

An Uneasy Alliance: Nationalists and Bolsheviks at the Creation of Bashkortostan

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The Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, or Bashkortostan, was created as the result of a deal between the Bolsheviks and Validov's Bashkir national movement. With the formation of Bashkortostan, the Soviet government established itself as a federation of republics with territorial autonomy. Historians have posited various explanations for the establishment of this system, ranging from the Richard Pipes "divide and conquer" position to the "affirmative action empire" argument of Terry Martin. This BPhil thesis examines the 1919 deal reached between the Bashkir nationalists and Bolsheviks to determine the fitness of these theories for this case. As I argue using primary sources, the collaboration between Lenin and the thoroughly non-Communist Bashkir nationalists can be explained by three factors: First, the strategic dictates of the Civil War increased the Bolsheviks' willingness to compromise with potential allies. Second, Lenin and, to a lesser extent, Stalin were committed to a system of territorial autonomy and cultural sponsorship aimed at the minorities of the former Russian Empire. Third, the broader Soviet campaign of modernization and education reform was assimilable with the national program, most notably in the sponsorship of minority languages.

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Preface

This thesis would not have been possible without the work of my advisor, Dr. James Pickett, a true expert and historian of Central Asia. I am deeply grateful for his time and effort. Additionally, I extend my thanks to Dr. Nancy Condee, Dr. Gregor Thum and Dr. Daniel Schafer for serving on my defense committee.

The University of Pittsburgh has been my home for over four years, in more than just the academic sense. As an aspiring historian and Slavicist, I could not have imagined a more supportive environment in which to pursue my studies. In particular, I must credit one man, the late Dr. Vladimir Padunov, who showed me that I had a place within the REEES community at Pitt. This work is dedicated to him and his formidable legacy.

1.0 Introduction

Case studies are valuable entry points into Soviet nationality policy. The formation of the Bashkir Soviet Republic, or contemporary Bashkortostan, is a case which revealed the possibilities and limits of Soviet national sponsorship. As I argue from the Bashkir case, a Soviet nationality politics emerged initially out of the Civil War, where the Bolshevik government fought for its own unsure survival. However, it took root because of Lenin's fixation on constructing a new Soviet society. When Sultan-Galiev's attempts to negotiate a greater Tataro-Bashkiria failed, Bashkir nationalists led by Validov declared the independence of "Little" Bashkiria.¹ During the Civil War, the nationalist leadership defected to the White Army before switching sides one final time. The agreement reached between the Bashkir nationalists and the Bolshevik leadership in March 1919 and their difficult collaboration in the establishment of Soviet Bashkiria generates several questions: What did the Soviets recognize in an autonomous Bashkir Soviet Republic? Was there a tradition of Bashkir statehood? When collaboration broke down, what remained of the project of a Soviet Bashkir Republic?

In my view, based on primary documents and the secondary literature, there are three factors which drove this relationship from its inception to its collapse. The first is the strategic reality. Any attempt to explain the Bolshevik recognition of Little Bashkiria in March 1919 must consider the circumstances of the Civil War, where Bashkir and other minority irregulars made up a significant contingent of Kolchak's army. The defection of 5,000 enemy combatants was strategically significant. The second is Lenin's commitment to "Soviet autonomy," or the

¹ The diminutive "Little Bashkiria" refers to thirteen cantons in the Volga-Ural region heavily populated by Bashkirs (a narrow interpretation of Bashkir territory).

policies which formally established territorial autonomy. While this factor was common to all sponsored Soviet nationalities, not all nationalities were recognized. Validov and the Bashkir nationalists used their position to secure independence from the Tatars. The third is the modernization project. After the Civil War, this meant incorporating Bashkortostan into the larger economy and making Bashkirs modern, proletarianized and Soviet. This was not purely economic modernization, but what the Bolsheviks saw as raising cultural development. In my view, this modernizing ideology encompasses sponsorship of the Bashkir language and educational *korenizatsiia* policies which continued well beyond 1920.

This paper builds on the foundational work of previous scholars, most notably Daniel Schafer and Ronald Suny.² Therefore, it opens with a survey of the secondary literature on early Soviet nationality policy. To provide background, an overview of their centuries-long history before Bolshevism follows. Then, I chart the relations between the Bolsheviks and the Bashkir leadership through primary sources. Building on this, I present my argument on the three factors I identify as central to the creation of Bashkortostan and their applicability beyond this case.

1.1 Soviet Nationality in the Secondary Literature

By 1917, nationalism in the Russian Empire was present but neither fully developed nor evenly distributed. Romantic philosophy, first making its impact in the 1820s among Russians,

² Daniel Schafer's doctoral thesis, "Building Nations and Building States: The Tatar-Bashkir Question in Revolutionary Russia, 1917-1920" (Ann Arbor, 1995) was an essential resource for this paper. Among his other writings, Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past* (Stanford, 1993) greatly influenced the orientation of this thesis. Their help and advice, especially Dr. Schafer's, is highly appreciated.

later inspired the non-Slavic minorities in the borderlands towards an early cultural nationalism.³ Social national consciousness came relatively early to the Russian Empire due to its disruptive economic and political reforms. Pipes theorized that the “intellectual and social ferment” of the late Russian Empire, caused by an increasing gap between the monarchy and the literate classes of Russian society, manifested itself in national movements among the minorities.⁴ By around 1900, national identity started to manifest politically, with minority parties elected to the Duma of 1906. In the political vacuum opened after the 1917 February Revolution, non-Russian populations organized into autonomist movements, which claimed, with varying degrees of legitimacy, to represent their people’s interest. Pipes goes so far as to say that Russia in 1917 was undergoing “a colonial revolution” as well as a political one.⁵ In this complicated political landscape, would-be national leaders seized this opportunity to advance their interests.

Nationality is useful for the modern state because it is a “knowable category” into which people can be sorted.⁶ In the Russian Empire, with the first census taking place in 1897, state attempts to count and organize the population were late by European standards. This census, the only modern Russian census conducted until well into the 20th century, did not even inquire about nationality as such; but rather asked about native language as a proxy.⁷ Interestingly, respondents self-identified their household language. While the empire did not have a nationality

³ Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*, Rev. ed., Russian Research Center Studies 13 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 7-9.

⁴ *Ibid*, 8-9.

⁵ *Ibid*, 82.

⁶ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Culture and Society After Socialism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 205.

⁷ *Ibid*, 38.

policy, Hirsch has shown the continuities between the ethnographic expertise of the late Russian empire and the early Soviet Union.⁸ Reliance on ancien régime experts and the 1897 census meant that language increasingly became a proxy for national identity. But for the peoples of the Volga-Ural, language was not a sure indicator of identity.

For the Turkic peoples of the Russian empire in 1917, national identity was strongly linked to their Muslim identity. Pan-Islamist and Pan-Turkist movements figure into the national development of Russia's minorities to a limited degree. Islam underwent a renaissance in early 20th century Russia, but one which failed to develop into a strong political movement. The Nov. 20, 1917 Muslim National Assembly (*Milli Medzhilis*) was weakened by the exit of the Bashkirs, who resented Tatar unwillingness to recognize them as a separate people.⁹ The Bashkir delegation's actions were instrumental in the development of a national policy in Russia, as their exit from the all-Muslim delegation set the stage for the collapse of Pan-Islamism as a political force. As Schafer notes, there were a multitude of supranational identifications to choose from, including Turko-Tatar and Tatar-Bashkir, in addition to the more local identifications.¹⁰ However, Tatar intransigence on the question of Bashkir separateness set the stage for further fracture of the Turkic Muslims.

