

Islamic Identities in Post-Soviet Russia: Realities and Representations

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Islamic Identities in Post-Soviet Russia: Realities and Representations

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union there has been huge political and economic upheaval in the Russian Federation, and this has of course impacted on the various ethnic and religious groups living in Russia. In the course of this article I plan to examine the development of Islamic identities in Post-Soviet Russia, with specific reference to the regions of Dagestan and Tatarstan. While academic discussion of these areas does exist, much of the focus in academic literature is on a re-evaluation of Islamic identities in Chechnya given the conflicts that have occurred there. I intend, instead, to discuss the development of Islamic identities in Dagestan and Tatarstan in three main sections; the development of religious identities, ethnic identities and political identities. Obviously these do not constitute three totally independent areas and frequently themes from one area will strongly affect another, but for the purposes of clarity I have constructed the article in this way. I then plan to look at the way in which Islamic identities in Post-Soviet Russia have been represented in the Russian media and popular fiction, and how these compare and contrast with the realities highlighted in the first three sections.

Methodology:

Primary data collected for this project came from various sources; the media, several popular novels in Russia today and reviews of these novels by the Russian press. Data was gathered by using the 'Universal Database of Central Russian Newspapers' and the 'Universal Database of Regional Russian Newspapers', and by performing key word searches for terms such as *Tatarstan + Islam* or *Tatarstan + Muslim*, similar searches were performed replacing *Tatarstan* with *Dagestan*. This provided a huge number of articles which was beyond the scope or timeframe of this project to analyse. 15 articles were selected from these searches and analysed to see how their representations of Tatarstan and Dagestan compared to that of the academic literature. Three contemporary Russian books which include representations of Muslims were brought to the author's attention in the course of research have also been included in the primary data to be analysed.[1] Most of the analysis of this section focuses on reviews of these books as this can be seen to offer an interesting insight into how the Russian public reacted to these books, and thus how representations of Muslims in Russia have evolved in recent years.

Russia's Muslim Population:

The Russian Federation contains nine Muslim republics: Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Dagestan, Chechnya, Adygeva, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Karbardino-Balkiria and Karachayevo-Cherkessia.[2] Calculating the number of Muslims living within Russia's borders however can be problematic; as Walker points out: 'one encounters very different estimates ... from as low as 3 million (or 2 per cent of Russia's total population of 145 million) to as many as 30 million (21 per cent).'[3] The difficulties stem from the fact that different groups in Russia argue for different figures for their own reasons; Islamophobes argue that figures are higher in an effort to scare non-Muslims over the demographic implications, Muslims themselves may also argue a higher figure to gain more state recognition and because the yearly quota set for the *hajj* by Saudi Arabia 'is based on the size of the country's Muslim's community.'[4]

Religious Identity:

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The vast majority of Russia's Muslim population are *Sunnis* (in Dagestan these tend to be *Shafi Sunnis* elsewhere they are *Hanafi Sunnis*), [5] with approximately 620,000 *Shiites Azeris* and small pockets of *Shiites* in minorities of Lezgins and Dargins in the Northern Caucasus.[6] In both Dagestan and Tatarstan the influence of *Sufism* has been particularly prevalent, and has been influential in the formation of current interpretations of Islam for Muslim identities in both these republics.

Interpretations of Islam by Russia's Muslims have been strongly influenced by the effect of Soviet attempts to eradicate religion in the USSR. Kerimov states that 'the whole period from 1917 to 1985 was characterised by struggle, oppression and persecution of religion and religious organisations, although from time to time the party and state to a degree softened their oppression of religion and changed their tactics.'[7] Kerimov rightly highlights the Great Patriotic War and Stalin's death as points where religious policies were relaxed, but Gorbachev's *glasnost* could arguably, by its very definition, be added to that list. Generally however, Kerimov correctly argues that the Soviet state conducted a war of attrition against religion, and Islam was greatly affected by this. From 1928 and 1941 the *Sharia courts* were dissolved, and 'Muslim clergy were removed from participation in citizen's judicial and legal affairs.'[8] Particularly damaging to Islam was the replacement of *mektebs* and *madrassahs* by secular state schools, so that '70 years of existence of Soviet Muslims was not reflected in theological works, because for the whole of that period Islamic theology was dead.'[9] Soviet authorities also attempted to cultivate an 'official Islam' by creating so-called 'Red Mullahs' from the lower ranks of the Islamic clergy who preached a form of Islam that complemented socialist ideals of state ideology.[10] However despite these efforts an unofficial Islam still operated in the Soviet Union, often aided by the official, Soviet-approved Islam, and traditional Islamic practices and teachings were passed to younger generations via word-of-mouth.[11] These practices, as well as aspects of folk culture, have been instilled into Islam (particularly in Dagestan) and this has meant that interpretations of Islam in Russia have taken on specific, regional traits.[12]

