

From Kräshen Past to Tatar Present: Gayaz Iskhakyi's *Zuleikha* on the Tatar Stage in 1917 and 1992

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On March 17, 1917, shortly after the fall of the Romanovs, in the building of Kazan's Russian theater, there took place the first performance of *Zuleikha*, a play by influential Tatar playwright and Muslim modernist reformer Gayaz Iskhakyi. Completed half a decade earlier, *Zuleikha* was not performed until the February Revolution abolished primary censorship. It told of the story of a Kräshen (baptized Tatar) woman, Zuleikha, and her community, who, though legally Orthodox Christian, adhere to Islam and suffer brutal persecution by the Russian state and Church.¹ Iskhakyi called his work a "tragedy"—a genre traditionally antihistorical—but the play's historicism is starkly obvious. *Zuleikha* is set in the 1860s, a time when a significant number of Kräshens openly repudiated Orthodoxy in favor of Islam and were punished as "apostates" under the Imperial law.² Most importantly, Iskhakyi portrays the very real complexity of Kräshen experience, Kräshens' ambiguous position in regard to both Russian and Muslim communities, with remarkable sensitivity

My special thanks to Bill Rosenberg, my colleagues at the University of Georgia Gender and History Workshop, and the two anonymous reviewers for *The Russian Review* for their helpful and knowledgeable comments.

¹On Kräshen apostasies see Paul Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia's Volga-Kama Region, 1825–1917* (Ithaca, 2002); idem, "The Limits of Religious Ascription: Baptized Tatars and the Revision of 'Apostasy,' 1840s–1905," *Russian Review* 59 (October 2000): 430–511; idem, "From 'Pagan' Muslims to 'Baptized' Communists: Religious Conversion and Ethnic Particularity in Russia's Eastern Provinces," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (July 2000): 497–523; Agnès Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy and Literacy* (Ithaca, 2014); idem, "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 (Summer 2011): 373–98; and idem, "Constructing an Islamic Identity: The Case of Elyshevo Village in the Nineteenth Century," in *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1914*, ed. Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzarini (Bloomington, 1997), 271–91.

²The author specifies the decade—"the sixties"—at the beginning of *Zuleikha*. Reference to a nineteenth-century Tatar Sufi saint who died twenty years prior to the apostasy, and the use of contemporaneous Russian administrative and legal terms, set the events of the play in the nineteenth century.

and subtlety. The play does not treat the desire of Zuleikha and her family to openly practice Islam as an expression of crypto-Muslim practices, or as a “return” to their presumed historical religion—a more familiar interpretation of Kräshen apostasies among Tatar intellectuals at the time. Rather, it underscores the importance of individual choice and historical memory in identity formation, exploring the tension between state-imposed ascription and subjective identification.

Staged with unprecedented success throughout 1917, *Zuleikha* then disappeared from the Tatar stage for more than seventy years. Iskhakiy, a radical Socialist Revolutionary (SR) and a nationalist, left his homeland in 1918, and his literary legacy was obliterated.³ It was not until 1992, following the collapse of Soviet Union, that the play was performed again, this time in the context of an emerging nationalist discourse and intellectual search for non-Soviet frames of historical reference. Much like in 1917, during Russia’s brief experiment with democracy, the 1992 performance of *Zuleikha* symbolized the birth of a “new” and “free” Tatar identity. Yet, the post-Soviet production significantly altered the original “structure” of the play, and the shifting of the internal focus of these cultural artifacts provides a unique opportunity to study the evolving dynamics of Tatar identities in the twentieth century.⁴

In this article I will examine and compare Iskhakiy’s original play and its theatrical renditions in 1917 and 1992. My point of entry into the story of *Zuleikha*—the most significant work of Russia’s Muslim prerevolutionary theater and a highly sophisticated, powerful work which has never been subjected to extended analysis in Western scholarship—is that it can be looked at as an important source of historical knowledge and imagination, which, through its performative nature, has been open to a variety of readings and interpretations.⁵ These different renderings show a particular trajectory, a gradual effacing—as we move from an implied prehistory of the play in Iskhakiy’s experience growing up in a partially Kräshen village to the play itself and its production and reception in both 1917 and 1992—of the centrality of individual agency in the formation of social and religious identity, in favor of a symbolic reading (also present in the original play, to be sure) of the heroes as representatives of a singular ethnoreligious collective—the “Tatar nation.”

³After the October Revolution, Iskhakiy joined the anti-Bolshevik SR forces and continued his social and political work in Siberia until General Kolchak’s takeover. See Flun Musin, *Gayaz Iskhakiy* (Kazan, 1998), 110.

⁴Although it is impossible to verify the extent to which the first staging of *Zuleikha* in March 1917 followed the original text, the fact that, according to a Tatar critic, it lasted seven hours and that Iskhakiy was consulted by Gabdullah Kariev, director of the Säyar troupe during the production of the play, implies that it was produced with great fidelity. See Käräm, “Gabdullah Kariev benefisy,” *Ang* 3–4 (1917).

⁵The relationship between historical memory and artistic production is explored in Raphael Samuel’s seminal study *Theaters of Memory* (London, 1996). On collective memory see, among many others, Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking French Past*, 3 vols. (New York, 1996–98); Nancy Wood, “Memory Remains: *Les lieux de memoir*,” *History and Memory* 6:1 (1994): 123–49; John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992); Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH, 1993); and Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, England, 1989); Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, 1994). For critique of the concept of collective memory see Wulf Kansteiner, “Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 41:2 (2002): 179–19; and Susan A. Crane, “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory,” *American Historical Review* 102 (December 1997): 1372–85.

Beyond investigating the interplay between artistic creation, sociopolitical context, and historical memory, my study takes advantage of theater's potential as a unique ground to examine issues of identity. The performative and fictional nature of theater allows for dynamic interaction between playwright, actors, and audience and makes it possible to test limits of identity that otherwise remain invisible in everyday life.⁶ The highly charged dynamics of theatrical space during *Zuleikha's* first, most memorable performance in March 1917 before a house so packed that the window sills were broken accounted for a rare moment of public catharsis during which the audience crossed the proscenium, bridging the boundary between illusion and reality.⁷ By joining in the heroine's prayer on stage, they expressed the depth of their communal identification with the drama that was taking place beyond the foot-lights.

There has been much recent high-quality work on the history of Russian Muslims, and, as I examine the importance of identity issues and cultural production in Muslim-state relations, my work builds upon recent studies.⁸ Agnès Kefeli, for example, provides a highly nuanced view of Kräshen apostasy as a process of conversion; Mustafa Tuna offers a complex analysis of the shifting nature of Muslim-state relations in the context of sociocultural and economic change in the period immediately preceding that at issue here; and James Meyer's story of the making of Pan-Turkism across Russian and Ottoman empires highlights the importance of situational contexts and interlocutor expectations to identity claims.⁹ This article provides yet another challenge to Robert Crews's too optimistic picture of Russian state efforts at integrating Islam into its structure and the resulting partnership between the two.¹⁰ *Zuleikha*, together with its 1917 and 1992 theatrical interpretations, demonstrates the depth and longevity of the fissures created by Russian colonial rule in the Volga-Ural region.

⁶On the experiential quality of theatrical performance see Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay in the Organization of Experience* (Boston, 1986); and Alaina Lemon, *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory, From Pushkin to Post-Colonialism* (Durham, 2000).

⁷Lena Gainanova, interview with Khazhi Sal'mushev, a ninety-five-year-old retired teacher (Kazan, February 10, 1993), cited in Gayaz Iskhakiy, *Äsärlär*, 15 vols. (Kazan, 1998–), 4:488.

