

**THE BASHKIR NATIONALITY QUESTION AND  
ZEKI VELIDI TOGAN IN THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION  
AND THE CIVIL WAR, 1917-1921\***

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The collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of independent states in the former Soviet lands have accelerated academic interest on the nationality question in the Russian Revolution and the Soviet era. During the last two decades numerous historical monographs on different national groups have been published. More importantly, there also emerged a search for new theoretical approaches to the nationality question in the Russian and the Soviet societies, which owes much to the new theories of nationalism and class developed in early 1980's.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the expansion of the field in terms of both historical and theoretical studies, however, the Bashkir nationality question has hardly attracted the attention of historians and political scientists. The purpose of the

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\* This article is a revised version of the paper that I prepared in 1998 for the seminar on "Russian Revolution, 1905-1917" at Binghamton University,

<sup>1</sup> The present paper owes much to this new literature on Soviet nationality question, particularly to the works of Ronald G. Suny, Yuri Slezkine, and Robert J. Kaiser. See Robert J. Kaiser, *The geography of nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, Princeton, New Jersey 1994; Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism", *Slavic Review*, 53/2(Summer 1994), 414-452; Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Stanford, California 1993. The articles in the following collection should also be mentioned in the above context. Alexander J. Motyl, ed. *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities, History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR*, New York 1995.

following paper is to shed some light on this relatively neglected issue with special emphasis to new paradigms concerning Russian and Soviet nationality question. In what follows I first consider reasons of this historiographic neglect. Next, I examine Ronald G. Suny's attempt to theorize various nationality questions during the revolutionary period and the Soviet era. Suny's approach is, in fact, a response to the classical understanding of the question, mainly that of Pipes' and Carr's. Within the light of Suny's model, the present paper offers a detailed examination of the Bashkir nationality problem. Such an examination of the Bashkir case makes possible a critical assessment of Suny's theoretical model. In the third part of the paper I will examine the attitudes of the peasant masses, Slavic and Muslim, in the Bashkir region towards competing parties, nationalist and communist, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary, Reds and Whites, as the key for an understanding of the Bashkir nationality question. Finally, I investigate Zeki Velidi's (Validov)<sup>2</sup> perception of the Bolshevik national policy. This part is mainly based on Velidi's voluminous memoirs.

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The Bashkir people, although regarded as a sub-group of the Tatars, appeared on the political arena as a separate element at the time of the Russian Revolution. After the February Revolution, Bashkir nationalists, led by Zeki Velidi, supported the idea of "territorial autonomy" (federalism) for the Muslim peoples of Russia and dismissed the Volga Tatars' strategy of "extra-territorial cultural autonomy" (unitarism). Following the October Revolution they declared the autonomy of Bashkiria, and rapidly arranged a Bashkir military regiment. Zeki Velidi was the president of the Bashkir

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Zeki Velidi Togan(1890-1970), Bashkir political leader and historian. In 1922, he left Turkestan and went to Europe through Afghanistan. In 1925, with the insistence of the Turkish officials he came to Turkey and accepted a position there. However, in 1932, he was in conflict with the Kemalist leadership regarding his critique of the mythical character of the "Turkish Historical Thesis" promoted by the Kemalist elite. As a result he was forced to leave the country. In 1938, after Mustafa Kemal's death, he was allowed to return to Turkey. Until his death he was professor of history at Istanbul University; in Turkic studies he was highly respected among international scholars. For more information on Zeki Velidi, see Tuncer Baykara, *Zeki Velidi Togan*, Ankara 1989. Nadir Özbek, "Zeki Velidi Togan ve 'Türk Tarih Tezi'" *Toplumsal Tarih*, 45(Sept. 1997), 15-23; idem, "Zeki Velidi Togan ve Milliyetler Sorunu: Küçük Başkurdistan'dan Büyük Türkistan'a" *Toplumsal Tarih*, 44(Aug. 1997), 15-23.

government and the chief-commander of the Bashkir military unit. Later, in early 1918, the Bashkir leadership participated in the SR-led counterrevolutionary Samara government (Komuch). But soon, realizing that the White generals were far from satisfying any of their demands, whether cultural or territorial in content, they turned to the Reds and played a decisive role in the Bolshevik victory against the White armies in the critical days of the civil war on the eastern front. Following this collaboration, the autonomy of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Bashkiria was granted. Zeki Velidi was the chairman of the *Bashrevkom* and the war commissar of the Bashkir Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR).

The Bashkir nationalists' collaboration with the Bolsheviks and the life of "Validov's little Bashkiria", however, would last no longer than one and a half years. Stalin's policy within this short period functioned so as to liquidate the power base of the nationalist leaders by means of the Narkomnatz apparatus. As a consequence, the only option for Zeki Velidi was to flee to Turkestan and try to organize there an opposition against the Bolsheviks.<sup>3</sup> Throughout this short historical course the Bashkir nationalist intellectuals and the Bashkir masses realized, from their own experiences, the actual characteristics of various social and political programs, Russian or native, revolutionary or counterrevolutionary.