Islam failed to politically unify the Bashkir and other Turkic tribes. A split between liberal and conservative Islam became one fault line. In 1908, Tatar mullahs were upset at the "revolutionary" use of the Tatar language for prayers, while Sadyk Imankulov claimed in 1912

⁸ Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 21-61.

⁹ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, 79.

¹⁰ Schafer, "Building Nations and Building States," 44.

that it was impossible to translate the Koran into Tatar.¹¹ Additionally, the split in the Russian Islamic world between the Persianate and Arabic cultures is presented as an impediment to the development of a common political identity. Pan-Turkism as a movement was rendered “ineffective” by “the absence of a clear-cut and realistic national program.”¹² The differences in the economic, political and social features of the Russian Turkic peoples weakened any sense of cohesive identity which might have been fostered.

The national dynamic between the Bashkir and Tatars is key to the Soviet recognition of Bashkortostan. When efforts to convert the empire’s Turkic Muslims failed, Catherine II promulgated her edict of religious toleration, which established the Muslim Ecclesiastical Administration in 1788.¹³ As Zenkovsky argues, these developments led to what he deemed the “Tatarization” of the Central Asian and Siberian frontiers. Since the Tatars were geographically dispersed throughout the entire empire and had attained a unique measure of wealth and authority among the empire’s Muslims, they were well-equipped to assume an authoritative position in the academic and spiritual elite. The commercial advancement of the Tatars was such that by the 19th century, they possessed something close to a trade monopoly.¹⁴ With this wealth in hand, the Tatar revival of the 19th century began, as seen in movements like the *usul jadid* (“new method”) reformist school of Islam.¹⁵ These reformist schools are presented as conduits

¹¹ Serge A. Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, Russian Research Center Studies 36 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 10.

¹² *Ibid*, 273.

¹³ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 24-29.

for socialist ideas, which, as a modernist program, were in line with national goals.¹⁶ Ross's *Tatar Empire* shows how the Kazan Tatars occupied a place among the Russian Turkic tribes akin to the Armenians in the Caucasus or the Germans in the Baltics.¹⁷ Between the 1850s and 1880s, Islam led to a modernization of Tatar societies.¹⁸ As the most "modern," the Tatars asserted a claim to authority among the Islamic world of Russia. Kazan Tatars led in the movement towards "secularization," with a desacralizing doctrine and a movement from "outward" to "inward" Islam.¹⁹ Ross's book covers how settler migration, trade, and "liberal democratic politics" caused discord between the Tatars and their neighbors.²⁰ The discord between the Tatars and the Bashkir is a notable example of this.

Scholars have offered several explanations for the emergence of Soviet nationality policy. Richard Pipes' emphasis on divide and rule was as influential as it was controversial. Critics built on his scholarship. Hirsch's article "Toward an Empire of Nations" begins by reckoning with the typical view of the Soviet Union as having pursued a policy of divide and rule.²¹ Ron Suny, for example, draws on Pipes repeatedly throughout his corpus even as he built an alternative argument emphasizing the constructed aspect of nations. Several of Suny's works are

¹⁶ Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World*, Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies 11 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 10.

¹⁷ Danielle Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2020), 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 12.

²¹ Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 201.

essential resources for understanding his argument on Soviet nation-building, especially *The Revenge of the Past*.²² Building on that, Terry Martin's *Affirmative Action Empire* and edited volume with Suny provide the vocabulary and background necessary to make sense of an empire which expended so much of its center's capital on the periphery.

As the Bashkir example shows, Lenin was not opposed to nationalism in principle. Slezkine argued that the Soviet Union was a state arranged by two prominent nationalists: Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. We might even think of Stalin as the “‘father of nations’ (albeit not all nations and not all the time).”²³ Lenin effectively took the entire Communist Party along with him by force. Members of the party's left-wing on the issue of nationalism, for example Bukharin, underwent a “vertiginous leap” from a purely cosmopolitan view to an active promoter of non-Russian nationalism. Onlookers often fail to see this due to their own pro-nationalist biases.²⁴ Indeed, the nationalism of Lenin and the early Bolsheviks was evident in how they spoke about the national communities within the Russian empire. Nations were really existing things, possessive of inherent qualities and tendencies. As Slezkine restates the Leninist line: “Nations might not be helpful and they might not last, but they were here and they were real.”²⁵ Ultimately, Slezkine presents the Bolsheviks as having advocated a pragmatic position in reckoning with already existing nationalism.

²² See Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past* (Stanford, 1993) and *Russia's Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) with Valerie Kivelson.

²³ Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994), 203.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

Since Lenin dominated the Bolsheviks generally and in matters of nationality policy particularly, there is significant secondary literature on the personal views and motivations of the man. Pipes says that Vladimir Lenin had three phases in his approach to nationalism: 1897-1913: when Lenin's views were developing, 1913-1917: when he formulated a plan for "using" national movements, and 1917-1923: when he adopted a new, more practical scheme.²⁶ Lenin occupied a niche position among European socialists. He believed that not all nationalisms are equal: some nationalisms are more dangerous or toxic than others. Particularly, he drew a distinction between great-power nationalism and small-power nationalism. The former is oppressive and must be destroyed, while the latter can be encouraged. To Lenin, the Russian Empire had been a state possessed of great-power nationalism. As a result, the state empowered ethnic Russians while steadily dispossessing the minorities of their ancestral land and legal rights. Lenin was sympathetic to Bashkir qualms with Slavic (Russian and Ukrainian) migration facilitated by the Stolypin reforms and the displacement they experienced on their ancestral lands. His own formulation of malignant great-power Russian nationalism rested on cases including that of the Bashkir people.

Lenin made the case that the Russian majority, having exhausted the trust of the minorities in the empire, should mollify discontent by implementing a program of minority culture sponsorship.²⁷ Lenin believed culture could only have class character.²⁸ If that was so, sponsorship of certain cultures could further the project of building socialism. A commonly held position among Russian Bolsheviks was that an "internationalist" policy ought to be pursued:

²⁶ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, 35.

²⁷ Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment," 207.

²⁸ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, 42.

since the Revolution would hearken in the dissolution of all class (and therefore, national) distinctions, sponsoring nationalisms appeared backwards. The greatest intellectual force behind this view was Rosa Luxemburg, a Polish Communist whom Lenin bitterly contested in polemics. “The Right of Nations to Self Determination” is one of Lenin’s treatments of the issue. Within the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Socialists, Piatakov represented the internationalist position. While intellectually unsatisfying to many members of the Party’s rank and file, Lenin’s arguments ultimately won the day.²⁹ When the position had become mainstream, Slezkine asserts that “nation building appeared to be a praiseworthy goal in its own right.”³⁰

Native language education was a cornerstone of Soviet *korenizatsiia* policies. The missionary and linguist Nikolai Il’minsky’s influence on Lenin may help to explain this commitment. As he had been a colleague of his father at Kazan University, Lenin was aware of the work of Il’minsky, who had evangelized in the native languages of the Russian minorities.³¹ Il’minsky was convinced that a person may only fully grasp the divine truth of scripture if they hear it in their native language. According to Slezkine’s interpretation of the Leninist model, native language also plays a vital role in the “conversion” of the peasant or minority into workers and future proletarians. As a “missionary project,” socialism must be translated into the various tongues of the empire, engaging with the national slogans which were animating the peoples of the periphery.³² Lenin, and to a lesser extent Stalin, were proponents of this theory which saw

²⁹ Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 209.

³⁰ Ibid, 210.

³¹ Isabelle Kreindler, “A Neglected Source of Lenin’s Nationality Policy,” *Slavic Review* 36, no. 1 (March 1977): 86–100, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2494673>.

³² Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 205.

language as a key to socialist conversion. Bolshevik authorities did not consider language and those “domestic arrangements” which constituted national culture to be a threat to the consolidation of authority within the Party. As Slezkine claims, to Lenin and Stalin: “‘National form’ was acceptable because there was no such thing as national content.”³³

Comparing the case of Bashkortostan with those of other Soviet nations reveals the extent to which it was “top-down” nationalism. Not all the nationalisms encountered and sponsored by the Bolsheviks were the same. Hirsch argues that Belarus was an example of a state being created “from above,” as a balance to Polish and Ukrainian nationalisms “from below.” Indeed, there was some unease with learning Belarusian as per the Party’s program.³⁴ A dense case study on Ukraine comes from Borys, who brought statistics and primary sources to bear on his analysis of how the historic Ukrainian region and people became organized into the Ukrainian SSR.³⁵ The collapse of the Tsarist regime and ensuing Civil War had increased ethnic tensions, increasing levels of ethnic awareness and self-identification. Zenkovsky claims that prior to the revolution of 1917, “no antagonism had been observed between the Bashkirs and Tatars,” claiming that many provinces in the Eastern Urals had “vacillated” between self-identification as Bashkir or Tatar.³⁶

³³ Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 206.

³⁴ Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 208-210.

³⁵ Jurij Borys, *The Sovietization of Ukraine, 1917-1923: The Communist Doctrine and Practice of National Self-Determination*, Rev. ed, (Downsview, Ont: University of Ontario Press, 1980).

³⁶ Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, 195.

1.2 Bashkirs Before Bolshevism (pre-October 1917)

The first definitive historical reference to the ethnonym we now know as “Bashkir” dates back more than a millennium. There may be an earlier reference, as Ptolemy identified several tribes which Togan postulates may be *bashkurt*, but this is unclear.³⁷ Barring this, the “Bāshghird” were first mentioned by the 10th century Arab traveler, Ahmad Ibn Fadlan. His travelog from an excursion along the Volga River provides the earliest ethnographic data available on the Bashkir. Having encountered their settlement near the Bolghar border, Fadlan’s tale relates the reputation of the Bashkir as a war-like Turkic people who practiced animism.³⁸ Complicating the historical timeline is a lack of clarity on whether references to “Bāshghird/Bashkurt” correspond with contemporary understandings of Bashkir identity. In the earliest known histories of the Volga-Ural basin, tribal names overlapped. Muslim sources labeled the Bashkir as “inner Bashkurts,” and the Magyars as “outer Bashkurts,” while the Bashkir of the Ural Mountains also divided themselves into “inner” and “outer” groups.³⁹ The 12th century geographer Sharif Idrisi describes this confusion in his report on the Bashkir.⁴⁰

There are several theories on the etymology of the word “Bashkir.” A common theory suggests that the word is a compound of two separate Turkic elements: *Bash* which means ‘head’

³⁷ Ahmed Z. V. Togan, *Istoriia bashkir* (Ufa: Kitap, 2010), 21.

³⁸ “We were on high alert, for they are the wickedest, most powerful, and most ferocious of the Turks.” from Ahmad Ibn Fadlan et al., *Mission to the Volga* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 85.

³⁹ Ahmed Z. V. Togan. “Bashdjirt,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman et al., 1, https://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1255.

⁴⁰ Togan, *Istoriia bashkir*, 27-30.

or ‘leader’ (Russian: *glava*), and *qort* meaning ‘wolf’.⁴¹ *Bashqort* is the original ethnonym, from which the others (“Bashkurd,” “Bashkort,” “Bashkir,” etc.) derive. There is some disagreement about this origin. Dunlop writes that *bashkort* comes from *beshgur*, meaning ‘five oghurs (a tribal name).’⁴² It is clear the term’s longevity has given rise to several folk etymologies. Names given to the Bashkir varied between the nomadic groups of Inner Asia over the centuries. After the 15th century, they were called ‘Istek’ by some of their Turkic neighbors, the root of the Ottoman word ‘Heshdek.’⁴³

There is a lack of consensus on the geographic origin of the Bashkir tribes. Togan writes that according to the traditional folk narrative, common ancestors of the Bashkir and Bulgar tribes came from the direction of Bukhara.⁴⁴ Chinese sources identify the Bashkir as being part of the Kipchak family, which had emerged in Southern Turkestan.⁴⁵ In the last millennium, tribes of the Bashkir settled in the Volga-Ural region, where they were eventually conquered by Mongols. Dwelling as they did near the “summer camping-grounds” of the Khans, the Bashkir tribes were incorporated into the Golden Horde by means including military conscription.⁴⁶ As the successive horde authorities fractured, the Bashkir tribes were split between different tribal

⁴¹ *Istoriia bashkirskikh rodov*. T. 34. Ch. 2, ed. S. I. Khamidullin (Ufa: Kitap, 2019), 18.

⁴² D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 34.

⁴³ Togan. “Bashdjirt,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1.

⁴⁴ Togan, *Istoriia bashkir*, 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 2.

suzerains. The most populous, southwestern territories of Bashkiria were under the control of Nogai horde, the east under Sibir and the northwest under the khanate of Kazan.⁴⁷

In the 10th century, Ibn Fadlan described the Bashkir as pagan or shamanic: “We noticed that one clan worships snakes, another fish, and another cranes.”⁴⁸ In the centuries following, the Bashkir tribes underwent a conversion to Islam. One of the central elements to look at when understanding Islamization is the conversion narrative. The narratives symbolize breaks with the past and continuities and are assimilable with “legends of origin” stories.⁴⁹ Traditionally, the narrative is that Islam took root among the Bashkir through the work of foreign missionaries from Islamic centers such as Bukhara and Baghdad.⁵⁰ Notably, the narrative does not locate Bashkir Islam within the Bolghar tradition. The Aueshkel shrine, marking the grave of three Baghdadi Islamic missionaries, is one example of this separate tradition.⁵¹ While this cultural self-understanding is valuable, Togan writes that Islam likely came to the Bashkir via Bolghar missionaries who were active in the Urals.⁵² It is notable that conversion likely did not take place before their migration to the Volga-Ural region.

⁴⁷ Alton S. Donnelly, *The Russian Conquest of Bashkiria 1552-1740: A Case Study in Imperialism*, Yale Russian and East European Studies 7 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 9.

⁴⁸ Fadlan et al., *Mission to the Volga*, 85.

⁴⁹ Devin A. DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition*, Hermeneutics, Studies in the History of Religions (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 10.

⁵⁰ Allen J. Frank, "The Tārīkh Nāma-Yi Bulghār of Tāj Ad-Dīn Yālchīghul Ōghlī" in *Islamic Historiography and 'Bulghar' Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1998), 92-95.

⁵¹ Frank, "The Tārīkh Nāma-Yi Bulghār of Tāj Ad-Dīn Yālchīghul Ōghlī," 92.

⁵² Togan, *Istoriia bashkir*, 34-35.

The process of the Bashkir tribes' annexation and integration into the Russian Empire was gradual. E. H. Carr writes that the Bashkir tribes sought protection from Moscow in the 16th century after being threatened by their Tatar and Kazakh neighbors.⁵³ With some exceptions, the Bashkir generally did not take Christian baptism; long the traditional form of elite assimilation into the Tsarist political order.⁵⁴ The empire gradually absorbed the territory and tribes of the Nogai horde as the power balance shifted in its favor over the course of the 16th century.⁵⁵ Baumann identifies the 1586 establishment of a fort at the confluence of the Belaia and Ufa rivers as “the first significant Russian colonization of the region.”⁵⁶ With “few geographic deterrents to aggrandizement,” the Russian state continued its Eastern expansion from there.⁵⁷

Cartographers of the Russian Empire marked the provinces of Perm and Ufa as the easternmost extent of the European continent, making the Urals the symbolic “cultural borderland” of European Russia.⁵⁸ As Pipes notes, the administration of the late Russian empire attempted to be relatively uniform and work through the “impracticability” of certain regions.⁵⁹

⁵³ Edward H. Carr, “Some Notes on Soviet Bashkiria,” *Soviet Studies* 8, no. 3 (1957), 217–219.

