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978-1-107-03249-1 - Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire, and European Modernity,
1788–1914

Mustafa Tuna

Excerpt

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Introduction

It was winter in the early 1860s. The residents of a Muslim village in the Samara Gubernia of the Russian empire's Volga-Ural region winnowed grain in the cold morning wind. A young boy watched small pieces of chaff float through the air and disappear into the bright rays of the rising sun. He asked his older sister where the chaff went. "To Mekerye," she responded dismissively. Volga-Ural Muslims referred to Nizhny Novgorod's famous annual trade fair as "Mekerye," in reference to the name of the small monastic town Makar'ev, downstream from Nizhny Novgorod on the Volga River, where the fair had first started in the seventeenth century. The wind blew the chaff to the east while Nizhny Novgorod was located hundreds of miles to the west of the young boy's village in Samara. But this did not matter to him on that cold winter day. He did not know where Nizhny Novgorod was anyway. He had never been there and the Muslim peasants in his community typically did not have access to printed maps that could have otherwise allowed him to ascribe significance to the geographic direction of a market town. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, this young boy, whose name was Rızâeddin bin Fahreddin (1858–1936), would become a prominent communal leader and an erudite Islamic scholar with encyclopedic knowledge of world affairs. He would remember the short exchange with his sister from that morning with surprise, as a frustrating sign of the ignorance of his fellow Muslims in the Russian empire, which he believed had to change along with a world itself changing with rapidity.¹

This book investigates the entangled transformations of Russia's Muslim communities in the Volga-Ural region, the tsarist administration, and the transregional vectors of exchange and interaction in the

¹ Raif Märdanov, Ramil Miñnullin, and Süläyman Răximov eds., *Rızaeddin Făhreddin: Fănni-biografik jentük* (Kazan: Ruhıyat, 1999), 10–11. In addition to this collection of materials on Rızaeddin bin Fahreddin, see İsmail Türkoğlu, *Rusya Türkleri Arasında Yenileşme Hareketinin Öncülerinden Rızaeddin Fahreddin* (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 2000); and G. Kh. Abdrafikova and V. Iu. Gabidullina eds., *Materialy k biobibliografii Rızıy Făkhreddinova* (Ufa: IIIaL UNTs RAN, 2010).

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long-nineteenth century (1789–1914) with a focus on that rapid pace of the tsarist empire's latter decades. This is an inherently messy story, as imperial situations often are.² The power that made Fahreddin's villagers spare a portion of their produce every year to pay taxes to the imperial state emanated from St. Petersburg, but when his sister needed a point of geographic reference beyond the small boundaries of their village, she chose a closer market town, not the empire's capital. Fahreddin did not know which way Nizhny Novgorod was located and possibly neither did his sister, but they certainly knew where their parents turned to face the Kaaba in Mecca when they prayed. Fahreddin completed his studies without leaving the Volga-Ural region, but when he contemplated traveling to seek higher knowledge early in his student life, he wanted to go to the madrasas of Bukhara in Transoxiana, not to one of the prominent universities of the Russian empire, such as the ones in St. Petersburg, Moscow, or nearby Kazan. Yet, upon graduating from the madrasa, he traveled to Ufa to receive certification at an institution that the tsarist state had founded in the late eighteenth century to regulate religious and certain civic affairs of Muslims in the empire (the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly), and he soon took a prominent position at that assembly too. The dynamics that defined the lives of Volga-Ural Muslims in the Russian empire as well as the lives of the empire's other subjects were complex, sometimes seemingly paradoxical, and always multifaceted.

Rather than attempting to organize this potentially confusing mess into a tidy yet oversimplified structure for the sake of false argumentative clarity, this book makes a sustained effort to engage the complexity of its subject matter in search of greater historical understanding. The through-line that strings together the resulting multilayered narrative is a focus on the intricate interplay of local, imperial, and transregional influences that shaped the experiences of Volga-Ural Muslims in the Russian empire. Therefore, this book offers first and foremost an informed recognition of the complexity of imperial situations like that of the Russian empire. An effort to identify conceptual tools to make sense of that complexity emanates from this recognition. And the narrative employs those tools to process a broad spectrum of historical data – ranging from macroeconomic indicators to newspaper advertisements, and from highbrow interpretations of a world in change to peasant

² Jane Burbank and Mark von Hagen, “Coming into the Territory: Uncertainty and Empire,” in *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930*, ed. Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen and Anatoly Remnev (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 1–29, highlights this point well.

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Figure 1 Rızâeddin bin Fahreddin.

rumors – thereby painting a holistic picture of the experiences of imperial Russia's Muslims. The resulting historical account presents insights not only to those interested in the Russian empire and its Muslim subjects but also to a broader audience involving the students of empires in general, Islamic studies, world history, and post-colonial studies.