For the historian, the Bashkir experience has the potential to clarify several questions concerning the revolution and the civil war. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, the Bashkir historical experience, despite its richness, has not yet attracted the scholarly interest that it deserves. The causes of this neglect are many, some more immediately apparent than others. First of all, it is a general inclination in historiography to discard small nationalities in favor of large nations, which are usually supposed to have the right to talk in the name of the small ones. The relationship between the Kazan Tatars and the other Muslim peoples of Russia, the Bashkirs in particular, is an example

<sup>3</sup> The history of political events in the Muslim lands following the February Revolution is widely available. For this reason in this paper I have only briefly summarized the course. For details, see Azade-Ayşe Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: a profile in national resilience*, Stanford, California 1986; Serge A. Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, Cambridge-Massachusetts 1960. Richard Pipes also covers in some detail the political events in Bashkiria, Richard Pipes, *The formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and nationalism, 1917-1923*, Cambridge-Massachusetts 1954.

of this. With their influential intellectual class, liberal mullahs and *jadid* intellectuals, the Kazan Tatars had an inclination to talk in the name of all the Muslims of Russia. Concerning the Bashkirs, the case was more explicit. Especially during the revolutionary years the Tatar nationalist intellectuals of Kazan origin usually denied the Bashkir culture and language as distinct from their own.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to its smallness, the semi-nomadic way of life in Bashkiria had something to do with this neglect. Nationalism is rightly considered to be a phenomenon of modern age, the age of communication and mass literacy. Yet, a modernist-reductionist version of this approach, which asserts that semi-nomadic and peasant societies are not capable of generating a national consciousness, tends to dismiss the particular historical conditions that could give way to the formation of a distinct social identity which in turn could be utilized by the nationalist elite of that society to establish a mass base for their claims. In this account the elites of great nations and the like-minded historians, paradoxically, notice the artificial nature of the nationalism of small nations while attributing a primordial character to their own nations.<sup>5</sup>

Another cause of the neglect of the Bashkir question is due to the fact that after the October revolution a considerable number of Tatar intellectuals migrated to Europe and Turkey, where they participated in anti-Soviet propaganda activities and the Turkish nation-building process under the Kemalist leadership.<sup>6</sup> These Soviet immigrants into Turkey, the Kazan Tatars in particular, and the historians who follow their point of view, present the Turkic nationality question in the civil war as a matter of unity among the Muslim-Turks which was supposed to be represented by the pan-Turkic

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth study of the nationalist movements among Russian Turks before the Soviet Regime, see Nadir Devlet, *Rusya Türklerinin Milli Mücadele Tarihi (1905-1917)*, Ankara 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Bennigsen and Wimbush, for instance, presented the Tatar nation as descending from the Volga Bulgars while presenting the Bashkir nation as simply created by Soviet regime. Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide*, London 1985, 233, 243. For a dispute concerning the Bulgar legacy among Tatar and Chuvash scholars after the Second World War, see Victor A. Shnirelman, *Who Gets the Past? Competition for Ancestors among Non-Russian Intellectuals in Russia*, Washington, D.C. 1996.

<sup>6</sup> For the Muslim and Soviet émigrés to Turkey, see Lowell Bezanis, "Soviet Muslim Émigrés in the Republic of Turkey", *Central Asian Survey*, 13/1(1994), 51-180.

ideology prevalent among the political elites of Kazan Tatars.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, they imply, whether explicitly or not, that the demand of the Bashkirs, Kazakhs and other Russian Muslims of political autonomy within a federalist Russia served Stalin's policy of "divide and rule".<sup>8</sup> These historians not only underestimate the hegemonic character of the Tatar claim, but also disregarded the social and class issues as a background for diverging national demands and programs, which in fact made any pan-Turkic program inconceivable. In short, this kind of nationalist historiography presents the Tatar program for Muslim-Turkic unity as the only possible program for Turkic unity, and neglects the particular experiences and programs of other Turkic national groups, and social classes within each group.<sup>9</sup>

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In the western scholarship, studies on the nationality questions of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union have been patterned to a great extent by the agenda and paradigms of Russian and Soviet studies with their theory of "totalitarianism".<sup>10</sup> This school viewed the development of nationalist

<sup>7</sup> This type of account is so widespread that one can even find it among the scholarly works published recently in the West. In this respect, her sympathy to Volga Tatars let Ayşe-Azade Rorlich to present the picture from the Kazan Tatars' point of view. According to Rorlich the formation of the Bashkir republic, Togan's little Bashkiria, was the key to erecting administrative, and even cultural, barriers between the Tatars and the Bashkirs, whose cultures and historical paths had always been closely intertwined. In Rorlich's presentation, the Kazan Tatars' project, the Idel-Ural State with its capital at Kazan, appeared to be the only alternative possible program for Turkic unity. In her view, the Bashkirs, Kazakhs, and other small national groups had been trapped by Stalin and Lenin. Rorlich, *op. cit.*, 137-38.

<sup>8</sup> During the first Turkish History Congress in 1932, Sadri Maksudi, Kazan Tatar and Muslim representative in the Russian *Dumas*, who was the proponent of the "extraterritorial autonomy" in the first all-Russia Muslim Congress in 1917, started a campaign against Zeki Velidi. Zeki Velidi at this congress was accused at dividing the political unity of the Muslim Turks in Russia. This congress proved how influential the Kazan Tatars were among the Turkish officials and intellectuals. For an account of this dispute, see Zeki Velidi Togan, *On Yedi Kumaltı Şehri ve Sadri Maksudi Bey*, İstanbul 1934.