Islam first spread to Dagestan in the 7th and 8th centuries, and more than 90 per cent of Dagestan's population has traditionally been Muslim.[13] The religious population in Dagestan are divided into two groups, along ideological lines: 'those centred on European values and those who look towards the East (and first of all, to Islamic norms.) These two groups are nearly equal in number. Those who look towards Europe are much more prevalent among the urban population.'[14] Only 20-25 per cent of the population consider themselves 'believers' in the traditional sense; 'those who observe all requirements of Muslim ritual practice'.[15] This is a result of the impact of Soviet anti-religion policies and the fact that 'in Dagestan there has always existed 'popular Islam', which resulted from the intricate tangle in the popular mind of local beliefs and folklore and the Muslim rituals and dogma.'[16] Local folk traditions in Dagestan have been co-opted into Islamic belief, and many sites such as the graves of local folk heroes in Dagestan have been ascribed significant religious importance which rural populations are particularly drawn to because of 'their alleged ability to work miracles ... [and the] rich and picturesque rituals of worshipping holy places, which simple folk prefer to the intellectual version of Islam propagated by theologians and learned men.'[17] Omelchenko and Sabirova found similar examples of Dagestani Muslims incorporating aspects of folk rituals into their Islamic belief systems from their fieldwork conducted in Dagestan; 'folk and *adat* (customary law) have influenced Islamic identity in Dagestan heavily'.[18] While this has drawn strong criticism from proponents of fundamentalist Islam, the educated *ulema* of Dagestan remains open to such interpretations, largely due to the tolerant nature of the *Shafi madhab* that is predominant in Dagestan.[19]

Islamic belief in Tatarstan differs strongly from Islamic belief in Dagestan due largely to a significantly different historical relationship with Islam. Tatars are Russia's largest non-Russian nationality, and 'the ethnic basis of Islam in the entire Volga region is, above all, identified with the Tatars (including Mishari and Nogai Tatars).'[20] Tatarstan identifies as the 'cradle of Russian Islam' which is 'derived from the conversion of indigenous Bulgars to Islam in 922 A.D.', and also boasts the second largest number of mosques in Russia, second only to Dagestan.[21]

Following the collapse of the USSR, Tatarstan experienced a rebirth of interest in religion and specifically Islam; 'by 1994, 67 per cent of Tatars in Tatarstan declared themselves 'believers''.[22] The renaissance of Islam is also noticeably visible with the construction of mosques in the region, most notably the Kul Sharif Mosque in the Kazan Kremlin (see figure 1).

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Figure 1: Kul Sharif Mosque in Kazan.

Islam in Tatarstan is referred to sometimes as 'Euro-Islam', a term which ascribes to it the attributes of civility and progression usually associated with Europe. This stems largely from the 'reformation-like' movement of *Jadidism* which dominated in 19th century Tatarstan and remained influential into the 20th century. *Jadidism* 'reformed Islam by bringing rationalism to bear in analysis of the Quran, introducing a wider range of secular topics into the education system at *mekteb* and *madrasah*, and placing secular phenomena like language, history and tradition at the forefront of the self-identification of Russian Muslims, mainly those of the Volga-Ural region.'^[23] *Jadidism* encouraged Muslims to move beyond 'purely scholastic methods of reading the Quran and aimed to interpret it with reference to the contemporary context. *Jadidism* [also] linked questions of religion to social and political questions.'^[24] This facilitated a secularisation of Islam in Tatarstan long before the Bolsheviks attempted to eradicate religious belief. Interestingly some contemporary religious thinkers in Tatarstan have argued that Tatar Islam represents an innovative form of Islam due to the fact it shows no animosity to the West, and is capable of absorbing aspects of Western society while retaining Islamic traditions.^[25]