⁸These include Robert Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, 2001); Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy*; Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire in the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, 2004); Robert Crews, *Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Charles Steinwedel, "Invisible Threads of Empire: State, Religion and Ethnicity in Tsarist Bashkiria, 1773–1917" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1999); Wayne Dowler, *Classroom and Empire: the Politics of Schooling Russia's Eastern Nationalities, 1860–1917* (Montreal, 2001); Elena Campbell, *Muslim Question and Russian Imperial Governance* (Bloomington, 2015); Allen Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia: The Islamic World of Novouzensk District and the Kazakh Inner Horde, 1780–1910* (Leiden, 2001); idem, *Materials on the Islamic History of Semipalatinsk: Two Manuscripts by Ahmad-Walī al-Qazānī and Qurbān 'alī Khālidī* (Berlin, 2001); Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim*; James Meyer, *Turks Across Empire: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856–1914* (Oxford, 2014); Mustafa Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire and European Modernity, 1788–1914* (Cambridge, England, 2015); Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865–1923* (Bloomington, 2007); and Austin Jersfield, *North Caucasus Mountain People and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal, 2001).

⁹Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim*; Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims*; Meyer, *Turks across Empires*.

¹⁰Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*. For critique of Crews's argument see, for instance, Michael Kemper, "Review of *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*," *Die Welt des Islams* 47:1 (2007): 126–29; and Mikhail Khodarkovsky, "Review of *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*," *American Historical Review* 112 (December 2007): 1491–93.

The recent studies which deal with the Muslim reform movement in late imperial Russia have pointed primarily to the new method (*jadid*) schools, Turkic print books, and, following the 1905 Russian Revolution, periodicals as the primary tools of reform. There has not been thus far a comprehensive analysis of the significance of theater to the modernists' strategies of remaking their society. In early twentieth century Tatar society, theater—a novel cultural endeavor—had the potential to reach a far broader and more socially diverse audience than other more traditional forms of literary expression. For Iskhakiy and the *iashlär*—the new generation of Muslim reformers to which he belonged—theater was a powerful tool and also a locus of social and cultural transformation.¹¹ It was through their efforts, that, by 1917, in just over a decade of its existence, Tatar theater had become a favorite mode of entertainment with audiences ranging from intellectuals and people of property to clerks and factory workers.¹²

IASHLÄR

Iskhakiy, born in 1877, was a key representative of these *iashlär* (literally, youth), as they were often called in the public discourse of the time, and as they referred to themselves. Culturally and politically radical, the *iashlär* distanced themselves not only from the Tatar religious elite, the *ulama*, but also from the earlier Muslim reformers, the *jadids*, whose political liberalism and social conservatism they criticized.¹³

Unlike the *jadids*, whose project of reform was predicated on the notion of renewed Islam along with the embracing of Western technological achievements and modernizing of traditional education, the *iashlär* centered their discourse around a concept of Tatar nation based on an explicitly secular, modern European model defined by unity of race, language, culture, and historical experience.¹⁴ In their discourse, Islam was a vital part of their self-conception, but not the main source of loyalty or an overarching framework for social change.

According to these pugilistic youth, the *jadids*' preoccupation with Islamic reform, their cautious approach to Tatar social conventions and religious sensibilities, as well as

¹¹Cf. Käräm, "Kazanda tatarcha teatr ve muzyka mösmineng iaktüne, 1916–1917," *Ang* 7 (1917); and Shähid Äxmädiev, "Bezdä sänaıgı näfisä," *Yulduz* 1240, 1244 (June 1914).

¹²Cf., for instance, Fatih Säıfı, "Sharyk klybynda: Bir mösafirnyng täässerate," *Yulduz* 1122 (February 1914); Shähid Äxmädiev, "Tatarcha teatr," *Yulduz* 1560 (November 1915); and Fatih Amirhan, "Gayaz äfände shäaräfenä," *Koiash*, April 11, 1917.

¹³See Amirhan's polemics with the *jadids* in his "Jädidi äfände mäkaläsenä dair," *Yulduz*, November 11, 1909, reprinted in Fatih Amirhan, *Äsärlär*, 4 vols. (Kazan, 1989), 4:151–155. On the appearance of a distinct self-defined second generation of Tatar Muslim modernists—the *iashlär*, the nature of their reform, and its connection to theatrical production—see Madina Goldberg, "Russian Empire – Tatar Theater: The Politics of Culture in Late Imperial Kazan" (Ph.D. diss. University of Michigan, 2009).

¹⁴Gaziz Gubaidullin, *Millätchelekneng bägüz äsasläri* (Kazan, 1918), 3–4; Validi, *Millät ve Milliyät* (Kazan, 1914), 30–35. For an excellent discussion of the mechanisms of secularization of Islamic education in the Volga-Ural region at the turn of the last century, which led to alienation from Islamic tradition of the *madrasah* students—the later generation of Muslim reformists, see Mustafa Tuna, "Madrasa Reform as a Secularizing Process: A View from the Late Russian Empire," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53:3 (2011): 540–70. For a primary account of Tatar *jadid* reforms in education see Zhämal Väldi, *Ocherki obrazovannosti i literaturny povolzshkikh tatar (do revoliutsii 1917 goda)* (Moscow-Petrograd, 1923), 46–62.

their political centrism, had failed to bring meaningful change to their society.¹⁵ In their desire to transform such existing cultural norms as gender separation (though loosely enforced), discreteness from Russian society, and strict adherence to Islamic ritual, the *iashlär* stressed the primacy of individual autonomy in social and religious matters. Hence, the main hero of Fatih Amirhan's 1908 play, *Iashlär*, rejects his father's generation's overt public religiosity and argues that his private Islam is stronger and purer.¹⁶ Likewise, the heroine of Iskhakiy's 1914 play *Mogallima* (Female teacher) protests against *jadid* notions of female contribution to society as enlightened wives and mothers, choosing to remain single and "serve the nation" as a teacher in a remote Tatar village in Siberia.¹⁷

Iskhakiy's choice of an Islamic stoic as the central female character in what became the most important Tatar drama of his time—*Zuleikha*—is unusual, given this intellectual milieu. However, the author's framing of the story within the historical context of the 1860s, the time of the largest Kräshen "apostasy," as well as his skillful use of Romantic tropes and fantastic elements, allowed him to explore issues of identity-formation central to the young reformers' discourse.

KRÄSHENS IN THE 1860S "APOSTASY" AND IN ISKHAKIY'S PLAY

Following Muscovy's conquest of the Khanate of Kazan in 1552, and again in the 1740s, the Russian state and Church converted a significant minority of Tatars to Orthodoxy. Converted either through force, revocation of traditional privileges, or material incentives, Kräshens (*kreshchennye tatory*; baptized Tatars) were never fully integrated into Russian society, and the extent of their belief was constantly questioned.¹⁸ At the same time, Kräshens, even those who eventually left Christianity for Islam, were perceived as distinct by the Muslim community, and prejudice against them was common.¹⁹

Kräshen "apostasies" began in the nineteenth century, and, while long-term cultural and linguistic connections between the Kräshens and Muslim Tatars played their role, the apostasies cannot be regarded simply as the result of Kräshen desire to "return" to their historic religion. Their identity was hybrid and distinct and drew on the polyphony of Christian, Islamic, and animist religious traditions in the Volga-Ural region.²⁰ Kräshen apostasies, which affected both formerly Muslim and animist communities, resulted primarily from the growth of Muslim proselytizing in the region, carried on by Sufi mystics and by apostate Kräshens themselves.²¹

¹⁵Amirhan, "Jädidi äfände."

¹⁶Amirhan, *Iashlär* (Kazan, 1910), 16.

¹⁷Gayaz Iskhakiy, *Mögallimä* (Kazan, 1914).

¹⁸See Paul Werth, "Coercion and Conversion: Violence and the Mass Baptism of the Volga Peoples, 1740–55," *Kritika: Exploration in Russian and Eurasian History* 4:3 (2003): 543–69; Matthew Romaniello, "Mission Delayed: The Russian Orthodox Church after the Conquest of Kazan," *Church History* 76 (September 2007): 511–40; and Michael Khodarkovsky, "'Not by Word Alone': Missionary Policies and Religious Conversion in Early Modern Russia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38 (April 1996): 267–93.

