(Re)constructing Muslim Identities from the Soviet Past: Muslim Tatar Women's Stories of Soviet Moral Selves

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Abstract

The revival of Islam in the central Russian republic of Tatarstan has transformed the daily landscape and the very notion of Muslim piety in the region. While a growing number of historically Muslim Tatars of all ages are embracing embodied piety, an older generation's turn to religion is often perceived as late in coming and insincere. Based on ethnographic research and personal narratives of practicing Muslim Tatar women, I explore the ways the older women (re)construct their Muslim identities in the context of Tatars' recent interest in Islam. Specifically, I analyze two older Tatar women's stories about their paths to Islam. My analysis suggests that by tapping into the Soviet past, the women strive to create a continuously moral self that can serve as a solid basis for their present-day Muslim piety.

Keywords

women – identity – narrative – Islam – Tatarstan – Russia

How do Tatar women of an older generation construct their Muslim identities vis-à-vis their Soviet past in the context of religious revival in present-day Tatarstan? This article explores the strategies that two older Tatar women, from different walks of life and with varying degrees of piety, use to position themselves as Muslims in the face of personal and social change. Drawing on the two women's narratives and on ethnographic observations, I argue that

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an older generation of Tatar women (re)constructs their Muslim identities by presenting themselves as the continuously moral selves that their present-day Muslim piety urges them to be. Each of these women begins their narratives about becoming practicing Muslims by reaching back into their Soviet pasts. In this strategy, the (Soviet) past serves as a valuable resource that the women utilize to construct the kind of selves they have always been or wanted to be: highly moral and, thus, always pious.

In this article, I draw from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tatarstan, primarily in Kazan, the capital, for a total of 13 months (June–July 2006, August–September 2008, and August 2009–April 2010). During this fieldwork, I observed that the recent Muslim revival in Tatarstan has created conditions that have enabled an increasing number of historically Muslim Tatars to express physical manifestations of Muslim piety.[1] At the individual level, this is demonstrated through observance of the five daily prayers, modest clothing, dietary restrictions, and the like. However, the majority of the population of both Tatarstan and Russia – largely people who hold secular[2] views, among them non-practicing Tatars – are not convinced that the physical aspect of Muslim piety is an integral part of the spiritual. For this majority, "believing in one's heart" is enough. While they may attribute the religiosity of younger practicing Muslims (generally in their teens and 20s) to a temporary curiosity seen as typical for their young age, they are even more skeptical about the older generation's (late 50s and older) relatively recent interest in observing Muslim piety. Moreover, a younger generation of practicing Muslims themselves may also raise questions about the older generation's character, integrity, personal authenticity, and

1 In my treatment of the Tatar religious revival, I draw on Hirschkind's conceptualization of the Islamic Revival, based on Egypt's example, as "not a given socio-ideological formation but a contingent and shifting constellation of ideas, practices and associational forms." Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 207. I further elaborate on the Tatar religious revival in a section below.

2 Following Asad, I treat the term "secular" as "a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledge, and sensibilities in the modern world." Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, ca: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25. Based on my fieldwork observations, I conclude that those who consider themselves secular (whether ethnic Tatars or not) in present-day Russia do not always share a certain set of behaviors, knowledge, and sensibilities. One way to describe what unites them is their own perception of themselves as secular. I would also suggest that those Tatars who identified themselves as secular explained to me that they did not necessarily deny the existence or importance of God or faith. Rather they did not see relevant the daily application of religious observances and practices to their own lives.

religious commitment. While these younger Tatars may be aware of the Soviet state's atheist policies, they themselves never lived under those conditions nor experienced them first-hand. Therefore, both groups may challenge older people's move to increased expressions of piety by asking why these people had not been interested in Islam for all of their lives, but suddenly are now. Such questions, whether legitimate or not, may explain the older generation's quest for creating continually moral identities – people who have always believed in God even if they did not always live by a set of values that practicing Muslims share and strive to cultivate. One way older Tatar women address such questioning is by creating a continuity of their identities through narrative.

Drawing on both theories of autobiography and psychology, Linde suggests that narrative is a key social resource for creating and maintaining personal identity.3 While the uncritical use of personal narratives, autobiographies, and life stories as both tools of (ethnographic) inquiry and means of representation has been challenged as problematic,4 older Tatar women's ability to produce a personal narrative is one legacy of the Soviet educational, political, and socio-cultural systems5 where facts of life were often made into "a moral fable."6 Therefore, an older Tatar woman's reliance on personal narrative and the Soviet past to create a continually moral self that would measure up to her present-day Muslim piety is not accidental. Her ability to re-construct her biography in accordance with a new "universe of discourse," informed by her Muslim piety, whereby "[s]ome aspects of the past are jettisoned, others are redefined, and some are put together in ways previously inconceivable" is, in fact, typical for religious conversion.7 The notion of conversion here is not lim-

3 Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993).

4 Lila Abu-Lughod, "Preface to the First Edition," in *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008): xxv–xxxii.

5 Yuri Slezkine, "Lives as Tales," in Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine (eds), *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 18–30.

6 Marianne Kamp, "Three Lives of Saodat: Communist, Uzbek, Survivor," *Oral History Review*, 26, no. 2 (2001): 25.

7 David Snow and Richard Machalek, "The Convert as a Social Type," *Sociological Theory*, 1 (1983): 266. In my analysis of Muslim Tatar women stories, I depart from Snow and Machalek's treatment of biographical reconstruction as rhetorical *indicators* of a convert. Instead, I approach biographical reconstruction as rhetorical *strategy* that enables one – in the act of narrative – to position oneself as a continuous and thus moral self. On conversion narrative and self-transformation, see Peter Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

ited to conversion from one religion to another or from an absolute lack of faith to becoming a born-again believer. Neither is it limited to a single occurrence. Rather, it refers to an ongoing transformative process whereby a once dominant universe of belief and discourse is replaced by a secondary one. What the stories analyzed below have in common is older Tatar women's attempts to construct their identities in such a way that their Soviet-era past is legitimized without undermining their present-day Muslim piety. I conclude that while Soviet-era policies and realities may often be denounced locally by religious people as "atheist," in fact, the personal Soviet past serves as a resource that can be tapped into in order to (re)construct Muslim identities and explain what appears to others to be a relatively recent turn to piety.

Before a detailed examination of the ways that two of the older Tatar women I interviewed during my fieldwork construct their Muslim identities through personal narratives, I review the Tatar Muslim revival and note some generational differences among practicing Muslim Tatar women in present- day Tatarstan. While these differences are not absolute, they generate diverse understandings of the role of religion and Muslim piety, contributing to creative identity-building strategies.