<sup>9</sup> Such an attitude generally dismisses Velidi's collaboration with the Kazakhs, his struggle in Turkestan with the members of the Kazakh Alash Orda and Turkestani Erk, and their political project of Greater Turkestan. Zeki Velidi's memoirs and historical writings concerning the years of the revolution and the civil war are invaluable sources for correcting this historiographical bias.

<sup>10</sup> For an account of the "totalitarianism" approach in western Russian and Soviet studies, see Stephen F. Cohen, "Scholarly Missions: Sovietology as a Vocation",

movements in the borderlands as natural phenomena. Accordingly, the formation of the Soviet Union over the ruins of the Tsarist empire is pictured as the Bolshevik conquest of borderlands which retarded the natural course of national development in each region. According to "cold war sovietology," various nationalisms in the borderlands would deepen the disintegration process of the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> This understanding is so widespread that one can find its impact even in monographs which could hardly be classified within the school of "cold-war sovietology".<sup>12</sup>

However, with the very emergence of a new understanding of the Soviet nationality question, the "totalitarian" school has been losing ground.<sup>13</sup> This new school, led by Ronald G. Suny and including scholars such as Yuri Slezkine, Robert J. Kaiser and others, basically rejects the idea that nationalism in Russia and the Soviet Union was a natural phenomenon and emerged as a response to the repressive policies of the Russian and Soviet centers. The new school, contrary to the old understanding, emphasizes the "constructive" aspects of Soviet version of nation-building. Yuri Slezkine, for instance, characterized the new regime as "ethnoterritorial federalism". This is viewed as a logical outcome of the Leninist theory of nationalism: "the more rights and opportunities a national minority would enjoy, the more trust it would have in the proletarians of the former oppressor nation."<sup>14</sup> The policy of indigenization, *korenizatsiia*, that recognizes Soviet republics, autonomous republics, and autonomous regions, and grants them unlimited cultural rights within an ethnoterritorially, autonomous structure is proposed to be the basic characteristics of the Soviet policy on nationality. According to the new school this particular version of nation-building in the Soviet

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Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience, Politics and History Since 1917*, New York, Oxford 1985, 3-37.

- 11 Richard Pipes' study on the nationality question and the formation of the Soviet Union, which was written at a time when cold war sovietology was emerging, is a good example of that genre. Pipes indeed established the very foundations of the so-called school with his book.
- 12 Carr viewed the nationality question as a matter of the dispersal of the Russian Empire and later reunion under the Bolshevik rule throughout the course of the Revolution and the Civil War. Edward Hallett Carr, *A history of Soviet Russia*, New York 1951, part III, "Dispersal and Reunion", 253-429.
- 13 For a very brief account of this new school, see Suny's review of Robert J. Kaiser's above mentioned book, *American Historical Review*, 101/1(February 1996), 211-12.
- 14 Slezkine, *op. cit.*, 419.

Union, contrary to what was expected by the Soviet elite, would eventually prepare the collapse of the Union.

A very important point, which this new school usually tends to dismiss, is the fact that such a policy under Stalin, whatever its relation with the Leninist theory of nationality, could have been possible only after the nationalist alternatives in various borderlands were politically eliminated. In Bashkiria for instance, the fully-fledged version of *korenizatsiia* was applied only after the liquidation of Zeki Velidi and his comrades in the *Bashrevkom* in 1920. If we pay more attention to the events of the revolutionary years and the civil war era, it becomes apparent that the "New Economic Policy (NEP)-like nationalist policy," was implemented only after the elimination of any alternative political claim regardless of its readiness to cooperate with the regime.

Although the contribution of this new school is primarily related to the period after 1921, Suny attempts to theorize the diverging experiences of the borderlands throughout the revolution and the civil war eras. Following the new conceptual approaches to class and nation he proposes that in the Russian case both class and national consciousnesses or identities are constructed phenomena.<sup>15</sup> According to Suny, classes and ethnicities are not simply imaginary. They are real social and historical categories. However, "their political claims are the specific products of historically derived discourses of our own times."<sup>16</sup> Taking class and nationality as equally constructed identities allows Suny to easily distinguish himself from the previous explanations of the nationality question in the Russian Revolution. "The nationalists' example, followed by most monographic studies of individual nationalities in the West, has produced histories of the non-Russian peripheries sharply distinguished from those of central Russia. Whereas much of the new social history depicts the revolution in the central Russian cities as a struggle between increasingly polarized social classes..."<sup>17</sup> Suny rather suggests that "here the social and the ethnic are so closely intertwined that separation of the two can be artificial and misleading".

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15 Suny, *op. cit.*

16 *Ibid*, 19.

17 *Ibid*, 77.



Suny covers the particular forms of the intersection of nation and class for nine nationalities within five groups. In Belorussia, Lithuania, and Azerbaijan national consciousness was weak among the native peasant populations and so nationalist leaders relied heavily on foreigners. In Ukraine and Estonia national consciousness was more developed, though not strong or widespread enough to overwhelm competing identities. Eventually in both countries the peasantry proved to be an unsteady social base for a political movement. The only alternative to the separatist movements was to look for German backing.

