

# KAZAN: THE RELIGIOUSLY UNDIVIDED FRONTIER CITY

COMMENTARY BY

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## Abstract

*Located at the confluence of the Turko-Islamic and Slavic-Christian worlds, Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, a semiautonomous region of Russia, is populated by roughly even numbers of Muslim Tatars and Eastern Orthodox Russians. The city is separately important to each group's national history. For the Tatars, it is remembered as the seat of their Islamic state that held sway over Russian principalities to the west for three centuries before facing defeat at the hands of Moscow in 1552. For the Russians, the victory over Kazan marked the beginning of a vast multinational empire. In light of its geography and history, Kazan would seemingly be counted among the world's religiously divided frontier cities. Yet Kazan, in spite of pursuing a sovereignty campaign throughout the 1990s, has managed to avoid the type of ethno-religious-based conflict visiting other frontier cities, such as Jerusalem, Sarajevo, and Belfast. What lessons might Kazan offer other religiously divided frontier cities? In approaching this question, this article analyzes bordering processes, specifically looking at the invisible socio-spatial borders socially constructed through narratives and symbols.*

**Keywords:** Kazan, Tatarstan, Russia, frontier city, Kul Sharif Mosque, the Cathedral of Annunciation

## Introduction

Located at the confluence of the Turko-Islamic and Slavic-Christian worlds, Kazan is populated in roughly even numbers by Sunni Muslim Tatars and Eastern Orthodox Russians. The city is separately important to each group's national history. For the Tatars, Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, a semiautonomous region of the Russian Federation, is remembered as the seat of their Islamic state that held sway over Russian principalities to the west for three centuries before facing defeat at the hands of Moscow in 1552. This loss of statehood was followed by periods of forced Christianization – and, for much of the twentieth century, forced atheism – in and beyond Kazan. For the Russians, their victory over Kazan not only commenced the rapid expansion of a multi-ethnic

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empire but also “signaled the beginning of the Russian *reconquista*” aimed at liberating Christian lands, including Jerusalem and Constantinople, from the Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

In light of its geography and history, Kazan would seemingly be counted among the world’s religiously divided frontier cities, which, according to Kotek, are characterized by three elements: “sovereignty’s quarrel, double legitimacy and conflict.”<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the Kazan-based government formed the vanguard of post-Soviet Russia’s “parade of sovereignties,”<sup>3</sup> an assertion of territorial autonomy that, although stopping short of separatism, threatened to divide the city, along with the broader region, along ethno-confessional lines. Yet Kazan, enjoying unprecedented independence from Moscow throughout the 1990s, managed to avoid the type of ethno-religious-based conflict visiting other frontier cities, such as Jerusalem, Sarajevo, and Belfast (not to mention Grozny). In fact, Kazan today, with its skyline graced in tandem by the minarets of the grand Kul Sharif Mosque and the signature onion domes of the Cathedral of the Annunciation, positions itself as a model of inter-confessional harmony in a world where religious difference frequently is associated with internecine strife.

What lessons might Kazan offer other religiously divided frontier cities? In approaching this question, a framework centered on borders is employed. This is in light of the fact that frontier cities, located along ethno-religious fault lines, are disputed because they confound the political-territorial ideal in which distinct cultural groups presumably are afforded their own discrete territories. However, as Klein asserts in his discussion of Jerusalem,

“...conflict in the frontier city is not only over sovereignty, but also on collective identity, narrative, social control, spatial division of labor, economics and control of resources, culture and administration.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, empirical and theoretical studies by cultural-political geographers increasingly focus on the social construction and maintenance of *discursive*, *symbolic* and *institutional* borders which define and separate cultural collectives at various scales, including “the local and micro scales of socio-spatial activity.”<sup>5</sup> A look into how these types of borders have been negotiated in Kazan might well prove instructive for other frontier cities divided by religion.

## Discursive and Symbolic Borders in the Frontier City

Defining who is “in” and who is “out” of an ideal community, discourses produce boundaries at all scales and therefore are integral in the social construction of collective identity. The Tatar political leadership of Kazan, in justifying its claim to territorial autonomy, crafted a narrative of a historically wronged cultural group. Instrumental was cultivating a sense of place among the region’s Russians

<sup>1</sup> Allen Frank and Ronald Wixman, “The Middle Volga: Exploring the Limits of Sovereignty,” in *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, eds., Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 140.

<sup>2</sup> Joël Kotek, “Divided Cities in the European Cultural Context,” *Progress in Planning*, vol. 52, 1999: 228.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Hale, “The Parade of Sovereignties: Testing Theories of Secession in the Soviet Setting,” *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 30, 2000: 31-56.

<sup>4</sup> Menachem Klein, “Old and New Walls in Jerusalem,” *Political Geography*, vol. 24, 2005: 59.