¹⁹Field notes, Kazan 2002–2003; Kefeli, "The Tale," 392.

²⁰Werth, "From Pagan," 499–500. Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim*, 3–5, 8–21.

²¹*Ibid.*, 39–59, 118–60; Kefeli, "The Tale," 378–79.

By the late 1860s—the immediate historical context for *Zuleikha*—almost ten thousand of the seventy thousand Kräshens had apostatized. The government, unable to force this unprecedented number of the “apostates” back to Orthodoxy, severely curtailed their sociopolitical rights, among other things, excluding them and their descendants from legal marriage and inheritance law.²²

Iskhakiy’s father was the imam of Kutlushkino (Iäushirmä) village, Kräshen inhabitants of which participated in the 1860s apostasy.²³ The author was certainly closely familiar with the struggles of Kräshen life and Kräshen cultural particularities. It is also not incidental that he began writing *Zuleikha* shortly after the 1905 Revolution, which, though expanding toleration by securing existing apostates’ Muslim status, required that they prove the “historic reality” of their Islamic beliefs, stopping short of granting genuine freedom of conscience.²⁴

In the play, *Zuleikha* (her Russian name is Marfa) and her family, while officially registered as baptized Tatars, secretly adhere to Islam.²⁵ When *Zuleikha*’s father Gyimadi (Vasiliy) is buried in a Muslim graveyard, the local priest decides to punish the family. *Zuleikha* is sent to a monastery and then forcibly married to a Russian peasant. Her husband, Sälimjän (Mitrofan), is banished to Siberia, their two daughters slip away, and their three-year-old son Äkhmät disappears.

In the third act, *Zuleikha* lives in a Russian village with her new husband, Petr, and their baby. During one of her emotional prayers, when she asks God to “rescue her from Russian captivity,” she is visited by a Sufi, who is on a mission to rescue her. When the two of them pray together—a pivotal moment for the 1917 audience—Sälimjän appears, having run from Siberia. All three try to escape, but only the Sufi succeeds. After being caught by Russian villagers, Sälimjän is beaten to death at Petr’s instigation. *Zuleikha*, in despair, poisons Petr and goes to prison.

The fourth act (set twenty years later) is made surreal by the appearance of angels who prepare *Zuleikha* for entrance to paradise—honoring and rewarding her suffering. This key act also features the dramatic transformation of *Zuleikha* and Petr’s Orthodox son, Zakhar, into her long lost Muslim son by Sälimjän, Äkhmät. In the last, fifth act of the play, Zakhar-Äkhmät attempts to rescue his mother’s coffin from the local church, but, unable to part with his Russian fiancée, is caught and murdered by Russian villagers.

A juxtaposition between externally generated identities and individual self-conception permeates *Zuleikha*. Kräshen distinctiveness and their ambiguous position in regard to the Muslim community is saliently communicated in the opening of the play through the words of *Zuleikha*’s daughters. These nine- and ten-year-old girls complain that Muslim children taunt them by calling them Kräshen: “They say we were taken to a Russian village and thrown into the stinky Church water.” To the girls’ question, “Are we not Muslims?” *Zuleikha* answers, “We are, it is just they are old Muslims, and we are the new Muslims.”²⁶

²²Werth, “The Limits,” 502–3.

²³Firdaus Garipova, “Iäushirmä avyly tarikhı,” *Miras* (1992): 108–12; Iskhakiy, *Äsärlär* 4:487.

²⁴Werth, “The Limits,” 506–9.

²⁵Page numbers in citation of *Zuleikha* refer to Iskhakiy, *Äsärlär* 4:371–445. All quotes have been verified using the first edition: Gayaz Iskhakiy, *Zöläykha* (Moscow, 1918). My source for the discussion of the post-Soviet production is a commercial videotape of the performance, recorded in Kazan in 1992.

²⁶Iskhakiy, *Zöläykha*, 372.

Her words convey to the audience that her identity as a Kräshen, even though Muslim, is distinct from that of the Tatar Islamic community.

Iskhakiy is also careful to signal the liminality of Zuleikha's living space, neither Muslim nor Orthodox. Until the priest comes, "the triangular shelf for an icon" is empty, with no light shining in front of it. In contrast, the walls of Petr's Russian house are adorned by a "number of icons of various sizes ... lighted by icon-lamps."²⁷ Likewise, in the second act, structured around a Kräshen wedding and full of folkloric elements, the playwright displays a ritual rooted in animism—the return of the young bride from the river where she was consoling the water-spirit (*su iiasy*) with an offering of breadcrumbs and silver coins.²⁸ This ritual, absent among Kazan Tatars, was common among the Mishärs—one subgroup of Tatars with whom the Kräshens shared a number of animistic practices. In the early twentieth century, Mishärs and Kräshens made up the majority of the population of the Chistai region where Iskhakiy's home village was located.²⁹ Iskhakiy's use of this animistic ritual would have underscored Kräshen particularity for his largely Muslim Kazan Tatar audience, regardless of whether or not the ritual was specifically practiced by the Kräshens.

While a distinct Kräshen identity is important to the play's structure and its 1917 production and reception, the main conceptual framework of *Zuleikha* is built around the idea of subjectivity of social and religious identity. The first act ends with the death of Zuleikha's father, Gyimadi. On his deathbed, visited by both the village mullah and the Russian priest, Gyimadi openly casts away his official Orthodox identity by professing the *shahada*, the Muslim testimony of faith. Furious, the priest accuses the mullah of "seducing" the "Christian" inhabitants of the house, while the mullah answers by quoting a Hadith which emphasizes individual identification with Islam as a sufficient condition of faith.³⁰

The pivotal figure of play, however, is Zuleikha. Here, female identity allowed Iskhakiy to underscore the violence exacted upon the heroine, her violation and, symbolically, the violation of her people. It is implicit that Zuleikha is raped by Petr. When Sälimjän, in pain, asks about her *other* baby, Zuleikha replies that she was "forced." Russianness and Christianity are literally forced on her, while her indigenous identity is suppressed. It is only after murdering Petr that Zuleikha can reclaim her identity and her body. As she explains to Marusia, Zakhar's kind-hearted Russian fiancée, only when serving time in Siberia was she "free at last." "I could pray when I wanted and how I wanted."³¹ "My sin," as she refers to her act of murder, ended her liminal existence and afforded her a measure of personal freedom as well as closeness to God.³²

²⁷Ibid., 371, 395.

²⁸On the animist roots of the oldest Kräshen rituals see Flera Biazitova, "Kräshen tatarlarnyng yollary häm yola zhyrlary," *Kazan Utlary* 6 (1992): 174–80.

²⁹*Tatary Srednego Povolzh'ia i Priyral'ia* (Moscow, 1967), 256.

³⁰"One who professes that there is no God but Allah is a Muslim" (Iskhakiy, *Zöläykha*, 384).

³¹Ibid., 422.

³²Similarly, in Sufi interpretations, such as Jami's fifteenth-century *Yusuf and Zulaykha*, the earthly desire of the Qur'anic Zuleikha (the Biblical Potiphar's wife) for Joseph symbolizes her longing for the eternal beloved, God, and her immoral behavior is forgiven in the end. On the centrality of Zuleikha's story in the Middle Volga region, especially among the Kräshens, see Kefeli, "The Tale" (and as one referential frame for Iskhakiy's play, *ibid.*, 391–35). On Jami's work see "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose 'Best Story'?" *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (November 1997): 497–500.