Latvia and Georgia constituted the third group. "Whereas Estonians, like Ukrainians, vacillated between nationalism and other social movements, Latvians, like Georgians, combined their ethnic and social grievances in a single, dominant socialist national movement. In both countries, class and ethnic identities overlapped and reinforced one another, but the form of expression was socialist rather than predominantly nationalist."<sup>18</sup> In Finland Suny finds another variant of the class/nationality relationship: all social groups favored independence, but the common national program could not overcome class and regional cleavages. The result was a bloody civil war; once the Russian enemy was removed, internal social tensions turned Finn against Finn.<sup>19</sup> The experience of Armenia, the fifth group, "as a geographically divided and endangered people led to a peculiar form of 'non-territorial nationalism'".<sup>20</sup>

According to Suny, in all the regions covered there were only two historical options: "The difficult choice before both the Russians and the non-Russian peoples was whether to support the central Soviet government and the revolution as now defined by it, or to accept a precarious existence in alliance with undependable allies from abroad with their own self-aggrandizing agendas".<sup>21</sup> Later he states the same idea even more explicitly: "From the very beginning, the pull between nationalism and socialism was a

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18 *Ibid*, 64.

19 *Ibid*, 71-72.

20 *Ibid*, 72.

21 *Ibid*, 78-79.



struggle between supporters of the Soviet government and foreign interventionists who hoped to gain allies in the war against the Reds".<sup>22</sup>

A similar dichotomy is also present in Carr's account. According to him, the Bolsheviks, by asserting the principle of national self-determination, at first secured unqualified support from the national movements of the eastern peoples. "But when the same Bolsheviks, after the October revolution, appeared in the form of a Russian government ruling from Petrograd ..., they explicitly or implicitly challenged the existing social order, the self-constituted national leaders transferred their allegiance to the forces of counter-revolution".<sup>23</sup> In Carr's view the civil war, which sealed the bankruptcy of the bourgeois national movements of the eastern peoples, marked the dividing line between the two phases of Soviet policy in the Muslim-Turkic borderlands.

Though the present paper follows Suny's model in examining the Bashkir case, that social and ethnic issues are closely intertwined, I would like to suggest that his overall conclusions are somewhat misleading. This is caused primarily by his dismissal of the nationality question in the Middle Volga region, the southern Urals, the steppes, and Central Asia.<sup>24</sup> In other words, he has not paid attention the case of the Tatars, the Bashkirs, the Kazakhs, and the Muslim peoples of Turkestan. Though a very promising attempt, this neglect results in his posing the nationality question during the revolution and the civil war as a matter of choices between binary opposites, which I believe was simply not the case in the Muslim regions, especially in the Volga and the Bashkir region. In these regions the question does not easily fit in any of the following dichotomies: revolution/counter-revolution, national-revolution/social-revolution, and Soviet regime/foreign intervention. In Bashkiria and the steppes in particular, where class differentiation had not fully developed, one should not easily attribute counter-revolutionary social aspects to the nationalists' program while presenting the Bolsheviks as revolutionary in social terms. In other words, one should be more careful in determining the social background of any nationalist political discourse. I

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Carr, *op. cit.*, 315-16.

<sup>24</sup> In the later parts of the book Suny mentions the Muslim nationality question, but while drawing the five type model he does not refer to the Muslim borderlands, except Azerbaijan.

will examine the social background of the Bashkir nationalism in what follows.

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For the Bashkir people the political question following the Revolution was connected with the land problem, particularly in the form of an ethnic cleavage between the semi-nomadic peasant natives and the Slavic settlers. The Slavic settlement in Bashkiria and in other southeastern regions was not a new phenomenon. Following the conquest of the Kazan and Sibir khanates, in 1552 and 1557 respectively, the southeastern borders of Russia experienced Slavic colonization. During the seventeenth century, Slavic peasant migration progressed as a steady trickle into the northwest territory of Bashkiria along the Kama River. Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century the Russians steadily built a network of forts which in turn intensified and secured the migration into the Bashkir land.<sup>25</sup> The native resistance to Slavic migrations and Russian penetration came thereafter. The Bashkirs fiercely opposed the Russian occupation, fighting almost uninterruptedly from 1662 to 1774, and took an active part in all peasant revolts in eastern Russia, such as those led by Stefan Razin and Pugachev.<sup>26</sup>

The Slavic migration to the east, including Bashkiria and northern Kazakhstan, entered a new stage with the construction of Trans-Siberian railroad in 1891. The migration further accelerated in the first decade of the twentieth century, especially following the Stolypin reforms which abolished the redemption payments for peasants. Consequently, the voluntary migration between 1901 and 1910 exceeded the total rural eastward migration for the entire nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

The size of the Slavic migration to non-Slavic Russia certainly had a disruptive effect on the natives' way of life.<sup>28</sup> There is no doubt that this centuries old pattern of Slavic settlement, which was to engender an uprising

25 Robert F. Baumann, (book review), *Kritika, A Review of Current Soviet Books on Russian History*, XX/1(Winter 1984), 8-9.

26 Benningsen and Wimbush, *op. cit.*, 247; and Pipes, *op. cit.*, 82.

27 Kaiser, *op. cit.*, 53-54. For a study on the Slavic migration to the Bashkir lands and Kazak steppes, see Alton Donnelly, "The Mobile Steppe Frontier: The Russian Conquest and Collonization of Bashkiria and Kazakhstan to 1850," In Michael Rywkin (ed.), *Russian Colonial Expansion to 1917*, London 1988.