Ethnic Identities:

Islam has also been a significant factor in the renegotiation of ethnic identities in Russia's Muslim republics; 'in Islamic-oriented ethnic communities, Islam is seen as a central component of ethnic identity and thus the development of ethnic identities enhances the symbolic positioning of Islam.'^[26] Indeed 'ethnic and Muslim identity in Russia are inextricably entwined; if only because all Russia's Muslims share an ethnic minority status within the Russian Federation.'^[27] Omelchenko and Sabirova found that respondents 'almost uniformly asserted their Muslim identity' when describing their ethnic identity.^[28] Furthermore many understood their Muslim identity as a birth-right, that 'since their ancestors were Muslims, so they were Muslims and their children would be Muslims.'^[29] There is, thus, a sense among Russia's Muslims that religious and ethnic identities are not separate, that they are related and inform each other.

During the Soviet period Muslims faced persecution not only due to their religious beliefs but were also persecuted as members of ethnic minorities, and 'only at the end of *perestroika* did the persecution of Muslims cease, and at once the Muslim congregations (*jamaat*) at the functioning village and town mosques which had remained intact in Soviet times were legalised.'^[30] Muslims in the Soviet Union interpreted Soviet nationality policies as a new form of 'russification' aimed at incorporating ethnic minorities into the Russian majority and thus eradicating them.^[31] The end of Soviet nationality policies towards ethnic minorities provided an opportunity to minorities to reassert their ethnic identity, something which Muslims in Dagestan and Tatarstan grasped immediately.^[32]

Dagestan is made up of a complex web of different peoples with as many as 102 different nationalities being present in the republic. The major ethnic groups come from three linguistic families namely the Dagestan-Nakh branch of the Iberian-Caucasian language family, the Turkic group in the Altai language family and the Indo-European language family.^[33] In the wake of the collapse of the USSR there was an attempt in Dagestan to fill the ideological vacuum by encouraging the politicization of the 'population along ethnic and religious lines almost simultaneously.'^[34] This resulted in the development of contradictory tendencies in the ethno-religious situation in Dagestan due to the divergent political and socio-economic interests among different ethnic groups, 'complex migration processes, and the tense relations among various ethnic groups.'^[35] In some senses, due mainly to shared historical fates and traditional understanding between ethnic groups, the situation managed to stabilize. In other ways 'the heavy pressure of continued economic instability, falling living standards, and an unfinished transformation,' meant that the cohesion among ethnic groups in Dagestan declined.^[36] Thus ethnic identity in Dagestan in the 1990s can be largely characterised as fragmented, but importantly the fragmentation of these ethnic identities has not led to the large scale conflict and violence which has been notable in neighbouring Chechnya. In fact the ethnic complexity of Dagestan 'has served to constrain extremism amongst any constituent group and led to the development of a process elite bargaining based on the maintenance of ethnic elite parity.'^[37] Similarly Islam has served to act as unifying factor for the plethora of ethnicities in Dagestan with people from all ethnic groups in Omelchenko and Sabirova's fieldwork describing themselves as 'Muslim':

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"We are all Muslims if we live in Dagestan." [38]

Therefore, for Dagestanis, Islam provided a supra-ethnic identity, as 'whilst ethnically extremely diverse, the vast majority of the population of Dagestan are Muslims, making Islam a potentially unifying force.' [39]

