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ARTICLE



The golden cage: heritage, (ethnic) Muslimness, and the place of Islam in post-Soviet Tatarstan

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ABSTRACT

Through the Weber-inspired metaphor of the 'golden cage', this contribution discusses the dual process by which both Islamic heritage and secularity are produced in Russia's Muslim-majority Tatarstan Republic: on the one hand ('gold'), Islam is given visibility/legitimacy as an element of Russia's civilisational makeup; on the other ('cage'), the region's Islamic past is shaped by the state while 'excessive' manifestations of piety are marginalised. The contribution focuses on actors and dynamics at two heritage sites in post-Soviet Tatarstan – Kazan's kremlin and Qol Şärif mosque, and Şaxri Bolğar. The 'golden caging' of Islam, encapsulated in these two intensely cherished heritage projects, resonates with a significant number of Tatars who, owing in part to the republic's history of governmentalisation and populist mobilisation, embrace (or accept) a 'secular' model of ethnic, moral, and civic personhood.

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Introduction: the golden cage

This contribution advances two contentions: 1) Islamic heritage projects in post-Soviet Tatarstan, a narrowly Muslim-majority republic within the Russian Federation,¹ can be understood as a 'golden cage' for Islam. The golden cage metaphor expresses the simultaneous foregrounding of religion in the public sphere and its siloing into a well-defined conceptual and physical space. 2) This operation taps into, legitimises, and aims to reproduce a specific type of postsocialist, post-atheist, 'secular' moral framework promoting existential attachments to Islam as a source of ethnic pride/identification but *not* as an ethically actionable teleology. This moral framework delegates the protection of Islam's 'traditional' values to temporal state authorities.

The golden cage metaphor comes, of course, from Max Weber, who used the term *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, problematically but popularly translated as 'iron cage', in the context of his analysis of modernisation to indicate rationalisation, the triumph of market logic, a decline of organic moral communities/ties, the rise of bureaucracies, and the fading of religion from consciousness (Baehr 2001). This contribution does not address questions such as how to translate Weber's expression accurately, or the extent to which his prediction was accurate. Instead, it takes his famous metaphor as a cue to discuss the

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ambivalent framing of religion in Tatarstan's post-Soviet secular order. Following Talal Asad (2003), this contribution does not use the terminology of secularity to suggest the idea of a public domain entirely *devoid* of religion, like the one imagined (although never actually realised) by the Soviet authorities. Rather, secularity here indicates a power arrangement in which an external, temporal authority exercises control over the 'sphere' of religion by defining its acceptable boundaries and contexts of expression, such as private/family life, authorised faith organisations, and, as I argue below, *religious-historical heritage*.

The 'golden caging' of Islam manifests itself in the spatial dynamics of Tatarstan's heritage sites, where material traces of the region's Islamic history (buildings, objects, etc.) are restored, magnified, and conferred visibility in the public domain – it is to this visibility that the 'gold' in my 'golden cage' metaphor refers – while awkward pasts are glossed over and outward demonstrations of piety, particularly if considered excessive or 'foreign', are either circumscribed or discouraged in the name of the public domain's pluralism/neutrality. These dynamics will be discussed by looking at narratives, practices, and controversies surrounding two of Tatarstan's most outstanding Islamic heritage sites and with reference to a long, ongoing trajectory of capillary governmentalisation in which state as well as non-state, all-Russian as well as local (ethnic) forces have contributed to the shaping of secular moral and civic personhood among the Tatars.

Across the social sciences, a consensus holds that 'heritage', far from being unmediated manifestations of a community's past, is the outcome of power dynamics firmly staked in the present (Bevernage and Wouters 2018; Geismar 2015; Hannoum 2008; Kohl 1998). The politics of memorialisation and national storytelling in the Russian (Malinova 2018; Sherlock 2011; Sibagatullin et al. 2020; Zabalueva 2017) and Tatarstani (Graney 2009; Kinossian 2012; Valeev 2007) contexts are well explored. By contrast, the study of moral-interpellative and affective dimensions of heritage have only recently begun and, to my knowledge, Russia's Islamic past has not been examined through this analytical lens. To address that gap, this contribution seeks to investigate the nexus of place (*lieux de memoire* endowed with powerful affects), power (Russia's illiberal, neo-traditionalist secularity), and personhood ('ethnic Muslimness' as a mode of subjectivity) in the context of Tatarstan's Islamic heritage landscape.

Heritage projects can be seen as ideological interpellations (Althusser 2014) that both *produce* and *presuppose* specific moral and civic subjectivities. For these interpellations to be 'persuasive', as Meyer and van de Port (2018) put it, heritage projects ought to affectively 'resonate' with predispositions that are not just the outcome of governmental efforts, but also of grassroots moral concerns and aspirations. Based on ethnographic fieldwork,² this contribution builds on Meyer and van de Port's recent work to investigate the affective dynamics by which two paramount Islamic heritage sites in Tatarstan – the Qol Şärif mosque/Kazan kremlin, and the medieval Şaxri Bolğar complex on the Volga River – enter into resonance with the public. It will be argued that the moral 'soil' that welcomed and nourished the mushrooming of heritage projects is the postsocialist condition of 'ethnic Muslimness', which is rooted in a long history of interactions between Tatar Muslims and Russia's state apparatuses.