However, just as in real life a majority of Kräshens remained committed to Christianity, not all Kräshens in the play choose to apostatize. When Sälimjän and his friend, Axmätjän, complain to a Kräshen from a neighboring village about the abuses of their priest, the neighbor suggests beating him up: “They sent sixty of us to Siberia ... but the priest disappeared.” “We cannot,” replies Axmätjän. “Not all of our people are of the same mind.”³³ Iskhakyi’s emphasis on the diversity of opinions within the Kräshen community highlights the possibility of individual internal conflict, which reaches its climax when Zuleikha’s son Zakhar experiences a dramatic transformation from fervent Orthodox believer to Muslim.

An aura of ambiguity surrounding Zakhar’s identity is generated from the beginning of the play and remains unresolved. In the first act, Zuleikha is rocking a cradle holding her three-year-old son, Äkhmät, who is absent for the rest of the play. In the third act, the heroine has another baby, evidently from Petr. At the end of the act, the audience knows that Sälimjän is killed and Zuleikha is arrested for poisoning Petr, but nothing is said about the baby.

It would be logical to assume that the adult Zakhar who appears in the fourth act is Zuleikha and Petr’s son. He considers the latter his father and blames his mother for murdering him. He is set on purifying his *partially* “Tatar blood” by becoming a parish priest. Moreover, Zuleikha herself tells Marusia that she had two daughters and a son—all of them lost. Yet she also implies that Zakhar might be Sälimjän’s! “How could a child born of a Muslim mother be an infidel? God, please show this child a true light, *for the sake of his father Sälimjän’s martyrdom*.”³⁴ Perhaps Iskhakyi has her displace the identity of her lost son from her beloved husband onto a child who was conceived in rape. In any case, since Zuleikha had two sons, we have to ask: if the grown Zakhar is Äkhmät, what then happened to Petr’s son? Iskhakyi clearly muddles Zakhar’s identity and makes it impossible to identify him with absolute certainty as either Petr’s or Sälimjän’s son.

The 1917 critics felt that the “logical” inconsistency of Zakhar’s character and his inexplicable transformation were the play’s most serious deficiencies. Was he “the son of Sälimjän or Petr?”³⁵ “It is understood that Zakhar is ... [Zuleikha’s] son from her Russian husband. ... Yet he ends up being Äkhmät. How did Zuleikha and Äkhmät meet? This remains unclear to the audience.”³⁶ “Zakhar’s sudden transformation from Christian to Muslim, the changes that took place in his spirit, all of this is not clear and is a major reason for the problematic nature of the last acts. ... Much has been written in the press about the confusion in regards to [Zakhar’s identity]. Was [Petr’s baby] left in the snow to die? Did someone take the baby?”³⁷ But in the structure of the play, this ambiguity precisely foregrounds Zakhar’s *decision* to become Muslim.

As a final consolation for Zuleikha’s suffering, she is given an opportunity to see her two now grown daughters, brought by the same Sufi who came to rescue her from Petr.

³³Iskhakyi, *Zöläykha*, 377.

³⁴Ibid., 426 (emphasis added).

³⁵Tiumenev, “Zöläykha – Möskäudä,” in Iskhakyi, *Äsärlär* 8:308.

³⁶Käräm, “Gabdullah Kariev benefisy,” *Ang* 3–4 (1917).

³⁷Anonymous, “Zöläykha,” in Iskhakyi, *Äsärlär* 8:313–14.

A divine music informs the audience of the arrival of angels. At this point, Zakhar, a shaken witness to visits both by angels, who vividly describe his mother's suffering and the honor which awaits her in paradise, and by his sisters, finds himself in a state of psychological crisis: "What am I to do? I do not know who I am. I am not Zakhar Petrovich! Am I Äkhmät, Sälimjän's son? Am I not Zakhar, who kept all the fasts and all the rules of the seminary? Am I not? I do not know!" Either transfigured by the miraculous, divine visitation or as a result of a conscious process, astonished and moved Zakhar (whose name, in fact, derives from the Semitic root for memory, z-k-r) "remembers" himself as Äkhmät, accepts his mother and sisters, and begins to consider Sälimjän his true father: "I am with you, I am your son. ... I am your brother!"³⁸

While the hero finds his family and "true" identity, he loses his beloved, and ultimately his life. In the last act, while attempting to rescue Zuleikha's body from the church, Äkhmät meets Marusia. He tries to persuade her to follow him. Marusia refuses, and Äkhmät, unable to part with her, is caught and killed by enraged villagers. The play ends with Marusia's words, "You killed him, no I killed him." (There is no indication to whom exactly this "you" refers. Most likely she is accusing her fellow villagers. But could she be accusing Äkhmät's Muslim companions? His mother? The audience?) Zakhar-Äkhmät's death lacks the aura of martyrdom that surrounds the deaths of Zuleikha, Gyimadi, or Sälimjän. Rather, it seems to express the tragic nature of his character, torn between his beloved, Marusia, a symbol of the Russian milieu in which he grew up and by which he was victimized in the end, and his dead mother, who represents the Tatar and Muslim part of his identity.

Zuleikha, with its focus on subjectivity of identity and religious belief, was emblematic of the *iashlär's* search for what it meant to be Tatar, Muslim, and, perhaps, modern, especially if one is to place the play in the broader sociopolitical context of Imperial Russia, in which externally generated identities supplanted and often repressed individuality.³⁹ The play also engaged the history of persecution and the issue of legal and religious inequality of Muslims, and specifically Tatars in the Russian Empire. Despite *Zuleikha's* historicism, it is also suprahistorical, and while Iskhakyi is careful to ground the play in specific time period and physical location—hence the mentioning of the tomb of a local Sufi saint—he notably omits any historical context of when, how, and why Zuleikha, her family, and the Kräshen community by implication, became Christian.⁴⁰ This ambiguity creates space for what is at least as important in the play—the collective experience and memory of the Tatars as a community within Russia, of which the Kräshen experience becomes iconic. It is this larger symbolism that proved to be critical in the way the play was perceived by the Tatar audience and the critics in the spring and summer of 1917.

³⁸Iskhakyi, *Zöläykha*, 434, 436.

³⁹On the tension between subjective identification and state-imposed identity in Imperial Russia see Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, 1997); and Gregory Freeze, "The *Soslovie* (Estate) Paradigm in Russian Social History," *American Historical Review* 91 (February 1986): 11–36.

⁴⁰*Zöläykha*, 439.

PERCEPTIONS AND RECEPTIONS: 1917

Iskhakiy was not present at the first, most memorable March performance of *Zuleikha*. Following his arrest and exile in 1906 for SR activities, the author had been prohibited from entering Kazan by the city's governor. He was living in Moscow when the ban became obsolete after February 1917: "I found out from newspapers that *Zuleikha* had been staged ... to a full house. I felt compelled to see the staging. ... I heard that Säyar had troubles with the angel scene. Finally, in April I was able to come and help. The results were beyond my expectation."⁴¹ Although Tatar theatrical critics did not hesitate to mention problems with the production, all testified to the incredible emotional hold the play had on the audience. The timing was perfect.

Tatars greeted the fall of the monarchy with excitement and great hopes for the future. The Provisional Government abolished legal distinctions among the multireligious and multiethnic former subjects of the Russian Empire and guaranteed basic civic freedoms. To the critics and the audience, the performance of *Zuleikha*, a play that addressed "the most terrifying page of our ... life," became a potent symbol of the new Russia. "Do we not live in a free world?"⁴²

Knowledge of the conversion was universal among Tatars, and the existence of a large Christian minority had been a cause of much anxiety among the Muslim Tatar population. Despite the fact that, by the end of the eighteenth century, Orthodox proselytism was contained, periodic fears and rumors of imminent conversion persisted. At the same time, any public discussion of this subject was strongly circumscribed, especially on stage. The manuscripts of all Tatar plays were sent to the imperial censor in St. Petersburg, Russian Turkologist Vasiliy Smirnov. His highly unsympathetic reviews of Tatar plays, many of which he banned, reveal a worldview which juxtaposed "barbaric," "fanatical" Tatars to "civilized" and "European" Russians.⁴³

Zuleikha put a symbolic end to Russian cultural and political hegemony through the dramatic public performance of previously sealed pages of Tatar history. In almost every review, the play is called "historical." Tapping into the Tatar popular memory of forced conversion, critic Shähid Äxmädiev wrote that, after watching *Zuleikha*, "the stories of our grandfathers who ... openly told us about the events of the past ... have become a living monument."⁴⁴ Gabdrahman Käräm called *Zuleikha* a "historical terror that discusses one of the most difficult, painful, and frightening pages of Tatar life."⁴⁵ Still, within the overarching Tatar historical narrative, he highlighted the specificity of Kräshen experience:

We have all heard about the *mükreh* [forced]; how they lived under double names, secretly performed Muslim prayers; that the priests would come and forcefully

⁴¹"Artist Gabdullah Kari," in *Shäheslärebez: Gayaz Iskhakiy* (Kazan, 2008), 239.