Tatarstan in comparison to Dagestan is less ethnically diverse, with Tatars constituting a majority (54 per cent of the population), and ethnic Russians constituting the second largest ethnic group. [40] Tatarstan has a much longer history and sense of national identity than Dagestan; the Tatar nation has existed in some form or other for centuries, being incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1552 by Ivan Grozny whereas the Dagestan Oblast appeared only in 1860. [41] The result is a far more augmented sense of 'Tatar identity' as an ethnic identity in comparison to 'Dagestani identity' which is hard to conceptualise as ethnic given the hugely diverse ethnicities present in Dagestan. However similarities do exist and much in the same way that many Dagestanis interpret being from Dagestan means to be Muslim in 'discussion about who is a Tatar and who belongs to the 'Tatar nation', one point is taken for granted: 'to be Tatar means to be Muslim'. [42] Ethnicity is framed as both a 'personal and intimate thing' and a 'process (of belonging) [that] was set in motion by the fact of 'birth', its momentum was determined by the individual's growing awareness of the uniqueness and richness of popular spirituality as they developed.' [43] Along with Islam providing a basis for a formation of an ethnic identity, Tatar identity has been constructed in the Post-Soviet era in opposition to the Russian 'other' and 'articulated through a 'national grievance complex.' [44] Tatars argued that their sense of identity had been undermined during the Soviet period by emphasis on the Russian language, and the loss of their own, which is why another aspect of the reassertion of ethnic identity in Tatarstan has been expressed through the re-establishment of the Tatar language. [45] The Tatar national language was developed by Kaium Nasiri (1825-1902) and was designed to be comprehensible to all levels of the population and the creation of the Tatar language was seen as 'accomplishing a unique revolution in the field of linguistics.' [46] The language is prevalent in contemporary Tatarstan and exemplifies the extent to which Tatars have managed to reassert their identity in the Post-Soviet era. [47]

Tatarstan is also notable for its level of tolerance among different ethnic groups, and while Tatar identity has been constructed in opposition to the Russian 'other' Omelchenko, Pilkington and Sabirova found that Tatars felt sympathy for Russians 'who had, as an ethnic group, also been damaged by the Soviet period'. [48] Similarly any conflicts that arose were seen as 'issuing from the political realm, never from any latent hostility between people of different ethnic backgrounds themselves.' [49]

Political Identity:

Islam has also been important for realisations of political identity in both Dagestan and Tatarstan. In the political arena Islam has been used as a tool for state building as Bilz-Leonhardt argues: 'all monotheistic religions have at times been understood as providing a comprehensive model for all spheres of human life, including state building. Christianity lost this function with the arrival of the separation of state and religion, but traditional Islam retains it.' [50] While Islam retains a sense of involvement in the state 'the notion of state patronage of Islam is not popular in Russia.' [51] Officially in Russia the state and religion are separate entities, but in reality the line between the two are less defined; 'the nature of the ambivalent symbolic and institutional relationship between church and state in Russia is captured in the preamble of the law on religious freedom, which recognizes "the special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia and in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture."' [52] The law continues to describe the distinction between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' religions, stating that 'Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and unspecified 'other religions' constitute 'an integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia'. [53] Therefore while technically Orthodoxy and Islam are legal equals in Russia, in reality there is far more state emphasis on Orthodoxy; 'while President Putin, like Yeltsin before him, has periodically visited mosques and synagogues, appeared in public with Muslim religious leaders, and called for inter-confessional dialogue and harmony, he has also employed Christian idiom in his discourse, incorporated Orthodox religious symbols in public rituals and ceremonies'. [54]

In Dagestan Islam has become an essential part of political discourse; 'for Dagestani politicians of different persuasions it has become a rule of accepted behaviour to advertise one's adherence to 'Islamic traditions'. [55] In

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her research, Sivertseva found that among the citizens of Dagestan there was a sense of indifference towards politics with as many as 45 per cent of people claiming that they did not support any party.[56] Despite this indifference, Islam has gradually become politicized in Dagestan, with religious figures looking 'more and more often to political institutions in order to accomplish religious goals.'[57] There have also been notable attempts from out with Dagestan to politicise and radicalise Islam in the republic, mostly from neighbouring Chechnya. This reached its peak with an invasion of Dagestan by Chechen and Dagestani militants in an attempt to construct an Islamic state outside of the Russian Federation which precipitated the second Chechen War in 1999.[58] Attempts such as these have been strongly rejected by both the political elites and citizens of Dagestan who do not generally want to secede from the Russian Federation or establish an Islamic state.[59]

