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Islets of Volga-Ural Muslims in the Far East

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Introduction

Russians, Tatar-Bashkirs from Volga-Ural region and other minorities of Russia immigrated to the northern territory of China called Manchuria at the end of 19th and in the beginning of 20th century. Because of economic and later political reasons these people also spread to the neighboring territories of China, Korea and Japan. The first wave of immigrants or workers started to come in 1898 when the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) started to be built. The second wave was after the 1917 Russian Revolution. Hundreds of thousands of workers, peasants, soldiers, wealthy persons, intellectuals, minorities etc. were involved in this immigration. These people spent approximately fifty years of their lives in these countries and very successfully preserved their belief, language and culture.

In the Far East, first Chinese-British (and also French, German, etc.), later Japanese-Chinese, then Chinese Russian, Japanese-Russian and at last Japanese-Soviet and Japanese-US rivalries were a blow on the former citizens of Russia after 1945. Some of them were brought back to the Soviet Union by persuasion or by force. According to one author, the Russian immigrants jumped "out of the frying pan, into the fire".¹ The luckier, who could get visas, immigrated to the USA, Canada, Australia or Turkey. So, the elderly among them had to change their countries two or even three times in their lifetime. Every new country meant new problems, new adaptation difficulties, and new economic insecurities.

In Manchuria as well Russians were in majority, the Tatar-Bashkirs in minority. In other words, even in a foreign country they were again living, working, and sharing the same schools with Russians. Maybe the only thing not in common was the worshipping places, namely churches and mosques. Certainly not everywhere were such facilities found. Tatar-Bashkirs were under the pressure of fascists or communists, and even of liberal Russians. In countries such as Japan, Manchutigo (Manchuria) or China they were recognized as Russians, because

¹ Leonid A. Petrov, "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire: Russian Immigrants in China", <http://north-korea.narod.ru/immigrants.html>.

they originally came from Russia, and local authorities did not distinguish between them and Russians. In other words, as in their homeland here too the Russian pressure and the influence of Russian culture on the young generation continued. Another problem was their inability to explain their problems to the local authorities. So their struggle was not just in the economic field; in order to have security, to preserve their religious and cultural identity they were forced to sacrifice a lot.

The Chinese Eastern Railway Company

Russia occupied the Chinese harbor in the north in 1860 and renamed it Vladivostok. Thus it fulfilled its desire to reach to the Pacific Ocean. But to reach this harbor in shorter time and in a less costly way it needed a shorter railway connection, which could cross the Chinese territory through Manchuria. St. Petersburg convinced Peking and by a treaty, the "Chinese Eastern Railway (CER)" Company (VKJD: Vostochnaia Kitaiskaia Zheleznaiia Dorogo) was founded. The Russian-Chinese Bank financed the construction. The railway, 2536 km. long, started to be constructed on August 1897 and ended on September 1902. CER was officially put to use in July 1903.²

The 1904-1905 Russian-Japanese War

At the beginning of 1904 the Russian fleet at Port Arthur was defeated by the Japanese fleet and the Japanese army won a victory at Liyang on September 1904 against the Russian army. With the mediation of the USA a peace agreement was signed between the warring parties in June 1905.³ The Japanese received in Manchuria the territory between Changchung and Port Arthur, which also meant that the Japanese became the new owners of the Northern Manchu-

² Peter Crush, "The Chinese Eastern Railway- a Glimpse of History",
http://www.hkrs.org.hk/members/crush/CER_1.htm#top#.

