathen and Muslim population of Kazan. But the Tatars

having all the time remained Muslims at heart, never allowed themselves to be conformed to the Christian faith. Rather, they resisted the active measures taken to make their nominal profession of Christianity in anyway a reality²¹, although in the latter part of the 19th century efforts were made to Christianize some Muslim tribes by means of schools established in their midst. It was a hard task for the Russians to convince the younger generation of Tatars for Christianity as a Russian professor has reported:

The citizens of Kazan are hard to win, but we get some little folk from the villages on the steppe, and train them in the fear of God, once they are with us they can never turn back²².

For the Russian criminal code used to contain severe enactments against those who fell away from the orthodox Church and sentenced any person convicted of converting a Christian to Islam to the loss of all civil rights and to imprisonment with hard labour for a term varying from eight to ten years. However, inspite of the edicts of the government, Muslim preaching activity succeeded in winning over the whole villages to the faith of Islam, especially among the tribes of north-eastern Russia²³.

The town of Kazan was the chief centre of this missionary activity. A large number of Muslim publications were printed here every year and *mullas* (ulama) used to go forth from the University to convert the pagans in the villages and bring back the Tatars to Islam, who had allowed themselves to be baptized. The increasing number of these Christian Tatars who had gone to swell the ranks of Islam alarmed the clergy of the orthodox Church, but their efforts failed to check the success of the *mullas*. Especially, since the edict of toleration in 1905 mass conversions have been reported. For example, in 1909, ninety-one families in the village of Atomva are said to have become Muslims and as many as 53000 persons between 1906 and 1910 have accepted Islam. This transformation is said to have owed much to the high moral of life of Muslim society as well as to the stronger feeling of solidarity prevailing in it. Moreover, the methods adopted by the Russian clergy, supported by the government to make the so-called Christian Tatars more orthodox, caused the Christian faith to become unpopular among them. On the other hand, the preaching of Islam carried forward with

full zeal and and sincere efforts by the Tatars. Every simple Muslim worked as a missionary of his religion and the appeal of the moral conduct of such men made the poor, backward, ignorant, heathen or half heathen tribes attracted to Islam and shun resistance against it. Moreover, in many villages of baptized aborigines, the non-Muslims might go away for the winter to work as tailors in the Muslim villages, where, after getting convinced, they embraced Islam and returned to their villages as Muslims of conviction with sufficient knowlege of the tenets of Islam and as a result influenced and induced the rest of their population to accept the same faith.

Notes and References:

1. In Turkic languages river Volga is called *Itil* (old Turkish), *Idel* (Kazan Tatar), and *Atil* (Chuvash) and the name is popularly connected with that of *Attila*. The Russian name Volga has a number of popular etymologies ranging from Turkic *Elga* 'river' to 'Valhalla', the paradise of the gods of the Vikings who sailed along its stream. The name *Idel*, however, is found on the oldest maps, such as the Roger Map of Al-Idrisi, which was prepared in Sicily in 1154 A.D. These maps were based on the accounts of early travelers who visited Bulgar in the 9th and 10th centuries. The narratives of Ibn Fadlan, Ibn Hawkal and al-Masu'di were followed by the account of the Andalusian traveler, Al-Garnati, who visited the city of Bulgar several times between 1135 and 1151 A.D. Interestingly Ibn Fadlan also uses the name '*Atul*' for river Volga. (*Historical Anthology of Kazan Tatar Verse*, ed., tr: David J. Mathews & Ravil Bukharaev, Curzon, 2000, p. 1). Volga is the longest river of Europe and the principal waterway of Russia, being navigable almost throughout its course. Its basin forms about one-third of European Russia. The Volga has played an important part in the life of the Russian people and it is characteristically named in Russian folklore as "Mother Volga". For centuries it has served as the chief thoroughfare of Russian colonization to the East. It carries one half of the total river freight of Russia and irrigates the vast steppes of the lower Volga region. Grain, building materials, salt, fish and caviars (from the Volga delta and the Caspian Sea) are shipped upstream; lumber is the main commodity shipped downstream.
2. Tatar is a collective name applied to the Turkic people of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The name is derived from *Ta-ta* or *Da-da*, a Mongolian tribe that inhabited present north-east Mongolia in the 5th century. It was first used to describe the peoples that overran parts of Asia and Europe under Mongol leadership in the 13th century. It was later extended to include almost any Asian nomadic invader, whether from Mongolia or the fringes of Western Asia. Due to the vast

movements and intermingling of peoples along with the very loose utilization of the name Tatar, present day Tatars include ethnic groups that look Mongolid at one end and Caucasoid at the other. Majority of them live in the Central and Southern parts of Russia mostly in Tatarstan. Sizeable Tatar populations are found in Ukraine, Poland, Bulgaria, China, Kazakhstan, Romania, Turkey and Uzbekistan. They collectively numbered more than 10 million in the late 20th century.

