

THE IDEA OF IDEL-URAL

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The region between the Volga (in Tatar: Idel) river and the Ural mountains was not always an easternmost periphery of Europe. A thousand years ago, it was a prosperous centre of Eurasian cultures, extending trade links to Scandinavia as well as Persia. The city of Bolgar could rival with any western European capital, and its splendour amazed Arab travellers like Ibn Fadlan, who was one of the first Muslim missionaries at the Bolgar court in 922. Bolgar had been founded by the descendants of the notorious Huns, who converted into Islam and balanced between the declining Khazar state and the ascending Viking federation that ultimately became Russia. Some of the Bolgars migrated into the Balkans, mixed with Slavs and became Bulgarians. Others turned into the Caucasus and are today known as the Balkars. In 1236, the city of Bolgar was sacked by Mongolian invaders, who established the Golden Horde as a part of their vast empire. Later on, the Golden Horde itself disintegrated into several khanates, one of which was centered in Kazan, the successor of Bolgar until its conquest by Russia in 1552.

Remnants of the old Huns and Bolgars may be seen in the Chuvash, a Turkic nation living at the west bank of the Volga, which has retained an archaic language and many pagan habits. The mixture of the Mongolian nobility and warriors with Bolgars and other local (Fenno-Ugric) peoples produced the Tatar nation. Because of their bad reputation in Russia (no history books fail to demonize the "Tatar yoke"), some Tatars would still prefer to call themselves Bolgars. On the other hand, neighbouring Fenno-Ugric peoples also adopted many Turkic and Islamic features from the Tatars and felt an affinity with them despite of different classification by scholars. Thus the Middle Volga region remained mainly Islamic and non-Russian, and whenever there was a major revolt against Russian colonial rule, the Tatars were joined by the Chuvash, Bashkir, Cheremish (Mari), Mordva and other nations.

In 1917, these nations of the Volga-Ural region founded a common state called Idel-Ural with 14-15 million inhabitants, of whom less than a third part were ethnic Russians. They aspired for autonomy, but were suppressed by the Bolsheviks next year. Soviet Russia applied now the well-known strategy of "divide and rule": instead of a single entity, stretching all the way to the Caspian Sea and bordering to Turkestan, as would have been natural and justified, the region was split into half a dozen different autonomous republics.

The first Soviet Russian creation to replace Idel-Ural, today's Bashkortostan, was established in 1919, but contained more Tatars than Bashkirs. Actually, most of the Bashkirs did not really know, what distinguished them from the Tatars in the first place. Even the most famous Bashkir nationalist leader, Zeki Validi Togan, was himself soon disillusioned, escaped abroad and became an advocate of Turkic unity. In 1920, the Chuvash nation - or rather, less than half of it - was "rewarded" with its very own lilliput autonomy. The Tatars were left with a rump-Tatarstan around Kazan, but only a quarter of all Tatars lived within its borders, while almost half of the population was Russian! In the 1930s, the process was finalized for to the Fenno-Ugric people: a quarter of the Mordva nation was united into a titular republic, where most of the population speaks Russian, and less than half of the Cheremish nation got their own among equal many Russians. It became clear, that the nationalist division of Idel-Ural only served the ideas of administrative centralization and cultural russification of the whole region.

The president of Idel-Ural, Sadri Maksudi Arsal, escaped to Finland in 1918. He was well received by the Finnish foreign minister, who remembered his valiant defences for the national self-determination and constitutional rights of Finland in the Russian Duma. The president in exile also met officials from Estonia before continuing in 1919 to Sweden, Germany and France, in a quest for western support.

When the national minorities and the autonomous republics of the Russian federation were allowed again to search for their identity and political interests, the idea of a common Idel-Ural federation was reborn. There are, however, many obstacles on the way ahead:

1. Local ("republican") leaders like Mintimer Shaimiyev, president of Tatarstan, are the same old communists nominated by the Soviet leadership before any reforms of the society were initiated, and it still is in their personal and family interests to continue the administrative division and extend their terms of office, which has enabled them to privatize the natural wealth (oil, gas, etc.), and to keep all power concentrated in their own hands. It is unlikely, that they would ever cede power democratically. The situation reminds us somewhat of that of pre-1860s Italy and Germany with their numerous principalities;
2. The federal authorities in Moscow ("Centre") will continue to divide and rule. Although Vladimir Putin as president of Russia has issued a decree about the formation of larger administrative units, in the 19th century fashion of General Gouvernements, he will not proceed to break any loyal "republican" leaders, and since the general governors will be nominated instead of elected, there is not even a chance of democratical representation at that level.
3. Popular feelings - specially among the ethnic Russian populations - can easily be manipulated by disinformation and provocations. The Tatars can be labelled "Turkic nationalists" or "Islamic extremists" to scare off Fenno-Ugric sympathisants. Russian culture, academic research and impressions among foreigners are full of Orthodox Christian and Soviet myths, that serve well if needed. The Arabs, for example, have never learned or cared about the fate of their co-religionists, because they have been fixed to other issues and tend to identify Tatars with the conquerors of Baghdad in 1258. The Armenians, who have strong lobbies in the USA and France, used to call their neighbouring enemies, Azerbaijani Turks, as Tatars. European historiography demonized both the Huns and the "Tartars", referring to the Greek underworld, Tartaros.
4. The Turkic and Fenno-Ugric nationalities themselves may not have too many prejudices and stereotypes of each other, and there is not a general animosity against Russians as individual people, but there is a terrifying lack of healthy self-respect. After generations of oppression, ridicule and deep hate (Russians put the blame of all their problems on the "Tatar yoke"), Tatars and the other Idel-Ural nations suffer from a collective inferiority complex, feeling all the time the need to explain and excuse for their very existence. The development of an influential, united Idel-Ural movement, however, can only be secured if nobody feels his identity threatened.
5. Even if neither the domestic elite nor the Kremlin, and neither external provocations nor internal confusions would weaken the idea of Idel-Ural, there would necessarily remain certain conflicts of interests. The main problem is, that only a part of the people in question would benefit from geographical solutions, home rule or independence. Residents of Moscow or other parts of Russia would be cut out and left to suffer possibly increasing discrimination and pogroms. This happened to the Jews who did not emigrate from Russia, and it is happening to the Chechens and other Caucasians who are feeling the consequences of secession.

For the reasons listed above, Idel-Ural is likely to remain more an Ideal Ural, a permanent vision of what could have been, or a utopy to be reached in a far-away better future. Italy and Germany could not have united by 1871, if foreign pressure would have overweighted the pan-Italian and pan-German movements. Greece, Armenia, and Israel could hardly have become what they are now, if there would have been no massive immigration caused by foreign interventions and accompanied by massacres. The birth process of nations is extremely painful, particularly in politically hostile environments. Both

Idel-Ural and a federative North Caucasus succumbed in 1918 to Russian intervention rather than to any domestic division. Switzerland was not born as a confederation suddenly and peacefully.

The peoples of Idel-Ural need first to develop a deep sense of solidarity and traditions of mutual assistance, but also the outside world could assist such a positive trend by supporting the idea and by giving a voice for those who do not seek salvation in the mercy of the Kremlin or in the petty pseudo-patriotism of former party bosses turned overnight to statesmen and big businessmen at the costs of their peoples.

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(The author has edited a book named "Mishäärit" about the Mishar Tatars, who form the oldest Islamic community in Finland. The book is presented at the publisher's homepage <http://www.clinet.fi/~zinger/books/>)