28 *Ibid*, 57.

in the steppes in 1916, was the basic social factor that induced a growing consciousness among the natives that was anti-Russian and anti-tsarist in orientation.<sup>29</sup> From Zeki Velidi's memoirs, which cover in detail the years of Revolution and the civil war, one can understand how burning an issue the land question was for the Bashkir people. The Bashkir government under Zeki Velidi paid great attention to the "nationalization of land" in Bashkiria. Though Zeki Velidi presented the nationalization of land as a socialist policy, it in fact meant taking back the lands from the Slavic settlers and the protection of the lands against further colonization.<sup>30</sup>

After the October Revolution, from the point of view of the Bashkir peasantry and their nationalist leaders the question was whether the new Soviet government would repeat the imperialist policies of the Tsarist regime. As Lenin clearly put the matter, "the Bashkirs do not trust the Great Russians because the Great Russians are more cultured and used to take advantage of their culture to rob the Bashkirs... And a nation like the Great Russians should be particularly careful because they have provoked such bitter hatred in all the other nations."<sup>31</sup>

Contrary to Lenin's recommendation, the Soviet practice in Bashkiria unfortunately provoked the centuries-old conflicts. This was a process through which the power of the Bashkir nationalist government under Zeki Velidi, the *Bashrevkom*, was liquidated. In 1920, following Zeki Velidi's flight to Turkestan with some of his Bashkir comrades of the *Bashrevkom*, most Soviet organs in the Bashkir territories were filled predominately by Great Russians who would fight for the interests of the Russian population there. "The Soviets took the side of the Russian colonists in their struggle for land with the Bashkirs. Bashkirs were, in many instances, excluded from membership in the soviets, and most of the land which the Bolshevik

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 58. For more information on colonization in Bashkiria, in steppes and in Turkestan in the twentieth century, see Pipes, *op. cit.*, 82-84. For the extent of settlement and how this migration transformed the economic and social life on the Kazakh steppes, see Martha Brill Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, Stanford University, California 1995(2<sup>nd</sup> edition), 83-99.

<sup>30</sup> Zeki Velidi Togan, *Hatıralar: Türkistan ve Diğer Müslüman Doğu Türklerinin Milli Varlık ve Kültür Mücadelesi* (Memoirs: The National Struggle of the Turks of Turkestan and other Eastern Muslim Turks), İstanbul 1969, 168.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Slezkine, *op. cit.*, 420-21.

institutions had confiscated in that area from the state, church, or private landowner, was distributed to Russian colonists... the urban and agricultural Tatar elements in the Bashkir territories also tended to side with the Russians against the natives".<sup>32</sup> In Suny's words, "in the absence of a significant proletariat... the party became a surrogate proletariat. Instead of being engaged in the actual revolution, which was anticolonial and led by nationalists or ethnosocialists, the party constructed a reading of the political moment that allowed them extraordinary freedom and left them open to precisely the charges of Russian expansionism of which Lenin had warned".<sup>33</sup>

What about the attitude of the popular masses towards the competing parties in Bashkiria? This is a critical question in understanding Bashkir nationalism thoroughly. We have sufficient information to believe that the nationalist leadership was far from lacking active popular support. In this respect, Pipes has provided information regarding a mass uprising in Bashkiria in 1920. Zeki Velidi also mentions the discontent among the Bashkir population following the repressive and centralizing policies of the Bolshevik government which would virtually liquidate the *Bashrevkom*. Following these events all of Bashkiria was thrown into civil war. The Bashkirs flocked in increasing numbers into the mountains to join the rebels. To repress the uprising, additional armed forces were transferred from neighboring provinces. The Russian peasants and workers eagerly flocked into punitive detachments to revenge themselves on the Bashkirs and to seize the land and cattle which they had long coveted.<sup>34</sup> In Pipes' words, "this Bashkir uprising of 1920 may be viewed as the result of a merger of two separate opposition movements: the initial political opposition of Bashkir officials and intellectuals was strengthened by the outbreak of a popular rebellion of the Bashkirs."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Pipes, *op. cit.*, 163.

<sup>33</sup> Suny, *op. cit.*, 95. Zeki Velidi, in his memoirs, provided a lively description of this very course from the perspective of a nationalist leader who viewed the Soviet regime, marked by Stalin's centralizing attempts, as the continuation of tsarist imperialism in Bolshevik form. For Togan's idea on Lenin's theory of nationality, see Togan, 459, 463, 481.

<sup>34</sup> For more details see Pipes, *op. cit.*, 161-172. Pipes' account is in full accord with Zeki Velidi's memoir, though Pipes did not use this memoir in his study.

<sup>35</sup> Pipes, *op. cit.*, 167.