Of course, neither the state nor the grassroots should be understood as monolithic. In the republic of Tatarstan, articulations of the state at the local level include regional branches of the Kremlin's federal regime, local republican institutions which are the

expression of moderate-nationalist ethnic elites, and a local religious bureaucracy (the Muftiate) that aspires to speak from the point of view (and on behalf) of Islam. But efforts 'from above' would have come to nought, or indeed would not have existed in the first place, if it weren't for the existence of shared moral sensitivities among a Tatar population actively seeking for a 'proper' – that is, socially and culturally acceptable – place of Islam in the post-Soviet era. To a critical number of post-Soviet Tatars, the 'golden cage' offers an answer to this search by elevating Islam as a glorious civilisation that contributed to Russia's greatness, while pre-empting the faith's claims to unparalleled truthfulness and binding guidance in all spheres of life. Although not universally accepted, this answer resonates with a prevailing desire among many Tatars for stability, 'moderation', and 'tolerance'.

From ethnic Muslims to ethnic Muslims

The Russian state's mature efforts to governmentalise the Muslim populations of its inner borderlands – the Volga-Ural region – began in the late eighteenth century with the establishment of Muftiates, official Islamic institutions designed to preside over Muslim communities and keep religious discourses within approved political frameworks. Islamic discourses that transcended the approved political boundaries were censored as potentially leading to separatism and religious 'fanaticism' (Ross 2020; Tuna 2015). These dynamics were accelerated and taken in a radical direction by the Bolsheviks' accession to power, in the wake of which Volga Muslims' religious, pedagogical, economic, and civic institutions/elites were either eradicated or brought under complete state control. The Soviets' theory of religion was rudimentary, including by Marxist standards, and their anticlericalism ferocious. As Sonya Luehrmann (2011) has demonstrated, however, ruthless and often violent as their project was, the Soviet authorities were not animated by mere intolerance, but rather by a 'productive' moral-ideological project aimed at socially engineering a specific, socialist, and (*ideally*) atheist version of the Enlightened secular subject.

Although the Soviet regime might have failed to permanently instil scientific atheism into the population, it did manage to secularise Tatarstan. As an effect of internal modernist tendencies but, above all, of party-led social change, Volga Muslims came to think of themselves as 'Tatars', an *ethnos* endowed with a set of national 'traits': language, ancestry, and 'folk' culture (Anderson, Arzyutov, and Alymov 2019). Religion, now recast as an outdated cultural vestige, was pushed to the margins of the mainstream. The Tatars' ethno-civic identity was emptied of direct, actionable links to Islam's ethical tradition. Yet, the Soviets' essentialist nation-building policies (Shnirelman 1996) engendered a powerful attachment to Islam reimagined as a visceral, inalienable hereditary trait that individuals share as members of the Tatar *ethnos* (Benussi 2018). This became known, in Tatarstan, as 'ethnic Muslimness' (*etnicheskie musul'mane*). Furthermore, in the final decades of the Soviet era, an intellectual trend emerged among the Tatar intelligentsia promoting a re-engagement with – and reinvention of – Tatar cultural heritage, or *miras*, through a secularising lens. This 'Mirasism' spurred a discovery of the Tatar past through literary and intellectual history as well as folklore and genealogy. At the same time, 'Mirasist' intellectuals produced a highly idiosyncratic, Soviet-influenced interpretation of this past, casting Tatar heritage in terms of a progression away from religion and towards secularity and 'enlightenment' (Bustanov and Kemper 2012).

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, perestroika swept over Russia and Tatarstan. The ‘Tatar national question’, which had been simmering for years, came to the fore, buoyed by the popularity of a now emboldened national movement or *milli xäräkät* (Iskhakov 2002). The national movement, led by intellectuals concerned with ethnic identity, rushed to reclaim Islam, seeing it as a ‘resource’ for the reinvention of Tatar ethnic culture (Yusupova 2016, 41; cf. Rorlich 1986; Shnirelman 1996; Graney 2009; Fallor 2011). Internally variegated, the national movement remained predominantly secularist (Iskhakov, Sagitova, and Izmailov 2004), in keeping with moral sensitivities deeply ingrained among swathes of the ‘ethnic Muslim’ Tatar population. While rejecting state atheism, the national movement and its supporters were – and remain – predominantly committed to what might be called a Habermasian vision of citizenship and society, whereby religion is kept separate from the *res publica*, especially as Tatarstan is an ethnically and confessionally variegated republic with a strong Russian minority (Ofitsial’nii Tatarstan 2020). In this framework, faith amounts to private opinion, while behaviour is defined by ‘reason’ and (conformity to) the ‘laws of the land’ in lieu of divinely revealed doctrine.

As the turbulent 1990s segued into an increasingly authoritarian centralist order determined to curb local autonomies, the *milli xäräkät* lowered its stakes (Sharafutdinova 2013). Today, Tatarstan’s political establishment continues to be dominated by a localist-minded, if pragmatic, Tatar ethnic elite. The guiding vision of this group appears to be inspired by a mild, ‘collaborative’ (Bulag 2010) nationalism geared towards accommodating ethno-localist aspirations within a pan-Russian patriotic framework, through an emphasis on Tatarstan’s multiethnic setup and the banners of civility and ‘*tolerantnost*’. Despite the system’s vulnerabilities in terms of nepotism and corruption, the ruling elites remain popular (Shirshova and Sarimova 2019; Tsybul’skii and Shaidullina 2016). The post-Soviet era’s intellectual-ideological experimentations did not substantially alter the framework of Mirasism, despite an ostensibly deeper engagement with Islam’s cultural dimensions. Updating Mirasism’s legacy for a post-atheist age, new generations of Tatar intellectuals have advanced Kremlin-friendly identarian projects such as Euro-Islam, a post-religious discourse framing Tatar Islam in exclusively cultural terms, and Eurasianism, a motley conservative movement stressing civilisational unity within an illiberally secular, plurally neo-traditionalist, paternalist, neo-imperial Russian state (Bustanov and Kemper 2012; Sibgatullina and Kemper 2019).

