

Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia

CONVERSION, APOSTASY, AND LITERACY



Ферелы Кудьяк-Козы Лаишевского уезда Казанской губернии, собравшиеся на молитву околоточной

► AGNÈS NILÜFER KEFELI

BECOMING MUSLIM IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA

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Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy



AGNÈS NILÜFER KEFELI



Cornell University Press
Ithaca and London

Jacket illustration: Apostates standing in front of their underground mosque in Kibiak-Kozi, Laishevo district. RGIA, f. 821, op. 4, d. 72, photograph no. 9. No date. Photograph courtesy of RGIA.

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First published 2014 by Cornell University Press
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kefeli, Agnès Nilüfer, author.

Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia : conversion, apostasy, and literacy / Agnès Nilüfer Kefeli.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8014-5231-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Islam—Russia—History. 2. Apostasy—Islam. 3. Apostasy—Christianity. I. Title.

DK34.M8K44 2014

947.00882'97—dc23

2014006974

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Cloth printing

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Eugene

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Acknowledgments

Perhaps because I grew up with both a Christian and a Muslim name and because I grappled from a very early age with different possible identities imposed by French schools or inherited from my parents' Celtic Breton and Turkic origins, I grew fond of the nineteenth-century Christian Tatar community whose names could also be either Christian or Muslim, depending on time, place, and context. Fortunately, no one asked me to choose between the different layers of my personal identities, and I did not have to face the hardships that this community endured for their religious commitments. In my personal scholarly journey, I had the support of many who helped me enter the world of these villagers whose imagination, faith, and endurance inspire both my admiration and sympathy.

I owe thanks to many people in the field of Eurasian and Central Asian studies who have either provided sources and material support or commented on my work: Stephen Batalden, Wladimir Berelowitch, Daniel Brower, Devin DeWeese, Robert Geraci, Fred Giffin, Shoshana Keller, Adeeb Khalid, Edward Lazzerini, Laurie Manchester, Danielle Ross, Daniel Schafer, and Paul Werth. My special gratitude goes to Allen Frank, whose passion for the Turkic literary world and sacred geography I share. I still recall our passionate conversations about Finno-Ugric and Turkic identities in Washington, DC, while I was a Kluge fellow at the Library of Congress. Finally, Uli Schamiloglu has always been my supporter and mentor since I came to the United States, giving me my first lessons of Tatar language and Arabic script, and later providing me with the opportunity to teach Tatar. This research, however, would not have taken the shape it did without the strong support of my Tatar and Kräshen colleagues, scholars, archivists, and language teachers in St. Petersburg, Orenburg, and Kazan: Iakhia Abdullin, Marsel' Akhmetzianov, Goldzhihan Biktimirova, Damira Gobaidullina, Damir Iskhakov, Radik Iskhakov, Lialia Khasanshina, Gennadii Makarov, Nikolai Petrov, Madina Rakhimkulova, Endzhe Sagidova, Raushaniia Shafigullina, Flera Urmanche, Farit Iakhin, Il'dus Zagidullin, and Fanzilia Zavgarova, who gave me access to local archives, extensive bibliographies, and the means and connections to do fieldwork in the countryside. My colleagues Jim Allen (a Europeanist), Kay Carr (an Americanist), and Pori Park (a scholar of Buddhism) were especially supportive throughout project, and I deeply appreciate the breadth of their perspectives.

My deepest gratitude and admiration go to the inhabitants of Elyshevo (Yilish), in particular the journalist Golsina Khamidullina, who shared her home, pictures of her ancestral past, handwritten diaries and epics, and introduced me to her village's sacred landscape and keeps me informed of its changes by e-mail. I was also

greatly aided by the inhabitants of Bogatye Saby (Baylar Sabası), in particular Saima Shafigullina and her son, Rafael, who drove me to the villages and sacred places that Russian missionaries and the police mentioned in their reports and diaries. I also remember fondly the welcome I received from the elderly Kräshen and Tatar community of Ianyli who diligently gathered around me to share their parents' and grandparents' memories and genealogies, and then took me to their cemeteries, mosque and church, and homes to show me amulets and books that belonged to their ancestors. Chura village also earned my admiration for keeping the Kräshen ways of life and rebuilding their church, and Kibiak-Kozi for restoring their mosque and finding ways to improve their knowledge of Islam, which they found faulty because of seventy years of communism. Finally, I still remember the chants of young Kräshen children, dressed in their grandparents' clothes, welcoming me to their school in Urias'bash with bread and salt.