Dagestan has also experienced conflict with a sect of Islamic fundamentalists known as the Wahhabis. Views of Wahhabis in Dagestan can be characterised as extremely negative; Wahhabis are associated with extreme views and terrorism, Wahhabism itself has been described as 'a non-Muslim faith', 'a corruption of faith' and having been 'specially invented to provoke strife between Muslims'.[60] While many in Dagestan have been informed by the negative press war waged against Wahhabism, many have also met Wahhabis or attended sermons given by proponents of Wahhabism, but fear of association with terrorism and extremism has provoked strong reactions in Dagestan against Wahhabism:

"I despise them, I hate them, I literally shudder when I think of them." (Dagestan, Dargin woman)[61]

Dagestani political elites have strained to avoid association with Wahhabism and to contain what they see as its growing prevalence in Dagestan, going as far as to actually ban Wahhabism in Dagestan despite this contravening the constitution.[62]

In Tatarstan Islam has been equally co-opted by the political elites in election campaigns and political rhetoric, and 'in the Russian Muslim community, the "Tatarstan model" is synonymous with overt state patronage of Islam.'[63] Although the local vice-*mufti* denies the suggestion that *imams* in Tatarstan are paid by the state 'President Shaimiyev appears to have issued an informal directive to rayon administration chiefs to assist in the construction of a mosque in each village.'[64] The clear distinction remains however that while the political elite may use the popularity of Islam to win favour with voters, Islam as an actual *political force* is not positively viewed in Tatarstan 'being associated with the reactionary policies and mercenary aims of the nationalist movements in the republic.'[65] Islam in Tatarstan is seen as 'necessarily engaged' with the state; 'Islam was viewed primarily as having a moral and ethical role in society and required state support in order to carry out this function.'[66]

As in Dagestan, there has been unease at the perception that Wahhabism may be making inroads into Tatarstan. Views of Wahhabism in Tatarstan are largely informed by the media's negative campaign against it, and are thus themselves mostly negative. Omelchenko, Pilkington and Sabirova found that understandings of Wahhabism were clearest among the intelligentsia who expressed uniformly negative views of it, and as in Dagestan, equated it with Chechnya and thus foreign influences.[67]

Representations of Islamic Identities – Analysis of Primary Data:

Representations of Islamic identities in the Post-Soviet press were surprisingly positive given the conflicts that have taken place in Russia since the collapse of the USSR. Articles found in searches using the 'Universal Database of Central Russian Newspapers' and the 'Universal Database of Regional Russian Newspapers' yielded mostly favourable when commenting on Tatars and Dagestanis. Often articles celebrated Muslim identity and Islamic festivals such as the following article which appeared in 'Vremia i Dengi' entitled '*Congratulations for Kurban-Bairam!*':

'Dear Muslims of Tatarstan! From all souls we congratulate you during the holy celebration of Kurban-Bairam!'[68]

Similarly there were articles describing religious festivities in Dagestan, often by provincial newspapers located far from Dagestan such as the following which appeared in 'Vostochno-Sibirskaja Pravda':

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'Tomorrow, the 27th of December, Muslims around the world will mark the celebration of the end of the fast, which has taken place during the course of the holy month of Ramadan. [69]

Similarly Russian (*Rossiiskie*[70]) Muslims are commonly noted in the Post-Soviet press for their peaceful nature given their adherence to the *Sunni* branch of Islam:

'Russian Muslims have always followed Islam of the Sunni sense which is very peace-loving'[71]

Negative representations of Muslims in the press tended to focus on Wahhabism as an extremist movement that stemmed from, and was fuelled by, foreign influences. Descriptions of Wahhabis tended to paint them as terrifying warriors out to corrupt the young Muslims of Russia:

'The weapons, which are more terrifying than a Kalashnikov, are not to be found in their hands, but in their heads. [72]