Alongside the national movement, perestroika ushered in a galaxy of grassroots piety movements that, by emphasising orthodox practice and Islamic universalism, challenged the *milli xäräkät*’s utilitarian approach to Islam and the mainstream self-representation of the Tatars as the most ‘secular’ (*svetskaia*) and ‘Europeanised’ (*evropeizirovannaia*) of the Muslim nations. Even though Islam is recognised as one of Russia’s ‘traditional’ religions (alongside Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism), grassroots piety movements are viewed with suspicion by both local and federal state authorities, which tend to frame unsanctioned religious trends as ‘foreign’, disloyal and extremist, and restrict them accordingly (Kravchenko 2018), and by the secular majority of the population. Despite the opposition, however, piety trends have gained traction, especially among the socially mobile urban youth. A degree of overlap exists between ethnic entrepreneurs and piety groups: many ethnic activists embrace Islamic asceticism and many pietists cherish their ethnic background (Yusupova 2018). However, the social landscape in Tatarstan remains

polarised, with a secular demographic core more attached to 'ethnic' understandings of Islam and a growing minority attracted to spiritual reform movements (Mukhametov 2011). In 1998 the republic equipped itself with its own Islamic apparatus, the Tatarstani Muftiate, which like its predecessors is intended to harness grassroots expressions of Islam while broadcasting state-approved discourses about the faith (Bekkin 2020, 299–332). The republican Muftiate can be seen as contributing to manufacturing a 'managed civil society' (Brunarska 2017) in Tatarstan in keeping with Kremlin-compliant intellectual and ideological frameworks.

All of these actors – the bureaucracy, establishment nationalist intellectuals, the Muftiate – have played an active role in making Islam a prominent element in moral discourses on civility and politics in Tatarstan. In other words, the state appears determined to reinforce the 'Muslim' element in the 'ethnic Muslim' equation. The concept of 'desecularisation from above' (Karpov 2013), aptly capturing the Russian state machinery's investment in religion, can be profitably, if cautiously, applied to Tatarstan. The Kremlin now positions itself, locally, domestically, and internationally, as a champion of illiberal conservatism and 'traditional values'. This move to foster patriotism among Muslim-background citizens resonates with Tatarstan's 'collaborative' national establishment and its populist-accommodationist agenda, and with segments of the loyalist Islamic officialdom.

However, the idea of 'desecularisation from above' does not convey the whole picture. There are limits to desecularisation. This development does not challenge the core tenets of secularity whereby religion is deemed a private matter: citizens ought to conform their public conduct with, and be socialised into, the 'law of the land' rather than revealed doctrine; and crucially, temporal state authorities have the right to police the boundaries of 'legitimate' religious expression. In other words, the foundations of the 'ethnic Muslim' construct are not shaken. Rather than pursuing Islamic piety, based on the authority of a revelation that transcends ethnic particularisms, worldly sovereignties, and the private/public separation in the name of salvation in the Hereafter, this version of the secular subject is encouraged to publicly espouse the supposedly 'traditional' values of the Tatar nation's civilisational heritage and to support a regime that claims to defend these values while, in doing so, controlling their expression.

Since the late Soviet period, mainstream discourses about Tatar heritage or *miras*, Islam, and Muslimness have tended – despite their variability – to be populist-identarian as opposed to piety-focused, emphatic about ecumenism/pluralism in the public domain and moderation in the private sphere, and tinged with patriotism (Bekkin 2018; Benussi 2020; Bustanov and Kemper 2012; Sibgatullina and Kemper 2019). It is against this backdrop of simultaneous engagements with Islam and commitment to a secular order that the post-Soviet heritage boom should be framed.

Places of Islam

Far from happening in a moral and political void, *miras* projects tap into specific sensitivities, 'interpellate' defined subjectivities, and seek to produce a certain type of citizen in Tatarstan. The past decades have witnessed a sustained campaign to restore religiously connoted historical sites, with the rebuilding of mosques, the opening of museums, and the erection of new monuments dedicated to great Muslim figures of the past. A leading

role in this campaign has recently been played by the republic's Vozrozhdenie/Yañaryş ('Renaissance' or 'Rebirth') Foundation, active since 2010 and chaired by the first president of post-Soviet Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev. Through the 'golden' framework of *miras*, the position of Islam in Tatarstan's collective self-narrative has gained unprecedented prominence and been made visible to both locals and visitors. In what follows, I zoom in on the two most renowned heritage sites where Tatarstan's Islamic *miras* is celebrated.

1) The towering Qol Şärif Mosque, erected between 1995 and 2006 as a powerful statement of ethnic pride and regional autonomy, soars from the centre of Kazan's UNESCO-listed kremlin, which was built by Russian conquerors in the sixteenth century on the ruins of a pre-existing Tatar citadel (Faller 2011; Graney 2007; Kinossian 2012; Valeev 2017). As the most widely reproduced landmark of post-Soviet Kazan and a veritable symbol of Tatarstan, the mosque attracts legions of tourists. Its bottom floor hosts a Museum of Islam open to visitors of all denominations, and special balconies ensure that non-Muslim visitors can photograph the prayer hall's sumptuous decorations. However, Qol Şärif is only irregularly open for worship, and many interlocutors reported that, given its position in the heart of the touristy old town and away from residential and business areas, it is not currently a popular option with practising Muslims.