The Tatar Muslim Revival and Generational Differences in Present-Day Tatarstan

The Tatar Muslim revival is multidimensional and manifests itself through the institutionalization of Islam,8 individual piety expressed through daily physical practices such as observation of the five daily prayers and modest

8 By institutionalization of Islam, I refer to an increase in or emergence of religious structures that are considered "official" by the state (as opposed to unregistered or underground) and thus "legitimate." For example, while in 1988, three years before the Soviet Union's collapse, there were 18 Muslim communities in Tatarstan, by 1998 their number had increased to over 700. See Rafik Mukhametshin, "Islamic Discourse in the Volga-Ural Region," in Galina Emelianova (ed.), *Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union* (New York: Routledge, 2009),
38. According to Musina, in 2007 there were over 2,000 Muslim communities in Tatarstan (R. Musina, personal communication, June 20, 2013). The number of Muslim religious organizations registered in Tatarstan as of January 1, 2013, was 1,193 and mosques owned and used by Muslims – 1,382, compared with only 18 mosques in 1988 (Musina, June 20, 2013). Also see "Religioznoe vozrozhdenie, etnokonfessional'nye otnosheniia i problem i integrat- sii obshchestva: primer Tatarstana," in L.M. Drobizheva (ed.), *Grazhdanskaia, etnicheskaia i regional'naia identichnost': Vchera, segodnia, zavtra* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaia entsiklopediia), 107–139.

clothing, and through private and public debates about the extent and the type of Islam that Tatars (and Russia's other Muslims) should practice. These debates take place in the context of the Russian government's attempts to control the religious space by promoting an official form of Islam, often referred to as "traditional Islam," and are loosely defined by adherence to the Hanafi school of thought within Islamic law.9 Further, the debates over "tradition- al Islam" often focus on daily physical practices and rituals – such as dress, ritual prayer, and even vocabulary – as opposed to more abstract canonical/ theological underpinnings of various Islamic traditions.10 Tatars' views on what kind of Islam (if at all) should be part of their identity vary by generation, although these generational differences are not absolute. While the older generation tends to support "traditional" Islam, the younger may challenge the very notion of "traditional Islam" and a way of life associated with it as "un-Islamic."11 Furthermore, while men are often seen as "official" representatives of Islam, women not only constitute the majority of Tatarstan's practicing Muslim population,12 but are often informal, yet primary, advocates and teachers of Islam both inside and outside their homes. As such, women play a particularly crucial role in the recent Muslim revival. The opening of this religious space in Russia, the qualitative changes occurring within that space, and debates about the nature of post-Soviet Islam, should therefore not be seen as a return to a previously existing religious space from an absolute absence

9 Tatars, like other Central Asian Muslims, have traditionally practiced the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, the oldest, and typically perceived as the most liberal, of the four main Sunni schools of law (*madhhabs*).

10 A case in point is a 2012 Stavropol government ban on headscarves in school. The controversy surrounding the ban prompted Russian President Vladimir Putin to comment, "In our culture (when I say – 'our,' I mean traditional Islam) hijabs don't exist," calling them a "foreign" tradition (author's translation from Russian). Official website of Russian President Vladimir Putin, December 20, 2012, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17173 (accessed February 4, 2016).

11 See also Liliya Karimova, "Muslim Revival in Tatarstan: Tatar Women's Narratives as Indicators of Competing Islamic Traditions," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emer- gent Religions*, 17, no. 1 (2013): 38–58 and Liliya Karimova, "'Islam as a Pillar': Muslim Tatar Women's Narratives on Tatars' Identity and the Future," *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia*, 53, no. 2 (2014): 8–32.

12 For sociological survey data on gender and Islam in Tatarstan, see R. Musina, "Islam v massovom soznanii tatar," in R. Mukhametshin (ed), *Islam i musul'manskaia kul'tura v Srednem Povolzh'e: Istoria i sovremnnost'* (Kazan: Fen, Akademiia Nauk rt, 2006), 523–535; R. Musina, "Etnicheskaia identichnost' tatarskogo naroda: osobennosti i resursy modern- izatsii (informatsionno-analiticheskaia spravka)," in *Kontseptsiia sokhraneniia etnicheskoi identichnosti tatarskogo naroda* (Kazan: Iaz, 2012), 45–46.

during the Soviet period.13 What is ultimately at stake here is (a way of) being a good Muslim in the context of the post-Soviet secular Russian state.14

The two women's narratives I analyze in this essay are representative of the ways an older generation of Tatar women discursively construct their religious identities in the context of the present-day Muslim revival. Their stories also shed light on the ways the older women's experience of piety is different from that of younger women. While the Tatar interest in Islam is not limited to one particular generation, today's community of practicing Muslim Tatars is dominated in size by two groups of women: a younger generation of women, in their late teens and 20s, and an older generation, in their late 50s and older.

The younger generation was born and/or came of age during the Tatars' post-Soviet ethno-religious revival, so Islam has always been part of their lives in some shape or form. Some of these young women were born into observant families and therefore were directly introduced to Muslim practices early on. Others were socialized into Tatar post-Soviet society, a society with high levels of interest in Islam, and thus were introduced relatively early to some form of Islamic piety through friends, relatives, and the media. For these women, becoming a Muslim was rarely associated with a need to "explain" an absence of religion in their lives before becoming observant Muslims. A change in their beliefs and practices happened early enough in their lives for them to say confidently: "I have been a practicing Muslim all my life." Alternatively, a young woman's interest in Islam could also be perceived as identity-searching, which would be understood as a natural process at an early stage in life.

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13 Dudoignon, for example, suggests the use of the term "religious mutation" to characterize the post-Soviet changes in the Muslim religious space, changes led "by actors with new profiles, new backgrounds, new techniques of communication and new audiences, within a rapidly changing geopolitical, social and institutional framework." Stephane A. Dudoignon, "From Revival to Mutation: The Religious Personnel of Islam in Tajikistan, from de-Stalinization to Independence (1955–91)," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 1 (2011):
59. My preference for the term "revival" stems, partly, from the fact that in the course of my fieldwork many Tatars referred to changes in Tatarstan's religious space as a "return of Islam" (*vozvrashchenie Islama*).

14 In this article, I focus on the moral imperative of being a "good" Muslim in present-day Tatarstan. I discuss political implications of the notion of "traditional Islam," a certain way of being a "good" Muslim it presupposes, and the divide that it has created in the Tatar Muslim community elsewhere. See Liliya Karimova, "Muslim Revival in Tatarstan: Tatar Women's Narratives as Indicators of Competing Islamic Traditions," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions,* 17, no. 1 (2013): 38–58. I draw on Mamdani's exploration of how the two opposites are created in the context of a secular state. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

The older generation's interest in Islam may be interpreted as a somewhat natural (and culturally expected among Tatars) stage of one's life, often associated with retirement. It was and is still common to hear from many Tatars that they will begin observing important daily Muslim practices (such as the daily prayer, fasting, etc.) upon retirement. This is because retirement provides the temporal flexibility that facilitates the observance of daily rituals or for studying at a local *medrese* (Ar./Tat: religious educational institution) or mosque. Retirement also symbolically marks the beginning of the end of life, and, therefore, may be considered an appropriate time for religious observance and spirituality. However, while the older generation's interest in religion may be perceived as somewhat natural, many Tatars, especially the younger generation of practicing Muslims, question older women's delayed commitment to piety and challenge its authenticity.