Specifically unease is expressed in articles about the prevalence and growth of Wahhabism in Dagestan and Tatarstan. Despite perceptions of Wahhabism found among Dagestanis by Omelchenko and Sabirova during their fieldwork in Dagestan, many articles suggest that Dagestan has succumbed to Wahhabi influence, whereas Tatarstan is depicted as fighting increasingly strong Wahhabi influences within the republic:

'In the State Security Committee of Tatarstan they showed me the levels of penetration of Wahhabism in the territory of the republic.' [73]

The journalist goes on to describe the five stages of Wahhabi penetration into Tatarstan, stating that Dagestan has already fallen victim the fifth which he describes as *'the organisation of mass disorder and seizure of power.'* This obviously stands in stark contrast to comments of the majority of Dagestanis in Omelchenko and Sabirova's research who feared Wahhabism and viewed it extremely negatively, and also that Dagestani politicians have recently banned Wahhabism.

Islam and Muslim identities have also been prevalent in popular fiction in Post-Soviet Russia, particularly so since the second Chechen War and the September 11th attacks in America. The importance of the influence of popular fiction on public opinion should not be underestimated; just as media can be a way in which opinions are informed so too can fiction. Figures 2-4 (below) show the front covers of three examples recent popular fiction in Russia, each of the books use Islam as the central concern of the plot.[74] Representations of Muslims in these works tend describe Muslims in blanket terms without noting different strands of Islam or origins of different Muslims, and descriptions of Muslims tend to be closer to the representations of Wahhabis in the Post-Soviet press.

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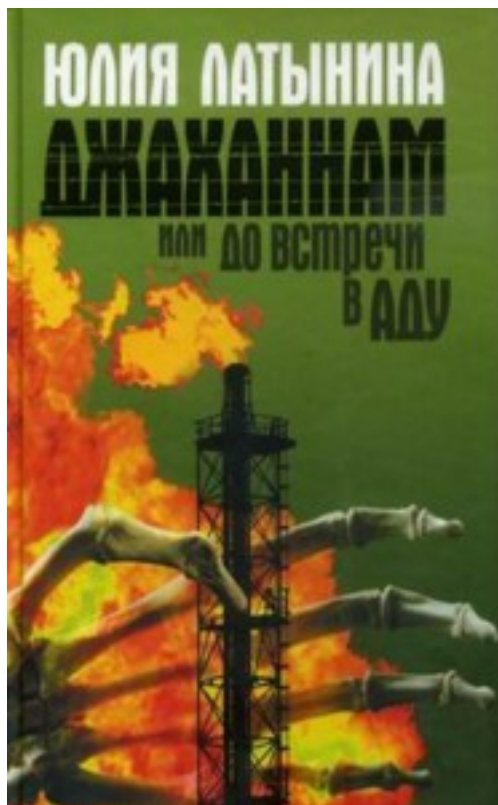
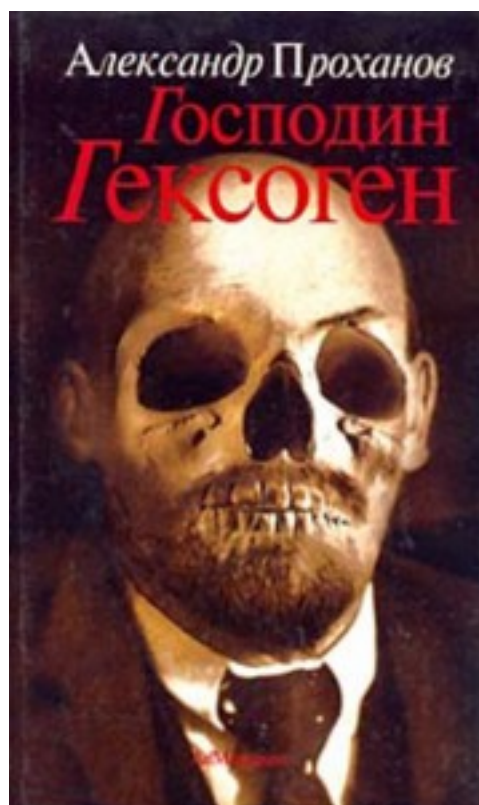