Three International Research and Exchanges Board Grants (IREX) funded these trips. Other grants—an American Fellowship of the American Association of University Women, a John W. Kluge Fellowship at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, seed grants from the Arizona State University Institute for Humanities Research and the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict—freed me from teaching. Arizona State University's Melikian Center and the Faculty of Religious Studies provided a subvention for this work. At the Kluge Center, in particular, I benefited tremendously from the conversations I had with my Kluge fellows, especially Johanna Bockman and Monica Dominguez Torres, and from the kindness and expertise of Caroline Brown and Mary Lou Reker, who created the right intellectual forum for my blossoming. Washington, DC, was also the place where I had the opportunity to discuss my work with two other friends, Robert Geraci and Rita Guenther, whom I first met in Kazan and who share equal passion for the Middle Volga region. My research assistants at ASU and the Kluge Center, Katrina Koser, Lourdes Saez, Nathan Schick, Joon Sik, Timothy Swanger, and David Walsh, provided invaluable help. I am also indebted to my anonymous readers and John Ackerman for their comments, which transformed my earlier manuscript into a book.

I am also grateful for *Slavic Review* to have allowed me to reprint portions of an article I wrote earlier: "The Tale of Joseph and Zulaykha on the Volga Frontier: The Struggle for Gender, Religious, and National Identity in Imperial and Post-Revolutionary Russia," *Slavic Review* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 373–398.

Finally, I would like to thank my father, Beyzade Yusuf Mejid Kefeli, and my mother, Anne Toudic, who because of their origins introduced me to Ottoman history and the history of minorities in France and Russia, and to the idea that there is more than one way to tell a story. My thanks also go to my sister, Eva Hanzade, and my children, Anne Safiya and Joy Nilüfer, who—when I was too busy deciphering my sources—would sing a Tatar song they learned in Kazan to remind me of their presence. All my gratitude also goes to my adopted Tatar family, Ilkem and Glius Mustafin, who took care of me as one of their own. Finally, I would have never completed this work without my husband, Eugene Clay, who patiently endured my saying that there was nothing I could do except "Tatar stuff." This book (or rather my story of the nineteenth-century Kräshen apostasies) is dedicated to him.

Abbreviations

Archives and Published Sources

GAOO	Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Orenburgskoi Oblasti, Orenburg
IKE	<i>Izvestiia po Kazanskoi eparkhii</i>
IOAIE	<i>Izvestiia Obshchestva arkhologii, istorii i etnografii pri Kazanskom universitete</i>
MPMS	<i>Missionerskii protivomusul'manskii sbornik</i>
NART	Narodnyi Arkhiv Respubliki Tatarstan
PB	<i>Pravoslavnyi blagovestnik</i>
PO	<i>Pravoslavnoe obozrenie</i>
PS	<i>Pravoslavnyi sobesednik</i>
PSZ	<i>Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii</i>
RGIA	Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv, St. Petersburg

Archival Citations

f.	<i>fond</i> (collection)
ed. khr.	<i>editsa khraneniia</i> (file)
op.	<i>opis'</i> (inventory)
d.	<i>delo</i> (file)
ch.	<i>chast'</i> (part)
l. or ll.	<i>list</i> or <i>listy</i> (leaf or leaves)
ob.	<i>oborot</i> (verso)

Published Source Citation

SPb.	St. Petersburg
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Note on Transliteration

I used the Library of Congress system of transliteration for Russian. For Kräshen texts, I applied the same transliteration system as for Russian Cyrillic. For Tatar texts I consulted were in either Arabic script or the Cyrillic alphabet. Because there is no standardized way to transliterate either alphabet for Tatar, I adopted the following method.