In the course of my fieldwork, I have witnessed how, while listening to an older woman's piety story, younger women expressed their approval or disapproval of an act or experience the older woman was relaying. This was often done through the Arabic religious terms that younger women use frequently in their daily life as a sign of piety. For example, an act that was deemed pious or moral was often met with *"Masha' Allah"* (Ar: God has willed it)15 or *"Subhan Allah"* (Ar: Praise be to God).16 An act deemed incompatible with Muslim piety was often met with *"Astaghfirullah!"* (Ar: I seek forgiveness from God!).17 I also observed that when it came to the older women's Soviet-era lifestyle and experience, the younger women's response was often silence or insertions of *"Astaghfirullah!"* accompanied by the shaking of their heads in disapproval.

The younger women's assessment of the older women's piety and character also came through in group discussions of certain religious issues, usually at a mosque or *medrese*. In one particular instance, an older Muslim Tatar woman who was a Mukhammadiia *medrese* graduate and occasionally gave informal mosque lessons told me about the way a younger woman had questioned the validity of her religious knowledge by asking for proof (citations) from original religious sources. The older woman was offended by this questioning of her

15 In a daily life, the phrase is used to express praise to Allah and appreciation for an event or person.

16 The phrase is used in the ritual of *tasbih* (Arabic: verbal glorification of God through a sequence of repeated phrases), as well as in daily life to express an admiration for some- thing good.

17 In a daily life, the phrase is used by Muslims to express their wish to abstain from doing something wrong or to ask forgiveness for an improper action or feeling. A Muslim is also encouraged to recite the phrase after every ritual prayer.

religious knowledge and thus questioning of her religious authority. In addition, this exchange violated the traditional Tatar practice of treating an older person as a figure of authority and conveying respect.

Questions regarding authenticity and sincerity of religious commitment are even more applicable to women who constitute a minority among practicing Muslim Tatars. These are women who are generationally "in between," in their 30s, 40s, and early 50s. They came of age or lived a significant part of their adult lives during the Soviet Union's final years and post-Soviet transitions (today's 40-year-old was 15 in 1990), transitions associated with socioeconomic instability and the loss of core values that had been part of their lives. These thirty- something and middle-aged women are considered by many to be too old to be doing soul-searching and too young to join the ranks of long-term retirees. As a result, their turn to piety may also be under close scrutiny. Both "in between" and older women may feel pressure to provide a culturally accept- able explanation for their Muslim piety. One way to (re)construct a Muslim identity that can stand up to the scrutiny of the younger generation and also satisfy the personal need for a coherent self-concept is to tell a life story that positions the self as a person whose internal moral compass has always been present. According to the women's stories that I heard and recorded, this ever- present moral compass led them through Soviet times, and the recent Muslim revival has finally allowed these women to become what they have strived fortheir entire lives: openly moral and pious.

Madina *apa*: Believing like a Muslim, Acting like a Soviet

I often began my fieldwork interviews by asking practicing Tatar women to share with me their paths to Muslim piety.18 Unlike younger women, many middle-aged, but especially older women often responded to my request to tell me how they came to Islam19 with sentiments such as "I did not come to Islam; I was born in Islam." Their narratives began with childhood memories of grandparents' Qur'an and prayer recitations, or their parents' and even their own attempts to secretly observe some Muslim rituals despite the Soviet state's

18 Liliya Karimova, "'Piety Stories': Muslim Tatar Women's Identity Performance, Negotiation, and Transformation through Storytelling," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 43, no. 4 (2014): 327–345.

19 The phrase "to come to Islam" (Ru: *Priiti v Islam*) has become a set expression in the Russian language to refer to someone's turn to Muslim piety, particularly manifested in observations of daily practices, such as the five daily prayers, the headscarf, dietary restrictions, and so on.

official policy of atheism. These older women (re)constructed their Muslim identities by talking about moral values that have always been part of their character, even if they were not able to act upon those values during the Soviet era. This talk enabled the women to create a continuously moral character that was not at odds with their present-day Muslim piety. Madina *apa* (Tat: aunt)20 is a case in point.

I met Madina *apa* in the summer of 2008 when I interviewed her at the Kazan *medrese* where she worked after leaving her job in local government. Madina *apa* was 55 years old at the time of the interview. She had become a practicing Muslim in the early 1990s when Tatarstan's ethnic revival was under- way, and Islam was not a force in its own right, but part of a powerful ethnic movement. At the time, Madina *apa* was in her late 30s, and was part of a small minority, not only because of her observance, but because of her age. In the course of her narrative, she described herself as "neither an *äbi* (Tat: older woman, grandmother), nor a girl then, but a woman of a middle age," implying that she was conscious of the age group she belonged to when she stepped onto the path to Muslim piety.

When I returned to Kazan in the summer of 2009 to continue fieldwork, Madina *apa* was still working at the *medrese*, and we talked again. While the second conversation was more informal – as Madina *apa* and I updated each other on what had happened in our lives over the course of the year – it once again turned to the subject of Madina *apa*'s path to Islam. Shared with me over two different occasions (and recorded by me both times), Madina *apa*'s story represents an example of a life story defined as a "discontinuous unit, consisting of a set of stories that are retold in various forms over a long period of time and that are subject to revision and change as the speaker drops some old meanings and adds new meanings to portions of the life story."21 Throughout her story, Madina *apa* strived to create a sense of continuity and coherence in her life (and narrative) as a way to position herself as moral despite not being an observant Muslim all her life. To (re)construct a Muslim identity, Madina *apa* emphasized the core values that defined her (moral) character even when she did not express them through observance. Madina *apa* told this story in response to a question about her path to piety.22

20 "Apa" translates from Tatar as "aunt." The term is customarily added to the first name as a form of address to an older female to convey respect. Throughout the article, foreign terms are marked by italics, followed by a translation. All names are pseudonyms.

21 Linde, *Life Stories*, 220.

22 Initials indicate an interlocutor's turn. I marked short pauses with elliptical marks and long pauses with double parenthesis. I described emotions in double parenthesis. Elliptical marks in square brackets indicate that a portion of the conversation was omitted.

Madina apa'*s story:*

L: I am interested in your path to Islam. How did you come –M:
– to Islam?
L: You probably lived most of your life during the Soviet Union, right?
M: *((Very long pause))*. Yes, exactly so. *((smiles, then chokes up))*
L: I would be grateful if you could share with me –
M: *((Deep sigh))*. Well, perhaps my whole life *((chokes up))* … I was looking for purity. It is a part of me … *((chokes up))*. But the fact that we live… in such a *((deep sigh))*, not a republic, in such a … country, where one has to raise children not in an environment one would like to. That is why I had been doing a lot of searching *((chokes up))*, I did not know *((long pause))*. Indeed, in the Soviet time we lived – there was alcohol- ism, and all of that. This did not leave my family untouched. The fact that the family that had been created … was not the family it should have been, right *ime* [Tat: right]? *((chokes up))*. True Tatars, they are a very pure people, right? *((Deep sigh))*. We were already russified23 at that time. And so, we ate what we were not supposed to and led not the kind of lifestyle we should have led. But when the family was cre- ated and the children were born, I realized that that was not the way to live. The children went to school *((long pause))* without knowing their own [Tatar] language. What was happening in my heart! I – *((chokes up))* I don't know what was happening. I –… some force was leading me exactly where it needed to. At that time, gymnasiums24 were opening, Tatar gymnasiums ((sigh))… And one woman told me: "If you are a Tatar, and if you don't understand what is happening in your heart, try sending your child to the Tatar gymnasium." This is where my life, such as it is now, began *((chokes up))*. Everything turned upside down. … In the first place, I came to religion because I had to help my child to learn the let- ters of the Arabic language. Since I had sent her to the gymnasium, there was the Arabic language as a subject. I did not know [the language], andI could not help my child.