Qol Şärif is the jewel in a heritage crown comprising other remarkable archaeological and architectural items, some of which carry strong ethnic connotations. Söyümbike Manarasi, a red-brick tower apocryphally thought to be the only surviving structure of the ancient Muslim citadel; the nineteenth-century baroque Presidential Palace, formerly the Russian Governor's house but now the residence of the republic's ethnic-Tatar highest authority; and a less conspicuous yet potently charged item – the Khans' Mausoleum, a 'cultural heritage object of federal importance', where the remains of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Tatar rulers are preserved. The ruins of the khans' underground burial chamber are visible to visitors through a thick glass roof surmounted by a crescent. Their actual remains were transferred in May 2017 to an adjacent protected vault, in a solemn ceremony involving the republic's highest religious and political authorities. Two steps from the mausoleum, a memorial stone carries the khans' names in Arabic and Tatar characters, emphasising the sacredness of the site. Next to the burials, and adjacent to the Presidential Palace, stands the Museum of the Statehood of Tatar people and the Republic of Tatarstan. The museum summarises the history of pre-conquest Turkic-Muslim-Chingisid polities – Volga Bulgaria, the Golden Horde, the Khanate of Kazan – upon which the *milli xäräkät's* national discourse is based. Lastly, in 2018, the sumptuous Irek Mosque was built a stone's throw from the kremlin. Its location on UNESCO-protected grounds and the fact that it carries the name of the new Tatarstan president's dead son have caused controversy.

The Kazan kremlin's assemblage of places of power (the Presidential Palace), places of institutionalised memory (the Statehood Museum), and burials of ancient rulers (the Khans' Mausoleum) conveys a potent narrative that reinforces Qol Şärif's statement as an ethnic symbol. In a bold declaration of continuity, the mortal remains of the khans are located at the heart of Tatarstan's capital (cf. Verdery 1999). The Khans' Mausoleum materialises the spiritual foundations of Tatarstan's ever-frustrated aspirations to sovereignty, embodied by the office of Head of the Republic and buttressed by the long historical tradition outlined in the museum. The crescent and the use of Arabic calligraphies openly gesture to Islam.

At the same time, the site is rich in references to the long Slavic Christian presence in the region. The Russian-style kremlin walls enclosing the site, the Imperial-age baroque buildings surrounding it, and above all the starry-domed Orthodox Christian Annunciation Cathedral standing tall right next to the mausoleum tell an edifying story of tolerance and peaceful multi-confessional coexistence (Graney 2007, 21; Kinossian 2012, 890).

2) The Şaxri Bolğar archaeological complex, also UNESCO-listed (for the controversies around this nomination, see Plets 2015), is approximately 130 km to the south of Kazan and encompasses the ruins of medieval Volga Bulgaria's capital city, Bolğar. It includes the remains of a Friday Mosque with its Great Minaret, bombastically restored between 2000 and 2012–2014, and several smaller mausoleums and minarets, protected as a national monument (*zapovednik*) since 1969. The area has long been a pilgrimage destination for Volga-region Muslims, including during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras (see below). Every year a large-scale Tatar national festival called the Holy Bolğar Gathering (*Cien*) takes place here, commemorating the official adoption of Islam by Bulgar rulers in 922.

Besides its archaeological features, the Şaxri Bolğar site is now home to an impressive Museum of Bulgar Civilisation (inaugurated in 2012), which offers a lavish visual journey through the history of the region's Turkic peoples, and the even more arresting White Mosque (built between 2010 and 2012), the Oriental design of which is reminiscent of India's Taj Mahal. The complex also hosts the Bulgar Islamic Academy (founded in 2017), which trains the republic's future imams and *ulema*. A recently built shrine/museum hosts the world's largest ever printed Quran (according to the object's caption). Also included are a Museum of Bread, artisanal workshops, souvenir stalls, 'nomadic' yurts, and even a camel farm purporting to revive an 'ancient tradition' from the times of the Great Silk Road.

Similarly to the Kazan kremlin, Christianity is also referenced at Bolğar, home to the Dormition Church, a small, unadorned, eighteenth-century Orthodox building. After the Russian conquest, Bolğar temporarily became the site of a monastery and was subsequently settled by Russians. Despite the crosses perched on its bell tower and roof, the Dormition Church is no longer a place of worship: in 1969 the site was turned into a museum and today the interior of the building hosts a small but informative historical-archaeological collection about Bolğar.³ During one of my visits, I was told about unheeded proposals to relocate the 'incongruous' churchlike structure further away from the Islamic ruins. One can infer that both conservation concerns and political-symbolical considerations may advise against this move: the bell tower and the Great Minaret stand, iconically, a few metres from one another, echoing the multi-confessional setup of Kazan's kremlin and reinforcing the Russian/Tatarstani narrative of intercommunal harmony and Pax Secularis.

Political phantoms

'It was as though I had always known that place, even without ever being there': this was how a Tatar friend, an ethnically conscious intellectual who had moved to Tatarstan after growing up in another province, described what he felt upon visiting Bolğar for the first time. Brimming with emotion, he tried to put to words a sensation that combined awe and familiarity: the feeling of transcending chronological boundaries – 'time travelling' –

and communing with the 'ancestors' (*predki*, or Tat. *babaylar*), who represent a core rhetorical and moral figure of ethnic Muslimness. Bolğar's ancestral pre-eminence is also acknowledged by many pietists, being identified as the site where the forefathers of the Tatar nation converted to Islam. One of my interlocutors, a scripturalist Tatar imam with a significant Salafi following, told me that Bolğar is a place endowed with a 'powerful energy' (*moshnaia energetika*) stemming from its spiritual history. He even endorsed the Holy Bolğar Gathering, a nationalist celebration, despite its dubious reputation among some scripturalists as a non-Islamic innovation. A recently revitalised legend about Bolğar (Frank 1996) apocryphally links the site to both Tatar ancestral time and Islamic prophetic time: stretching history and geography to make the first generations of Muslims (seventh and eighth centuries) overlap with the conversion of Volga Bulgaria (in the early tenth century), this legend positions the burials of three companions of Muhammad (*try sakhabyy-spodvizhniki*) in Bolğar. The three companions preached Islam and performed miracles: one of them would marry the daughter of a Bulgar leader, thereby 'becoming' an ancestor to the Tatars. A monument to the three companions was added to the archaeological complex in 2011.

