The Tatars

People Profile

People INTERNATIONAL

Who are the Tatars?

The name 'Tatar', also spelt 'Tartar', means 'archer' and is historically somewhat ambiguous. Over the centuries it has referred to different groups of people. Today it primarily refers to the Turkic people of the Volga region of Russia. There are three main groups of Tatars: the Volga (Kazan), the Crimean and the Siberian. Formerly, Kazan Tatars would refer to themselves as 'Bolghar' or simply 'Muslim'. They are now a settled people, mainly peasants or merchants who have totally lost their traditional tribal structure.

It is most likely that the Tatars are descendants of the people called "Bulgars" who arrived in the area of the Volga in the early 8th century AD. They were well established and became a flourishing state. In the 13th century the Bulgar State was conquered by the Mongols, and it eventually became the seat of the Kazan (Tatar) Khanate. During this time it developed as a centre of Islamic scholarship. Today there are an estimated 8,324,000 Tatars, the majority, 7,121,000 live in Russia. Substantial colonies of Tatars have dispersed since the 1800s to live in nearly every republic of the former Soviet Union, in particular Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Tatars have a wide range of appearances, from fair skin and blue eyes to those resembling Mongols.

History of Tatarstan: One quarter of all Tatars live in their homeland of Tatarstan, situated within Russia. The capital, Kazan, was conquered by the Russians in 1552 under the leadership of Ivan the Terrible. On May 27th 1920, Tatarstan was constituted as an Autonomous Region, meaning that it supposedly had a partial autonomy but was not a fully-fledged republic of the USSR. In 1990 the Tatar Republic declared sovereignty, which served to heighten consciousness of its culture and heritage. It became an independent state while remaining associated with the Russian Federation.

Culture

Language: Tatar is a member of the Kypchak west Turkic language group of the Altaic family. It is closely related to Bashkir. The written Tatar language has been based on the Cyrillic script since 1938. The majority of Tatars also speak Russian.

Literature and Education: Tatars have a history of literature, over ten centuries long, including a considerable 19th century literature, from the period of nation building, attesting to a high level of literacy. Even Lenin declared on one occasion that the Tatars were better educated than the Russians are. There are 1800 libraries in Tatarstan containing over 20 million books in Tatar.

Art: Tatars have a rich and long history of the arts, particularly theatre, orchestral music, opera, ballet, architecture and literature.

Dress: Traditional Tatar dress consists of leather boots and long jackets with baggy trousers, or a long ruffled skirt for women, displaying Tatar national patterns. Today Tatars dress like the rest of Russians. Many men wear 'kalpaks' (dark, lamb-skin hats).

Diet: Traditional and popular Tatar dishes include *Pilmen:* small meat-filled dumplings cooked in soup or stew; *Peremetch:* fried circles of dough, filled with meat; *Kobete:* pie with layers of dough filled with rice and chicken, and raisin compote.

Economy

Traditionally the Tatars cultivated barley, wheat, millet, and a variety of fruit especially melons, and walnuts. They were also famous for their crafts and trade skills, particularly in figured shoes and other leather goods, felt, embroidery, furs, honey and beeswax, stone-masonry, carpentry and building. Tatars held a leading economic position among the Muslims of the Russian Empire. Today Tatarstan is one of the most economically developed republics of the former USSR. It has a powerful industrial potential, based on machine-building, oil-producing, chemical and light industry, and a stable agricultural sector.

Society

Family Structure: Tatar culture is heavily influenced by Islam. Their social structure remains strongly patriarchal, with the father serving as legal head of the household and private plot. His word is final on all family issues, notably family earnings, deciding when and how the income is spent. When the father dies, he is succeeded by his widow or, if she is also dead, by his oldest brother or sister. Work, although not strictly regimented, is divided along traditional lines. The women cook, carry water, wash clothes, and tend livestock; the men engage in more strenuous labour. Tatars are somewhat less traditional in that they have been more influenced by Russification. Therefore, the family unit tends to be small with the modern rural Tatar family reckoned in two, or at the most, three generations living under one roof.