Yet, even for those very critical days, it is not accurate to portray the Soviet policy concerning social and political matters as simply repressive. In this respect to look at the practice of the 'Society for Aid to Bashkiria,' *Bashkiropomoshch*, created by Soviet government in Moscow in order to provide relief to the needy and prevent starvation and disease in the area, is illuminating.<sup>36</sup> In 1920 this society provided assistance to 150,000 Bashkirs. These relief efforts of the society was utilized to establish an efficient and centralized Bolshevik party apparatus in the region. "Within five months the party membership in Bashkiria increased fivefold, and Communist organizations... were setup in 90 per cent of the counties."<sup>37</sup> The money used in this relief effort was actually came from the funds Lenin offered to the Bashkir nationalists as compensation for civil war losses caused by the Red Army in Bashkir territories.<sup>38</sup> The Soviet government preferred to distribute this money as material assistance to the Bashkir people through the *Bashkiropomoshch* instead of transferring it directly to the Bashkir government. According to Zeki Velidi, the purpose, no doubt, was to undermine the national government's popularity among the Bashkir population.

These two examples, the mass uprising of 1920 supporting the nationalist leadership and the Bolshevik policy of *Bashkiropomoshch*, illustrate the complexity of the social and political problem in Bashkiria. The contention of this paper is that any of the following extreme approaches can not explain this complexity. The first pictures the issue as simply a matter of Soviet repression of the native population while the second presents the nationalist leadership as lacking any popular support and just representing a reactionary social program against the new Soviet regime. To avoid simplistic explanations, and to understand the Bashkir question in a broader context, we need studies on the perceptions of the peasants in the region, Bashkir and Slavic, regarding the very course they were experiencing. To understand the problem in the southern Ural region in its full complexity, one also needs to focus on the peasant attitudes towards Whites, the nationalist leadership, and various Russian parties including the Bolsheviks throughout the civil war era.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 165; and Togan, *op. cit.*, 278.

<sup>37</sup> Pipes, *op. cit.*, 165.

<sup>38</sup> Togan, *op. cit.*, 278.

However, the current historiography underestimates rural politics in the Bashkir lands during the period under consideration.

The historiographical neglect of the rural politics during the revolution and the civil war is actually a general phenomenon. Historians outside the Soviet Union, as stated by Orlando Figes, hardly made a detailed study of the relationship between the Bolsheviks and the peasantry, which, during the formative years of the Soviet regime, constituted the overwhelming majority of the population.<sup>39</sup> Again, as pointed out by Figes, most of the western studies concerning these years have focused on the military aspect of the civil war, and explained the victory of the Red Army as merely a military issue.<sup>40</sup>

Regarding a focus on peasant politics, Figes' recent study on the Volga countryside during the revolution and the civil war, appears as an exception. He focused on the northwestern part of the Volga region: Penza, Saratov, Samara, and Simbirsk, a region populated for the most part by Slavic peasants. Although Figes' main purpose is not to address the peasant issue as it was intertwined with the nationality question, and although he has not covered the peripheries of the Volga region, and the southern Urals and the northwestern steppes in particular, where the proportion of the non-Slavic peasantry, Muslim to a great extent, was more important, and so where the peasant question could not be understood without referring to the nationality problem, this study, its methodology, the questions it has raised, provide insights regarding the nationality question in the Volga region, and in Bashkiria in particular. Figes examined the peasant attitudes towards competing political parties throughout the civil war era by focusing on the village and *volost'* soviet elections. He has investigated the initial failure of the Bolshevik policy in the regions mentioned above. This policy was implemented by the Committees of the Rural Poor, *Kombedy*; Figes examined the social composition of rural soviets, and especially on how the Bolsheviks later were able to establish their control on the rural politics. The students of the Bashkir nationality question should produce a similar account of the rural politics in the southern Urals, a part of the wider Volga-Ural region which Figes has not paid attention to. Without such an approach it is

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<sup>39</sup> Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War, The Volga Countryside in Revolution, 1917-1921*, Oxford 1991, 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 1

impossible to draw general conclusions concerning the popular support that any of the political parties, including the Bashkir nationalists under Zeki Velidi, secured.

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In this final part of the paper I explore the ideological/discursive aspects of Bashkir nationalism which are also indispensable in understanding the Bashkir nationality question. By examining Zeki Velidi's memoirs I aim to shed some light on how the Bashkir nationalist discourse was influenced by the general left-wing revolutionary enthusiasm of the time. This particular discourse, which was phrased not as an opposition to the Bolshevik ideology in explicit terms but rather phrased mainly with reference to a world revolutionary discourse, suggests that the Bashkir nationalists were ready to find a place for themselves in the ideological setting of the new regime. The same discourse was also shaped so as to reflect the social contradictions between the Bashkir periphery and the Soviet center, as discussed above. In the following, I would argue that the political and ideological encounters between Bolsheviks and the Bashkir leadership could not be interpreted as a matter of mere political manipulation. This is especially true for Bashkir leadership and for some Bolsheviks, particularly Lenin and Trotsky.