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The primary protagonists of this book are the Volga-Ural Muslims, roughly consisting of the Turkic-speaking Muslim population of the lands to the north of the Caspian Sea and their wide diaspora. The Volga-Ural Muslims represent the northernmost reach of Islam in the premodern world: a status challenged only by the diasporic expansion of Muslim communities in the modern era. More importantly though, having been incorporated into the emerging Russian empire in the mid sixteenth century, the Volga-Ural Muslims have had the longest experience of living as subjects of a conquering non-Muslim power and – with a few exceptional periods – surviving under regimes hostile to Islam to this

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day. Only the Hui Muslims in China have a comparable and, in fact, longer experience of living under non-Muslim powers, but their communities emerged through immigration and conversion, without the shock of imperial conquest that the Volga-Ural Muslims faced in the mid sixteenth century.³

In the centuries following their incorporation into the Russian empire, the Volga-Ural Muslims dispersed over a wide area stretching from St. Petersburg in the west to Kashgaria in eastern China. Moreover, they maintained intense cultural exchange with other Muslim communities in Transoxiana, the Kazakh Steppes, the Caucasus, the Crimea, and increasingly in the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman territories. Between the mid eighteenth and the mid nineteenth centuries, the Russian state encouraged this exchange in order to utilize Volga-Ural Muslims to extend tsarist influence over other Muslim peoples in the empire's borderlands. Yet, in the late-nineteenth century, tsarist agents also problematized the Volga-Ural Muslims' broad reach by suspecting them of being sympathizers and potential collaborators of the Ottoman Empire and by restricting their contacts with Muslims elsewhere in Russia, especially the Kazakhs. As a result, thanks to the diasporic expansion and wide cultural reach of the Volga-Ural Muslims, the scope of this book extends from the Volga-Ural region to a broader Muslim-inhabited geography, to the Russian empire itself, to Europe, and eventually to a global web of relations. As such, the history of Volga-Ural Muslims in the Russian empire provides a revealing case to study many historiographically significant questions, from the vitality of empires to the dynamics of imperial situations and from the expansion of European modernity in colonial or imperial settings to the integration of Muslims in non-Muslim societies.

Today, a contemporary map would identify at least two Muslim "nations" – Tatars and the Bashkirs – in the Volga-Ural region, but this should be considered the outcome of many layers of tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet identity politics, with limited relevance for the pre-revolutionary period. Nationalist ideas emerged among Volga-Ural Muslims only in the last decades of the tsarist regime and did not produce fully fledged nations before the Soviet era. I use "Volga-Ural Muslim" as a relatively neutral designation with more historical validity for the tsarist era, while turning to various other ethnic and tribal categories – such as Tatar, Bashkir, Noghay, Mishar, and Tipter – that existed among Volga-Ural Muslims to distinguish between those categories when necessary or to

³ Michael Dillon, *China's Muslim Hui Community: Migration, Settlement and Sects* (London: Curzon Press, 1999).

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reflect their usage in specific sources. Russian and European observers used “Tatar” to refer to Volga-Ural Muslims in general too, but the term had broader connotations, designating Muslims in a wider geography, including the Crimea, South Caucasus, and Siberia, and even non-Muslims, such as the Kräshens, also known as the “Baptized Tatars.”⁴

We also need to qualify the term “imperial Russia,” for it simultaneously refers to the tsarist state and its agents, the territories and peoples ruled by the tsarist state, and the institutions that the tsarist regime created and employed to govern. Even after we differentiate between such aspects of empire, we still need to recognize that these entities interacted in different ways in different imperial contexts and periods. The “imperial turn” since the end of the Cold War provided us with excellently nuanced histories of empires, but ironically, the cumulative upshot of this new attention to empire has been an essentialist assertion of the superiority of empires over nation-states in accommodating human diversity.⁵ Empires did not possess an essential nature; they were evolving structures with multiple faces. The Volga-Ural Muslims remember their subjection to the Russian empire before the mid eighteenth century as a horrendous experience characterized by forced conversions and expulsion from fertile lands. Catherine II (r. 1762–96) altered these circumstances as she built an imperial model based on governing through intermediaries. However, yet another model based on unmediated governance emerged from the Great Reforms of Alexander II’s reign (1855–81).⁶ In short, the Russian empire revealed many faces in different phases of its history. *Imperial Russia’s Muslims* analyzes how the shifts between these phases affected Volga-Ural Muslims in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Beneath the overarching trends of imperial governance, the interventions of particular imperial institutions or agents could affect an empire’s subjects in diverse ways too. Different ministries of the tsarist government had different priorities, and their policies regarding Muslims did not necessarily agree. More notably, the institution of *zemstvos* as local

⁴ Allen J. Frank, *Islamic Historiography and “Bulghar” Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia* (Boston: Brill, 1998), 42–43.