Marriage: Most Tatars prefer to marry within their own people group. However many of the extended family traditions have been dropped or diluted, especially in the cities, and intermarriage is becoming more common. Polygamy is permitted but is not usual. The traditional Tatar wedding, *Nikah*, has a very rigid structure and is held in the absence of the bride and groom. It starts with the symbolic registration of the marriage contract *Meher*. This contains the husband's obligations to the wife, particularly in the case of divorce. The couple gives their consent to marriage through witnesses, then part of the Koran is read followed by the wedding banquet. It is only after this banquet that the couple are considered to be married. In the 1990s the *Meher* completely disappeared from the ceremony, having lost its legal power, and it became traditional for the couple to take part in the *Nikah*.

Religious life and Islam

The Tatars adopted Islam as their religion in 922 AD. During the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries Islam came under persecution from the Russians, but every time their mosques were burned or razed to the ground, the Tatars returned to build new places of Muslim worship. In 1744 alone, 418 mosques were destroyed as part of an attempt by the Orthodox Archbishop of Kazan to remove all traces of Islam from the area. After 17 years, not a single mosque was left in Kazan, but it failed to eliminate Islam from the popular consciousness. Today about 90% of Tatars profess the Sunni Islamic faith, though probably only about 5-10% are "true Muslims" according to a Kazan Imam. Many Tatars see being a Muslim as an important element in preserving their national identity. 38% of Tatars are secularist and 1.5% follow Orthodox Christianity.

Contact with Christianity

History: The Tatar impression of Christianity has been marred by attempts to convert the Tatars to Russian Orthodoxy through coercion and tax inducements during the 17th and 19th centuries. This was part of a wider policy by the Tsars to pursue Russification. It had little long-term success but led to an intensification of the Tatars' bitterness and antagonism towards the Russians and therefore Christianity. Many attempts even motivated the few proselytes that had been won to return to Islam.

The Tatar Church Today: There are an estimated 20,000 Tatar Orthodox Christians, but it can be legitimately questioned whether many of these have a meaningful personal faith. In 1990 there were around 25 Tatar Protestant Christians. By 1999 this had increased to 2,440. The majority of these are in Russia (2,100), with 310 in Kazakhstan and 30 in Kyrgyzstan. These Protestant Tatars belong to the Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist and Independent churches. Of these believers only about 10% speak Tatar. Since 1997 a bill passed in Russia makes it difficult for non-Orthodox Christian churches to become legally registered and recognised as a "religious organisation". Without this they are unable to own land or buildings, carry out charitable work or teach their beliefs to outsiders. They must also inform the local secular authorities about their formation and each activity. However, an indigenous cell group from a large Charismatic church in Kazan has been reconstituted as a church (conducted in Tatar). One other Tatar cell group is known to exist but there probably are more. 60% of Tatars have never heard the Gospel.

Bible Translation: The Tatars are the largest people group in the former Soviet Union with the least Scripture available in their language. In 1998 the four Gospels, Acts, Psalms, and twelve titles of Christian books were available in Tatar, including "The life of Christ". There are also limited radio broadcasts and the Jesus film in Tatar. There is a real need for more translation to be done.

Please pray:

- For translation work of the entire bible and other Christian literature into Tatar, to be completed and well distributed and read.
- For the development of a truly authentic Tatar church.
- That the nominally Orthodox Tatars will come to a living faith in Jesus.
- That God would send more workers to the field to work with Tatars, especially from non-western cultures.
- That the Russian churches in Tatarstan may be used of God to reach the Tatars.
- That the churches outside Tatarstan would catch the vision for reaching the Tatars in their communities.
- For the Russian and Tatarstan governments, that peace may prevail and freedom of becoming a Christian will be unhindered.

People International

People International is working to bring the love of Christ to the Muslim peoples of Central Asia and to establish churches among them. These people include such groups as the Aimaq, Azeris, Baluchis, Bashkirs, Dagestanis, Hazaras, Hui, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Kurds, Pukhtuns, Tajiks, Tatars, Turkmen, Turks, Uyghurs and Uzbeks.

People International is an interdenominational Christian mission, which has been in existence since 1979. Since that time, we have been researching, visiting and recruiting for Central Asia and making it known to the Christian church. We now have over 90 workers living in Central Asia, involved in church planting, friendship evangelism, Bible translation, literature distribution, medical work and teaching, among other things.

If you are interested in being involved in the work of reaching the Tatar people, then please contact People International at:
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