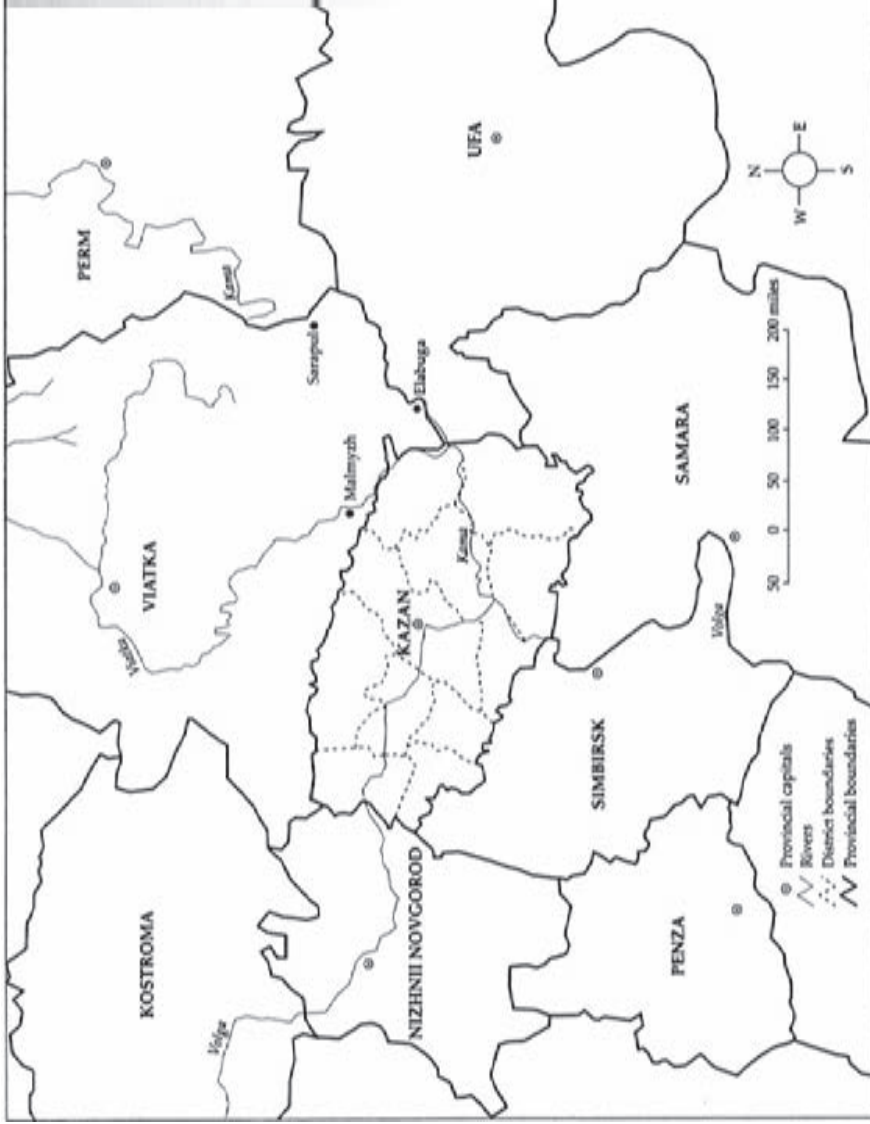
For titles and personal names in Cyrillic, I used Edward Allworth's transliteration method as given in *Nationalities of the Soviet East: Publications and Writing Systems* (1971) with two major changes. With regard to consonants, I distinguished between *q* before a back vowel and *k* before a front vowel, and *gh* before a back vowel and *g* before a front vowel, except in Russian and international loan words.

For personal names in Arabic script, I used the standard English transliteration system for Persian as given in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (2001) but without diacritical marks in the text. However, diacritics appear in the text in the names of books and in the footnotes. Long vowels, however, appear only for words of Arabic and Persian origin, not for Turkic words and Russian loan words. In most cases, the vocalization of Tatar personal names and book titles is given as reported in modern Tatar.