23 Madina *apa* uses the term *obrusevshie*, which most often carries a negative connotation of being assimilated by a dominant (Russian) culture.

24 One of the post-Soviet secondary education trends was to modify formerly Soviet schools and model new schools after gymnasiums that existed in Russia before the Revolution and were known for a more holistic approach to education. Thus the term "gymnasium" (or "gymnasia") was applied to many new schools opening in the post-perestroika period, whether they actually implemented the model or not.

[. . .]

> I had to learn the [Arabic] letters, so I had to find where … I could learn them. I went to a mosque, I … learned to write and read [in Arabic]. I studied at the mosque for a year, and, naturally I could help my daughter and check her homework. So this is the way I came [to Islam], gradually, step by step, step by step *((chokes up))*.

[. . .]

L: How did it change your life?
M: Oh, it turned it upside down 180 degrees.

[. . .]

> Our family always celebrated holidays, you know this, right? And, there always was … alcohol, right? Even when I was not in Islam, I was never a supporter [of alcohol]. I didn't want it; I didn't like it. But since the entire society lived this way, I had to do the same thing, so that people wouldn't say that you are a miser, you don't provide [alcohol], you are this and that, right? *((chokes up))*. When I had come to Islam, I realized that alcohol is not allowed, pork is not allowed. Not just prohibited, but fundamentally: why, for what [reasons], what good [this prohibition] brings. When you go with knowledge *((sighs))*, one really wants to … decline all this. And so, gradually, step by step, we were able to achieve all this.

Madina *apa* began her story by acknowledging, in response to my question, that she had lived most of her life during the Soviet era. She continued her narrative not with matter-of-fact biographical information, but by describing a set of values – purity – that she was searching for, had believed in her "whole life," and that were part of her. By doing so, Madina *apa* at the very outset positioned herself as a certain type of character she was and had always strived to be: pure, moral. This is despite the external conditions that she had lived under and her children were born into. At the outset, Madina *apa* described Soviet social norms as incompatible with the personal values and beliefs she had always held. The fact that while describing the country as an inappropriate environment for raising children Madina *apa* switched to the collective "we" indicated that she was speaking not only on behalf of herself, but, possibly, on behalf of the listener, other Muslim Tatar women, or other mothers of her generation. Doing so allowed Madina *apa* to point out that the kind of life she

used to live was a shared Soviet experience, a consequence of living in a certain place at a certain time, and thus something out of her control and not indica- tive of who she truly was.

While Madina *apa* acknowledged social problems such as alcoholism25 that "did not leave [her] family untouched," her use of a passive voice while describing her family's lifestyle at the time allowed Madina *apa* to distance herself from the social norms she had never endorsed in the first place, even if they had affected her family. By admitting that she had been doing a lot of soul searching because she did not know how to fix her family's problems, which were part of the larger Soviet society, Madina *apa* implied that she could not be held responsible for not acting on her true beliefs. Ultimately, Madina *apa* felt compelled to tap into her Soviet past to explain her path to piety and con- struct her Muslim identity, but doing so required distancing her core values from those embraced by most Soviet citizens (and her own family at the time). In his book *Islam after Communism*,26 Adeeb Khalid examines multiple ways that the official Soviet policy of atheism transformed Muslim beliefs, practices, and ultimately, religious identities in former Soviet Central Asia so much so that celebrating a Muslim holiday with a shot of vodka was a socially and morally accepted norm. While the same observation is applicable to other Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union, such as Tatarstan, it may not hold water with the younger generation of Muslim Tatars who may find the older generation's turn to Muslim piety as "too little, too late." I suggest that another strategy Madina *apa* used to address any doubts about and to construct a truly Muslim identity out of – or despite – her Soviet past was by commenting on the integrity of Tatars – and thus her own integrity. While ethnocentric in nature, such an argument may be appealing because it suggests that, as some- thing that runs in the blood, moral purity is always there, even if temporarily undermined by external conditions of the Soviet regime.

The way Madina *apa* presented her argument was also important: "Tatars, they are a very pure people, right *(ime)*?" By phrasing the sentiment as an alternative question with the ending clause in Tatar (*ime*) while the rest of her talk was in Russian, Madina *apa* solicited another Tatar's (the researcher's) reassurance of Tatars', and thus her own, purity. As Madina *apa* continued

25 On the relationship between alcohol consumption and masculinity among men in Russia, see, for example, Sarah Ashwin, "The Post-Soviet Gender Order: Analysis and Implications," in Sarah Ashwin (ed.), *Adapting to Russia's New Labour Market: Gender and Employment Behaviour* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32–56.

26 Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University Press of California, 2007).

her story, she suggested a possible reason for why Tatars, such as her family, while being a very "pure" people, were not immune to the social problems of the Soviet time: they had been "russified." While the Russian version of the word "russified" often refers to cultural assimilation, language use in particular (for example, Madina *apa*'s children did not know Tatar when they went to school),27 Madina *apa* implied religious assimilation as well. By saying that alcohol had affected her family28 and that they had eaten what they were not supposed to, Madina *apa* implied not only her family's, but also the majority of other Tatars' or even Soviet citizens', ignorance and/or non-observance of the Muslim dietary requirements that prohibit the use of alcohol and encourage the consumption of only halal food.29

Furthermore, the fact that Madina *apa* referred to religious assimilation as "russification" pointed out that, unlike a younger generation of Muslim Tatars who were more likely to separate religious and ethnic elements of identity, people of Madina *apa*'s age and older tended to conflate the religious and the ethnic aspects of identity.30 This is further evidenced in Madina *apa*'s

27 For "russification" in the context of the language use, see Suzanne Wertheim, "Gender, Nationalism, and the Attempted Reconfiguration of Sociolinguistic Norms," *Gender and Language*, 6, no. 2 (2012): 265.

28 As my relationship with Madina *apa* developed, she disclosed to me that her husband's love for alcohol had turned into an addiction that affected the whole family. After she be- came an observant Muslim, she was able to make her husband give up alcohol entirely – something Madina *apa* hinted at at end of the narrative cited here.

29 *Halal*, or that which is allowed, implies not only abstinence from alcohol and pork, as many non-practicing Tatars may think. Cattle and poultry must be slaughtered in accordance with a certain ritual for the meat to be considered *halal*, or appropriate for consumption in accordance with the Muslim normative law. Some women I interviewed shared that they had stopped eating out because of difficulty finding dining establishments that would meet their religious dietary requirements. While the number of Muslim-oriented restaurants has been growing in Kazan, they are still few and far between outside Tatarstan's capital. Furthermore, some women reported that they had reduced their socialization with friends who did not take into consideration such dietary requirements because going out with them meant not only having to attend dining establishments that carried alcohol and pork, but sometimes sitting at a table where those products were served. Practicing Muslim Tatar women who had children in school or kindergarten also reported difficulties associated with ensuring that their children were served "proper" food.