This material is illustrative of Bolğar's emotional power. For many Tatars, the site is a veritable 'affective pulsar', a high-density object in the firmament of collective existence, capable of amplifying visions, stories, memories, and aspirations. Bolğar beautifully illustrates Meyer and van de Port's (2018, 14) characterisation of heritage projects as 'sensational' forms through which subjects experience a degree of identification with the 'stuff of the world'. The point might be further nuanced: in the case at hand, my friend's sensation of consubstantiality is not with *the* world, but with *a* world – historically, morally, and geographically defined. Which only adds poignancy to the questions raised by Meyer and van de Port (2018, 19–24): what are the processes/premises by which 'authenticity [is] successfully attributed' to heritage projects? What makes heritage *persuasive*? This contribution argues that in the case of Tatarstani *miras*, one important factor is the feedback loop between heritage projects and practices/discourses on 'ethnic Muslim' moral subjectivity.

Tatarstan's Islamic heritage sites are exciting novelties. Their newness does not lie merely in the fact that they feature additions, augmentations, reconstructions, and embellishments that are actually recent, but, more importantly, in the very claims to ancientness underpinning their persuasiveness – claims that are an eminently modern development (Hartog 2015). Söyümbike Manarası for example, albeit old, does not date back as far as the Khanate of Kazan – however, 'folk archaeology' expresses modern-era Tatar nationalist feelings and a romantic fascination with antiquity. Tatarstan's *miras* sites are tasked with conveying a sense of the direct presence of the (Islamic) past in the present (Meyer and van de Port 2018, 22). These sites are, to use Yael Navaro's metaphor (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 14), inhabited by the political 'phantoms' of Islam: objects perceived as connected to the greatness of bygone Muslim states in a landscape that was Russified/Sovietised for centuries. In Navaro's fieldsite of Northern Cyprus, the phantoms of the island's Greek past were frantically exorcised by a pro-Turkish regime. For decades, if not centuries, a comparable erasure was carried out in the Volga region at the hands of the Russian state (Rorlich 1986; Ely 2003). In a spectacular – if politically delicate – reversal, the post-Soviet Tatarstani authorities officially gave rebirth to the cherished yet feared presences of the republic's illustrious Muslim ancestors.

Bolğar's stately hodgepodge of ancient and new openly declares its aim to bridge the gulf between contemporary Tatars and their forefathers. The Qol Şärif mosque, named after an illustrious sixteenth-century Muslim spiritual and resistance leader, stands where Kazan's medieval Friday mosque was supposedly located. In fact, albeit recently built, it claims not merely to reproduce, but to *be* that mosque (Kinossian 2012). A few metres away, the ancestors literally surface from the medieval depth, with their kingly burials merging with a museum that chronicles the splendour of Islamic kingdoms and empires. These presences can evoke potent, resonant affects. Consider this recent example: in the summer of 2020, the media team of prominent opposition leader Alexei Navalny released a video-exposé of corruption in Tatarstan, denouncing the local leadership's wheeling-and-dealing. This denunciation was met coldly in Tatarstan, not just on account of strictly political dynamics (the leaders' popularity, the video-makers' outsider status), but also because of the video-exposé's incautious approach to Islamic *miras*. Specifically, footage of the Qol Şärif mosque, flippantly used as a 'mere' visual symbol of the republic, was juxtaposed with images evoking corruption and ill-gotten wealth (dollar bills, diamonds, oil pumps, etc.) eliciting indignation even among viewers who would otherwise have sympathised with the video-makers' anti-corruption statements.

This leads me to the following point: Tatarstan's heritage sites can be understood in Althusserian terms as ideological-interpellative apparatuses, storytelling mechanisms that rely heavily on symbolism and iconicity. The gigantism-oriented, monumental approach to *miras* restoration (Plets 2015) matches the authorities' loud recounting style. *Miras* sites are meant to be *legible*, attention-grabbing, and accessible. Unlike most mosques in Kazan, which are not particularly tourist-friendly (but are open 24/7 to religionists), Qol Şärif's luxurious inside welcomes visitors and their cameras through ad-hoc observation terraces. Şaxri Bolğar is furnished with infrastructure facilitating access and tourist enjoyment. Both Qol Şärif and Bolğar's White Mosque are iconised and widely reproduced in the form of industrially manufactured postcards, souvenir pictures, Islamicate-style embroideries, and prayer rugs. The story is about Islam: the over-the-top Orientalist architecture of Şaxri Bolğar's White Mosque, or the crescents topping Söyümbike Manarası and the Khans' Mausoleum, symbolically convey an idea of Muslimness through their conventional association with Islam in art and architecture. This resonates with most Tatars' affective investment in Islam as a civilisation of which their forefathers were part.

Simultaneously, the presence of churches and crosses in *miras* sites (even in the absence of actual Christian worship, as in Bolğar) not only symbolises Christianity but also Tatarstan's multi-confessionalism and *tolerantnost'*, contemporary secular values which are projected back onto the ethnically diverse Turkic polities of yore. All historical museums – the museums of Tatar statehood, Islam, and Bulgar Civilisation – frame Volga Bulgaria and the Kazan Khanate as multiethnic entities, harmoniously inserted in a multi-civilisational Eurasian ecumene of which Russia is the latter-day incarnation and protector (on the politics of the Eurasia concept among Russia's Muslims, see Sibgatullina and Kemper 2019). Thus, one side of the Tatar *miras* 'story' emphasises ethnic uniqueness, civilisational grandeur, and 'national resilience' (Rorlich 1986), with Islam's spiritual legacy playing a central role in the narrative. The second concerns Tatarstan's (and Russia's) ancient and rich tradition of religious-cultural diversity and exemplary pluralism, enabled by the accommodating benevolence of sovereigns across the ages. This double-faceted

narrative, encompassing nativist as well as ecumenical elements, lends itself uniquely well to the national-populist, yet pluralist and secular-humanist, moral framework of post-Soviet Tatarstan.