Figure 2[75]



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Figure 3[76]



Figure 4[77]

'Gospodin Geksogen' and 'Dzhakhannam' are thrillers which revolve around concerns about Islamic extremists obtaining a nuclear weapon, but it is 'Mechet Parizhskoi Bogomateri' (The Mosque of Parisian Notre Dame) which provides attempts the most extreme representation of Islam. In her novel Elena Chudinova depicts Europe as a fundamentalist Islamic state, with Christians living in ghettos.[78] The book has been marketed as a thriller and stacked on shelves next to books such as Harry Potter.[79] Chudinova has been defensive over the reactions to her overtly Islamophobic book and has made no secret of her criticism of Islam and Muslims as is apparent in following quotation from an interview she gave to an Orthodox website entitled "The Mosque of Parisian Notre Dame' Anti-utopia? Scandal? Warning?":

– *'Is Russia [just] for those who love Russia?'*

– *'Russia is for those who love Christ.'***[80]**

Chudinova's representations of Muslims are obviously hugely negative, what is surprising though is the book should be marketed alongside children's books such as Harry Potter. Equally surprising is that some reviews of the book saw her book as a prediction of Europe's future, arguing that complacency in the form of liberalism and tolerance towards Muslims in Europe will

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inevitably lead to the fundamentalism she describes in her novel:

'Could this really happen? Could Islamic extremists come to power in the United Arab Emirates? Could they forcibly convert the European nations to Islam? ... I, unfortunately, have to say yes. This is not the most likely outcome of events, but it is very possible. '[81]

Chudinova is obviously more representative of the extreme versions of xenophobia that exist in Russia, and her representations should not be attributed as the views of all Russians by any means. But that her work was marketed to the extent that it was, and that she gave interviews in such central papers as 'Pravda'[82] is illustrative of the scope of popular fiction and thus its ability to influence people. Her representations of Islam and Muslims as violent extremists stand in stark contrast to realities found by Omelchenko and Sabirova in particular in the course of their fieldwork in both Dagestan and Tatarstan, where as previously mentioned respondents abhorred violence and Wahhabi extremism.

Conclusion:

Since the collapse of the USSR Russia's Muslims have renegotiated their identities using Islam as a tool to reassert their religious, ethnic and political identities. Islam in Dagestan and Tatarstan has absorbed not only the effects of Soviet anti-religion policies but also specific regional traits such as folk influences in Dagestan, and the secularizing influences of *Jadidism* in Tatarstan. Consequently while religion has experienced a huge revival in the peoples of these republics, many in Dagestan did not consider themselves true Muslims as they did not strictly adhere to Islamic practices and supplemented Islam with aspects of folk culture. In both Dagestan and Tatarstan, the nature of *Sunni* Islam has meant the cultivation of a tolerant branch of Islam that accepts seemingly different interpretations of Islamic theology in both these republics.

Islam has equally been utilised in both republics to renegotiate ethnic identities, and in both republics there is a perception that Islam, or to be a Muslim, is inextricably intertwined with being Dagestani or Tatar. Ethnic nationalism has been apparent in both republics, largely as a defensive reaction to the perceived 'russification' policies of the Soviet Union. This, however, has not led to widespread conflict, and in ethnically diverse Dagestan, Islam has acted as a unifying force for diverse ethnic identities.

In the political sphere Islam has been increasingly used as a tool by politicians, but the concept of state Islam is unpopular. Equally both republics have experienced a rise in Islamic extremism in the form of Wahhabism. In reality the actual prevalence of Wahhabism seems small, but in the media there appears a tendency to represent the prevalence of Wahhabism as much greater. In the case of Dagestan, Wahhabism is often depicted as a serious problem with some articles even suggesting that Dagestan is consumed by the extremists. Tatarstan is depicted as a less serious case, but many articles emphasise the need to be vigilant about Wahhabism and suggest that it may have already made significant inroads into Tatarstan.