⁴²Sh[hähid] Ä[xmädiev], "Zöläykha," *Yulduz*, March 22, 1917.

⁴³Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv, f. 776 (see, for instance, op. 26, d. 815, ll.1–2, 8–13, 8–19, and op. 25, d. 861, ll. 1–11).

⁴⁴Axmädiev, "Zöläykha."

⁴⁵Käräm, "Gabdullah Kariev."

convert their children ... but we only knew about this, we did not see their tragedy and terror with our own eyes, did not hear it with our own ears. ... Gayaz äfände with his sharp and beautiful pen brought *their* tragedy alive before our eyes and made an unforgettable impression.⁴⁶

Käräm clearly sets Kräshens at some distance from the Tatar Muslims.⁴⁷ Yet, he grants them a place within his community by calling them “mükreh” (Arabic for “forced”) instead of the more common Russian-derived “Kräshen” (“baptized,” or, literally, *kreshchennyi*—“having had the sign of the cross”). Critic Ramazan Tiumentev’s dichotomous “Kräshen Muslims” placed the apostates at the intersection of the Orthodox Russian and the Tatar Muslim world, a place of struggle “between the government’s ... plan of Russification, [the policy of] forced conversion, and the forces of the Tatar nation steeped in Islamic spirit.”⁴⁸

As for the audience, it was precisely the centuries-old unofficial story of conversion that accounted for the strong emotional hold of the play. As one eyewitness recounted, “cries, whispers, and moaning were heard everywhere in the theater. On stage, the most terrifying event—forced conversion—was taking place.”⁴⁹ Some apparently fainted and were taken out of the hall on the stretchers. The most dramatic moment of the performance took place during the third act. When Zuleikha, played by famous Tatar actress Gulsum Bolgarskaia, was performing Muslim prayer in Petr’s house, members of the audience crossed the proscenium, ascending the stage to join the heroine in her emotional act.⁵⁰ The barrier between “real” and “imaginary” was thus broken, the theatrical stage transformed into a public space where heroine and spectators joined in a moment of powerful communal solidarity, and the real-life boundary that divided Kräshens and Muslims was effaced, even if symbolically.

No critical review mentioned this intense and meaningful event, and such silence is telling regarding the interaction between the critics and the audience. Tatars were among the first Russian Muslims to have modern theater—a source of great pride and a mark of “cultured-ness,” especially for the *iashlär*.⁵¹ The critics, part of the *iashlär* milieu, expected the audience to behave in “cultured” ways that would demonstrate their understanding of “illusion.” During one performance of *Zuleikha*, the audience reacted with startled laughter as the Kräshen wedding was interrupted by the Muslim call to prayer, the *adhan*. Perhaps, for the audience this was a moment of confusion between reality and illusion. A critic was incensed: “With this little detail [the *adhan*] the author wanted to add some national color to the scene, to awaken a lyrical feeling. ... Our people found this curious, screamed, broke

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Cf. also Axmädiev’s observation that the play depicted “real Kräshen life,” and his reference to Kräshens’ Christian names (“Zöläykha”).

⁴⁸Tiumentev, “Zöläykha,” 305.

⁴⁹Gainanova, Interview, in Iskhakiy, *Äsärälär* 4:488.

⁵⁰From private conversation with contemporary Tatar playwright Iunus Safiullin (Kazan, January 2003). The eyewitness was director and actor Khusain Urazikov, who told Safiullin about the 1917 performance he witnessed in Kazan as a young man.

⁵¹See footnote 8. For a useful discussion of audience-critic interactions in prerevolutionary France see Jeffrey Ravel, “La Reine Boit! Print, Performance, and Theater Public in France, 1724–1725,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29:4 (1996): 391–411; and idem, “Seating the Public: Spheres and Loathing in the Paris Theaters, 1777–1788,” *French Historical Studies* 18:1 (1993): 173–210.

into laughter, and completely ruined the atmosphere. The time has come to learn some theater manners.”⁵² Critics likely viewed the remarkable breach of the proscenium in March 1917 as unsophisticated and unbefitting their norms of European “cultured-ness,” but none were brave enough to criticize such spontaneous expression of religious, ethnic, and social solidarity.⁵³

Zuleikha’s potential to inspire political action through broad communal identification was well-understood by Iskhaki. At his urging, Säyar staged the play in Moscow during the First All-Russian Muslim Congress in May 1917. The performance featured one important omission. Taking the advice of the critics, who had been annoyed at the ambiguities surrounding Zakhar, Kariev dropped the fifth act in which the hero loses his life because of his love for the daughter of the Russian priest. This omission, which presumably restored a sense of closure, compelled one critic to accuse the troupe of entering the domain of the “pseudo-classical—the final victory of the good.”⁵⁴ It was suggested that the fourth act too should be cut or dropped. Both acts toned down the heroism of the play, made the audience “reconcile with the world’s evils,” and turned the whole thing into a phantasmagoria.⁵⁵

And then there were major deficiencies in the representation of the divine. The fourth act was “written for a very high-level theater,” but in the critics’ opinion Säyar was not up to the task.⁵⁶ The troupe’s stage design was called “provincial”—“one could see the angels climbing up a ladder from the back of the stage,” the decorations were “plain,” and the “supposedly Muslim angels,” played by “women and children, their hair blond and wavy,” looked just like “Christian angels.”⁵⁷ But it was Säyar’s representation of the angel of death, which Kariev, apparently, changed with every performance, that brought down the particular wrath of the critics. “Neither a crow nor Mephisto,” “this stooped, skinny, plucked, winged, and white-bearded grandpa makes you laugh and feel sad at once.”⁵⁸

Still, Kariev, whom Iskhaki had granted a life-long contract to stage *Zuleikha*, was reluctant to drop the fourth act. We know how important the act was to the playwright, especially the angel scene. And perhaps it was the play’s lofty surrealism and the absence of simple answers that, as even a very critical reviewer of the Moscow Congress performance admitted, “shook the audience, lit fire [in their hearts], and made them cry.”⁵⁹

Zuleikha’s performance at the congress functioned as a symbolic call for unity. Even Iskhaki, a convinced SR who viewed the world through the prism of socioeconomic disparity, argued at this time for broad extraterritorial, centrally administered cultural autonomy for *all* Russian Muslims. The majority of Tatar delegates to the congress supported this form of political organization, since it best suited Tatar interests—almost half lived

⁵²Anonymous, “Zöläykha,” 316; cf. Nurkin, “Iashlär,” *Koiash* 1057 (December, 1916), in which the author criticizes the Tatar audience’s “habit” of whistling and hand-clapping as inappropriate.

⁵³On the audience’s diversity during *Zuleikha*’s 1917 performances see Amirhan, “Gayaz äfände”; and Käräm, “Zöläykhaning öchenche märtäbä uynalue,” *Ang* 3–4 (1917).

⁵⁴Tiumenev, “Zöläykha,” 307.

⁵⁵Anonymous, “Zöläykha,” 313.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 310.