⁵⁴ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, 6.

⁵⁵ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, Ninth edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 144-150.

⁵⁶ Robert F. Baumann, “Subject Nationalities in the Military Service of Imperial Russia: The Case of the Bashkirs,” *Slavic Review* 46, no. 3/4 (1987): 491, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2498099>.

⁵⁷ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, 1.

⁵⁸ Charles Steinwedel, “How Bashkiria Became Part of European Russia, 1762–188,” in *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930*, ed. Jane Burbank, Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 94.

⁵⁹ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, 4-5.

The Volga-Ural region, historically prone to rebellion and possessed of great natural wealth, became the focus of these efforts.

The political history of the Bashkir in the Russian Empire is marked by numerous rebellions against central authority. The 17th and 18th centuries saw many years of intermittent revolts from the Bashkir. In 1705-1711 there were revolts after St. Petersburg raised the annual quota of *iasak* (tribal tax) and horses.⁶⁰ The founding of Orenburg on the Iiak in 1735 gave rise to widespread rebellion from tribal leadership. This led to extreme brutality when in response the expeditionist Ivan Kirillov razed 700 Bashkir villages, killing or forcing into labor an estimated 12-14% of the population.⁶¹ Decades later, Bashkir forces participated in the famous Pugachev rebellion of the 1770s.⁶² Donnelly provides an excellent overview of the difficulties experienced by the Tsar in incorporating the Bashkir into the imperial fold.⁶³

As mining and other industries developed in the Volga-Ural region, Slavic settlers moved into historically Bashkir lands.⁶⁴ The 18th century saw greater interaction between Russians and Bashkir as Russian industry took root in the Urals at a large scale. In the first quarter of the 18th century, nearly twenty metallurgical works were established in the region, with a requisite labor force of over 5000 serfs.⁶⁵ By the 1740s, when Orenburg was established as a new imperial

⁶⁰ Nancy S. Kollmann, "Eighteenth-Century Expansion: Siberia and Steppe," in *The Russian Empire 1450-1801, 1st ed.*, *Oxford History of Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶² Baumann, "Subject Nationalities in the Military Service of Imperial Russia," 491.

⁶³ See Donnelly, *The Russian Conquest of Bashkiria 1552-1740: A Case Study in Imperialism*, Yale Russian and East European Studies 7 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968).

⁶⁴ Riasanovsky, N. V. and Steinberg, M. D., *A History of Russia*, 411-412.

⁶⁵ Kollmann, "Eighteenth-Century Expansion: Siberia and Steppe," 90.

province, 50,000 East Slavic settlers had moved into the regions historically populated by Bashkir tribes.⁶⁶

Language occupies an important position in Bashkir national identity, a cultural element which is distinct from its Tatar neighbors. A Turkic language of the Kipchak branch, Bashkir has loan words from Mongolian, Ob-Ugric, and Russian.⁶⁷ The Bashkir literary tradition is very young, and a Bashkir independent written language was devised with Soviet support only in 1923. Sponsorship of the Bashkir language and its place in economic modernization will be examined in a later section.

Before the reforms of the late 18th century, the Bashkir and other tribes of Inner Asia were exempt from military service. They were viewed as either being culturally unprepared for service or generally unreliable.⁶⁸ In 1798, after rebellions had been put down and political control of the Bashkir people was perceived as stable, a new irregular military force was assembled: the Bashkir Host (*Bashkirskoe voisko*). The Host, a military force utilized by the Empire in roughly the same manner as the Cossacks, was employed in order to defend the “Orenburg line,” a collection of forts along the Central Asian frontier.⁶⁹ As administration was centralized and the military modernized, Bashkir irregular forces were absorbed into the so-called “native” *inorodtsy* units of the Russian army. When the presence of *inorodtsy* forces in the

⁶⁶ Kollmann, “Eighteenth-Century Expansion: Siberia and Steppe,” 91.

⁶⁷ *Dictionary of Languages: The Definitive Reference to More than 400 Languages*, ed. Andrew Dalby, Rev. ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), s.v. “Bashkir.”

⁶⁸ Baumann, “Subject Nationalities in the Military Service of Imperial Russia,” 490.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Orenburg *guberniia* were deemed unnecessary, the Bashkir Host were phased out.⁷⁰ Baumann quotes War Minister I. O. Sukhozanet, who wrote in 1858 that "[t]he Bashkirs as a *voisko* are entirely unnecessary for the state."⁷¹ In this, the Bashkir mirror the process of integration encountered by other "native" units in the empire: they served their function for a time before being assimilated into the regular army at a more opportune political moment.⁷²

Military reform was followed by economic reform, which aimed at building uniformity between the regions. As the Bashkir people no longer occupied a frontier role on the empire's southern flank, Shukhozanet recommended the gradual conversion of the Bashkirs into state peasants.⁷³ The 1865 creation of an Ufa *guberniia* under civil administrative control marked the beginning of this process in earnest.⁷⁴ Russo-Bashkir relations were impacted by the reforms of the Russian Empire, including the liberation of the serfs. It was not until Stolypin's 1907-1911 reforms, which supported colonization of the steppe and subsidies for farm owners, that this

⁷⁰ Daniel Schafer, "Local Politics and the Birth of the Republic of Bashkortostan," in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Cary, North Carolina: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2001), 168.

⁷¹ Baumann, "Subject Nationalities in the Military Service of Imperial Russia," 490.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 502.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 495.

⁷⁴ *Bol'shaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia*, "Ufimskaya Guberniya"
https://old.bigenc.ru/domestic_history/text/4703697.

occurred at scale.⁷⁵ The presence of the new settlers became a point of contention between the tribes and the center, coming to the fore during post-Revolution Bashkir congresses.⁷⁶

Collapse of the Tsar's government following the February Revolution presented an opportunity for the empire's religious and ethnic minorities to assert autonomy over their own affairs. The first organizational move on this front came from the *Ittifak*, a Russian Muslim political party, who met in March 1917 and elected a provisional Central Bureau of Russian Muslims.⁷⁷ They resolved to convene a conference, issuing invitations to all Muslim peoples of the empire. Discussion would center on how best to go forward in self-organization and government following the toppling of Tsar Nicholas II's government.

At the first all-Russian national Muslim Congress, the empire's Muslims gathered to chart a path forward as a united group. The geographic and ideological diversity was marked in the 900 delegates who arrived from the four corners of a country filled with political and reform-oriented fervor.⁷⁸ The Muslim leaders of Russia looked to a restoration of their place in the new democratic order as well a new position on the international stage. Political differences were stark among the Congress attendees. Few Bolsheviks featured in the ranks, while the radical left, primarily of the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) variety, was noticeable among the Tatars, Bashkirs and Azerbaijanis.⁷⁹ A Moslem Socialist Committee, formed by Tatar socialists, became a

⁷⁵ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, 82.

⁷⁶ A. A. Validov in *U Istokov Federalizma v Rossii (1917–1920): Sbornik Dokumentov i Materialov: v. 2 ch. 1*, ed. S.F. Kasimov (Ufa: Kitap, 2005), 40-42.

⁷⁷ Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, 139.

⁷⁸ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, 76-78.