Its ethno-religious overtones notwithstanding, Tatarstan's *miras* apparatuses strive to generate an inclusive form of 'spatial intimacy' (Walton 2015) whereby not just Tatars, but all Russian citizens should feel welcome at heritage sites, in line with: a) pragmatic, collaborative-nationalist Tatar political discourses that envision a patriotic convergence of Turkic-Muslim and Russian elements; b) Moscow's project of a united, multi-confessional and multiethnic (if conservative and illiberal, 'Eurasian') Russia; and c) the post-Enlightenment underpinnings of the modern nation-state as well as the idea of cultural heritage itself. And indeed, heritage sites attract visitors of diverse ethnic and confessional background, including many Russians who understandably take pride in the diversity of the country and rejoice in Tatarstan's success story. Of course, the many contradictions and polarisations that persist in Tatarstani and Russian societies – epitomised by the less collaborative segments of the *milli xäräkät* and, above all, by anxieties around piety movements (Benussi 2020) – belie this idyllic narrative. The fact that the *miras* ideological storytelling is not watertight (see next section) is widely acknowledged. In Navaro's terms (2012), partaking in this narrative does involve some 'make-believe'. Nevertheless, most Tatars, including many politically savvy individuals, are happy to be persuaded, and have come to genuinely cherish sites such as the Kazan kremlin and Bolğar.

Although the state is central to the production of Tatarstan's *miras* apparatuses, as we shall see in more detail below, heritage sites' persuasiveness is more than merely a matter of top-down propaganda. Heritage sites both tap into, and actively contribute to reproducing, a moral tapestry where threads of neo-traditionalism, ethnic pride, religious moderation, all-Russian patriotism, civility, and Soviet-conveyed Enlightenment values intertwine. This is a highly appealing mix, which resonates with the inclinations and desires of many in the Tatar mainstream, especially in the 'ethnic Muslims' demographic: proud of their ethnic roots and yet steeped in post-Enlightenment modernity, jealous of their Muslim identity yet self-avowedly secular (*svetskie*), protective towards the symbols of their republic yet (for now) moderately supportive of Moscow's brand of multiethnic, plurally illiberal patriotism.

The place of Islam

Tatarstan's *miras* boom would not have been possible without coordinated directives and resources from the state. As studies by political scientists (Graney 2007, 2009), geographers (Kinossian 2012), sociologists (Yusupova 2016), and anthropologists (Plets 2015, 2018) illustrate, both republican *and* federal apparatuses have been instrumental to the blossoming of Tatarstan's Islamic heritage. State intervention has not been limited to lavish funding, active restoration, and swift construction of infrastructure, but includes behind-the-scenes heritage politicking: Moscow and Kazan have lobbied in unison, at international level, for the inclusion of Şaxri Bolğar and the Kazan kremlin into the UNESCO World Heritage List, eventually overcoming the initial reservations of that body (Plets 2015). The Tatar ancestors' rebirth, rendered possible by state intervention, is not just a demonstration of the state institutions' goodwill but also a manifestation of their

investment in keeping control over Tatarstan's historical and religious narratives. In socialist and postsocialist societies, the past has often been a crucible of political anxiety (Brubaker and Feischmidt 2002; Verdery 1991). Tatarstan's Islamic past is no exception (Shnirelman 1996), especially against the backdrop of nationalist and piety movements. Owing to their potential to unsettle and polarise, Tatarstan's Islamic phantoms had to be 'caged', adjusted to the process of centralisation and ideological tightening that Russia has undergone over the past two decades.

Drawing again on Navaro's terminology (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 14), *miras* apparatuses are arenas in which the phantoms of long-gone Muslim polities encounter the 'phantasms' of the state, in both its local/republican and its federal articulations. Despite operating at symbolic/ideological/ideational level, such as in heritage *discourses*, 'phantasmic' statecraft produces quite tangible, material, political manifestations, such as heritage *sites*. In the case under analysis, some state 'phantasms' have recognisable faces: Tatarstan's heritage agency is chaired by Mintimer Shaimiev, who was Tatarstan's first president and is already in the process of becoming an 'ancestor'; the new Irek mosque by the Kazan kremlin carries the name of the new president's dead son; Vladimir Putin's face looks down from t-shirts on the souvenir stalls selling Islam-themed trinkets in Bolğar. But the state also manifests itself more implicitly, by curating the narrative about the place of Islam in society, a process occasionally liable to mutate into censorship. In heritage, 'a history *is chosen*, which then becomes the history of the town or district [. . .]; a history discovered, rediscovered or unearthed, and then displayed' (Hartog 2015, 182, emphasis added). This *chosenness*, of course, implies that only *some* ancestors are admitted into the present framing of history.