⁵⁷Tiumenev, “Zöläykha,” 307; Anonymous, “Zöläykha,” 311.

⁵⁸Tiumenev, “Zöläykha,” 309; Anonymous, “Zöläykha,” 312.

⁵⁹Tiumenev, “Zöläykha,” 309.

outside the immediate borders of the Kazan region.⁶⁰ However, their dreams were shattered when the majority—delegates from the Caucasus and Central Asia, fearing further influx of Slavic peasants—voted for a decentralized ethnoterritorial federation. Less than a year later, the victorious Bolsheviks dashed all these aspirations. They abolished independent Muslim agencies, suppressed resistance by Tatar “nationalists”—Iskhaki among them—established new territorial borders in the Volga-Ural region, and proceeded to implement sociocultural policies which emphasized Kräshen and Tatar distinctiveness as separate “nationalities” in a ferociously secularizing state.⁶¹

The specificity of the historical moment during which *Zuleikha* was first performed, including this universally perceived need for ethnic and religious unity, perhaps can account for the singularity of critics’ reading of the play. Zakhar’s unclear past and present complicated an already complex search for Tatar identity by challenging the straightforward connection between collectivity, religious identity, and ethnicity—a challenge that the Tatar critics were evidently not ready to accept in 1917. Their verdict was clear—the fourth act must also go, and so it would in the new post-Soviet production of the play.

REDISCOVERING *ZULEIKHA*: OLD AND NEW IDENTITIES IN POST-SOVIET TATARSTAN

The 1992 performance of *Zuleikha* on the stage of the Kamal State Theater signified a break with the Soviet past, as well as continuity with the prerevolutionary period. Post-Soviet Tatarstan was experiencing a burst of national sentiment, accompanied by a search for a new framework for Tatar identity.⁶² For many intellectuals and youth, the rich cultural life of the early twentieth century became the model for national revival. References to and publication of works by prerevolutionary authors and social thinkers became commonplace on the pages of prominent periodicals, such as the journal *Miras* (Heritage). The intellectual pursuits of these prerevolutionary authors, silenced during Soviet rule, presented a challenge to the hegemonic temporality which accorded the Bolsheviks a pioneering role in bringing modernity to the “backward” peoples of the former Russian Empire.

As is the case with non-Russian ethnic or “national” histories written in the Soviet Union, the history of Tatarstan focused on the historic inevitability of Russian expansion. Russia’s role as a “civilizing” agent in native historical development provided justification for “voluntary unification” with the Russian Empire.⁶³ The post-Soviet project of writing a history of the Tatar people (*Tatar khalky*) transcended Tatarstan’s borders by including the history of the diaspora and linking Tatar past to the broader Turkic world and the independent Turkic states that had existed in the Volga-Ural region and Central Asia.⁶⁴ As such, this

⁶⁰Musin, *Iskhaki*, 106–7; Azade-Aysha Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience* (Stanford, 1986), 128–29; Serge Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), 145–50, 142.

⁶¹Rorlich, *Volga Tatars*, 131–33.

⁶²On post-Soviet construction of national identities see Ronald Suny, “Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations,” *Journal of Modern History* 73 (December 2001): 862–96.

⁶³Cf. Z. I. Gilmanov et al., *Istoriia Tatarskoi ASSR: S drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei* (Kazan, 1968), 65, 94. While the authors emphasize the colonial nature of Russian rule over the Volga-Ural region, they frame it in Marxist terms of class struggle.

⁶⁴Saläm Alishev, “Otkuda est’ poshli tatar,” *Izvestiia Tatarstana*, February 2, 1993.

project was highly subversive of the established Russian and, especially, Soviet historiography.

At the same time, if, in 1917, the “nation” had been an elusive concept, one among many diverse potential axes of identification—Russia’s Muslims, Turko-Tatars, Bulgars, imperial subjects, urban dwellers, or inhabitants of the countryside—following the collapse of the Soviet regime, the modern nation became the primary overarching framework for defining Tatar identity. The ultimate question was which of the many possible identifications and versions of past should be included in or excluded from this framework and the emerging nationalist narrative.⁶⁵

One argument, continued from the prerevolutionary era, concerned the ethnonym “Tatar,” which Bulgharists rejected. They claimed the ancient Muslim state of Bulghar-on-the-Volga as their only historical heritage at the expense of the “Tatar-Mongol” Golden Horde.⁶⁶ In this way, the Bulgharists challenged Russian nationalists’ exclusivist claims to the Volga-Ural regions, claims based on the popular assumption that Tatars were brutal thirteenth-century invaders.⁶⁷ Still, the majority of Tatar intellectuals saw in “Bulgharism” a problematic assertion of “racial purity.” Bulgharism alienated non-European looking Tatars and denied the organic interaction among the Bulghar, Finno-Ugric, and Kipchak-Mongol populations of the Golden Horde. This interaction had resulted in the creation of the Kazan Khanate, the independent fifteenth-century Muslim state in which most Kazan Tatars see their direct and unquestionable historical roots.⁶⁸

Skimming these historical arguments, the political elite, in an effort to achieve autonomy from Moscow and assure peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic and religious groups, put forth the concept of a “Tatarstani nation” based on territorial and economic unity, with an emphasis on individual civic rather than ethnic rights. Nationalists, however, believed that this model would lead to cultural stagnation, since Soviet assimilationist policies, such as the switch from the Arabic, to the Latin, and then eventually to the Cyrillic alphabet, or

⁶⁵See, for example, Alfred Khalikov, “‘Tatar’ atamasy turynda,” *Miras* 5 (1992): 118–27; Indus Tahirov, “Tatar milläten nichek anglarga?” *Miras* 6 (1992): 89–96; Kasym Fäsakhov, “Biz nindi mirastan bash tartabyz?” *Miras* 5 (1992): 128–35; Damir Iskhakov, *Problemy stanovleniia i transformatsii tatarskoi natsii* (Kazan, 1997); and *Ocherki po istorii tatarskoi kul'tury (v kontekste “Zapad-Vostok”)* (Kazan, 2001).

⁶⁶Khalikov, “Tatar atamasy.” On the importance of territorially and religiously based Bulghar identity among the Volga-Ural Muslims, and in early local historiography, see Allen Frank, *Islamic Historiography and “Bulghar” Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia* (Leiden, 1998).

⁶⁷The anxious responses by some local Russian nationalists to Tatarstan’s 1990 declaration of sovereignty—“we are going back under the Tatar Yoke”—underscored the pervasiveness of such presumptions (field notes, Kazan, 2002–2003). On opposing views of Tatarstan’s autonomy see F. Khisamutdinov, “Komprommis—put’ k soglasiu,” and R. Stepanova, “My uzhe khlebnuli razocharovaniia,” both in *Izvestiia Tatarstana*, February 3, 1993. For a discussion of divergent attitudes between Tatarstan’s Russophone and Tatar-speaking population toward the republic’s push for greater political and economic autonomy see Helen Faller, *Nation, Language, Islam* (Budapest, 2011), 75–107.