30 With respect to language use as a marker of not only ethnic, but also religious identity, Helen Faller observes that "the act of speaking Tatar is thought to affect one's internal dis- position in a way that brings the speaker closer to Islam." Helen Faller, *Nation, Language, Islam: Tatarstan's Sovereignty Movement* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2011), 246.

connection of an "inappropriate" lifestyle with her children's lack of Tatar language skills, which created a deep moral crisis within her. For Madina *apa*, as well as for her friend who suggested that Madina *apa* send her children to the Tatar school, to be a moral person meant to be a proper, "pure" Tatar, and thus not to be "russified." Ultimately, Madina *apa*'s use of the collective pronoun "we" in her discourse of russification could refer not just to her own family, but an entire community of Tatars who could not live up to their internal purity, due to russification of the Soviet era.

What's particularly interesting about Madina *apa*'s narrative is that it follows the "before and after" pattern typical of conversion narratives. In these narratives, the narrator compares her life (and thus herself) before the conversion ("me then") and after ("me now").31 Such an ability to compare one's past and present is an example of reflexivity, defined as the narrator's ("me now") ability to separate herself from and evaluate the protagonist ("me then").32 While becoming a pious Muslim changed Madina *apa* and her family's lives, she does not distance her present Muslim self from her former Soviet self entirely, but instead shows how she strived to create a continuity of values she always held important. To do otherwise would be to not only undermine her personal integrity, but also the integrity of an entire people she represented and spoke on behalf of, the historically Muslim Tatars. Therefore, Madina *apa*'s ability to speak about the changes in her life is an act of reflexivity indicative of a moral narrator, and thus moral character:

> reflexivity created by the act of narration means the speaker is always moral, even if the protagonist of the narrative is not. Thus, if a person tells a narrative that indicates that he or she acted badly, the fact the narrator knows and indicates that the action was not right reveals understanding of and allegiance to the norms shared by the speaker and addressees, even if the protagonist did not know them, or was not able to live up to them at the time. In response to such narratives, a negative judgment can be brought against the protagonist, but not against the speaker.33

Madina *apa*'s ability to reflect on the Soviet past made it possible for her to present herself as a moral and thus truly Muslim woman despite the pressures and

31 Tuija Hovi, "Religious Conviction Shaped and Maintained by Narration," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 26, no. 1 (2004): 35–50; Ge Speelman "Continuity and Discontinuity in Conversion Stories," *Exchange*, 35, no. 3 (2006): 304–335.

32 Linde, *Life Stories*, 122–123.

33 Ibid., 123–124.

limitations of that time. The emotional candor with which she shared her story contributed to its rhetorical power. While it was not uncommon for women's eyes to water occasionally as they shared their stories with me, Madina *apa* was fighting back tears throughout her entire narrative. Abu-Lughod and Lutz suggest that "the reality of emotion is social, cultural, political, and historical" and advocate for a shift in emphasis from emotions as located within the body to "discourses on emotions and emotional discourses [that] are commentaries of the practices essential to social relations."34 Following that stance, I locate Madina *apa*'s emotions in the sociocultural context and suggest that Madina *apa* was fighting back tears as a culturally appropriate way for a Muslim Tatar woman to handle emotional situations: with modesty, patience, and calm.35 The emotional force behind Madina *apa*'s story, illustrated in repeated attempts to fight back tears, spoke, first and foremost, to the sincerity of her narrative and contributed to the (re)construction of a continually moral character – an underlying basis for her present-day Muslim piety.

Alfia *apa:* Believing like a Soviet, Acting like a Muslim

Similar to Madina *apa*, several older Muslim Tatar women, when conversing with me, traced the origin of their current Muslim piety to their Soviet past. In line with the biographical reconstruction that is typical of conversion narratives, the women often attributed pious meanings to certain experiences that had occurred long before the women had become observant. Not all women, however, talked about their long-held values as a basis for their continuously moral character and thus Muslim identity, even if they failed to act upon those values at the time. Some, like Alfia *apa*, explicitly denied any presence of faith in the past, but told stories in which they time and again acted piously without realizing it.36 In such instances, it was the women's actual behavior, as reported

34 Lila Abu-Lughod and Cagherine A. Lutz, "Introduction: Emotion, Discourse, and the Politics of Everyday Life," in Catherine A. Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod (eds), *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 18–19.

35 Faller makes a similar observation about funerals. Tatar women of childbearing age are discouraged from attending funerals, and those women who attend are supposed to refrain from crying so as not to make it more difficult on everyone else. Faller, *Nation, Language*, 153. This practice differs, for example, from the Russian custom of loud weeping (Ru: *prichitanie*) during a funeral when close female relatives of the deceased weep and verbally express their grief and sorrow.

36 Linde suggests that the narrator's ability to go back far in the past and to tell multiple non-contradictory stories contributes to the richness of account, which, in turn, creates a

in their stories, that served a basis for their moral character and Muslim piety,even though they were far from religion at the time.

I met Alfia *apa* one Saturday morning during an informal religious lesson at the Nurulla mosque in Kazan. Unlike Madina *apa*, who gave up a full-time low-level government job to raise her children, teach part time, and eventually do administrative work at the *medrese*, Alfia *apa* was a former government employee who had dedicated her life to a successful professional career (albeit at the expense of her family and health, which she commented upon with regret during our conversation). Since her teaching job and the job at the *medrese* paid very little, Madina *apa* relied on her husband to provide a middle-class standard of living for them. In contrast, Alfia *apa* admitted to enjoying the benefits of having worked at a high-level government position, such as connections (important social capital in Russia) and a comfortable pension that allowed her to maintain an upper-middle class life style upon retirement. Unlike Madina *apa*, who always carefully covered her body and head, Alfia *apa* did not wear the headscarf outside the mosque and was not as committed to performing the five daily prayers at the set times as Madina *apa* was. These differences in observing the Muslim rituals would be enough for the general public and practicing Muslim Tatars alike to locate Madina *apa* and Alfia *apa* at different points on the Muslim piety continuum. Finally, while Madina *apa*'s religious education began at the *Märjani* mosque, where she attended informal lessons to learn Arabic and to which she attributed her first step onto the road to piety, she eventually graduated from the Mukhammadiia *medrese*. Her level of religious education, thus, was higher than that of Alfia *apa*'s, who attended a three-year long informal class at the Nurulla mosque in order to learn how to perform the five daily prayers correctly and how to read the Qur'an on her own. While Madina *apa* and Alfia *apa* came from different socio-economic backgrounds and, generally, had different life experiences, their relatively late interest in observing Islam – even though not uncommon for middle-aged and older Tatar women – could serve as a reason for a particularly careful evaluation of their commitment to Muslim piety, the extent and quality of their religious knowledge, or, ultimately, the integrity of their character. Whereas an evaluation of character is always part of an identity negotiation process, the younger generation of practicing Muslim women often view the middle-aged and older generations' turn to piety with careful scrutiny. The trajectories of younger women's lives and their paths to piety are quite different from those of the women of Soviet generation who were non-practicing for most of their lives.