The phantasms of the state dwell manifestly in Tatarstan's museums, archaeological collections, and institutions endowed with the explicit political-didactical role of 'legislating history' (Bevernage and Wouters 2018) into a story of harmony and Eurasian brotherhood. In Tatarstan, as elsewhere, the 'silences', the 'sorrows', and the 'secrets' (Hirschkind 2016, 224–225) of historical memory, particularly those concerning conflict, hostility, and trauma, are edited out of the narrative. During the Kazan khans' reburial ceremony in 2017, ex-President Shaimiev declared that 'in this land, wars were fought, negotiations were held, and agreements were reached' (Gafiyatullina 2017). Such neutral vocabulary paints the Russian conquest in a diplomatically rosy light. However, despite three decades of hopes, expectations, and campaigning on the part of national activists, the one monument that has never been allowed to stand in or near the kremlin (or elsewhere in Kazan), is a statue commemorating the Muslim defenders of Kazan who fell under Ivan the Terrible's conquering army in 1552. By contrast, an imposing nineteenth-century memorial to the fallen Russian conquerors is scenically located at the confluence of the rivers Volga and Qazansu. Some phantoms are still condemned to speak in ghostlike whispers.

Although the official narrative emphasises *tolerantnost'*, the coexistence of Islamic and Christian traces in heritage sites is also a cause of bitterness. Let us take the Kazan kremlin, whose Russian buildings manifest five centuries of Russian domination: a widely circulated narrative opines that the beautiful Annunciation Cathedral was built by the Russian conquerors with the spoils of the original Friday Mosque (Graney 2007, 21), putting the Cathedral's materiality at odds with the dominant narrative of multi-confessional inclusivity and peaceful coexistence (Plets 2015, 68, 75; Urazmanova

et al. 2014, 147). Similarly, Şaxri Bolğar's Dormition Church was built with materials removed from Islamic buildings and Muslim gravestones (Gafarov 2012; Gainutdinov 2014). In a local folk story dating at least from the Soviet era, Bolğar's juxtaposed minaret and bell tower are said to represent the 'fight' between Muhammad and Jesus, suggesting an irreducible enmity between Tatars and Russians. During state atheism, the dilapidated towers appeared on the verge of collapse, and onlookers waited to see which building would outlast the other and symbolically triumph in that formidable religious battle.

More subtly, *miras* sites are not just places where Islam is celebrated, but also sites where Islam is contextualised *in detachment* from expressions of piety. Religious piety, in the secular order of which the state is guarantor, is supposed to remain within the private sphere. Hence it sits uncomfortably with heritage sites' Habermasian publicness and neutrality, even in the case of 'Islamic' sites. It is no coincidence that visible manifestations of piety such as prayer (*namaz*) are hard to come by at Qol Şärif, Bolğar, and other such sites while *miras* narratives tend to frame Islam as 'culture' and 'civilisation' rather than a living ethical tradition made of eternally valid, binding truths and obligations. Performances of piety, like the recitation of the Quran, are sometimes enacted by Muftiate personnel, i.e. religious 'specialists', and take place behind glass screens (here, the 'caging' is literal) for the benefit of camera-wielding visitors.

Although there are mosques in both the Kazan kremlin and Bolğar, most visitors engage with the *exteriors* of these buildings, or their 'museumified' sections, without physically setting foot into the prayer halls. At both sites, in fact, prayer areas close down at the time of *namaz*, which is normally performed by a small fraction of tourists. Unlike regular mosques that are open around the clock, Qol Şärif only operates during diurnal working hours, which gave rise to perplexities over its very status as a place of worship. The following episode is revealing: In 2012, Qol Şärif was the scene of a conflict between the then-resident imam Ramil Yunusov and Tatarstan's religious establishment. While the details of this clash (some of which remain hidden from public scrutiny) cannot be recapitulated here, an interlocutor who had witnessed the circumstances explained the affair by saying the imam had been 'too popular' for a mosque such as Qol Şärif, erected under the auspices of a secular/multi-confessional vision. The imam had attracted a following of scripturally-oriented young Muslims, which, as my interlocutor somewhat bitterly put it, was 'too much for a mosque [intended] for display (*paradnaia*)'. Yunusov, alongside 'a whole bunch of mosque-goers', was accused of Wahhabism, and the mosque building was closed for 'renovations' (Ivshina 2012) until its reopening with a more amenable resident imam. This crisis suggests that despite Qol Şärif being *the* monument to the region's Islamic history, or indeed *precisely for that reason*, an 'excess' of piety was not welcome there (cf. Kinossian 2012, 889).

The ruins of Bolğar attract controversies too. In 2016 an ethnic-Muslim singer and belly-dancer used the White Mosque's façade as background for a mildly sensual music video, prompting an outcry from some pietists who considered her performance sacrilegious, or at best 'ignorant'. As several 'secular' commentators conceded that the clip was indeed in poor taste, the performer retorted that her artistic choices expressed admiration for her people's 'Oriental culture', and her supporters added that tourists roam Bolğar, including the White Mosque square, in skimpy clothes all summer anyway. Indeed, authorities do

not and would not enforce dress code at heritage sites, leaving it to tourists to balance a sense of respect – the classic humanist posture – with weather-related considerations, to the annoyance of pious observers.

Occasionally, loosely structured devotional activities take place in Bolğar, such as the circumambulation of stones or the collection of ‘healing’ water. While these practices deserve to be discussed independently, for the purpose of this contribution it is sufficient to note that both state actors and scripture-minded pietists, as well as those who perform them, tend to consider such devotional practices as expressions of ‘folk culture’ rather than of doctrinally-grounded piety. Overwhelmingly, these are indeed propitiatory activities *sans* Quranic content. Unlike *namaz*, they do not require ritual purity or a specific dress code (such as wearing the veil): in fact, even Russians and non-Muslim-background visitors may participate in them.