⁶⁸Takhirov, “Tatar milläten,” 90–91. For an example of the earliest historiographic work which linked the Bulgars, the Golden Horde, and the Kazan Khanate so as to provide Volga Tatars with a continuum of historical identities see Shihabetdin Märjani, *Möstäfad al-äkhbar fi ähvali Kazan vä Bulgar* (1885; reprint ed. Kazan, 1989). On Märjani’s historical thesis see Uli Schamiloglu, “The Formation of Tatar Historical Consciousness: Sihabaddin Marcani and the Image of Golden Horde,” *Central Asian Survey* 9:2 (1990): 39–49.

the virtual absence of secondary education in their native language, had long endangered the Tatars' ethnic and religious identity.⁶⁹

Discourse about the role of Islam and Islamic praxis in sociocultural and political life was crucial to these diverse conceptions of what it meant to be Tatar at the end of the twentieth century.⁷⁰ The political elite's concept of "European Islam" sought to guarantee Tatar cultural survival and was simultaneously directed at the challenge of "foreign" Islam, often identified with Islamism.⁷¹ It has been said to have been modeled on the *jadid* conception, but closer analysis reveals a synthesis of the *iashlär*'s thinking with the Soviet-era transformation of Islam into an ethnic marker and an "aspect of national culture."⁷² For its proponents, being Muslim was an "innate" part of Tatar ethnic identity that, while important, should remain secondary to loyalty to the nation. Moreover, not religious praxis and piety, but self-identification was to be the defining element of one's Muslim-ness.⁷³

"European Islam," or, as it was later called, "Tatar Islam," appealed to the largely secular last Soviet generation of Tatars.⁷⁴ For ultranationalists like Fauzia Bairamova, however, it signified the assimilation and extinction of the Tatar nation, which could be saved only by a return to the Islamic law and way of life.⁷⁵ Others, particularly Tatar youth, opted on more personal grounds for a stricter application of the Islamic law, the most visible public manifestation of which became wearing the *hijab*, a head scarf partially covering the upper body.⁷⁶ By adopting elements of female dress that were not traditional for Tatars, young women claimed Islam as a universal religion rather than a domestic and "innate" part of their ethnicity, subverting both Soviet secularism and post-Soviet nationalism.

It is within this complex, multifaceted discourse on the meaning of Tatar identity that one should place the 1992 performance of *Zuleikha*. The original drama, despite its complex national and extranational appeal, was still textually structured around Kräshens. Zuleikha and her community's identity was distinct and fluid, and their choice to be Muslim was still a real choice, while Iskhaki's development of Zakhar further underscored the importance of individual self-conception in religious and social life. Moreover, the mystical elements, especially Zuleikha being ushered into paradise, were particularly appealing to the 1917 audience well-familiar with the Islamic way of life and Sufism.

The contemporary adaptation, on the other hand, focused exclusively on the experience on Tatars as an ethnoreligious collective during the oppressive imperial and, by implication,

⁶⁹F. Sultanov, "Islam i tatarskoe natsional'noe dvizhenie v XX veke," in *Tatarstkaia religiozno-filosofskaia mysl' v obshchemusul'manskom kontekste* (Kazan, 2002), 200–202, 212–16.

⁷⁰Leyla Almazova, in "The Phenomenon of the Kazan Mosque 'Shamil': Sufi Origins of Healing Practices," presented at the 15th Annual Conference of the Central Eurasian Studies Society (New York, 2014), discussed the rise and popularity of "non-normative" Muslim practices in contemporary Tatarstan. Cf. Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 2007).

⁷¹Sultanov, "Islam," 203–9. The term "European Islam" was coined by Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiev's top political advisor, Rafael Khakim. See his *Gde nasha Mecca: Manifest Evroislama* (Kazan 2003).

⁷²Khalid, *Islam*, 85; Khakim, *Gde nasha Mecca*, 25.

⁷³Ibid., 24–25, 49–63, 21–27.

⁷⁴Field notes, Kazan, 2002–2003.

⁷⁵Sultanov, "Islam," 214.

⁷⁶Field notes, Kazan, 2002–2003.

Soviet past. While the words remain virtually unchanged, small yet important passages are omitted. Subtle but profound restructuring occurs through choice of music and musical instruments, dance, decorations, and costumes. Most importantly, the message of national resilience is salient in the choice to produce only the first three acts of the play. Rather than end with Zakhar's death, the play now ended with a stark scene of Zuleikha walking off to Siberia in the midst of the snowy night, surrounded by three Russian soldiers.

In the background, *Allah hu akbar* (God is great) is sung. In fact, unlike in Iskhakiy's original, in which the first act ends with Gyimadi's profession of the *shahada*, and the second with Cossack gunshots that disrupt the Kräshen wedding, each of the three acts of the 1992 rendition ends with *collective* singing of the *adhan*, magnified by the sound of a kettle drum.⁷⁷

If, for the Tatar audience in 1917, Islam was an organic part of their existence, a kind of *milieu de mémoire*—hence the spontaneous communal prayer on stage—the 1990s spectators and performers, emerging from more than half a century of bellicose Soviet atheism, perceived religion very differently. In the contemporary production, the organic elements became ritualized. Public Islamic practices became a new element of Tatar self-identification, something to be reflected on and commemorated. This is particularly palpable in the second act, when the “folklore” of the Kräshen wedding is not only interrupted by the *adhan* (as in the original where it is directed at the wedding participants) but is also concluded with it. Here, the *adhan* is no longer an organic “little detail” which gave “some national color to the scene,” as a 1917 critic stated.⁷⁸ Rather, the collective singing is a powerful message, a clear effort to shape Tatar collective memory as that of a Muslim community whose religious and ethnic identity was repressed by the hegemonic state.

The emphatic singing of the *adhan* at the end of the second act is sharply contrasted with the sound of the church bells (part of Iskhakiy's text) that opens the third, final act of the 1992 performance. Zuleikha enters the stage—a room in Petr's house—having come back from a church service. In the original, surrounded by the icons, the heroine blows out the icon lamps and tears off the cross around her neck, indicating to the audience a personal space which remains in her control despite her plight.⁷⁹ In the 1992 production, Zuleikha keeps her cross on throughout her long prayer that God rescue her from “Russian captivity.” Moreover, the entire act takes place against the backdrop of a large cross, constructed optically out of the chimney of a stove and a horizontally positioned crossbeam. These elements of the contemporary production, the cross in the background, the large cross on Zuleikha's body, worn during her prayer, while lying on the floor and comparing herself to a “floor rag under a black Russian” (present in the original), function as disturbing visual markers, symbolizing the physical violation of Zuleikha and the whole nation.

At the same time, the Kräshens' particularity and their ambiguous position vis-à-vis both the Orthodox Russian and Muslim communities is completely omitted. As noted above, Iskhakiy is careful to signal the distinctiveness of Zuleikha's house in the first act—neither Muslim nor Orthodox. In the 1992 performance, no icon shelf or other markers of

⁷⁷Iskhakiy, *Zöläykha*, 395.

⁷⁸See footnote 61.

⁷⁹Iskhakiy, *Zöläykha*, 395.

Kräshen distinction are visible, and no icon is placed for the priest's sake. Also, in the original, all Kräshen men who gather at Gyimadi's (other than Sälimjän) take off their skullcaps when the priest appears. One of them takes a cross out of his pocket. When confrontation erupts between the mullah and the priest, only Zuleikha's family and a "few others" openly assert that they are Muslims.⁸⁰ By contrast, in the 1992 production, not only do the men not remove their skullcaps, they also raise the dying Gyimadi off his bed and menacingly approach the priest while forcefully repeating *Allah hu akbar*.

Most striking is the visual absence of Kräshen-ness in the wedding scene. But here this is accomplished not so much through an emphasis on Islamic elements, as through reinforcing Soviet constructions of Tatar folk traditions. In the original, the scene is loaded with songs, rituals, and dances which presumably were specific to the Kräshen or, at the very least, to a particular locale. As noted above, the centerpiece of the wedding was the return of the young bride from the river where she cajoled *su iiase* (the water-spirit)—a pre-Islamic practice indigenous to some (but not all) groups of Volga and Ural Tatars.⁸¹

Already in 1917, these folkloric elements were invented, in a Hobsbawnian sense, insofar as they were extracted from a living and fluid oral tradition and inserted into an individual literary and artistic one.⁸² In the contemporary rendering, these elements have become generalized attributes of Tatar "national" culture, similar to, for example, Sabantuy, the festival of the plow, which was traditionally celebrated only by Tatars from the Kazan region, but in the Soviet period became an official Tatar "national" holiday.⁸³ The wedding participants are dressed in ways reminiscent of Soviet state museums and nationality concerts, while the particularities of the Kräshen costume, especially female headdresses, are completely absent.⁸⁴ Singing of Tatar songs has been abandoned in favor of "national" Tatar dancing performed by professionals. Most strikingly, instead of the original violin present in the 1917 production, the 1992 performance featured the omnipresent accordion—the instrument of Soviet Tatar "folk" or "national" music.⁸⁵

According to one astute post-Soviet critic, the contemporary production was "not quite Iskhakiy." Instead it revealed "to the maximum the aesthetics of traditional Tatar theater."⁸⁶ Clearly, the critic cannot mean the short-lived tradition of early twentieth-century modern Tatar theater. The latter was the product of the secularizing Europeanizing urban intellectual milieu of late imperial Kazan and reflected the *iashlär* fascination with Western modernism, Romanticism, and Russian realism. After 1917, this hybrid tradition had become

⁸⁰Ibid., 384.