³ "Battle of Mukden",
<http://www.tiscali.co.uk/reference/encyclopedia/hutchinson/m0009814.html>.

rian part of CER.⁴ The Japanese now possessed a 1.128 km. long railway. Later they build the junction between Mukden and Dangdong.⁵

Japan' relations with Asian countries and the Islamic world

After defeating China in 1895, signing a Union agreement with Great Britain in 1902 and defeating Russia in 1905 Japan became as a world power in the European way. Japanese politicians between the years 1900-1945 considered Muslims in the Fareast as an instrument for their goals to defeat the European colonies. It may also be that in the struggle with Russia, Russian Muslims were subjects with whom cooperation was needed. As far as we know the Japanese notables had their first contacts with a well-known religious person, politician and traveler, Abdurrashid Ibrahim (1857-1944),⁶ during his visit to Tokyo in 1908. He spent four to five months there and contacted many Japanese notables. He even became, on 7 June 1909, the only Muslim founding member of "Asia Gi Kay" (Asian Defense Force), which was a core right wing organization.⁷

After the occupation of Manchuria on 1931 the Japanese interest in the Muslim world grew further. It must not be a coincidence that Abdurrashid Ibrahim and Ayaz Ishaki (1878-1954)⁸ were visiting Japan a second time or that other Turks such as Muhsip Çapanoğlu, Mehmed Fuat Kirkanahar, the Ottoman Prince Abdulkarim Efendi (1904-1935) came there in those years.⁹

⁴ Peter S.H. Tang, *Russian and Soviet Policy in Manchuria and Outer Mongolia, 1911-1931*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke Univ. Press, 1959, p. 51.

⁵ "South Manchurian Railway", <http://print.infoplease.com/ce6/history/A0846087.html>.

⁶ İsmail Türkoğlu, *Sibiryalı Meşhur Seyyah Abdürreşid İbrahim*, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, Ankara, 1997.

⁷ Abdürreşid İbrahim (ed. Mehmed Paksu), *20. Asrın Başlarında İslâm Dünyası ve Japonya'da İslâmiyet*, I, Yeni Asya Yayın. 1987, İstanbul, p. 508. Selçuk Esenbel, "Japan's Global Claim to Asia and the World of Islam: Transnational Nationalism and World Power, 1900-1945", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 109, No. 4, October 2004, p. 18.

⁸ For more info. *Muhammed Ayaz İshaki Hayatı ve Faaliyeti (100. Doğum Yılı Dolaysıyla)*, Ankara, 1979.

⁹ Selçuk Esenbel, *op.cit.*, pp.27-28.

Places of Turk-Tatar Concentration

The immigration of Turk-Tatars from Russia to Manchuria and from there to Korea, China and Japan started in the last two years of 19th century, when the CER construction started. First they came to work in this construction or to make business along the construction line. Many of them did not go back and settled where they were after the 1917 October Révolution broke out. So they became emigrants like many Russians and other minorities from Russia. The settlers also brought their families from their homeland, and thus many small colonies arose in the Fareast. After the Bolshevik takeover many wealthy persons, members of the White Army, joined these emigrants. Thus these ethnic colonies became larger. When, in 1919, the traffic on CER between Manchuria station and Harbin stopped the economic situation deteriorated and Turk-Tatars like other former Russian citizens went to other cities searching jobs. According to our research Turk-Tatars were living in Manchuria - from the north to the south - at Manchuria (station), Hailar, Tsitsihar, Harbin, Changchun, Kirin (Girin), Mukden (Shenyang), Anshan, Dairen (Dalian), Paganichnaia (station); in Korea Keijo (Seul), Taegu, Pusan, Pyongyang; in China harbor city Tientsin and Shanghai; in Japan Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto, Kumamoto, Miyazaki, Odawara, Kurumi etc.¹⁰

The only motive for coming to such desolate places was to make a living. First comers were petit merchants whose origins were from Gubernia's Penza and Tambov, which were situated in the southern European part of Russia and 4-5 thousand km. away from Manchuria. They started to open their shops on the CER line. After earning enough money many of them brought their family members. When the Turk-Tatar community started to grow their needs for cultural and spiritual life became crucial. They created their own religious and cultural societies in order to build their own mosques and primary schools.¹¹ After the 1917 October revolution the majority of Turk-Tatars were settled mainly in two cities: Harbin and Hailar; in the 1930s, due to the worsening economic situation, they started to spread to Korea and Japan. They were generally trading with fur, leather, wool, fabric and clothing.¹² Between the years of 1900 and 1938 Turk-Tatars in the Fareast build or rented 18 buildings, which were used as primary

¹⁰ *Bulletin*, No. 5, Mukden, 1935, p. 1-3.