The fact that the Bolshevik leaders were far from having a single viewpoint on the nationality question made it easy for the Bashkir leaders to cooperate with the new regime. Whatever Stalin's pragmatic policies towards the Bashkir nationalists throughout the civil war era, the great majority of the Bolshevik leaders did not believe in the policy of an alliance with the nationalist leadership of the eastern peoples, including the Soviet Muslims. For Preobrazhensky, Bukharin, Stalin and others the question was whether or not "the commerce-oriented bourgeoisie and intellectual upper crust in the economically backward countries inevitably aspire to solve the national problem in pretty much the same framework that the big bourgeois powers used in setting up their nation states."<sup>41</sup>

However Lenin was not convinced by any of his comrades' left-wing critiques, and insisted on the necessity of a careful treatment of the natives,

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<sup>41</sup> For Preobrazhensky's critique of Lenin's preliminary thesis, see Branko Lazitch and Milorad M. Drachkovitch, *Lenin and the Comintern*, v.1, Stanford, California 1972, 385.



both the masses and the nationalist elites. As reflected in his memoirs, Zeki Velidi believed that he would be able to make use of this diversity of opinions among the Bolshevik leadership. At least in the beginning he was optimistic especially about Lenin's support of the Bashkir leadership despite Stalin's centralizing policies. Trotsky also supported Zeki Velidi and suggested to Lenin that the Party should benefit from Zeki Velidi in its eastern policies. Trotsky told Zeki Velidi that he was trying to influence Lenin against Stalin's plan of separating the Bashkirs and Kazakhs and liquidating the Bashkir regiment, which in Stalin's view was very dangerous. According to Trotsky, Lenin was however influenced to a great extent by Stalin concerning the nationality issues.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, Lenin's preliminary theses for the Second Congress of Comintern on national and colonial questions, which Lenin discussed not only with his Bolshevik comrades but also with native leaders including Zeki Velidi, marked a turning point for Zeki Velidi. Lenin in fact modified his preliminary theses after being criticized by his left-wing comrades as exaggerating the role of bourgeois nationalist parties in the colonial world.<sup>43</sup> After modification the disputed article of the theses took the following form: "The Communist International should arrive at temporary agreement and, yes, even establish an alliance with the revolutionary movement in the colonies and backward countries. The International, however, should absolutely maintain the independent character of proletarian movement, even in its embryonic stage."<sup>44</sup> The discussions on the preliminary theses and Lenin's "new position," which coincided with Stalin's plan of separating the Bashkirs and Kazakhs administratively and liquidating the nationalist leaderships, was regarded by Zeki Velidi as proof of the inherent imperialistic tendency of the Russians, that of never trusting the natives and always trying to dominate them. With this policy turn, the political situation became unbearable for Zeki Velidi. Before his flight he expressed his critiques of the Bolshevik policy in a letter to Lenin.

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<sup>42</sup> For Zeki Velidi's conversations with Trotsky, see Togan, *op. cit.*, 293.

<sup>43</sup> For the discussions on Lenin's thesis, see Lazitch and Drachkovitch, *op. cit.*, 382-392; and on the effects of Lenin's adoption of his position after the critiques, see Suny, *op. cit.*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> For Lenin's thesis as it was ratified by the Comintern Congress, see John Riddell (ed.), *To See the Dawn, Baku, 1920-First Congress of the Peoples of the East*, New York 1993, Appendix 4, 266-272.

Zeki Velidi's critique is related to Lenin's idea that "only the proletariat of all the world's advanced countries can win final victory... But they cannot triumph without the help of the toiling masses of all the oppressed colonial peoples, especially those of the East".<sup>45</sup> However, he expressed his critique of these theses not only as a sign of Russian imperialism in the Bolshevik form but also in the more general context of the question of the relations between the proletariat of the west and the emancipation of the eastern peoples. In his view, Lenin's idea concerning the necessity of the assistance of the western proletariat in establishing socialism in the backward societies of the east meant that the established colonial systems and policies in India, Turkestan, and Africa would be carried out through the political organizations of the British, Russian, and French and Belgium proletariats.<sup>46</sup> Zeki Velidi did not stop there. According to him socialism in the case of a nation which previously had a tradition of imperialist policies, such as Russia, would inevitably produce imperialist practices. In his view the logical outcome of these theses was that the western proletariat would continue to be stronger than the eastern proletariat even after socialism had been established on a world scale. The socialists of the great nations would never trust the native socialist and suspect if they would unite with the nationalist petty and middle bourgeoisie against the proletariat of the advanced countries. The Russian communists would never trust the native socialists and communists. As a result, the proletariat of an advanced nation would never allow the native socialist to establish socialism in their own countries by themselves, and further, due to this suspicion, the proletarian organizations of the advanced societies would always tend to liquidate one group and replace it with a new one, a tendency which would repeat itself over and over again.<sup>47</sup> What Zeki Velidi suggested against this "imperialist socialism" was a "democratic socialism". According to him socialism could only be established by the peoples of the east and so the world revolution would be an eastern revolution.

These thoughts concerning the revolution in economically less developed societies were in fact not unique to Zeki Velidi. Among the

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<sup>45</sup> Lazitch and Drachkovitch, *op. cit.*, 379.

<sup>46</sup> From his letter to Lenin, see Togan, *op. cit.*, 463.

<sup>47</sup> Togan, *op. cit.*, 481.

intellectuals of the Muslim east the idea of an eastern revolution, created by the enthusiasm of the Russian revolution, was widespread and phrased in a wide spectrum, ranging from an explicit nationalist discourse to a more Marxist one. In fact, the major issue was related to a search for collaboration between nationalism and communism. This search produced ideologies and political programs which we know as “national communism”. It should also be noted that this search for a synthesis of nationalism and communism was not unique to the Muslim-Turkic world, it would be a major ideological theme within the twentieth century revolutionary agendas.