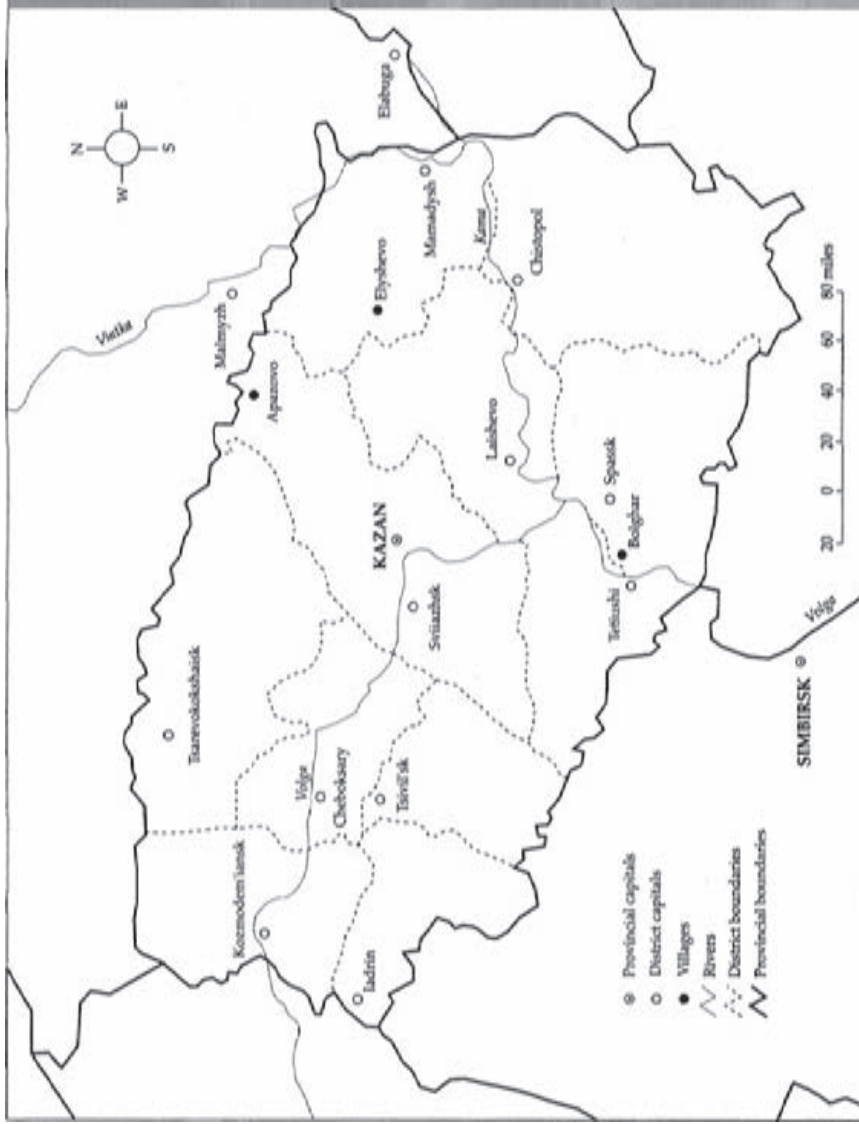
In general, for the spelling of Islamic terms I used the classical Arabic-script spelling and gave their standard Romanized transcription without diacritics. Arabic words that are commonly used in English and listed in *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* were not italicized.

Names of villages are usually reported in Russian, except when the Tatar name has some relevance in the text and differs completely from the Russian name. In general, the Tatar name of a location is placed in parentheses after its Russian name the first time it appears.