<sup>5</sup> David Newman, “The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in our ‘Borderless’ World,” *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 30, no. 2: 144.

that stressed their closeness – a psychological similarity based on a centuries-long physical proximity – to the Tatar people. For example, this narrative is seen in a government-sponsored publication, which asserts that the region’s two largest ethnic groups are united by a common territory and share a common “social culture” (*bytovaia kul’tura*):

*“Tataria is our common home, our common care. For the Tatars, who have lived here from time immemorial, this land is their mother’s bosom where they formed as a nation. For the duration of seven centuries they had their own statehood, which they have now regained. ... For Russians, who also have lived here for centuries, Tataria has also become their native land. The Volga Russians [volzhane-russkie] have formed a way of life that is clearly different from that of other Russians.”<sup>6</sup>*

Hence, this discourse works to produce boundaries that unite Tatars and Russians within the region. It also distances Volga Russians from their ethnic brethren beyond the region. This inclusive bordering narrative, echoed in public speeches delivered by Tatarstani President Mintimer Shaimiev,<sup>7</sup> contrasts sharply with those of other religiously divided frontier cities. For example, when asked how Northern Ireland became predominantly Protestant, Deagan de Bredun, the bureau chief at *The Irish Times*, summarized in five words the story oft-repeated among Belfast’s Catholics: “Invasion, conquest, settlement, plantation, migration.”<sup>8</sup>

Ensuring the protection, cohesiveness, and solidarity of a community, symbols act as borders that nurture and sustain collective identity. In religiously divided cities, synagogues, churches, and mosques often are the most important symbols of group identity. Indeed, perhaps the most important symbol of the Tatars’ post-Soviet national revival, a project aiming to restore the invisible confessional boundaries collectively distinguishing them from Russians, was the reconstruction of the Kul Sharif Mosque within the confines of the Kazan Kremlin. Built as a replica of the mosque destroyed by Muscovite troops in 1552, the resurrected religious structure physically reaffirms the cultural collective’s historical legacy and in so doing contributes to the transcendence of the “colonial-dominated quality of Tatar identity.”<sup>9</sup> Importantly, in commencing the reconstruction of the Kul Sharif Mosque, the Tatar government simultaneously ordered the complete refurbishment of the Cathedral of the Annunciation, which, following Moscow’s defeat of Kazan, had been constructed on the very foundation where the original mosque formerly stood.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in giving respect to the physical

<sup>6</sup> R. Akhmetov, “O Nashem Patriotizme,” [About Our Patriotism] in *Respublika Tatarstan: Noveishaya istoriya*, [Republic of Tatarstan: The Newest History] eds., Farid Mukhametshin and Liubov’ Ageeva (Kazan: Medikoservis, 2000), 51.

<sup>7</sup> See generally Mintimer Shaimiev, *Tatarstan: Progress cherez stabil’nost’* [Tatarstan: Progress through stability] (Kazan: Idel Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Dominic Beggs and Rathman Indurthy, “Explaining Why the Good Friday Accord is Likely to Bring a Lasting Peace in Northern Ireland,” *Peace and Change*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2002: 331.

<sup>9</sup> Azade-Ayse Rorlich, “History, Collective Memory and Identity: The Tatars of Sovereign Tatarstan, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 32, 1999: 380.

<sup>10</sup> The destruction or usurpation of mosques, synagogues, or churches and their subsequent replacement by or conversion to the conquerors’ holy buildings is a highly symbolic act that signifies the complete subjection, and even literal extermination, of the enemy group. This is a practice with a long tradition. Early Christian rulers appropriated Greek and Roman pagan temples and turned them into churches; the Parthenon is a famous example. Hindu temples in Pakistan and India were commonly demolished by Muslim conquerors and overlaid with mosques. Soviet authorities, of course, employed this tradition, re-inscribing traditional holy sites with their own quasi-religious ideology. No faith was spared in the communist regime’s drive to stamp out traditional religion and re-inscribe the

emblem of the Tatars' lost statehood, a religious structure important to the ethnic Russian nation, Kazan shows that the demarcations underpinning collective identity, though generated in distinction from the Other, need not be directed *against* the Other.<sup>11</sup> But, if the Kul Sharif Mosque and the Cathedral of the Annunciation separately undersign divergent ethno-national bordering processes, taken together, as seen in panoramic representations of the Kazan Kremlin, they provide a new and inclusive symbol that creates an inclusive boundary that defines the city.<sup>12</sup>

## Linguistic Borders in Kazan: Transcending the Dual Landscape

The symbolic boundaries shaping national culture are expressed in seemingly banal ways that, in the context of the frontier city, can easily become points of bitter contention. For example, take the languages of street signs, which Klein likens to “barricade walls” protecting a community's cohesiveness.<sup>13</sup> In asserting its autonomy in the early 1990s, the Kazan government passed legislation making both Russian and Tatar official languages of Tatarstan,<sup>14</sup> an institutionalization of culture which manifested itself publicly in bilingual signage throughout the city. For the remainder of the decade, while the Tatar language was printed in a Cyrillic alphabet, its increasingly public presence raised no local objections. However, in 2000, when the Tatars' decision to switch to a Latin-based alphabet<sup>15</sup> was tested on the urban landscape, Moscow intervened to halt a bordering process that, as one Kazan-based newspaper observed, would strengthen the Tatars' “place in the Turkic world.”<sup>16</sup> It's important to note, though, the federal center's interference garnered little support by the Russians of Kazan. Nonetheless, Moscow's continuing refusal to permit the Tatars' control of their own culture is symptomatic of a tendency that reverses Kazan's previously enjoyed autonomy.