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positive character because it shows that choices made by the narrator were not random,even if presented as such, but well thought through. Linde, *Life Stories*, 140.

I approached Alfia *apa* at the mosque while she and other students were waiting for the arrival of an *abïstay*, an informal female religious teacher, to start the lesson. Alfia *apa* readily agreed to share her story with me and proceeded to begin her narrative then and there, in the presence of her adult daughter (in her mid-30s) and a close friend (in her early 40s), both of whom observed a degree of religiosity similar to that of Alfia *apa*. Alfia *apa* paused her narrative when the teacher arrived, with a suggestion to continue our conversation at a restaurant when the lesson was over, explaining that the three of them enjoyed an occasional lunch at the restaurant after the mosque lesson. I present Alfia *apa*'s narrative in three separate accounts, divided at narrative points where Alfia *apa* finished one account of her path to Muslim piety and began another.

The first story is Alfia *apa*'s response to my question about how she cameto Islam:

A: So, how did I come to Islam? My mom died early; she was 51, and I was 29. I grew up in an atheistic family. My mom was a teacher, and dad was the head of a collective farm, meaning faith was out of the question there. You know what kind of times those were, right? So. She was born in 1927. My father also worked for the police. So, there was never any mentioning of God in the family. And my mom passes away at 51. She had an aggres- sive cancer then. When she was dying – It so happened there were three of us, sisters, and I had to take care of her. And she is telling me: "Go find a *babushka* [Ru: old lady],37 *Kïzïm* [Tat: my daughter], I don't have long to live. It's necessary to recite *Yasin.*"38 I didn't even understand what it was, *Yasin*. How so? She had never talked about it.

L: Did she recite *namaz* [Tat: ritual prayer]?

A: She herself did not recite *namaz*. She did not know anything except *Bismillyahi-rahmanir-rahim.*39 I went looking for a *babushka*, brought her,

37 Whereas Alfia *apa* uses the Russian word *babushka*, which can be translated as "an old lady" or "grandmother," she does not mean "grandmother," an "old lady," and certainly, not a Russian old lady. She refers to a Tatar old lady, most likely an *abïstay*, a Tatar female religious authority who, during the Soviet period, was one of the very few informal sources of Muslim religious knowledge.

38 "Yasin" is a Tatar pronunciation of the title of the 36th *surah* (Ar: chapter) of the Qur'an. In accordance with *Sunnah* (Ar: normative conduct based on the Prophet Muhammad's example), the *surah* is recited when a Muslim is nearing death.

39 Alfia *apa* referred to the Arabic phrase that usually translates as "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful." The phrase opens every Qur'anic *surah*, except the ninth, and is recited during the daily prayer. Tatar Muslims with only the most passing connection to Islam would be familiar with this phrase. In the context of everyday life, the phrase

and *Yasin* was recited for her. She was already very ill at the time. When she was dying she said: "*Kïzïm* [Tat: my daughter], they say there we wait for your prayers only. I was *nadan* [Tat: ignorant]," meaning "uneducated," "you can not recite, and I could not teach you. Go to a mosque from time to time and give alms in my name." So, she passed with this *vasïiat* [Tat: covenant]. And, of course, I would go by a mosque and give alms, but not very often. And so there were the following two occurrences in my life. So, once I am on my way to work, and an old man cannot get on the bus. The crowd pushes him away, he almost falls down, everyone tries to get on this bus; everyone is late for work. I approached him – I had extra time – and say: "*Babay* [Tat: old man, grandfather], why are you traveling so early? You will get trampled over." And he says: "*Min, kïzïm* [Tat: I, my daughter],40 work at a mosque."

L: This was in Kazan?

A: This was in Kazan. We lived in the X district then. And so, I tell him: "Just a minute, I will help you." So, when a bus came, I sort of pushed him onto the bus and asked for a seat for him, I myself traveled standing up. Then the space began freeing up on the bus, and I sat down [next to him]. I tell him: "*Babay* [Tat: old man],41 since you work at a mosque, may I give you *khäer* [Tat: alms]? There hasn't been a year yet since my mom died." And I wrote down for him.42 He was a very religious old man, his eyes were so kind. I did it and forgot about it. And all of a sudden, I have a dream that night. My mom greets me home after work, all dressed up, a lot of food on the table, she says: "*Kïzïm* [Tat: my daughter], sit down, I made [it] for you." I re-memberedmilletporridge, yellow, *tarïiarmasï* [Tat: millet porridge], right?

A: So, I sat down and say: "Mom, why did you do this? You were so sick recently, I would've cooked myself." And she goes: "*Iuk, iuk, iuk* [Tat: no, no, no], *kïzïm* [Tat: my daughter]!" And she pours oil [into the porridge], so happy, so happy. And so, naturally, when I woke up, I understood why, right? Ok, so that's one dream.

Unlike many practicing Muslim Tatar women of her age, Alfia *apa* did not begin her narrative by stating that she had been born in Islam or that she believed

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is pronounced by Muslims before doing something in order to receive a blessing fromGod, and thus succeed at whatever he or she is doing.

40 Also, "my girl."

41 Also "grandfather."

42 Alfia *apa* meant she wrote down her mother's name, so that the old man could pray forher mother.

in her heart all her life. Quite the opposite, Alfia *apa* began her narrative by admitting that she grew up in an "atheistic family" where faith was not present. She mentioned her parents' professional background as a possible reason of why "there was never any mentioning of God in the family." At the time of Alfia *apa*'s parents' generation (1940s–1950s), one could secure employment and/or build a successful professional career, such as rising to the ranks of the head of a collective farm, only by being an active member of the Communist Party and thus by embracing (at least on the outside) the Soviet state's official policy of atheism.

While other women of Alfia *apa*'s age often told stories about witnessing their parents' or grandparents' secret observances of Muslim rituals – in an attempt to illustrate that faith was always part of their family – Alfia *apa* did not provide such accounts. She further illustrated the relative absence of religious observances/discussions in her family by stating that her mother did not recite *namaz* [Tat: ritual prayer] and that "She did not know anything except *Bismillyahi-rahmanir-rahim*," a Qur'anic phrase pronounced by Muslims before doing something. According to Alfia *apa*, her own first personal experience with Islam took place at age 29 when her mother was dying of cancer and asked Alfia *apa* to find someone to recite "Yasin," a Qur'anic *surah* (chapter) recited by Muslims at someone's deathbed to ease the process of passing. While Alfia *apa* admitted that she did not understand what "Yasin" was, since her mother had never talked about it before, the fact that her mother asked for it indicated some presence of faith in the family, or their understanding of some religious observances related to lifecycle rituals. It is further evidenced by the fact that Alfia *apa*'s mother, while admitting that she was illiterate in the matters of religion because she could not "recite," asked her daughter to give alms after her death, so that prayers were said in her name.