⁷⁹ Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, 139-140.

rallying point for far-left Muslim radicals.⁸⁰ Mullanur Vahitov criticized the *Ittihad* (Muslim union) as bourgeois and encouraged “toiling Moslems” to take part in the proletarian uprising.⁸¹ Clerics and conservatives from the northern Caucasus and Central Asia clashed with centrist *Ittifak/Ittihad* factions and the growing ranks of Muslim Socialist Revolutionaries.⁸² The difficulty in organizing such a large set of politically and culturally diverse communities became quickly apparent. As Zenkovsky notes: “Islam revealed itself to be stronger than any national or racial program”⁸³ in uniting the disparate peoples of the empire represented in Moscow on May 1, 1917. However, the hope of religious solidarity was soon to be dashed by persistent sectarian disputes.

A debate emerged within the Congress between advocates of “territorial” and “cultural” models of autonomy. Tatars, scattered throughout the Empire and in very few areas possessive of a majority, advocated the Austrian (Bauerist) system of a centralized state with cultural, non-territorial autonomy.⁸⁴ The Bashkir delegates, joined by the Caucasians, Crimeans, Kazakhs and other Central Asians, supported the territorial autonomy option.⁸⁵ Within a federation, territorial autonomists desired the right to civil self-administration in addition to cultural protections. After some deliberation, the majority of the Congress voted for the principle of national-territorial

⁸⁰ Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, 140.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 141.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 140-142.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

federalism for the Muslim minorities in the former Russian empire.⁸⁶ Those groups which did not occupy a discrete section of land would be given national-cultural autonomy as well as representation within the All-Muslim Council. The resolution also established a central All-Muslim governing body for the regulation of spiritual and cultural affairs.⁸⁷

As dysfunction within the Muslim Union grew, representatives of the Bashkir tribes turned towards advocating for their own movement. A regional bureau was established in Orenburg in order to assemble a congress on Bashkortostan's place within a new democratic Russia.⁸⁸ This congress of tribal representatives, held in the historic complex of Karavan-Sarai during June 1917, produced a series of documents to this end. First, the delegates issued a statement concurring with the All-Muslim Council on the issue of national-territorial autonomy.⁸⁹ The document asserts that the Bashkir had been victims of unequal treatment in their own lands, losing ancestral lands to Slavic migration and favorites of the Tsar.⁹⁰ Therefore, the delegates argue for land redistribution. The land question was central to any proposed Bashkir polity within a democratic Russia.⁹¹ However, as the events of October 1917 made clear, a democratic Russia was not long for this world.

⁸⁶ "Resoliutsii Vserossiiskogo musul'manskogo s'ezda, sostoiavshegosia v Moskve 1-11 maia 1917 g." in *Vserossiiskii musul'manskii s'ezd* (Moscow, 1917), 6-7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 8-9.

⁸⁸ Validov, *U Istokov Federalizma v Rossii (1917–1920)*, 39.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 40-42

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 41-42.

⁹¹ *Ibid*.

1.3 Towards a Soviet Bashkortostan (1917-1923)

How did the Bashkir polity take shape under Bolshevik rule? The Russian Revolution, particularly the October coup, brought national politics to center stage. A perfect storm of minority self-determination movements and Lenin's ambition to a "Soviet autonomy" made this the case in 1917 and beyond. The October coup triggered chaos throughout the former empire, the Bashkir lands constituting no exception. In this moment, Lenin did not adopt a traditional Marxist view on nationalism. Mere days after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks issued a declaration recognizing the self-determination rights of the empire's minorities.⁹² This was a work of overconfidence; a risky ploy or naive declaration depending on one's outlook. The actions of the Bolsheviks in 1917 suggest the truth of Hegel's statement that "the pallid shades of memory struggle in vain with the life and freedom of the Present."⁹³

Validov's memoirs from this period indicate that while the Bolsheviks' message on self-determination was a welcome sight, he did not see it as the basis for receiving autonomy: "In order to guard our people from illusions surrounding this declaration, *Farman* № 1 was issued."⁹⁴ *Farman* (order) № 1, issued nine days after the Bolshevik declaration, describes the chaos and lawlessness which erupted in Bashkiria following the October Revolution.⁹⁵ To restore

⁹² Vladimir I. Lenin and Joseph Stalin "Deklaratsiia prav narodov rossii" in *Natsional'no-Gosudarstvennoe Ustroistvo Bashkortostana (1917 - 1925 Gg.). Dokumenty i Materialy*: T.1, ed. B. Iuldashbaev (Ufa: Kitap, 2002), 71. Hereafter, this source will be shortened to *NGUB*.

⁹³ Georg Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree, Dover Philosophical Classics (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, inc, 2004) 6.

⁹⁴ *NGUB*, 1:94.

⁹⁵ Validov, *U Istokov Federalizma v Rossii (1917–1920)*, 56.

order, the leadership took matters into their own hands, establishing Bashkortostan as an independent republic with a national government and military.⁹⁶ The *farman* calls on the Bashkir people to support neither the Kerensky faction (which did nothing for autonomy), nor the Bolsheviks (who promise autonomy but also “give disorder, lawlessness and outrages”).⁹⁷ The document also states that their Cossack neighbors’ anti-Bolshevism threatened to turn their territory into a battlefield. In response, the Bashkir leadership advocated a neutral position, as the Civil War had not yet forced them to choose a side.⁹⁸

A second *farman*, issued less than a week after the first, revealed the limits of the Bashkir Regional Council’s authority. In the document, the council delineated the territories constituting autonomous Bashkiria.⁹⁹ Bashkir revolutionary councils were to become the primary organs of government across the republic, with coordination between the various authorities and the center to be carried out in Orenburg, the site of a temporary Bashkir Commission.¹⁰⁰ Not recognizing their authority, the commissar of the Provisional Government in Orenburg asserted that there was no basis for the Bashkir Regional Council to speak for the Muslims of that city.¹⁰¹ The telegram states that the Regional Muslim *shuro* and Muslim Military Committee were desirous of cultural autonomy, not the territorial scheme advanced by the Bashkir council.¹⁰² This exchange portended conflict between the Orenburg Muslim *Shuro* and the Bashkir Central Council.

⁹⁶ Validov, *U Istokov Federalizma v Rossii (1917–1920)*, 57-58.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 56-57.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 60-61.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 69.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 68.

¹⁰¹ TsGAOO RB. F. 1832. op. 3. d. 377. Ll. 7–8 in *NGUB*, 1:191.

¹⁰² *NGUB*, 1:191.

Despite this, planning the administration of Little Bashkiria continued apace and its protocols were published in January 1918.¹⁰³ The document defined autonomy beyond a vague statement of self-determination. According to the second article of the first statement, the official language of the new republic was to be Bashkir.¹⁰⁴ This is the first invocation of language. As a primary aspects of non-Tatar identity, the establishment of Bashkir as an official language was a symbol of independence. What constituted the Bashkir tongue and who would make that determination had yet to be decided. Iumagulov advocated for a separate Bashkir literary language, to formalize the differences between it and Tatar.¹⁰⁵ The document stipulates that Bashkir would be co-official with Russian, and that there would be no discrimination.¹⁰⁶ The leaders of Little Bashkiria asserted authority over all historic territory before the so-called “plundering of the Bashkir lands.”¹⁰⁷ Institutions of governance were also established through the protocol. Bashkiria was to have a parliament by the traditional Mongol name of *kurultai* and a *duma* with representation from the several cantons. Additionally, regardless of geography, all citizens besides religious clergy were obligated to serve the central Russian state in some way.

These initial plans for Little Bashkiria were stopped early in their development. Tensions came to a breaking point in February 1918, when Validov and the Bashkir Central Council were arrested by the Orenburg *Shuro* and Muslim Military Committee. A temporary Revolutionary

¹⁰³ *NGUB*, 1:207-215.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 207.