Islamic identities have been co-opted by popular fiction in Russia particularly since the Chechen

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Wars, September 11th and various terrorist atrocities committed in Russia. Depictions of Muslims tend to be generalised, and in the most extreme cases Muslims are depicted as violent extremists with desires to convert the world to fundamentalist Islam. This stands in contrast to the realities of actual perceptions of Muslims in Dagestan and Tatarstan, who view extremism and violence extremely negatively.

While the popular fiction discussed described Islam in an overwhelmingly negative light, the Russian press actually depicted the Muslims of Dagestan and particularly Tatarstan in a favourable light. Many papers published articles celebrating Islamic religious festivals, suggesting that Islamophobia is not as prevalent in the media as expected considering representations of Islam in popular fiction.

Explanation of key terms:

Hajj – ‘The *hajj* is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca during the second week of Dhu al-Hijjah, the final month of the Islamic lunar calendar. All adult Muslims are required to perform the *hajj* at least once in their lifetimes provided they possess adequate resources and their absence from home will not create unreasonable hardships for their families.’[83]

Imam – ‘*Imam* as used in the Quran means leader, foremost, symbol, model, ideal, example, revelation, guide, and archetype.’[84]

Kurban-Bairam – ‘Kurban Bairam is a solemn day of celebration. It is a time when ceremonial visits are paid to one’s elders, relatives, and friends.’[85]

Madrassah – ‘An establishment of learning where the Islamic sciences are taught, the *madrassah* is a college for higher studies.’[86]

Madhab – Sunni School of Law.[87]

Mekteb – An Islamic primary school.[88]

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Mufti – ‘A Muslim jurist capable of giving, when requested, a nonbinding opinion known as a *fatwa*, on a point of Islamic law is termed a *mufti*.’[89]

Ramadan – ‘*Ramadan*, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar (the *hijrah* calendar), is the only month specifically mentioned in the Quran... It was in the second year of *hijrah* (the Muslim Era), prior to the battle of Badr, that believers, men and women, were commanded to fast from dawn to dusk for the whole month.’[90]

Sharia – An Islamic code of law.[91]

Shiite – ‘The term *Shiah* literally means followers, party, group, associate, partisan, or supporters. Expressing these meanings, *Shiah* occurs a number of times in the Quran. Technically the term refers to those Muslims who derive their religious code spiritual inspiration, after the Prophet, from Muhammad’s descendents, the *ahl al-bayt* (literally, people of the house). The focal point of Shiism is the source of religious guidance after the Prophet; although the Sunnis accept it from the *sahabah* (companions) of the Prophet, the Shiah restrict it to the members of the *ahl al-bayt*.’[92]

Sufism – ‘Sufism can be described broadly as the intensification of Islamic faith and practice, or tendency among Muslims to strive for a personal engagement with the Divine Reality.’[93]

Sunni – ‘Practiced by the majority of Muslims, Sunni Islam is based primarily on the *sunnah*, the customary practice of the prophet Muhammad. This practice is preserved in the *hadith* (tradition), which consists of the accounts of what the Prophet said or did. The tradition and the Quran are the main sources of religious law. Also important is *ijma*, the consensus of the religious scholars which reflects the Sunni emphasis on community and its collective wisdom, guided by the Quran and the *Sunnah*.’[94]

Ulema – Refers to a group of Muslim scholars; ‘The Arabic word ‘*ulama*’ is the plural of ‘*alim*’, literally “man of knowledge”.’[95]

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Wahhabism – ‘An eighteenth-century religious revival (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*) movement founded in Nejd in Saudi Arabia by the scholar and jurist Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1702/3-1791/2). Although originally founded as a religious movement designed to purify society of un-Islamic practices, it took on a political dimension in 1744 when an alliance was formed between Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn Saud that placed religious scholars in an advisory and legitimating role to political authority... this movement has been accused in the contemporary era of inspiring militant extremism and global *jihad*, particularly in connection with Al Qae'da and Osama bin Laden.’[96]

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Figure 1: Kul Sharif Mosque in Kazan. Available at:

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Figure 2: Cover of Dzhakhannam. Available at:

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