The narrative of Alfia *apa*'s mother's death signifies Alfia *apa*'s initial interest in religion. While Alfia *apa* did not mark the opening narrative as a story, she began her conversation with it to provide an important piece of informa- tion without which the other two stories would not have had the same rhe- torical and identity-building effect. Furthermore, while Alfia *apa* (who was 60 years old at the time of the interview) did not go all the way back to her child- hood, her account of an event that took place 30 years ago provided temporal depth to her story. The fact that at 29 Alfia *apa* was the sole caretaker for her dying mother and was the one to carry out her mother's religious wish characterized her as a caring daughter who respected her parents and their religious traditions. In other words, it characterized her as moral.

Alfia *apa* continued her story by narrating three more accounts that con- tributed to her stepping onto the road to piety, all accounts from a relatively

distant, Soviet past. In all these narratives, the protagonist (Alfia *apa* then) once again came across as a highly moral human being, even though the narrator (Alfia *apa* now) never identified herself as such or talked about her values. She marked the accounts by saying: "there were the following two occurrences in my life."[43] The first one was Alfia *apa*'s helping a *babay* (Tat: old man) onto a bus and a dream that followed. The significance of this account was in both its meaning and form. Alfia *apa* interpreted the dream following her kind gesture toward the old Tatar man (who was also a religious authority at the time) as an important sign related to her mother's dying wish to make prayers in her name, which he did. This was evident from Alfia *apa*'s statement "And so, naturally, when I woke up, I understood why, right?" where Alfia *apa* referred to the reason she saw the dream without actually stating it. The form in which Alfia *apa* presented the story – with detailed descriptions and dialogue – also con- tributed to the richness of the account. Finally, the significance of this account was also in the fact that its protagonist, Alfia *apa*, then was a highly moral per- son. She was moral not only because she helped the old man, but because she "did it and forgot about it." She probably would not have remembered it had it not been for the dream, which points to the generosity, sincerity, and morality of the protagonist's character. Not distancing herself from the protagonist allowed the narrator to make a connection with the protagonist: Alfia *apa* wasand is a moral person.

After Alfia *apa* finished narrating the first account (marked by her saying "Ok, so that's one dream"), she immediately moved on to describing the next non-contradictory account that contributed to her piety, her story's coherence, and continuity of her (moral) character:

A: Then there was another occurrence in my life, which also took place the year my mom died. I go home from work. Well, back then, if you lived here, you would know…

L: Yes, I remember the Soviet times.

A: There was nothing [in the stores]. So, they used to sell beef ribs. They would sell them in a cafeteria. [We] would stand in line. Do you remember there were these meshed grocery bags? So, I was carrying [the ribs] home in a plastic bag inside the meshed bag. There was an old Russian woman who lived in our apartment building. I no longer remember her name. I was only 29. And so she is sitting – it turned out she was not receiving a pension – there were old ladies then who were not entitled to a social pension. So, she says: "Oh, where did you buy these ribs? They

43 In her actual narrative, Alfia *apa* tells three stories, not two.

> would make a nice soup!" Those ribs were cheap then, but impossible to buy. I thought, oh gosh, we even buy meat from the market. But for her [the ribs were] important, so I gave her the whole bag. We used to live on the fifth floor, and she lived on the ground floor. So she says: "Your mom died recently. May she rest in peace." And while I was walking up the stairs, I heard her pray. That night I see a dream. My mom, she is so happy, and she says: "*Kïzïm* [Tat: my daughter], you sent me a jacket. It's black, but still it's so nice, so warm!" What does it mean? It means that they know everything about our deeds here.44 I started thinking about it.

Alfia *apa* marked the second story as related to the first one by putting it in the same time frame and context – the Soviet era. The second account mirrors the first one in many aspects even though they were both treated as "occurrences": events that could not have been purposefully planned by her. Both events (a) happened within the first year of Alfia *apa*'s mother's death; (b) took place when Alfia *apa* went to work (the first account) or from work (the second account); (c) involved Alfia *apa*'s impromptu kind gestures toward an older person who happened to be religiously observant and poorer than Alfia *apa*'s family; (d) followed by dreams of her happy mother; (e) featured rich detail and dialogue; (f) prompted Alfia *apa* to think about their significance and ascribe religious meaning to them; and (g) portrayed Alfia *apa* as a caring individual, and thus highly moral, without much effort on the part of the protagonist to be one.

The significance of these stories for Alfia *apa*'s (re)constructing her Muslim identity is further evident in Alfia *apa*'s comment on them when we resumed our conversation at a restaurant after it was interrupted by the teacher's arrival and the mosque lesson. At the restaurant, Alfia *apa* picked up her narrative with the following summary: "So, there were these signs. I began to believe. Of course, I was far from the faith. But I began to believe that people die and come alive because my mom appeared in my dreams so vividly and with such signs." Alfia *apa*'s statement may seem contradictory because in one breath she says both that she began to believe and that she was far from the faith. However, this contradiction is clarified at the end of yet another story that, according to Alfia *apa*, contributed to her path to piety: her narrative about receiving a state-subsidized apartment she had been waiting for. In the absence of a private housing market during the Soviet period, a worker was entitled to a state- subsidized apartment (or to a bigger apartment if the family had outgrown

44 By "here" Alfia *apa* means life on earth (as opposed to afterlife).

an existing one, which was Alfia *apa*'s case).45 However, one had to wait for years or even decades and was ultimately at the mercy of those in charge, as is evident from Alfia *apa*'s account below:

A: We used to live in a one-bedroom apartment, I was in line for [a bigger] apartment.46

L: When was all that?

A: It was in the 1980s. I was waiting for an apartment. Now they want to give it upon Moscow's approval, now they don't. It just wouldn't work out. So, I stopped by a mosque – I was drawn there after those dreams. There were the signs.

[…]

A: So, I had to solve the housing question. And I was solving it myself. We had a one-bedroom apartment. […] I went to the Märjani mosque to see an *abïstay* [Tat: female religious authority]. [She was] very pleasant, educated. And I tell her that there was no luck in my getting an apartment. She says: "Do you believe in the Almighty? Do you recite *namaz* [Tat: ritual prayer]?" "No." "You need to carry out the *Korban* [Tat: animal sacrifice] ritual47 in order to get the apartment." So, I ordered the *Korban* ceremony, and it was carried out. It happened to be the Festival of the Sacrifice, the end of August. She helped me; I bought it; she gave me addresses, and I gave away all the meat from the sacrifice. It was right before I received an apartment. When I came to those addresses, I was so surprised to see women with no legs, others just after surgery, some with many many kids, and things like that. And so I gave away the meat, and in December I got the apartment. It was at the end of August, so if you count, I got the apartment after four months.

45 A rare exception was so called cooperative apartments (*kooperativnye kvartiry*) that one could buy for a full-market price. But even those apartments were in great demand and rarely available.

46 In the Soviet Union, the government distributed apartments free of charge to a certain segment of the population. There were huge waiting lists, and one could be on a waiting list for a few of years or even several decades, depending on a combination of factors.