⁵ Among many sources on the “imperial turn,” see Ilya Gerasimov, “In Search of a New Imperial History,” *Ab Imperio*, 2005 (1): 33–56; Michael David-Fox, Alexander M. Martin, and Peter Holquist, “The Imperial Turn,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 2006 7(4): 705–12; Alan Mikhail and Christine M. Philliou, “The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2012 54(4): 721–45.

⁶ Charles Robert Steinwedel, “Invisible Threads of Empire: State, Religion, and Ethnicity in Tsarist Bashkiria, 1773–1917” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1999), especially 4–5, provides a similar argument.

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bodies of governance in the Great Reforms era (1861–81) and the increased involvement of Muslims in other local administrative forums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created ample room for variations between central state policies and the acts of local administrative organs. These variations moderated the Volga-Ural Muslims' overall experience as subjects of the late Russian empire, even though a survey of central state policies alone would present the bleak picture of an assimilationist government attempting to limit the cultural livelihood of its Muslim subjects.

Finally, a more complete understanding of the Volga-Ural Muslims' overall experience in late imperial Russia requires an examination of their mundane circumstances and encounters, which were admittedly shaped by but not limited to the binary of state–subject relations. The world surrounding an average Volga-Ural Muslim's daily experiences changed exceedingly fast in the last decades of the long nineteenth century. This was part of a global transformation marked by the acceleration of time, reduction of distances, industrialization of production, and supposed human victories over nature – by railways and steamboats, telegraphy and print media, machinery and cash crops, and penicillin and public health projects.⁷ “Modernity,” or more precisely “European modernity,”⁸ is a shorthand for these processes (the list of which may well be expanded) as they emerged and evolved in western Europe – with North America in its wake – and spread to other parts of the world at varying degrees, speeds, and forms.⁹ However, “modernity” is a loaded term with multiple connotations, including references to much earlier and much later phenomena.¹⁰ Therefore, I choose to use it sparingly throughout this book and instead, focus on describing the processes of transformation at play in various contexts.

These processes of transformation moved from Europe outward, as Europe provided the models, technology, and, sometimes the push for change. Antonio Gramsci's theory of “cultural hegemony” may be a

⁷ For an insightful analysis of this process, see Stephen Kotkin, “Modern Times: The Soviet Union and the Interwar Conjunction,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 2001 2(1): 111–64.

⁸ For a Eurocentric definition of modernity, see Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 1–2.

⁹ An inspiring account regarding the nature of this spread is Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1947) along with Fernando Coronil, “Introduction: Transculturation and the Politics of Theory: Countering the Center, Cuban Counterpoint,” in *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Among many sources, see *Daedalus: Early Modernities*, 1998 127(3); and *Daedalus: Multiple Modernities*, 2000 129(1).

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useful way to consider this process if we imagine hegemony on a global scale, with Europe's (and later North America's) cultural frame gradually defining the "norm" in the rest of the world.¹¹ This seemed spontaneous as Europe's cultural frame spread to various regions of the world, claiming legitimacy primarily through the mediation of intellectual networks, but it also involved and eventually produced a significant level of coercion that materialized not only in physical force, as in the "opening" of China to free trade, but also in emulative pressure, as in the deliberate choice of Meiji reformists to transform Japan in the image of Europe in the late nineteenth century.

European modernity affected the Russian empire's western borderlands first and proceeded rapidly in an eastward direction following the railway lines that covered European Russia in a dense web by the turn of the twentieth century. But this transformative process faded beyond the Ural Mountains, as only a single railway line sliced through Siberia. Two Russias emerged in the end: one in the lands to the west of the Ural Mountains and one to their east. The Volga-Ural Muslims inhabited the frontier zone between these two worlds. With a sharp comparative perspective resulting from their in-betweenness, some of them looked up to Europe as a model of emulation and down upon their coreligionists as ignorant masses to be molded in Europe's image: a project in the making. This book carefully distinguishes that intellectual project (often referred to as "Jadidism" in the literature) from the actual processes of transformation that shaped the everyday lives of Volga-Ural Muslims in late imperial Russia, thereby revising conventional historiography's tendency to equate the experience of Volga-Ural Muslims with the ideas and efforts of progressive intellectuals among them.¹²

¹¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12.