¹⁰⁵ Ahmed Z. V. Togan, *Vospominaniia: Bor'ba narodov Turkestana i drugikh vostochnykh musul'man-tiurkov za natsional'noe bvtie i sokhranenie kul'turv.* trans G. Shafikov and A. Iuldashbaev (Ufa: Kitap, 1994), 297.

¹⁰⁶ *NGUB*, 1:208.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*.

Committee to administer the autonomous Bashkir republic was established in its place.¹⁰⁸ This temporary council issued a statement on the arrest of the former members of the old *shuro*, identified as conspirators against the Soviet state and people.¹⁰⁹ Following the arrest of the former leadership, it appeared as if Bashkiria was in the hands of a pro-Bolshevik faction. Under the rhetoric was a continuation of the Bashkir and Tatar dispute over autonomy. A telegram appeal addressed to Lenin and Stalin identified issues which had compelled the Tatar-dominated Orenburg *shuro* to act: the appointment of Manatov as commissar of Muslim Affairs, recognition of Karavan-Sarai as a Bashkir possession and rumors of Soviet willingness to grant Bashkortostan autonomy.¹¹⁰ So-called “Tatar chauvinists” were wearing “the mask of Bolsheviks” in order to pursue their aims.

As discontent built in the country, the Tataro-Bashkir Constituent Congress gathered in May to work out the details of the new republic. Addressing the Congress, Stalin laid out the theoretical principles of Soviet nationality policy.¹¹¹ The Bolsheviks, Stalin says, are mindful of Russia’s position between the oppressed peoples of Asia and the European imperialist powers. Support for the national liberation movements of Asia is support against the oppression of the bourgeoisie, which uses discrimination to control the toiling masses.¹¹² Stalin invoked the right

¹⁰⁸ R. M. Raimov, *Obrazovanie Bashkirskoi Avtonomnoi Sovetskoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respubliki* (Moscow, 1952), 467-469.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 467.

¹¹⁰ Totlybaev, *NGUB*, 350.

¹¹¹ Joseph V. Stalin, *Sochineniia v 13 t. T. 4: Noiabr’ 1917–1920*, (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1947), 90-92.

¹¹² Stalin, *Sochineniia v 13 t. T. 4: Noiabr’ 1917–1920*, 90.

to self-determination in establishing a new Tataro-Bashkir republic.¹¹³ If the Tatar and Bashkir representatives could successfully resolve their differences, they might present a model to the other peripheral peoples of the former Empire.¹¹⁴ Stalin later wrote of the Tataro-Bashkir republic as having some of the only national leaders outside of Ukraine willing to negotiate real terms of federation with Soviet Russia.¹¹⁵ Notably, this republic did not supersede the existing Bashkir autonomous republic: in fact, the problem of territorial disputes between the new Tataro-Bashkir republic and “Bashkirdistan” was a clearly recognized obstacle. The problem was delegated to the Constituent Congress of Soviets of the Tataro-Bashkir region.¹¹⁶ Stalin wrote that their recommendations would surely be approved by the Party’s Central Committee.¹¹⁷ The Muslim commissariat issued an appeal to the Bashkir and Tatar people, advocating for the Tataro-Bashkir republic.¹¹⁸ The authors of the appeal tried to mollify Bashkir distrust, writing of the Tataro-Bashkir republic as “the embodiment of the sacred desire of the Bashkir people.”¹¹⁹ This quasi-Romantic nationalism was aimed at generating support from those uninspired by the Bolshevik cause.

¹¹³ *Obrazovanie SSSR: sbornik dokumentov, 1917–1924*, ed. E.B.Genkinoy (Moscow: Izd. Akademii nauk SSSR, 1947), 38-39.

¹¹⁴ Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 92.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 49.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 50.

¹¹⁸ *Obrazovanie Bashkirskoi avtonomnoi sovetskoi sotsialisticheskoi respubliki: sbornik dokumentov i materialov*, ed. B. Kh. Iuldashbaev (Ufa: Bashknigoizdat, 1959), 144-145.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

The Russian Civil War, which kicked off in the months following the Bolshevik coup, interrupted any peaceful resolution of the Tatar/Bashkir land dispute. The historical record shows the Bashkir leadership's agnosticism on the ideologies underpinning the Russian Civil War. As Validov wrote: "We are neither Bolsheviks nor Mensheviks: we are only Bashkirs."¹²⁰ The demands of the Bashkir leadership were simple. Primarily, their discontent with the Russian central government came from perceived infringements upon their lands and traditional way of life. Bashkir leadership was interested in protectionism for their people.¹²¹ This appears to be the 'ideology' with the greatest currency. As I have noted, a resolution to the issue of land reform, returning lands occupied by waves of Slavic migration to the Volga-Ural region, was central to any desired political arrangement.

As war spread in the Spring of 1918, the position of the Bolshevik regime appeared tenuous, as provisional governments challenged their authority from all sides. Bashkirs of note either joined the White forces of the anti-Bolshevik Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly (*Komuch*) or left politics.¹²² While some Bashkirs may have been inspired by the high rhetoric of the Bolsheviks, leadership was beginning to regard them as the likely losers of the Civil War. Seeking to preserve a route to autonomy, the leadership opened negotiations with the White forces. In the summer of 1918, military support was secured for the Siberian Provisional

¹²⁰ Validov, *U Istokov Federalizma v Rossii (1917–1920)*, 60-61.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 42.

¹²² Daniel Schafer, "Local Politics and the Birth of the Republic of Bashkortostan," 168.

Government.¹²³ The leadership pledged independent national units in the Civil War, which would transition into a Bashkir police force following the war.

The agreement indicates the strong bargaining position of the Bashkir leadership and military forces. However, as the Civil War dragged on, the Whites' strategic position was deteriorating. Zenkovsky notes that the November 1918 Kolchak coup radically changed the orientation of the White forces towards rejecting Turkic autonomy.¹²⁴ This did much to change the Bashkirs' loyalties during the Civil War. By the start of 1919, White forces were pushed back by successful offensives of Frunze's Red Army.¹²⁵ As their position worsened, friction grew between the Bashkir and the White forces of Kolchak. Discrepancies over strategic decisions and war aims were amplified by the Great Russian chauvinism of the anti-Bolsheviks, culminating in Admiral Kolchak ordering the dissolution of Bashkir military units' abandonment of territorial autonomy.¹²⁶

During the Civil War, the idea was that if the minority populations of the former Empire heard the friendly pronouncements of Lenin and Stalin, they might be compelled to drop their White allies. There is some evidence of success. During the Civil War, it is hard to imagine Validov negotiating with the Bolsheviks, whom he had betrayed less than a year prior, if Lenin had not built up a reputation for relative sensitivity to the national question. Slightings and bigotry from White Army personnel compounded this perception. Crucially for the Bashkir national

¹²³ Sh. Tipeev. *Osnovnye etapy v istorii natsional'nogo dvizheniya i Sovetskoi Bashkirii (1917–1929 g.)*, (Ufa: Izd. Bashkniga, 1929), 33-36.

¹²⁴ Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, 199.

¹²⁵ Schafer, "Building Nations and Building States," 334.

¹²⁶ Schafer, "Local Politics and the Birth of the Republic of Bashkortostan," 168.

movement, Lenin was sympathetic to the belief that the Tatars were attempting to use their greater economic and cultural clout to dominate an independent Bashkir people. It is my belief that this reflects the Leninist conception of nationalism and an extension of the principle of oppressor versus oppressed nationalisms.