Some scripturalists see such practices as unsanctioned, possibly even ‘pagan’ ritualism divorced from a deep commitment to the faith (Abu Ibrakhim Tatarstani 2012; cf. Urazmanova et al. 2014, 139–141; for a theologically informed position seeking to conjugate Bolğar’s collective affective import with the imperatives of scriptural exactitude, see Ansar 2011’s interview with the Tatar spiritual leader Mukaddas Bibarsov). By contrast, the secular authorities tolerate these practices, which resemble generic ‘secular’ traditions such as rubbing statues or dropping coins around monuments, as picturesque manifestations of ‘traditional’ devotion and culture (Benussi 2020).

Let us consider some contrasts between Islam as *miras* and Islam as piety. Firstly, heritage ‘makes visible and expresses a certain order of time’ (Hartog 2015, 152). It implies a linear, sequential conception of history – the ‘habitat’, so to speak, of the Tatar nation – within which a chronologically defined ‘Islamic’ past is mobilised and linked to the present *qua* past. Piety, by contrast, transcends human history: the prophetic/early Islamic experience is not a bounded chronological period, but a source of timeless ethical guidance meant to shape human behaviour until the fulfilment of Scripture. Secondly, heritage presupposes that moral subjects’ relationships with Islam be mediated through the body politic of the Tatar nation, and by extension its quasi-state embodiment-cum-guarantor, Tatarstan. Piety movements, on the other hand, promote the shaping of virtuous, ascetical personhood through direct engagement with Islam’s discursive tradition. Thirdly, heritage’s regimes of spatial pedagogy – e.g. museums, monuments, viewing platforms – demand that individuals move in sites as secular visitors/viewers: simultaneously *regulated* into disciplined, orderly fluxes (cf. Curtis 2008) and *unconcerned* with Islamic norms on attire, gender mixing, decorum, and purity. Pietists take their commitment with them wherever they go. Finally, heritage presupposes a multi-confessional and multiethnic order based on *tolerantnost’* and privatised religion: UNESCO listings and the acquisition of ‘federal importance’ for Tatar Islamic objects construe the Tatars’ spiritual legacy as one among many other contributions to human civilisation, placing Islam on the same footing as other ‘cultures’ within Russia and beyond. Piety presupposes the superiority of the Quranic revelation to other religious traditions and advocates conversion and self-reform.

It would be myopic to state that there is a fundamental incompatibility between heritage sites and doctrinally informed piety. The vast majority of the Tatar pietists I spoke with, even those who most earnestly emphasised the primacy of Islamic universalism over ethnic particularism, showed, unsurprisingly, some degree of attachment to

their Tatar identity and heritage. Many pietists cherish and frequent, or have frequented, heritage sites, which after all *include* places of worship. But the concept of ‘inclusion’ in this context is appropriately ambivalent, suggesting acceptance as well as *confinement* – the word’s etymological origin. The dynamics by which these sites came into being, and which regulate their functioning, emanate from a governmental order founded on the containment of religion within its allocated slot. As such, they are liable to chafe with the universalist principle of Islam. To piety movements, religion is a matter of revealed truths, universally valid and superior to any other, and irreducible to silos or bounded spaces (Benussi 2021; Hirschkind 2006).

Conclusion: secular spaces and secular selves

While expressing a Tatar specificity, Tatarstan’s Islamic heritage regime exists under the aegis of post-Soviet Russia’s illiberal, neo-traditionalist pluralism (Graney 2007; see Yusupova 2016). The creation of spaces where Islam is displayed and celebrated is thus also a strategy to police the boundary between the religious sphere and the public domain: an arrangement that I have dubbed the ‘golden cage’. Among a critical number of post-Soviet Tatars, what makes this arrangement legitimate and persuasive, and capable of eliciting genuinely intense affective responses, is the prestige of a specific model of moral, ethnic, and civic personhood wherein Muslimness emanates from communal belonging in a shared civilisational history rather than self-cultivation under the aegis of a universalist ethical doctrine geared towards salvation in the world to come.

Tatarstan’s Islamic heritage projects are thus instantiations of a specifically *secular* order: Islam is no longer hidden or marginalised as it was in the Soviet era, but is assigned a ‘proper’ place – both physical and discursive – by the external, temporal, avowedly non-confessional authority of the state. I have characterised this mechanism as a ‘golden cage’. To a critical mass of post-Soviet Tatars, particularly those steeped in Soviet upbringing, the golden cage of *miras* gives Islam a proper frame: as a cherished source of ethnic pride and transgenerational solidarity, and a repository of conservative values for some, but also as a potentially ‘excessive’ force that needs to be reined in by temporal state institutions in the name of stability, moderation, and ‘harmony’ at the local and national levels.

Notes

1. According to official data, Tatarstan’s largest group is the predominantly Sunni Muslim Volga Tatars at 53% of the population, followed by Russians at 35%. Smaller groups include Chuvash and Bashkirs (Turkic) as well as Udmurts, Mordvins, and Maris (Finno-Ugric) (Ofitsial’nii Tatarstan 2020). On the multifariousness of Tatar Muslim experiences, and the challenges involved in assessing ‘degrees’ of religiosity, or modes of ethnic identification, or political aspirations in Tatarstan, see Karimova (2017).
2. Fieldwork took place between June 2014 and December 2015, followed by regular research visits in subsequent years. I have visited the Kazan kremlin and Bolġar on multiple occasions, including religious and civic holidays. During my sojourns, I relied on ethnographic methods such as participant observation and semistructured interviews. In addition to ethnographic data, the present contribution also draws on Tatarstani media sources. All participants have given verbal informed consent, in keeping with local sensitivities and as approved by the ethical board of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. All participant data has been anonymised, without altering this piece’s scholarship.

3. Separate from the heritage site, the Russian town also hosts the Church of the Pentecost (under construction as of 2020) and the nineteenth-century Church of Saint Abraham, which was originally located in a nearby village.

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