¹¹ Mahmut Tahir, "Rusya Dışında Kazan Türkleri", *Kazan*, sayı 1, Eylül 1970, p. 14.

¹² P. Sorokin, "Russian Tatar Emigré Communities in East Asia" (Paper presented at CESS 2004 Conference, p. 11.

schools or medersas.¹³ Certainly the Tatar population was not distributed evenly. The main concentration was in Manchuria was at Harbin. We do not have the exact figure for Muslims in the Far East, but estimations range from 10 to 15 thousand.¹⁴ When the economic situation deteriorated and war became a reality the number of Turk-Tatar émigrés dropped in 1945 to at least 5 thousand.

Harbin Turk-Tatar Religious and National Association

Harbin is situated in the north of Manchuria. After the establishment of CER it became a very important trading center. With CER contributing many Russian high schools, colleges, theater buildings, hospitals, shopping centers were opened. After 1914 consulates were opened by 16 countries and about 300 international companies had their offices in Harbin.¹⁵

The number of Tatars who started to settle in Harbin after 1901, grew after the Russian-Japanese war (1904-1905). First they built, in 1901, their first wooden mosque or *masjid*. But after the Muslim society grew bigger, this small *masjid* ceased to meet the needs. Therefore a *masjid* made of bricks was built in 1906 at Artillerskaia Street No. 58.¹⁶ On the same year Turk-Tatars of Harbin nominated İnyetullah (Ahmedi) Seli-Ahmed as *imam*. He also acted as *muallim* (teacher) at the nearby primary school. In the beginning he had just two pupils to teach. He ordered books and magazines from Russia, which formed the basis of the community's library.

Abdurrashid İbrahim, who visited Harbin in 1908, wrote about the primary school and the mosque. He wrote: "Pristan looks like a little Tatarstan. Wherever Russians laid a foundation, our Tatars went there, and put their tents."¹⁷

In 1918 the school had already one hundred pupils. With the float of revolution many new immigrants arrived in Harbin. As a result the number of pupils grew to 150. On the millennium of the adoption of Islam by the forefathers of Turk-Tatars, namely Bulgars, the Muslim population of Harbin decided to build a mos-

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.15-16 (see the table. "Turk-Tatar communities in North East Asia") [*Milli Bayrak*, 1935-1945].

¹⁴ Ayaz İshaki, "Yırak Şark Timir Yulı Meseleleri", *Yanğa Milli Yul*, No. 12, Berlin 1934, p. 3.

¹⁵ Li Qiang, "I Live by the Songhua River", www.chinatoday.com.cn/English.

¹⁶ Ali Merthan Dündar, "Japonya Türk-Tatar Diasporası", *Modern Türklük Araştırmaları Dergisi*, No. 1, Nov. 2004, p. 77.

¹⁷ Abdürreşid İbrahim, pp. 191-193.

que and the construction started. But in September 1924 (?) the *imam* of (*ahond*) İneyetullah Seli-Ahmed, who was the inspirer and collector of donations, died, and the construction stopped.¹⁸ Although the people of Harbin was able to put the crescent on the minaret, the political disturbances in China, then the Soviet-Chinese skirmish in 1929, the Japanese-Chinese war in 1931, the floating disaster in Harbin on 1932, all these events caused as a backlash to the construction. Because of the bad economical situation the Muslims of Harbin were not able to donate funds.¹⁹ It was not a secret, also, that the Harbin Turk-Tatar Religious and National Association was not administrated properly. So much so that in September 1934 the Association declared a deficit of 34 thousand yen.²⁰ Nevertheless the new *imam* Münir Hasibullah (1896-1944)²¹ launched a new donation campaign on 1936 and traveled to almost every corner in the Fareast where the Turk-Tatars were living. His energy and efforts brought the donation necessary to complete the construction of the mosque. At last, on 8 October 1937, the "Millennium Mosque" in Harbin was opened to prayers.²²

The number of Tatars was at its peak in the 1920s, reaching several thousands. In the 1930s the number dropped to one thousand, and some 500 were buried at the Muslim cemetery of Harbin.