As the Red Army steadily encroached upon their territory, the leaders of the Bashkir national movement once again reevaluated their position in the Civil War. Disappointed with their allies, the leadership gauged Bolshevik openness to a settlement. The Bolsheviks were willing to deal, and negotiations began in the months leading up to the Eighth Party Congress.¹²⁷ In February of 1919, the Bashkir reached an agreement with the Bolsheviks based on several key principles.¹²⁸ First, autonomy was to be guaranteed along the principles of the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Second, an amnesty was to be declared for all members of the national leadership. Third, the leadership must issue a command to their forces to immediately take up arms against the forces of Dutov and Kolchak.¹²⁹ This was to be accompanied by a public announcement of the deal and an appeal to cease attacks on Red forces, whereupon Bashkir representatives would travel to Moscow to negotiate a lasting deal.

For the fledgling Soviet state embroiled in civil war, strategic realities dictated policy more than strict ideological commitments. Even if blindly holding onto utopian Marxism were an option while the state was threatened with collapse, there were no answers to be found in socialist theory. Lenin clearly understood that without neutralizing the military threat which the

¹²⁷ Schafer, "Local Politics and the Birth of the Republic of Bashkortostan," 169.

¹²⁸ *Obrazovanie Bashkirskoi Avtonomnoi Sovetskoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respubliki: sbornik dokumentov i materialov*, ed. B. Kh. Iuldashbaev (Ufa: Bashkirskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo, 1959), 224.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

state faced from all sides, there could be no Socialist Russia. Even beyond the battlefield, unless a stable political arrangement could be formed, the Bolsheviks would not survive the peace. In early 1919, dynamics had shifted. The Whites were battered, and Frunze was on the march. Taking this into consideration, the initial recognition of Little Bashkiria was an event which took place under very different circumstances than those of March 1919.

While not decisive, 5000 troops defecting from the enemy on a critical front was a strategic upshot. Besides its direct impact on the military-tactical situation, the defection of the Bashkir irregular forces marked an important Red Army victory in the psychological conflict over the former Russian Empire. To be sure, the Civil War was a struggle for hearts and minds, reflected in the morale of the opposing armies. Credence is lent to this argument by Pipes, who identified the years 1917-1923 as representing a third turn in Leninist nationality policy, one defined by his pragmatism and adaptation to strategic realities.

The agreement reached between the Soviet and Bashkir authorities on the establishment of Bashkortostan within the RSFSR was published on March 23, 1919.¹³⁰ In it, the framework of administration is revealed. Bashkortostan was to have its own armed forces under the command of the Red Army: a four-regiment cavalry division and three-regiment infantry brigade.¹³¹ Notably, support from the RSFSR was pledged for the purposes of “cultural-education measures.”¹³² Until a congress of soviets could be called, political power was vested in the

¹³⁰ *Dekreti Sovetskoi vlasti: [sbornik]*, vol. IV (10 noiabria 1918 g. — 31 marta 1919 g.) (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1968), 514–519.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 518.

¹³² *Ibid.*

Bashkir Revolutionary Committee.¹³³ This document formed the constitutional basis for both Soviet and contemporary Bashkortostan. It also marked the start of a year and a half of “increasingly difficult collaboration” between the Bashkir leadership and the Soviet center.¹³⁴

The case of Soviet Bashkortostan set the stage for the development of a Soviet nationality politics, in that it confirmed the principle of ethno-territorial autonomy and revealed the limits of Bolshevik collaboration with national leadership. Therefore, Soviet Bashkiria is the precipitating case in the development of a Soviet nationality policy and set a standard by which future autonomous republics might be organized. A directive from the Central Executive Committee, issued in late September 1919, formally handed over administration of the territory of Little Bashkiria to the Bashkir Revolutionary Committee, comprised of non-Communists.¹³⁵ The handover of personnel and administration was to take place immediately. However, there were several caveats introduced which were aimed at strengthening central control over the economy. A food supply commissar of the Republic, responsible for implementing Soviet food policy, was to be appointed by the Moscow food supply commissariat in consultation with Bashrevkom.¹³⁶ Supplies to the Bashkir republic were to be directed by Moscow. For their part, the Central Committee promised direct correspondence between themselves and the Bashkir representatives.

The Soviet decision to recognize Little Bashkiria in March of 1919 was a strategic decision aimed at countering Kolchak in the Civil War, but one made possible by the Leninist political environment. Principles of territorial autonomy, much less that of ethnic particularism,

¹³³ *Dekreti Sovetskoi vlasti: [sbornik]*, T. IV (10 noiabria 1918 g. — 31 marta 1919 g.), 519.

¹³⁴ Schafer, “Local Politics and the Birth of the Republic of Bashkortostan,” 165.

¹³⁵ *Dekreti Sovetskoi vlasti: [sbornik]*. T. IV (10 noiabria 1918 g. — 31 marta 1919 g.), 121–122.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 122.

were not generally embraced by the Bolsheviks in 1917. In fact, it was almost singularly Lenin who championed policymaking on the basis of nationality. I argue that this commitment to formalized territorial autonomy and limited sponsorship of non-Russian cultural institutions, or “Soviet autonomy,” is a major driver of the Bashkir-Bolshevik collaboration. Under the umbrella of Soviet autonomy, I would include all non-linguistic policies of *korenizatsiia*.¹³⁷ The Bolshevik course of action on nationality policy was indelibly impacted by Lenin’s strong partisan commitments on two aspects of the nationality discourse: opposition to Luxemburgist internationalism and a Bauerist scheme of cultural autonomy.

The formulation of “Soviet autonomy” has its origins in the words of Lenin and Stalin. After switching back to the Soviet side and signing the agreement of February 1919, the Bashkir delegation arrived for negotiations in Moscow. Stalin writes to the Central committee that the Bashkirs will “surely receive Soviet autonomy.” Additionally, he calls for backing the Bashkir toiling masses and “to support them in the task of establishing Soviets in Bashkiria.”¹³⁸

In considering what the national policies of a socialist state ought to be, the Russian Bolsheviks had little help from Marx and Engels. On this subject, not much had been written in *Das Kapital* or other canonical texts of the Communists. Marx and Engels had a firm belief in Western proletarian supremacy, believing that big states with developed economies and industries were more progressive than small nations. Lenin saw the sponsorship of non-Russian nationalisms as a means for righting the state’s historical wrongs. He believed that some inequities in favor of the minority population were necessary to build a cohesive Soviet state.

¹³⁷ Linguistic policies exempted due to their association with the modernization element of my argument.

¹³⁸ GACHO, f. 11, OP. 1, D. 7, l. 6 in *Grazhdanskaia voina v Orenburgzhe. (1917–1919 gg.): dokumenty i materialy*, ed. A.Ya. Borisova (Orenburg: Kn. Izd., 1958), 217.

Commitment to particularism was by no means a forsworn conclusion of the original Bolshevik platform. Strong arguments against this position came from Plekhanov, who stated that as Marxists advance a system to critique nationalism, they have no business picking favorites.¹³⁹

One act of incorporating the Bashkir population into the Soviet system was through the direct disbursement of aid to “victims of the Whites.” In October 1919, the Council of the Peoples’ Commissars issued a resolution that 150 million rubles be allocated for the relief of Bashkir who had suffered at the hands of White forces.¹⁴⁰ An individual was to be appointed as point person for the distribution of the aid. As well as opening up the coffers during a time of budgetary strain, the resolution offers aid from all Soviet civilian and military authorities, including the deployment of specialists.

Modernization was one of the fundamental principles underpinning the Soviet project in Bashkortostan. Modernization in the Soviet sense meant setting the stage for industrial society. This fixation on the modern extended beyond purely economic affairs. On matters of nationality policy, “low cultural development” associated with a particular culture was a commonly cited deficiency.¹⁴¹ Some feared that the level of cultural development among the Bashkir population rendered them especially vulnerable to anti-Bolshevik influence.¹⁴² In the peripheries of the empire, there were roadblocks to economic centralization, including linguistic barriers with the

¹³⁹ Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*, 34.