Among Russian Muslims it was Sultan Galiev who would give a theoretical manifestation to these ideas during the 1920s.<sup>48</sup> As a nationalist and communist leader Galiev’s political thought has been relatively well studied. A comparison of Galiev’s thought with that Zeki Velidi would be interesting. For example, it is ironic to notice the similarities between Sultan Galiev’s theories of “proletarian nations”, “colonial international”, and “eastern revolution” and the ideas expressed by Zeki Velidi in his letter to Lenin. The only difference is that Sultan Galiev, as a member of the Communist Party and Narkomnatz, presented his ideas within a Bolshevik and Marxist language while Zeki Velidi was not so careful in this respect. Both of them attributed a proletarian characteristic to the peasant societies of the east.<sup>49</sup> In that sense their approach to world revolution might be considered as an alternative to the classic Marxist outlook of a European revolution to which the Bolsheviks had subscribed. Their criticism of Bolshevism as a continuation of Russian imperialism intensified as soon as they realized that the new regime would give them no chance to implement their political programs.

In the world political conjuncture following 1921, and the Bolsheviks policy adjustments to this new conjuncture, there remained no room for

<sup>48</sup> For Sultan Galiev’s theoretical ideas, see Alexandre Bennigsen, *Muslim national communism in the Soviet Union: a revolutionary strategy for the colonial world*, Chicago 1979.

<sup>49</sup> Concerning the backward societies Lenin had ideas similar to those of “proletarian nations”. For a summary of Lenin’s ideas which attribute proletarian characteristics to the peoples of backward societies, see Slezkine, *op. cit.*, 421. “Taken as a whole and compared to more ‘cultured’ nations, however, they were legitimate proletarians by virtue of having been cheated and oppressed. Under imperialism... colonial peoples had become the global equivalents of the western working class.”

revolutionary enthusiasms which were in fact stimulated by the Russian revolution. By 1921 the Soviet regime had to a great extent secured its power in the borderlands with the final liquidation of the nationalist leadership, though in Turkestan the Bolsheviks needed more time to settle the native distrust. In this new conjuncture, the nationalist elites' belief that they could accommodate within the Soviet system lost its relevance.<sup>50</sup> The short lived Bashkir socialist experimentation under the leadership of Zeki Velidi should be evaluated in this context.

In this new era, Soviet nationality policy was marked by *korenizatsiia*, a "NEP-like policy". The new regime granted "ethnoterritorial autonomy" to the natives, and promoted their cultural and linguistic rights, but not political autonomy. As predicted by Zeki Velidi, because of the distrust of the Russian Communist Party, the native communists that the Bolsheviks recruited in the Republics were eliminated on a regular basis and replaced by new ones. This was one of the main aspects of Stalin's nationality policy.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that in order to understand the Bashkir nationality question thoroughly, we need to formulate new theoretical approaches and research agendas. In this account, Suny's perspective on the national question in the Russian revolution, that one should understand the national question as a part of a single revolutionary process and that class and ethnic matters are intertwined in that process, and Figs' exemplary study of the rural politics in the Volga region provide solid theoretical and methodological ground for an understanding of the Bashkir nationality question, which was basically framed by the land problem and the form of the political regime that would replace the tsarist autocracy.

A study of the Bashkir question could demystify established paradigms still persistent in the historiography. As I have demonstrated that the political problems following the Russian revolution in the Volga and Ural regions were highly complicated. Until 1921 both Bashkir and Kazakh leaders were ready to accept a political solution within the Soviet system.

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<sup>50</sup> However, for Sultan Galiev and his comrades, they would have some more time within the Party and the Soviet system.

However, the political program proposed by the Bashkir and Kazakh nationalist leadership, phrased as political territorial autonomy, was quite different from the pan-Turkist Tatar *jadidist* intellectuals' program of cultural autonomy. From a pan-Turkist point of view the Bashkir and Kazakh program might have appeared as contradictory to a Turkic unity. However, concerning such a broader nationalist program, the Bashkir and Kazakh intellectuals had their own proposal: a Turkic federation under a confederative Soviet regime.

The particular ethnic and class composition of the Bashkir society and its geographical proximity to the Russian-Soviet center gave the Bashkir case its peculiar characteristics. The nationalist leadership's readiness to cooperate with the Bolsheviks, its revolutionary ideological discourse, and the Bashkir socialist experiment with the Soviet system for more than a year, make the Bashkir case different from any of Suny's five types. Within the context of Suny's model, the Bashkir case, and the experiences of the Kazakh steppes and Central Asia as well, could be considered as the sixth group. Accordingly, this paper's focus on a small nationality in the central Russia, i.e., the Bashkirs in the Volga region, helps complicate the theoretical model that Suny has offered.

Nationalist leaderships in this sixth group were more ready to cooperate with the Soviet center. In these regions "NEP-like nationality policy" (nativization, *korenizatsiia*) was implemented only after 1921, that is, only after the nationalist leaderships, as in the case of Zeki Velidi in Bashkiria, had all been eliminated regardless of their readiness to cooperate with the Soviet regime. What would have happened if the power of Zeki Velidi and his comrades had not been eliminated? Regarding the nationality question, today we know that the Soviet regime under Stalin did not produce a democratic solution. Yet, whether a socialist Bashkiria under the leadership of nationalist Zeki Velidi and within a confederative Soviet system could have contributed to a more democratic political experience remains an open question.