Chinese communists confiscated all belongings of the Association when they took the power in the country. In 1960 there were only 4-5 Tatars left. In other words, the history of immigration to Harbin lasted 60 years.²³

Another place of concentration was at Manchurian Station. According to İbrahim, who visited this place on 1908, there was a *masjid* and a little school for some 300 people of Tatar origin.²⁴

Hailar Turk-Tatar Religious and National Association

¹⁸ *Bulletin*, No. 3, Mukden, 1935, p. 3.

¹⁹ Mahmut Tahir, "Bin Yıl Camii (Harbin'deki Türk-Tatarların dini ve millî cemiyeti)", *Kazan*, No. 6, (Dec. 1971-Feb. 1972), pp.39-40.

²⁰ *Bulletin*, No. 3, p. 3.

²¹ E. Agi, "İmam ve Öğretmen Münir Hasibullah (1896-1944)", *Kazan*, No. 23, 1980, p. 53-55.

²² Mahmut Tahir, *op.cits.* p. 40.

²³ Mahmut Tahir, "Harbin'deki Türk-Tatarların Dini ve Millî Cemiyeti", *Kazan*, No.7-8, March-Aug. 1972, pp. 94-96.

²⁴ Abdürreşid İbrahim, p. 180.

In 1906, when the population of Tatars reached a certain amount, they bought a building for their association in the center of Hailar, in which they opened their *masjid* and a school. This *masjid* was also recognized officially by the *Muftiat* of Ufa.²⁵

In 1919 the Muslim people of the city created the "Hailar Turk-Tatar Muslims National Administration".²⁶ In their institutions, they emulated the structure of the Turk-Tatar National Parliament, which was founded in November 1917 by the people through free elections in Ufa and abolished by Bolsheviki on 25 April 1918 by force.²⁷ In 1925 the Muslims of Harbin built a *masjid* as big as to contain 400 people at the same time. The cost of this mosque was 10 thousand silver dollars. In the best time more than 2 thousand Tatars lived in Hailar and in the 1950s, about 700 graves could be counted in the Muslim cemetery.²⁸ One of the important *imams* and *muallims* of the Hailar community was Hatip Halidi (1893-1977) who died in İstanbul.²⁹

Except the *masjids* mentioned above there were little *masjids* and primary schools at many places. For example, at Hun Hul Di farm; 120 km. far from Hailar³⁰; at İl-Duga village 70 km. from Buhidu station³¹; at Chang-Chun (Sinzin)³²; at Mukden³³; at Shanghai³⁴; at Shi-Tou-Hedtse station³⁵ and also in Korea at Seul (Keijo) and Pusan³⁶ *masjids* and primary schools were opened. They were of different sizes and existed for a certain time.

²⁵ Mahmut Tahir, "Haylar'daki Türk-Tatarların Dini ve Milli Cemiyeti", *Kazan*, No. 11, March 1974, pp. 35-40

²⁶ *Bulletin*, No. 2, Feb. 1935, p. 8.

²⁷ For more information, : Nadir Devlet, *1917 Ekim İhtilali ve Türk-Tatar Millet Meclisi*, Ötüken Neşriyat, İstanbul, 1998.

²⁸ Mahmut Tahir, *op.cit.*, pp. 35-40.

²⁹ Emrullah Ağı, "Hatip Halidi", *Kazan*, No. 21, 1978, pp. 58-59; Ali Akış, "Hatip Halidi (1983-1978)", *Türk Kültürü*, No. 186, April 1978, pp. 383-384.

³⁰ Mahmut Tahir, "Hun Hul Di'de Türk-Tatar Cemiyeti", *Kazan*, No. 22, 1978, p. 22.

³¹ Mahmut Tahir, "İl-Duga Cemiyeti", *Kazan*, No. 22, 1978, p. 23.