¹⁴⁰ *Dekreti Sovetskoi vlasti: [sbornik]*. T. VI (1 August — 9 December 1919 g.) (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1973), 152.

¹⁴¹ Raimov, *Obrazovanie Bashkirskoi Avtonomnoi Sovetskoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respubliki*, 24.

¹⁴² P. Mostovenko, “‘O bol’shikh oshibakh v ‘Maloi’ Bashkirii’: [otryvok iz vospominanii]” in *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 5, no. 76 (1928), 106-107.

center. Propaganda efforts were underway to encourage the cooperation of the minorities, but they were limited in their utility. Lenin saw it as an imperative to extend Soviet power over the entirety of the former Russian Empire and was willing to expend important resources to make that happen.

On the issue of sponsoring national language, there was genuine overlap between the Bolsheviks and the Bashkir national leadership. For the Bashkir movement, the Bashkir language was a marker of separate identity from their Tatar neighbors. In the declaration establishing Little Bashkiria, the co-equality of Bashkir with Russian is proclaimed in the second article.¹⁴³ Official recognition of Bashkir was a formal acknowledgement of the fact that they were separate and constituted their own community. It took some time for the national language policy of the national republics to be formalized, as scores of bureaucrats between *Narkompros* and the other educational agencies jockeyed over control.¹⁴⁴

The sponsorship of the Bashkir language was understood by the Bolsheviks to be aimed at raising their level of social and economic development. Already by 1920, the Bolsheviks devised a written alphabet for the Bashkir language. At the time of the 1897 Russian imperial census, 80% of the population of Bashkirs were illiterate.¹⁴⁵ The much-known literacy campaign which the Soviet Union embarked upon is born of the same impulse.

The Bolshevik sponsorship of the Bashkir language was notable in its scope and yielded immense results. Linguistic policies to promote the Bashkir language included the development

¹⁴³ *NGUB*, 1:207.

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Blank, "The Origins of Soviet Language Policy 1917-21," *Russian History* 15, no. 1 (1988): 71–92.

¹⁴⁵ R. F. K., "The Recent Russian Census," *Foreign Affairs* 6, no. 2 (1928), 333-35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20028610>.

of a Cyrillic Bashkir script, the promotion of language education, and the promotion of Bashkir to co-official status. Clearly the extent of the policies sponsoring the Bashkir language and their requisite investments cannot be justified on purely economic grounds. However, it was part of a larger project of modernization which was both economic and political: aimed at raising the “cultural development” of the small-numbered peoples of Russia to incorporate them into a modern, centralized industrial state. Other educational policies the Bolsheviks pursued can be incorporated into this framework. While the Bashkir language was sponsored, it is important to note that simultaneously an overhaul of Russian language instruction was being done by the Bolsheviks.

The arrest of Shamigulov by the Bashvoenrevkon marked the end of the collaboration between Moscow and the Bashkir nationalists. Most of the leadership of the Bashkir movement who had collaborated with the Bolsheviks ended up joining the *basmachis* in Central Asia. It is the result of a breakdown in negotiations between a bourgeois national elite and the Bolsheviks wherein the national leadership overstepped the limits of autonomy. While ultimately collaborating with the Bolsheviks, Bashkir autonomists, led by Validov, would have preferred to create their own national party to represent their interests.¹⁴⁶ After the establishment of the Bashrevkom and its return to Bashkiria, local Soviet administrators felt threatened at the prospect of land expropriations.¹⁴⁷ In this they represented the viewpoint of the new peasant settlers (*novosiolys*). Zenkovsky claims that after Bashrevkom “naively” tried to free itself from the local Communists, Bashkir autonomy was rendered a fiction. A decree in spring 1920 put all military and economic affairs in the hands of Moscow, while educational, health, and other ‘politically

¹⁴⁶ Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, 200.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 202.

harmless' departments of government remained under local control.¹⁴⁸ Forced into a position either submitting to political powerlessness or armed resistance within Bashkiria, Bashrevkom's members opted to leave for Central Asia, where they continued their political activity. Zenkovsky ends this chapter with a statement that in place of Little Bashkiria "was created Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, "socialist in content" but only one quarter Bashkir.¹⁴⁹

1.4 Conclusion

For the Russian Empire, 1917 marked not only the collapse of the Tsar and his government, but the collapse of an unstable, pre-modern system of ethnic relations. For some of the minority peoples of Russia, including the Bashkir nationalists, the grand promises of socialism were understood through a national lens. While the highfalutin words of Lenin and Stalin promised much in terms of independence from the center, national autonomy was something to be offered largely in principle, impossible in substance when in competition with the goal of building socialism.

The experience of the Bashkir national movement between 1917 and 1923 illustrates the transition from idealism to calculated pragmatism in Lenin's thinking on the national question. Its end result showed the hollowness of the Soviet nationality project: a republic only a quarter ethnic Bashkir and nominally committed to the Bashkir cultural tradition.¹⁵⁰ Faced with the

¹⁴⁸ Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, 204-205.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 208.

¹⁵⁰ Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, 208.

dispute between the Tatar and the Bashkir national movements, the Soviet authorities led by Lenin and Stalin opted for a policy of ethnic particularism. Driven by the persistent Bolshevik belief that structural solutions could be found for longstanding social inequities, the center allocated resources to the promotion of limited territorial cultural autonomy, including language sponsorship.

Memoirs from Mostovenko, who worked under both the Bashkir and Soviet authorities, describes general confusion at Bolshevik intentions with regards to Bashkortostan.¹⁵¹

Implementing Party directives was complicated by the political dynamics of the Volga-Ural region. Competing centers of authority (such as the Ufa Industrial Cooperative) as well as inter-ethnic tensions between Bashkir and Slavic workers threatened the stability of the republic.

In many ways, meaningful autonomy was never a real option in the centralized socialist state, as Sovietization implied an almost total regulation of local affairs. Ultimately, the experiment was ended by one of its greatest initial supporters. Stalin's crackdowns on Ukrainian nationalists during the 1930s ended the sponsorship which his own Narkomnats had given to non-Russians during the 1920s. Many scholars point to Stalin's crackdowns and sharp pivot away from previous practice as evidence that the 1920s "affirmative action" policies were window dressing for divide and rule; the slogans of self-determination a form of *maskirovka* to obscure the center's "true centralizing aims."¹⁵²

The decisions made by Bolshevik administrators in dividing the federation into ethnic republics are visible in the present day. State formations such as Idel-Ural and Greater

¹⁵¹ Mostovenko, "'O bol'shikh oshibakh v 'Maloi' Bashkirii': [otryvok iz vospominanii]," 106-107.

¹⁵² Mikhail Geller and Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present*, 1st edition (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 86.

Bashkortostan, which were imagined but not realized, occupy real meaning in the minds of people even today. They are reserves of memory which can be drawn upon. Generally speaking, the system of national autonomous republics has been stable, lasting throughout the Soviet era and into the successor states. This is not always the case. Forefront in the mind of contemporary readers is, of course, the war in Ukraine.

Across the spectrum of modern governments, finding an answer to the “national question” has proven to be a tall order. It was on the frontier between Europe and Asia that the Soviets determined what being part of a “peculiar empire” meant.¹⁵³ In his conclusion, Zenkovsky claims that “the period of relatively free expression of political opinion and of the opportunity to educate the younger generation in the national spirit, which had begun in 1905, quite clearly ended in 1920.”¹⁵⁴ As the case of Soviet Bashkortostan shows, the path to 1920 was not a straightforward one.

¹⁵³ Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Cary, North Carolina: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

¹⁵⁴ Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*, 269.

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