47 Alfia *apa* is talking about the sacrifice of a livestock animal during the Muslim holiday known among Tatars as *Korban Bayram* (Eid-ul-Adha in Arabic), which honors Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son as an act of worship and obedience to God. Giving away the sacrificial meat as charity is considered *Sunnah* (Ar: normative conduct based on the Prophet Muhammad's example).

L: What year was that?

A: It was 1989. My mom passed away in 1979, and I got the apartment in 10 years. It wasn't right away. It was 10 years without faith. I believed in God: *Bismillyahi-rahmanir-rahim. Allahu Akbar*.48 And when I got the apartment, I really started believing in God. I was thinking a lot, and realized that I must learn to recite *namaz* [Tat: ritual prayer].

On the surface, Alfia *apa*'s decision to go to the mosque – a spiritual place – in order to solve a housing problem – a worldly issue – may seem contradictory and raise questions about the integrity of her character. However, if interpreted within the socio-historical context at hand, it indicates quite the opposite. During the Soviet era, the only way one could expedite the process of getting free housing was through powerful connections or by bribing the appropriate official in charge. The fact that Alfia *apa* did not do either points, on the one hand, to her powerlessness in front of the system, but, on the other hand, to her desire to explore an alternative solution, a spiritual one. Because the Soviet state's policy of atheism resulted in people's losing religious knowledge, it was common for Tatars to turn to elders with their spiritual and worldly needs. As the only ones who preserved the Muslim religious tradition, often in a vernacular form,49 old- er Tatars who possessed some religious knowledge often acted as figures of religious authority and mediators between people and God. While in the context of the post-Soviet religious revival practicing Muslim Tatars stress the importance a personal relationship with God and frown on many secular Tatars' use of "mediators," it is still not uncommon to witness non-practicing Tatars stopping by a mosque and asking a *mullah* (Tat/Ar: Muslim clergy)50 to recite a prayer in some- one's name or pray for a positive outcome in a private matter. Therefore, Alfia *apa*'s decision to go to a mosque to seek help with the housing problem was an "appropriate" thing to do if one believed in a spiritual way of solving a problem.

In the narrative above, Alfia *apa* presented an account that was not directly related to the other two stories. Yet, it was a formative experience on Alfia *apa*'s

48 Arabic phrases translated as "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful" and "God is the Greatest," respectively, and used by Muslims during formal prayers and in daily interactions as a form of "informal" worship. Many non-practicing Tatars may be familiar with these phrases and even use them as markers of their Muslim identity without necessarily knowing their meaning in its entirety, as Alfia apa's story illustrates.

49 Mukhametshin suggests that the Russian colonial rule resulted in the merger of ethnic (Tatar) traditions and religious (Muslim) practices, further intensified by the Soviet state's policy of atheism, which led to vernacularization of local Muslim practice and knowledge. Mukhametshin, "Islamic Discourse in the Volga-Ural Region."

50 Today, the term is mostly used to refer to an older generation of Muslim clergy. The young- er generation prefer to be referred to as "*khäzrät*" (Tat/Ar: Muslim clergy).

road to piety, and portrayed her as a highly moral character whose present-day Muslim piety and identity would be hard to question. While throughout her narrative Alfia *apa* admitted the absence of religion in her family or early in her life, even a younger practicing Muslim would be unlikely to conclude that Alfia *apa* was an atheist and had only recently become interested in Islam. Rather, a person listening to Alfia *apa*'s narrative is likely to conclude that the way she practiced Muslim piety in the Soviet period was typical for the majority of Tatars at the time. The fact that toward the end of her narrative, Alfia *apa* linked the emergence of strong faith with the decision to recite *namaz* points to the evolution, and thus continuity, of her Muslim piety, not to a jump from an absolute absence of faith to believing.

Conclusion

The recent Muslim revival in Tatarstan is changing not only the social, political, and cultural landscape in the region, but also the ways Tatars perceive Islam and their religious identities. Today, there is a whole generation of younger Tatars who were raised as practicing Muslims and for whom bodily manifestations of Muslim piety are as important as "believing in one's heart." These younger Tatars, along with non-practicing Tatars of all ages, may question the turn to embodied Muslim piety and Muslim identities of older generations as sudden, inconsistent, and insincere. It is for this reason, I believe, that practicing older Tatar women go to great lengths to (re)construct their Muslim identities in ways that position them as continuously moral and thus pious. In the stories these women tell about their paths to Islam, the Soviet past serves as a valuable recourse for creating a continuity of both identity and belief.

Throughout my fieldwork, only one older practicing Muslim Tatar woman talked about her turn to Muslim piety as a complete rupture from her Soviet past and self. Even though generationally she identified herself as "a person of the Soviet government,"[51] she vehemently denounced Soviet policies – including the official state policy of atheism – that resulted, according to her, in social and personal problems that many families were still struggling with years after the Soviet Union's collapse. While throughout her narrative she also tapped into the Soviet past, it was in order to distance herself from it entirely. This woman stood out in her mosque study group of other older Tatar women partly because, unlike the rest of them, she was unforgivingly critical of the

51 The exact phrase was "Ya chelovek sovetskoi vlasti."

Soviet past and her own inability to live morally in it.52 Such a sudden rupture with one's past and adamant criticism of the protagonist (her at the time) was an exception among her generation of practicing Tatar women, and could be perceived as "inappropriate" for her age group.53

While Alfia *apa's* path to piety, reflected in the trajectory of her narrative, differed from that of Madina *apa's*, what united these women's stories was the presence of coherence and continuity in their narratives as a reflection of the kind of people they have always been and the values they have always held: coherent, and thus moral. To build a convincing case for her continuous piety and Muslim identity, Madina *apa* strove to portray herself as a highly moral individual by talking about internal moral values, even if she did not act on those values at the time. Even when a non-practicing Muslim, Madina *apa*'s belief in Tatar purity and her continuous attempts to find it in a Soviet, and later post-Soviet, society plagued by problems characterized her as moral. Unlike Madina *apa*, Alfia *apa* did the right thing without giving much thought to it. Alfia *apa*'s ability to intuitively know right from wrong and act upon what she thought was the right thing to do at the time contributed to the creation of a highly moral character whose recent turn to piety could be interpreted by onlookers as non-contradictory, or perhaps even natural. These stories highlighted the older women's ability to draw on their Soviet past to position themselves as continuously moral, which served as a basis for their present- day Muslim piety and ultimately enabled them to (re)construct their Muslim identities in a convincing and creative way.

52 While attending mosque lessons with older Tatar women, I often heard them confess that they regretted having had abortions or consuming alcohol in the past. However, similarly to Madina *apa*, they always qualified their regrets with an explanation that their actions were the norm at the time, something they did not know was a sin, and something they couldn't help at the time. The fact that these kinds of regrets were voiced often by the older generation of women – sometimes with a solicitation from the mosque lesson teacher – speaks to the frequency of Soviet practices the women have come to consider sinful andnow regretted.

53 Linde, in *Life Stories*, argues that the absence of coherence in one's life story ultimately speaks to the absence of a coherent self, which, in turn, is culturally inappropriate among middle-class white Americans. I would argue that the same cultural expectation applies to Tatars.