¹² For examples of works that read Volga-Ural Muslim history through the lens of progressive intellectuals, see Cafer Seydahmet Kırmır, *Gaspırah İsmail Bey* (Istanbul: Türk Anonim Şirketi, 1934); Serge A. Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, *La presse et le mouvement national chez les musulmans de Russie avant 1920* (Paris: Mouton, 1964); Akdes Nimet Kurat, "Kazan Türklerinde 'Medeni Uyanış' Devri," *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, 1966 24 (3–4): 95–194; Abdullah Battal-Taymas, *Kazan Türkleri: Türk Tarihinin Hazin Yaprakları* (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1966); Khusain Khasanovich Khasanov, *Formirovanie tatarskoi burzhuaznoi natsii* (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1977); Ayşe Azade-Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986); and Christian Noack, *Muslimischer Nationalismus im russischen Reich: Nationsbildung und Nationalbewegung bei Tataren und Baschkiren: 1861–1917* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000).

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Since the Cold War the literature on the history of Volga-Ural Muslims in tsarist Russia has improved significantly beyond this conventional historiography and made important contributions to the “imperial turn.” Some of the best studies in the field sifted through dusty files in the archives to explore the views, predicaments, anxieties, and policies of Russian imperial agents and institutions about the presence of Muslims in *their* empire.¹³ Others provided us with detailed accounts of religious debates, institutions, and to some extent, daily life among Volga-Ural Muslims primarily by looking at the previously little explored writings (mostly manuscripts) of Islamic scholars.¹⁴ Still others combined archival data with insights from late imperial Russia's Turkic press to reveal the social, cultural, and economic transformation of Volga-Ural Muslim communities in ways underexplored before.¹⁵ And finally, a few scholars focused on the interaction of Russia's Muslims with the tsarist state beyond a more conventional resistance paradigm.¹⁶

¹³ Some outstanding works in this category are Steinwedel, “Invisible”; Robert P. Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), especially 86–157 and 264–308; Paul W. Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia's Volga-Kama Region, 1827–1905* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), especially 177–99; Wayne Dowler, *Classroom and Empire: the Politics of Schooling Russia's Eastern Nationalities, 860–1917* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), especially 120–49; and Elena I. Campbell, *Muslim Question and Russian Imperial Governance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ See, for instance, Michael Kemper, *Sufis und Gelehrte in Tatarien und Baskirien, 1789–1889: der islamische Diskurs unter russischer Herrschaft* (Berlin: K. Schwarz, 1998); Frank, *Islamic Historiography*; Daniel Damirovich Azamatov, *Orenburgskoe Magometanskoe Dukhovnoe Sobranie v kontse XVIII–XIX vv.* (Ufa: Gilem, 1999); Allen J. Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia: The Islamic World of Novouzensk District and the Kazakh Inner Horde, 1780–1910* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Rafik Muhammetshin, *Tatarskii traditsionalizm: osobennosti i formy proiavleniia* (Kazan: Meddok, 2005); Allen J. Frank, *Bukhara and the Muslims of Russia: Sufism, Education, and the Paradox of Islamic Prestige* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Rozaliya Garipova, “The Transformation of the Ulama and the Shari'a in the Volga-Ural Muslim Community under Russian Imperial Rule” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2013).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Noack, *Muslimischer*; and Radik Salikhov, *Tatarskaia burzhuaziia Kazani i natsional'nye reformy vtoroi poloviny XIX-nachala XX v.* (Kazan: Izdatel'stvo Master Lain, 2000). Many works in this category remain in dissertation format. See Agnès Kefeli-Clay, “Kräshen Apostasy: Popular Religion, Education, and the Contest over Tatar Identity (1856–1917)” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Arizona State U., 2001); James H. Meyer, “Turkic Worlds: Community Representation and Collective Identity in the Russian and Ottoman Empires, 1870–1914” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University, 2007); Danielle M. Ross, “From the Minbar to the Barricades: The Transformation of the Volga-Ural 'Ulama into a Revolutionary Intelligentsia” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2011); and Madina V. Goldberg, “Russian Empire-Tatar Theater: The Politics of Culture in Late Imperial Kazan” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009).