3. An ancient people who lived around the south of Black Sea.
4. Silver coins were minted here from the middle of the 10th century. The following two lines engraved on a coin of Bulgar dating from 930 A.D. could be cited as a numismatic evidence.
Minted in the city of Bulgar by Mika'il bin J'afar. (Mika'il was the son of Almash bin Yaltwar, the ruler of Bulgar Kingdom, who accepted Islam at the hands of Ibn Fadlan and had adopted for himself the name, J'afar)
5. Volga-Bulgaria has always been a meeting place for various cultures and civilizations of the world. Fur from the Urals was worn by the rulers of the ancient Greece, Babylon, Persia and India as well as by the monarchs of Byzantium. Traders not only exchanged goods, but brought with them the cultural traditions of their own lands, and such memories were preserved and reflected in the legends which grew up in the Volga-Ural area. Traces of these legends can be found in literatures as far apart as those of Finland, Hungary, northern China and Siberia. The myth of eternal tree, which extends its branches to the heavenly abode of the gods is found in the folklore of both Tatarstan and Scandinavia. Throughout the 11th and 12th centuries, Bulgar kingdom maintained close trade and cultural links with Khwarzm which at that time had attained the position of a relatively great power. Its capital Urgenj had become one of the most magnificent cities of the Muslim world full of mosques, schools and thriving markets. The Bulgar sovereign Khan Salim had fortified the capital as early as 1164. (*Historical Anthology, op.cit.*, p. 2)

6. In its political meaning, the term Russia applies to the Russian empire until 1917, to the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) from 1917 to 1991, and to the Russian Federation since 1991. The name also is often used informally to mean the whole of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR); the Russian Federation was established in 1991 when the USSR designate and the former RSFSR became an independent nation. The term Russia is also used to designate the area inhabited by the Russian people as distinguished from other Eastern Slavs from non-Slavic peoples.
7. For more details of the Caliphal embassy and the circumstances in which the diplomatic relations between the Islamic empire and the Bulgar state were initiated, see the present authors article, "Description of Some Central Asian Tribes in Ibn Fadlan's 10th Century Account: A Study of Bulgar, Guzz, Pecenege and Bashgard Turks of Volga-Ural Region", *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Srinagar Vol. XI, 2000, pp. 31-43.
8. For the trade relations of Rus and Volga-Bulgaria with Byzantium and the Arab empire, see: "Identifying the Roots: A Study of the Emergence of Islam, Social Milieu and Trade Activities of Volga-Ural Region in the 10th century", paper published in the proceedings of the second International Symposium on "Islamic Civilization in Volga-Ural Region", Kazan, Tatarstan, 24-26 June, 2005.
9. Anthology, *op.cit.*, p.3.
10. Cf. T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, New Delhi, 1913, p. 244ff.
11. It is reported that Volga Tatars had tried to convert to Islam the Russian sovereign Vladimir, whose conversion could simultaneously result into the mass conversion of Russians to Islam, but they failed to obtain this objective because of the Russians' unwillingness to part from wine "the use of which", the sovereign declared, "was they very joy of their life".
12. Arnold, *op.cit.*, p. 242.
13. The whole area from the river Irtish in Siberia upto the shores of Black Sea is generally known as *Dashti-Kipchak*.
14. Kol Gali belonged to the royal line of Bulgar. It is, however, more probable that like many Turkic poets, he came from a family of clerics,

among whom scholarship and poetry prospered the most. Recently, the Kazan archeologist, Alfred Khalikov, has fixed his dates more precisely and states that he was born in 1183 and died between 1236 and 1240 during the Mongol invasion of Volga-Bulgaria. UNESCO too celebrated the 800th anniversary of the poet in 1983. Other important poets include Hisham Katib (14th century), Saif-i-Sarai (1321-1396), Muhammad Amin (1460-1518), Kul Sharief (d. 1552) and many

15. Robert L. Canfield ed., *Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 91-2. After the Socialist Revolution the process of Russification resulted in the complete demographical transformation of Volga-Bulgaria. The process of the Russification of Russia's Muslim subjects was under way when Kazan (in 1552) and Astrakan (in 1557) fell under direct Russian rule. Orthodox Russian missionaries were permitted to operate in the conquered areas among their Muslim inhabitants. More serious than this rather ineffectual proselytizing activity (it is indeed surprising how adamant Muslims were against converting to the Christian or any other religious system) was the tremendous influx of Russians to the occupied territories, and the ultimate dispersal of the original Muslim inhabitants to points further south and ultimately to Central Asia. This led gradually to Russians having substantial majorities in most areas previously inhabited totally by Muslims especially in such great urban centres as Kazan, Astrakhan, Tashkent, Samarqand, Bukhara, Dushambe and others.
16. Bobrovnikoff, "Muslims in Russia", *The Muslim World*, Vol. I, London, 1911, p. 13.
17. Idem
18. Franz Von Schwarz, *Turkestan*, Freiburg, 1910, p. 58.
19. D. Mackenzie, *Russia*, Vol. I, London, 1877, pp. 242-4.
20. Arnold, *op.cit.*, p. 247.
21. Mackenzie, *op.cit.*, p. 246.
22. Hepworth Dixon, *Free Russia*, Vol. II, London, 1870, p. 284.
23. Mackenzie, *op.cit.*, p. 245.