⁸¹Ibid., 389.

⁸²Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, England, 1992). Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006).

⁸³Iskhakov, *Problemy stanovleniia*, 11–12.

⁸⁴In his discussion of film adaptations of British literary classics, Raphael Samuel notes that characters' worn-out costumes were changed into more aesthetically pleasing attire, which also became "historicized" so as to reflect a particular epoch (*Theaters of Memory*, 404–9). In the 1992 costumes, "historicization" is absent; rather, they are familiar as artifacts of "traditional" Tatar culture. On Kräshen costume see Guzäl Valeeva-Suleimanova, *Tatar Mille Kieme* (Kazan, 1996), 226–30.

⁸⁵Tiumenev, "Zöläykha," 309. On Tatar prerevolutionary music see Sultan Gabashi, "On Tatar Music," in *Sultan Gabashi: Material i issledovaniia* (Kazan, 1994), 46–48.

⁸⁶Aigul Gabiasheva, "'Zuleikha' vernulas'?" *Izvestiia Tatarstana*, February 2, 1993.

emblematic of the aesthetics of the “Tatar bourgeoisie” and was repressed. Although the representations of “national” tradition were allowed, the meaning of “tradition” changed—it was homogenized and constrained to “socially” correct themes, most commonly related to village life and Tatar folklore.

The 1992 production reflected the legacy of these constraints. The actress who played Zuleikha “created a vivid *realistic* image of partially illiterate, deeply religious Tatar woman. The pathos was lowered. ... Zuleikha is no longer a ... martyr but a cowed *village* woman, the victim of her own ignorance and prejudice.” The post-Soviet restructuring of Iskhakiy’s play was meant to make *Zuleikha* “understood by the contemporary theatergoer,” as the critic notes. This spectator was raised in the “spirit of realism and atheism,” and is separated from Iskhakiy’s “mystical and religious work” and his audience “by an enormous chasm in aesthetics and worldview.”⁸⁷ Hence, we see “lowered” “pathos,” “traditional aesthetics,” “uber-realism, and post-Soviet ethnoreligious nationalism. But, the critic claims, by making *Zuleikha* more available, the contemporary production took away from the play’s originality—that “which made it unlike any other work in the national art.” There is not a single reference to “Kräshen” in the entire review.

One member of the contemporary Tatar intellectual milieu stated that *Zuleikha* was a “period piece” and was not relevant to contemporary Tatar life; others complained about the play’s “lack of sophistication.”⁸⁸ Certainly, the truncating of the original text did not help the aesthetic appeal of the play. However, this truncating—both literal and metaphorical—of the text was not, in some ways, unexpected, given the tension between late-twentieth-century Tatar and Kräshen communities. For the 1917 audience, *Zuleikha* was more than a “historical document”: it was a “living monument” that embodied the Tatar experience at large, staged at a time when Kräshens were still seen as a part, even if distinct, of the larger Tatar community.⁸⁹ Following the 1860s, those Kräshens who remained with the Church began to develop a strong separate non-Russian and non-Muslim identity which came into full bloom during the early Bolshevik policy of encouraging national development of “small peoples” of the former empire.⁹⁰

The policy of nativization was abandoned in the second half of the 1920s when Stalin pushed for greater centralized control, and Kräshens became part of the Tatar “nationality.” The public assertion of their sense of distinctiveness became visible again in the late 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with and responding to, in part, the rise of nationalist sentiment among Muslim Tatars. However, for post-Soviet Kräshen “nationalists,” their distinctiveness was rooted neither in the specificity of their religious tradition nor in their adherence to Orthodox Christianity, but in their *ethnic* particularity.⁹¹ For many Muslim Tatars, Kräshen

⁸⁷Ibid. (emphasis added).

⁸⁸Personal conversation, Kazan 2003.

⁸⁹Käräm, “Gabdullah Kariev.”

⁹⁰Werth, “From ‘Pagan,’” 502–14. See also Yuri Slezkine, “USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53 (Summer 1994): 414–52.

⁹¹See, for instance, Aleksandr Zhitnikov and Aleksei Rufimskiy, “Bitva Davida i Goliafa, ili kak kriashchenny otstavaivaiut svoe pravo na sushchestvovanie,” *Radonezh* 1:119 (2002): 6–7, available at www.kryashen.ru/rus.php?nrus=article_text&id=176.

insistence on their separateness as an “ethnos”—*kräshen khalky*—was viewed as part of Moscow’s larger policy of encroachment on Tatarstan’s economic and cultural autonomy. Kräshens were often seen as ignorant of their own history and lacking a memory of past. As one young Tatar asked, “Why don’t they embrace Islam? Have they forgotten that they were *forced* to become Christians?”⁹²

The changes that were made in the 1992 production of *Zuleikha* rendered the play at once less challenging to its potential audience and, paradoxically, despite the introduction of Islam into the nationalist discourse, more familiar. It is ultimately unsurprising that such a monotonal production of Iskhaky’s masterwork failed to have a major cultural resonance in 1990s Tatar society. While the issues, ideological vectors, and potential identifications which absorbed the post-Soviet generation were not identical to those which consumed their prerevolutionary forebears, they represent a different but still complex searching for Tatar identity. It is impossible to say, of course, what the reaction would have been had the play been produced with more fidelity (or with more complex and thoughtful accommodation to the present). However, one suspects that the early 1990s audience, like the diverse but deeply receptive audience of the 1917 production, would have been moved.

Nor will we soon find out how today’s audience would receive such a production.⁹³ As a prominent member of the Tatar theatrical community explained, “we cannot produce such plays anymore. They [the authorities] come and close us down for supposed failure to pay taxes.”⁹⁴ A little more than a decade into post-Soviet existence, when Tatarstan’s sovereignty had proved ephemeral in an increasingly authoritarian Russia, *Zuleikha* could no longer be performed on the stage of the Kamal Tatar State Theater in Kazan, a fitting symbol, perhaps, of the renewed repression of identity, cultural past, and freedom of conscience.

⁹²Personal conversation, Kazan, 2003.

⁹³A 2005 film version of *Zuleikha* made waves among the Tatar community and riled Russian nationalists. A reimagining of Iskhakyi’s play, the film removes the fluidities of identity and individual choices crucial to the original conception, as well as *Zuleikha*’s agency, and lacks elements of surrealism. The movie was distributed in mosques and shown at several festivals but never widely released. Director Ramil Tukhvatullin attempted to explain to journalists his decision not to release the film in Russian theaters, noting “that *Zuleikha* is a festival-type movie. The artistic content of a film, naturally, differs from historical reality, but, nonetheless, it is possible that some viewers will get the wrong idea (*vospriniato neadekvatno*).” See “Fil’m ‘Zuleikha’ stal prizherom kinofestivalia ‘Berlin-Asia,’” December 12, 2006, available at http://tatarmoscow.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=787%3A-l-le-&catid=17&Itemid=34.

⁹⁴Personal conversation, Kazan, 2003.