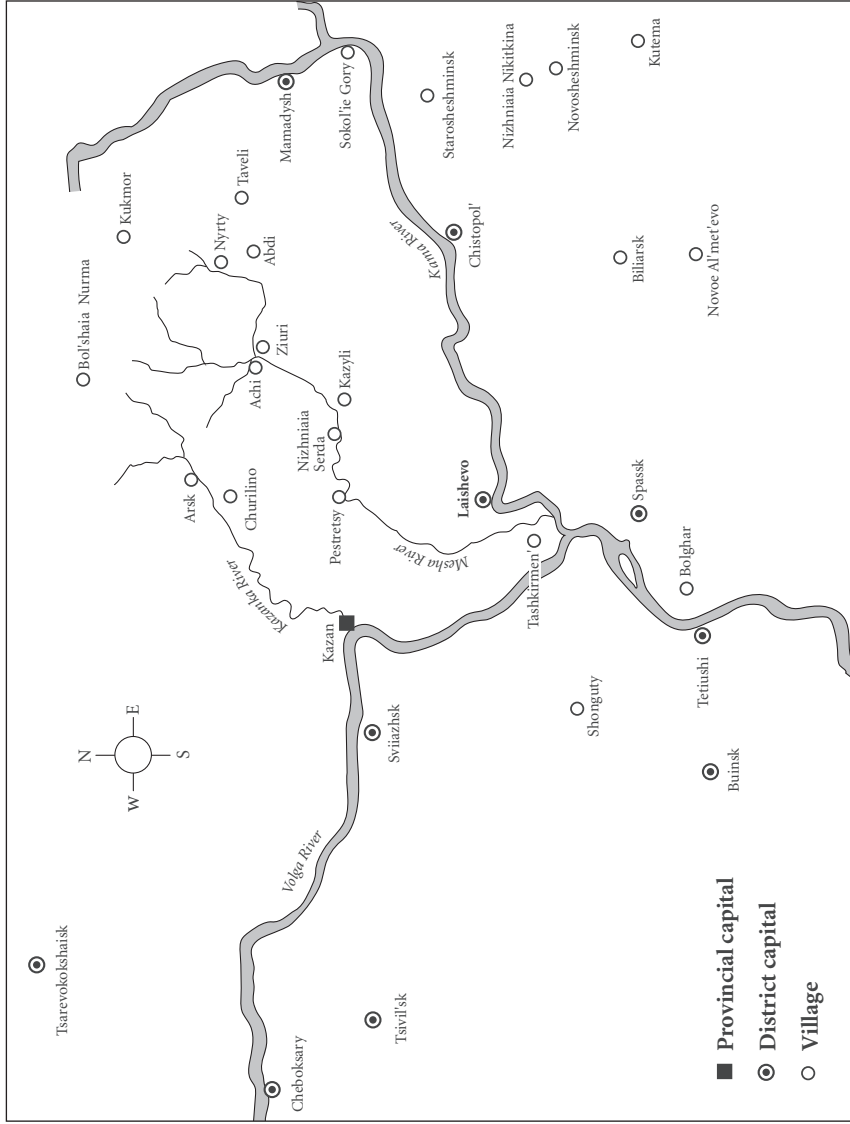
Dates are given according to the Julian calendar, which in the nineteenth century was twelve days—and in the twentieth century, thirteen days—behind the Gregorian calendar.