³² Mahmut Tahir, "Çan-Çun (Sin-Zin) Türk-Tatar Cemiyeti", *Kazan*, No. 18, 1976, p.49.

³³ İnaletullah Akçora, " Mukden Şehrindeki Tatarların Dini ve Milli Cemiyeti", *Kazan*, No. 7-8, March-August 1972, pp. 97-99.

³⁴ Mahmut Tahir, "Şanhay Şehrindeki Türk-Tatar Cemiyeti", *Kazan*, No. 22, 1978, pp. 23-24.

³⁵ Mahmut Tahir, "Doğu Çin Demiryolu Boyunda Yaşayan Tatarlar (Kazanlılar)", *Kazan*, No. 10, Dec. 1973, pp. 30-31.

³⁶ Mahmut Tahir, "Koreyada Tatarlar", *Kazan Utları*, No. 7, 1990, pp. 178-179.

Conclusion

We see that the Turk-Tatars, similarly to peoples of other nationalities, started to come to the Far East with the construction of CER beginning in 1898. This flow of emigrants lasted until the 1920s. The Tatar-Bashkirs settled in Manchuria (which became the autonomous state of Manchutigo under the Japanese protectorate in the years 1932-1945), Korea (which was annexed by the Japanese in 1910), China and Japan, at least in 25 to 30 different cities, towns, villages and stations. When their number reached a certain level they opened religious and educational facilities to preserve their religious and national identity. They also established, after the Mukden *Kurultai* (Convention) on 4-14 February 1935, a "Far East İdil-Ural Turk-Tatar Muslim National Center".³⁷ This Center started to publish a weekly called *Milli Bayrak* (National Banner), which was run by İbrahim Devletkildi (1901-1967), as editor, who was also at same time the Secretary of the Center.³⁸ But the main leading force was Rukiye Muhammedish (1908-1989), who was writing most of the articles and at the same time working for the Center's education section. *Milli Bayrak* published 440 issues until both of them were arrested by the occupying Soviet Military forces.³⁹ This weekly newspaper was the mouthpiece of the Center. All religious, national days and historical events were reminded to the people. In other words, it had a very important function.

The most important and effective Muslim associations were in Manchuria: Hailar, Harbin, Mukden and Changchun (Sinzin); in Korea: Seoul (Keijo); in China: Tientsin and Shanghai; in Japan: Tokyo, Kobe, Nagoya and Kumamoto.

At the beginning of the 1940s life in the Far East got worst because of World War II. Unemployment, shortage of food and security problems became the most important concerns of the people. Japan was losing the war. American nuclear bombs thrown to Nagasaki and Hiroshima gave the last blow to Japan. On 10 August 1945 the Soviet Army entered Manchuria. On 14 August 1945 the Japanese Emperor Hirohito (1901-1989) declared the unconditional surrender of Japan.⁴⁰

³⁷ "Yırak Şarkta Yeşevçi İdil-Ural Türk-Tatar Müslümanlarının Dini-Milli Merkezi", *Yanğa Milli Yul*, No. 88 (5), 1935, pp. 9-13.

³⁸ "Milli Bayrak Gezitesi Çığa Başladı", *Yanğa Milli Yul*, No. 94 (12), 1935, pp. 28-32.

³⁹ Mahmut Tahir, "Milli Bayrak Matbaası", *Kazan*, No. 18, 1976, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁰ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/printable.asp?url=/ssi/H/Hirohito.html>.

Then, all anti-Soviet associations, also the İdil-Ural Turk-Tatar Muslim Center and all subordinate associations were liquidated. Many of their leaders such as the President of the Center Ahmedshah İzettullin, Secretary İbrahim Devletkildi, Head of the publication section Rukiye (Muhammedish) Devletkildi (she had married İbrahim on 17 October 1943), Treasurer Salman Aiti, President of Chanchung Association Gilman and Secretary Emrullah Agi, President of Harbin Association Salayev and Hüseyin İbrahimov, Esat Agayev from Hailar, Tokyo imam Kurbanali and several others were arrested by the Soviet forces, then deported and sentenced at least to ten years in concentration camps.⁴¹ Some survived these 10 years of punishment and were deported for another five-six years to some desolate places in Siberia. But many of them did not survive.