Kazan's bilingual landscape<sup>17</sup> should not be mistaken for a dual landscape in which cultural difference is exaggerated through parallel governmental institutions and spatial segregation. Murphy<sup>18</sup> has shown how these dynamics have contributed to Belgium's current travails. In religiously divided Belfast, where, for example, Catholic children and Protestant children attend separate schools, a dual

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landscape with their totalitarian ideology. It is instructive that, while the Soviets destroyed thousands of holy Christian sites, including the largest and third-largest cathedrals in Moscow and Irkutsk respectively, they left the Cathedral of Annunciation in Kazan and St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow intact. These churches, both symbols of the Russians' defeat of the Tatars in the sixteenth century, an event that heralded the onslaught of empire, were deemed untouchable by the Soviets.

<sup>11</sup> This lesson is starkly contrasted by the post-socialist experience in religiously divided Mostar, where Catholic Croats targeted mosques for destruction and Muslim Bosniaks did the same to Catholic churches, forces from each side recognizing that the elimination of an enemy group is precipitated by the elimination of its symbolic borders.

<sup>12</sup> See Nadir Kinossian, “The Politics of the City Image: The Resurrection of the Kul-Sharif Mosque in the Kazan Kremlin (1995–2005),” *Architectural Theory*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2008: 188–205.

<sup>13</sup> Klein, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Until then, only Russian was recognized as an official language.

<sup>15</sup> See Dilyara Suleymanova, “International Language Rights Norms in the Dispute over Latinisation Reform in the Republic of Tatarstan”, *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2010: 43–56.

<sup>16</sup> Sofiia Saiganova, “Turki Roiut pod Rossiu Cherez Tatarstan,” [Turks are digging under Russia through Tatarstan] *Vremia i Den’gi*, 8 February 2001: 3.

<sup>17</sup> The Kazan-based government until recent years pursued a policy of eventual functional bilingualism among all residents of Tatarstan, requiring all students, regardless of ethnicity, to study Tatar. This policy has effectively been halted by Moscow.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Murphy, “Belgium's Regional Divergence: Along the Road to Federation,” in *Federalism: The Multiethnic Challenge*, ed., Graham Smith (London: Longman, 1995), 73–100.

landscape, often physically separated by “peace walls,” inhibits reconciliation between Republicans and Unionists.<sup>19</sup> Post-Dayton recovery and redevelopment was hampered in Bosnia’s divided cities, where “half-mayors” oversaw municipal functions on either side of boundaries dividing populations along religious lines.<sup>20</sup> In Kazan, however, Tatars and Russians, though demarcated by invisible cultural borders, are integrated in all other respects, including spatial dwelling patterns.

## Concluding Remarks

A few preliminary lessons can be taken from Kazan and applied to other religiously divided cities. First, past narratives and symbols of conflict are not immutable. They can be reinterpreted or new ones that are inclusive or reconciliatory can be developed, if political elites take the initiative. The destruction of the bridge linking the Catholic and Muslims sides of Mostar, for example, was so symbolic of the wartime hostilities that engulfed that city. New narratives and symbolizations should focus on the bridge’s role in reconnecting the two formerly antagonistic sides. In Belfast, new murals emphasizing the current peace could counter the power of existing militant partisan murals. Also, there is particular support for memorials honoring all the victims of the conflict,<sup>21</sup> an idea that could be applied to other religiously divided cities. Second, the economic benefits of peace should be emphasized. Indeed, as witnessed by the increasing numbers of visitors, foreign and domestic alike, to Kazan, there is a growing tourism market for cities home to religious diversity. Perhaps the most profile guest to Kazan is United States’ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who last October paid a visit to both the Kul Sharif Mosque and the Cathedral of Annunciation and praised the city for its interfaith harmony. A cultural frontier city could hardly ask for a better public relations endorsement.

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<sup>19</sup> See Joanne Hughes and Caitlin Donnelly, “Community Relations in Northern Ireland: A Shift in Attitudes,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2003: 643-61.

The Good Friday Accord, however, has led to the creation of a power-sharing government in Belfast, signaling a reversal that “is likely to bring long-lasting peace,” according to Beggan and Indurthy, 2002: 331.

<sup>20</sup> See Julia Demichelis, *NGOs and Peacebuilding in Bosnia’s Ethnically Divided Cities*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report, No. 32, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> See Kris Brown and Roger MacGinty, “Public Attitudes Toward Partisan and Neutral Symbols in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, vol. 10, 2003: 83-108.