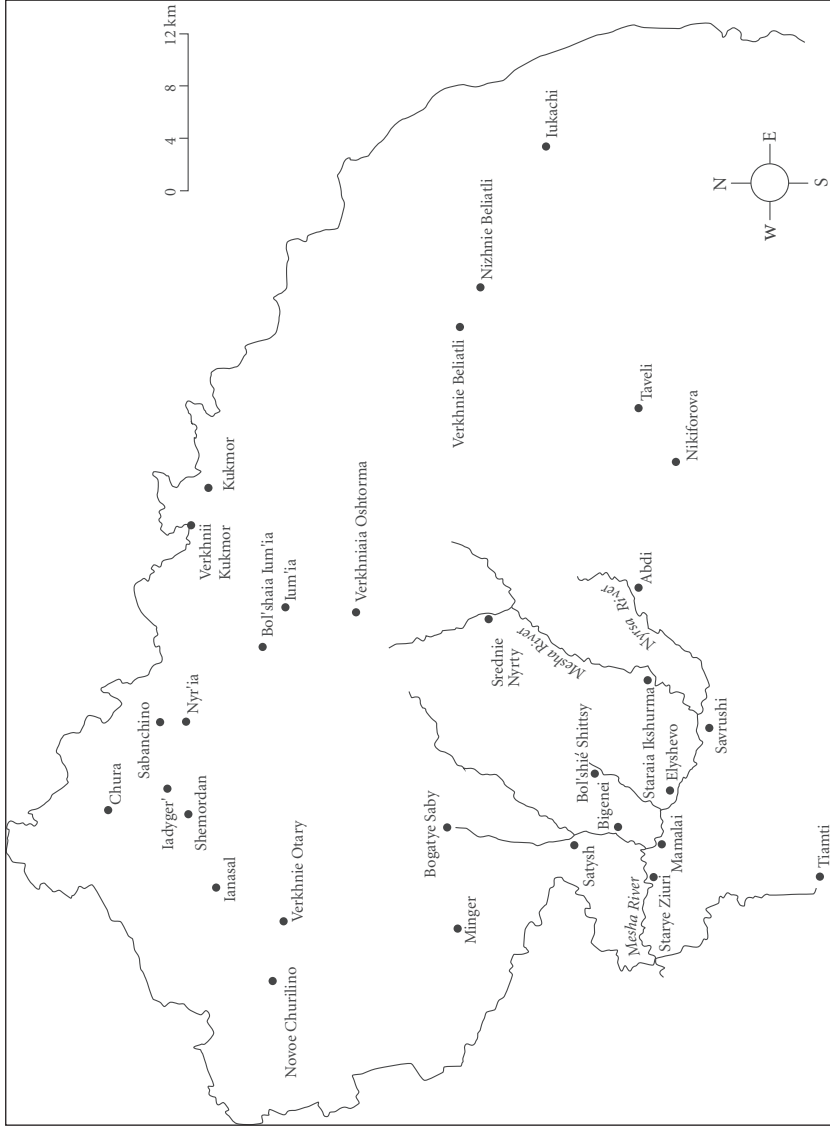
Volga Provinces (late nineteenth century). From Robert Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).



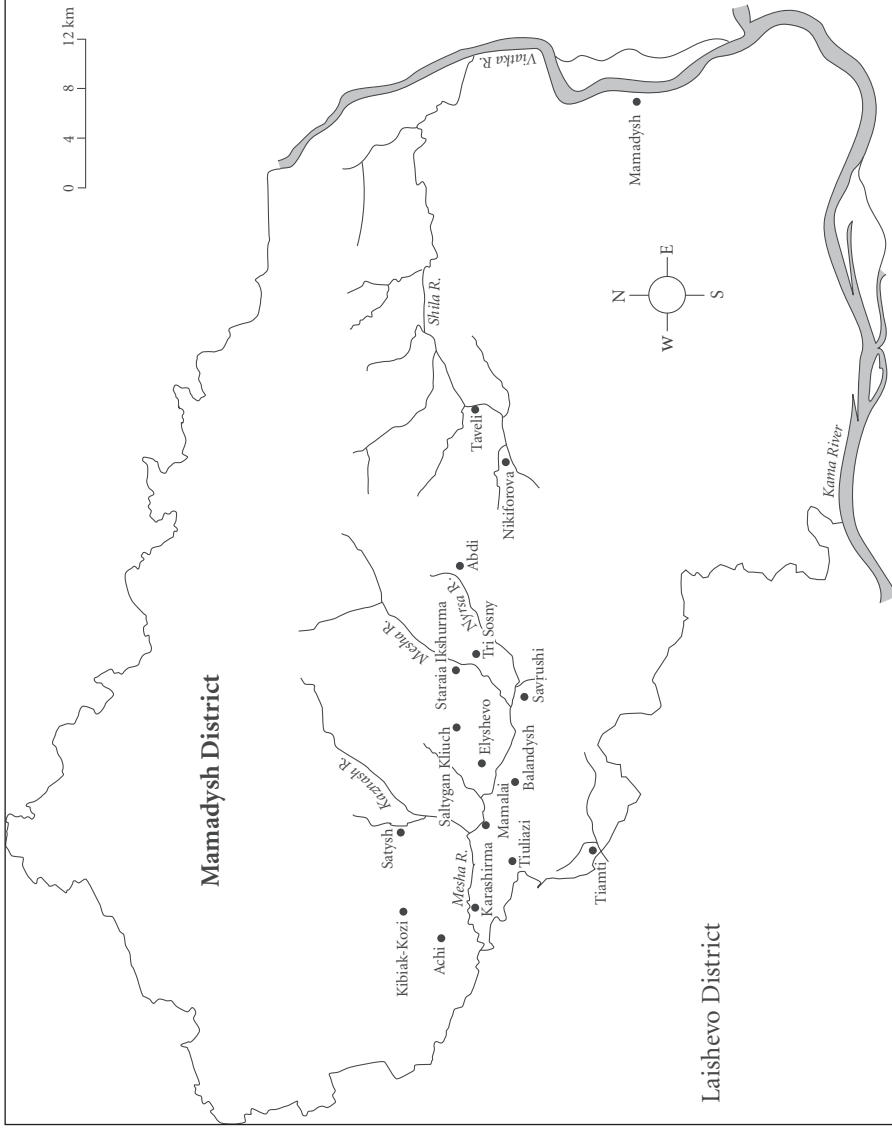
Administrative Map of Kazan Province (late nineteenth century). Adapted from Robert Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).