This punishment created a shock among Turk-Tatars. All *masjids* and primary schools were closed. In a few years Turk-Tatars of the Fareast who received visas left for the USA, Canada, Australia or Turkey. Very few returned to the Soviet Union and a few hundred stayed in China.⁴²

In 45 year,s thousands of Turk-Tatars children received religious and history education and learned their mother tongue. As far as we can determine there were 21 associations, 18 *masjids* and 15 primary schools functioning in the Fareast.

In summary we can say that the Tatar-Bashkirs, although their numbers was not high and they were living scattered, tried to preserve their religious and national identity. But political developments dispersed them, in not longer than a half century, to different parts of the world.

⁴¹ From the interview made on May 1989 with late Mahmut Tahir.

⁴² Leonid. A. Petrov, "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire: Russian Immigrants in China", <http://north-korea.narod.ru/immigrants.html>.

TABLE I: ASSOCIATIONS FOUNDED IN THE FAR EAST

- 1) Harbin Turk-Tatar Religious and National Association (TTRNA) [Volga-Ural Turk-Tatar Culture Association :VUTTCA]*
- 2) Paganichni Station TTRNA
- 3) Manchuria Station TTRNA
- 4) Haylar Muslim National Administration [VUTTCA]*
- 5) Hun Hul Di TTRNA
- 6) İl-Duga Village TTRNA
- 7) Changchun (Sinzin) TTRNA [VUTTCA]*
- 8) Dairen [VUTTCA]*
- 9) Mukden TTRNA [VUTTCA]*
- 10) Tientsin TTDM İdaresi [VUTTCA]*
- 11) Shanghai TTRNA [VUTTCA]*
- 12) Girin TTRNA [VUTTCA]*
- 13) Tumen [VUTTCA]*
- 14) Keijo (Seoul) TTRNA [VUTTCA]*
- 15) Pusan TTRNA
- 16) Tokyo Mahalle-i İslamiye
- 17) Tokyo [VUTTCA]*
- 18) Kobe TTRNA [VUTTCA]*
- 19) Nagoya TTRNA [VUTTCA]*
- 20) Kumamoto TTRNA [VUTTCA]*
- 21) Singishu (Antung) TTRNA [VUTTCA]*

* The Association's name was changed after 1934.

TABLE II: MASJIDS AND SCHOOLS FOUNDED IN THE FAR EAST

NAME	NUMBER*	MASJID/DATE*	CEMETERY	SCHOOL*	NUMBER OF STUDENTS*
Harbin	500	1905, built		1905	2
	2.000	8.10.1937 Millennium Masjid	500	1918	150
Paganichni Station	200-250	1920-1940, rented		1920	25
Mançurya Station	500	1904-1935		1920	10-15
Hailar	1.200	1906, bought		1906	100
		1925, 400 people	700	1919 build	72
Hun Hul Di Farm	100	1920-1943, rented 1943, built		1920	5-10
İl Duga Village	100	1920-1945 build			
Şi-Tou-Hedtse Station	150-300	1935, built		1935 build	5-10
Changchun (Sinzin)	250	1932-1945, rented			
Mukden	200	1923, rented		1923 rent	5-10
Dairen	100	1925 ? built			
Tientsin	120	5.8.1928, built		1928	5-10
Shanghai	200	1922, rented		1935 rent	10-15
Girin	70				
Keijo (Seuol)	100	1926, built		1926	5-10
Pusan	50	1923, rented			
Tokyo	800	1925, rented		1925 rent	10
		12.5. 1938, built		1937	25
Kobe	600	1923, rented		1923	15-20
		11.10.1935, built		1935	20-30
Nagoya	50	1935, built		1925	10
Kumamoto	50	rented			
TOTAL*	7.540				

* The figures are estimates and may have margins of error of %20-30.