¹⁶ Azamatov, *Orenburgskoe*; Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Norihiro

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In this last group, Robert Crews' treatment of the tsarist state's "policy of toleration" toward Islam (which involved not only letting the Muslims be, but also transforming their religious institutions into instruments of imperial rule) especially resonated and found broad acclaim among the students of the imperial turn.¹⁷ Yet, most specialists on Russia's Muslims have criticized (sometimes even dismissed) Crews' argument as overly favorable to the tsarist state, disregarding of regional and periodic differences, and poor in representing Muslim points of view beyond what might be gleaned from the records of adjudicated conflict situations.¹⁸ Beneath this criticism lies an objection to the rosy image of empires, and especially the Russian empire, which has evolved from the imperial turn and, according to Adeeb Khalid, has become "absurd" taken to an "extreme."¹⁹

Imperial Russia's Muslims intervenes in this debate and argues that the Russian imperial situation, which involved multiple layers of human interaction at the local, governmental, and transregional levels, was too complex and multifaceted to provide a definitive answer to the question of empires' abilities in accommodating difference, especially as an indicator of their endurance.²⁰ Instead, *Imperial Russia's Muslims* highlights

Naganawa, "Molding the Muslim Community through the Tsarist Administration: Mahalla under the Jurisdiction of the Orenburg Muhammedan Spiritual Assembly after 1905," *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, 2006 (23): 101–23; Norihiro Naganawa, "Holidays in Kazan: The Public Sphere and the Politics of Religious Authority among Tatars in 1914," *Slavic Review*, 2012 71(1): 25–48; and Stefan B. Kirmse, "Law and Empire in Late Tsarist Russia: Muslim Tatars Go to Court," *Slavic Review*, 2013 72(4): 778–801.

¹⁷ Crews, *For Prophet*. Also see Robert Crews, "Empire and the Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia," in *American Historical Review*, 2003 108(1): 50–83. For examples of Crews' reception, see Mikhail Dolbilov, "Russifying Bureaucracy and the Politics of Jewish Education in the Russian Empire's Northwest Region (1860s–1870s)," in *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, 2007 (24): 112–43; Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 112; and Eugene M. Avrutin, *Jews and the Imperial State: Identification Politics in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 35.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Michael Kemper, "Review of *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*," *Die Welt des Islams*, 2007 47(1): 126–129; Adeeb Khalid, "'Tolerating Islam' review of *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and empire in Russia and Central Asia*," *London Review of Books*, 24 May 2007; Michael Khodarkovsky, "Review of *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*," *The American Historical Review*, 2007 112(5): 1491–1493; and Alexander Morrison, "Review of *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 2008 86(3): 553–557. Rozaliya Garipova's recent dissertation offers a fresh revision of many of Crews' analyses as well. Garipova, "The Transformation."

¹⁹ Khalid, "Tolerating Islam". Also see Adeeb Khalid's objection to a similarly pro-empire argument in Adeeb Khalid, "Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 2000 1(4): 691–99.

²⁰ Two important and inspiring works dealing with this question are Barkey, *Empire*; and Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

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the complexity and inherent ambiguity of imperial situations in the case of the Russian empire. It builds on the insights that the divergent vantage points of the earlier literature offer, and with the benefit of fresh evidence from various source categories, it constructs a new conceptual model for studying multiple layers of human interaction in imperial contexts.

Domains: A conceptual model for writing history

Two diametrically opposite forces work against each other in the process of historical writing. While things, humans, events, and institutions relate to one another in inseparable and often unpredictable ways, historians observe snapshots of past reality and convey observations and ideas through framed categories that the human intellect needs in order to process data. Therefore, writing history requires creating a coherent narrative with a beginning and an end from snapshots of seemingly unending webs of relations. Some level of distortion remains inevitable as the historian chooses what to include and what not to include in the resulting narrative, therefore, further delimiting what is already limited by the available snapshots of past reality.²¹ With this predicament in mind and in an effort to preserve the intricate and elusive nature of history as much as possible, even as it is cast in the molds of textual narrative, I chose to follow a fluid model of delimitation that focuses on a particular area, like eyesight, and moves as needed while constantly maintaining a gradually dimming view of the rest of the visible universe.

To put that eyesight model into practice, I introduce the term “domains” as a conceptual tool highlighting certain patterns and connections in history while maintaining a sense of their actual fluidity. This concept emerged in the early stages of my research on the Volga-Ural Muslims as I compared their experiences with those of Russia’s Jewish communities for which the outstanding work of Benjamin Nathans on “the crossing of visible and invisible boundaries” by Jews in the late Russian empire served as a primary reference.²² Beginning in the 1790s, Russian imperial law confined the residence of Jews to the visible boundaries of the Pale of Permanent Jewish Settlement in Russia’s

²¹ For an inspiring discussion of the process of delimitation in writing, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 15–16. For another work that has inspired my search for a new model of inquiry that transcends the limits of purely regional, confessional, or ethnic categories, see Alexei Miller, “Between Local and Inter-imperial: Russian Imperial History in Search of Scope and Paradigm,” *Kritika*, 2004 5(1):7–26.

²² Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), quote on 1.