The Volga-Kama Region. Source: I. N. Syrnev, "Karta Srednego i Nizhnego Povolzh'ia," in *Rossia: Polnoe geograficheskoe opisaniie nashnego otechestva*, vol. 6 (St. Petersburg, 1901).



Northern Mamadysh District. Source: *Materialy dlia sravnitel'noi otsenki zemel'nykh ugodii v uezdakh Kazanskoii gubernii*, vol. 6, *Uezd Mamadyshskii* (Kazan, 1888).



The Region of Elyshevo. Sources: *Materialy dlia sravnitel'noi otsenki zemel'nykh ugodii v uездakh Kazanskoj gubernii*, vol. 6, *Uезд Mamadyshskii*, Kazan, 1888; vol. 7, *Uезд Laishevskii*, 1889. Chistopol', USSR [Eastern Europe 1: 250,000], Army Map Service (LU), Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army, Washington, D.C., 1954. NN 39-2, Series N501.

BECOMING MUSLIM IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA

Introduction

In 1866, the police arrested a well-to-do trader who had petitioned that his village be officially recognized as Muslim. His father, a parish elder, begged him one more time to rejoin the church, but Mikhail Matveev stubbornly refused to listen. In desperation, his father asked him to take off his fine leather boots and replace them with rude bast shoes—a vivid warning about the grim fate that awaited him in Siberia. But the father’s pleas changed nothing. Matveev’s wife proudly stood by his decision, repeating tirelessly that they both considered themselves Muslim. What explained this young couple’s determination? What did it mean to become Muslim in Imperial Russia?¹

Over the course of the nineteenth century, tens of thousands of Orthodox Christian Tatars like Matveev and his wife formally petitioned the czar to be legally recognized as Muslims. At great personal risk—including the possibility of arrest, imprisonment, deportation and exile—these “apostates” from Christianity asked to leave the favored established faith for membership in a tolerated, but second-class, religion. Many of these Tatar Christians known as *Kräshens*, from the Russian word for baptized, made this difficult choice through the influence of a well-developed network of Islamic primary education, brought to them by neighboring Muslim Tatars. Rooted in a thaumaturgical tradition that dated back to the fourteenth-century conversion of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, this educational network was far from moribund but provided a cultural treasury of miraculous stories about saints and prophets that the apostates could draw upon as they fashioned their new Muslim communities. Apocalyptic stories about God’s final judgment of the infidels, marvelous accounts of Muslim martyrs in pagan lands, and tales of divine deliverance fueled the apostasy movements. Filled with miracles, this literature served to expand the boundaries of Islam among Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples of the Middle Volga, including many of the baptized Tatars who had converted to Christianity after the Russian conquest in the sixteenth century. For these Kräshen converts to Islam, becoming Muslim meant participation in the moral order described and defined in these traditional narratives: a world in which God actively and miraculously intervened on behalf of the Islamic community. These stories affirmed the possibility of divine empowerment for the most ordinary believer, and they emphasized the imminence of the final judgment.

1. Evfimii Malov, “Ocherk religioznogo sostoianiia kreshchenykh tatar, podvergshikhsia vliianiiu magometanstva,” *Pravoslavnyi sobesednik* (hereafter *PS*) 18, pt. 1 (1872): 243–244.

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