



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Tatars of Russia

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Overview

Numbering over 6.6 million, the Tatars, or Volga Tatars, are an ethnically and geographically diverse Turkic people who have historically resided in Western Russia.^[1] The Republic of Tatarstan is considered the ethnic homeland of the Tatar people and constitutes one of the administrative divisions of the Russian Federation. Although the LDS Church has maintained an official presence in Russia for over two decades and has maintained a congregation in Tatarstan since 1997, there has been extremely limited missionary work conducted among the Tatar people, no expansion of missionary activity within the Tatar homelands, and essentially no development of an LDS Tatar community of any consequential size.

This case study provides background information on the Tatar people in Russia and the history of the LDS Church in areas where they have traditionally resided. Church growth successes are identified, and opportunities and challenges for future outreach and growth are examined. LDS outreach among other ethnic minority groups in Russia is reviewed and the size and growth of other nontraditional, missionary-focused Christian groups among the Tatar is summarized. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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Tatar Overview

Related to other Turkic Muslim peoples in the former Soviet Union such as the Bashkirs, the Tatars descend from various Turkic tribes who inhabited present-day Russia and Kazakhstan - most notably the Bulgars. Volga Bulgaria was formed in present-day Tatarstan during the ninth and tenth centuries around the same time that Islam was introduced into the area. In 922, Islam became the official religion. The Mongols conquered Volga Bulgaria in 1236 and retained control of the region until their influence weakened, resulting in the establishment of the Kazan Khanate in 1438.^[2] In 1552, the Russians conquered Kazan Khanate, resulting in the Tatar people becoming the first Muslim people to come under Russian rule.^[3] In the late 1910s, there was a brief independence movement among Tatars to form a separate state. However, the Soviets squashed these efforts and assimilated Tatarstan into Soviet Russia as the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Tatar language, culture, society, and representation in government were restricted or limited during Soviet rule due to Russification efforts to suppress ethnic minority groups throughout the country. In the 1980s, Tatars stood at the forefront of Soviet reform policies under President Gorbachev, especially in regards to regional government and religious expression. In the early 1990s, Tatarstan gained significant autonomy pertaining to its legal system within the Russian Federation.^[4] Current issues of interest to many Tatars include the sovereignty of Tatarstan, and the preservation and propagation of Tatar language and culture.

As a result of the influence of Soviet Russia during most of the twentieth century, the vast majority of Tatars are bilingual in both Russian and Tatar.^[5] Muslims account for 90% of the ethnic Tatar population. Although the Tatars were secularized during most of the Soviet era, a resurgence in Islamic identity has occurred since the 1980s.^[6] Other sizable religious minorities include those who are nonreligious (7%) and Christians (3%).^[7]

LDS Background

The LDS Church did not appear to extend any missionary activity in the Tatar homeland until the 1990s. In mid-1997, the Church organized its first branch in Kazan. The Church attempted in 1998 and again in 2002 to register its Kazan Branch, but in 2002 the branch remained unregistered.^[8] Registration of the branch appeared to occur sometime in the 2000s.

In late 2011, there were approximately 50 active members in the Kazan Branch and two full-time missionary companionships

assigned to the city. Returned missionaries reported that only a handful of Tatars have joined the Church throughout Russia, and most of these converts have appeared to join the Church in Kazan.

As of mid-2014, the Church had no Tatar translations of LDS scriptures, gospel study materials, or missionary outreach tracts.

Successes

The continual operation of the Kazan Branch and the assignment of full-time missionaries since 1997 constitute the greatest successes of the Church in reaching the Tatar people. Without these efforts, there would likely be only a few Tatar Latter-day Saints worldwide, if any at all. The Church's minimal presence in Kazan presents the only feasible opportunity at present to extend specialized outreach among the Tatar people.

Opportunities

The Tatar are the most populous traditionally Muslim people in Russia and are therefore of key importance to LDS missionary efforts among ethnic minority groups in the former Soviet Union. There do not appear to be any limitations on proselytism in Tatarstan based on current legislation, providing the Church with the rare opportunity to reach a traditionally Muslim people within their homeland. However, the most successful proselytism efforts will require member participation in the finding, teaching, and fellowshiping processes, particularly from any Tatar members in the region. As the Kazan Branch presents the only realistic opportunity for the Church to reach the Tatar within a timely and efficient manner, the use of the branch as the base of Tatar-specific outreach will be vital towards making any headway within the near future. Methods that mission and branch leaders could use to improve the effectiveness of initial proselytism efforts include the establishment of a formal Tatar language proselytism program sponsored by the Russia Samara Mission that assigns a Tatar-designated missionary companionship to Kazan, the organization of a Tatar-speaking Sunday School class in the Kazan Branch, and holding special firesides and activities for Tatar members and investigators in the branch. Personnel in the translation department coordinating with mission leaders to identify suitable Tatar Latter-day Saints with sufficient language skills to translate basic outreach tracts and gospel study materials into Tatar has long-term potential to improve how the Tatar people see the compatibility of the Church with Tatar culture, and present the gospel in their native language. Depending on the self-sufficiency of the Kazan Branch, church leaders may elect to open a member group or small branch to service the southern half of Kazan in order to improve accessibility and better permeate the city population with LDS outreach centers.

Online proselytism efforts also present good opportunities for reaching the Tatar. Tailoring the presentation of LDS teachings to the background of Muslims and providing this information in the Russian and Tatar languages will be essential for these efforts to yield any measurable success. Use of social media platforms such as Facebook to target Tatar speakers with materials on the Church and invitations to learn more online through missionaries can help jumpstart outreach in locations where there are no nearby LDS congregations.

Challenges

The Kazan Branch constitutes the only LDS congregation within the Tatar homeland. As most Tatars reside outside of the Kazan metropolitan area and proselytism efforts within Kazan have primarily targeted ethnic Russians, the Church has yet to begin overt missionary activity among the Tatar people. The Church has a very limited presence within Russia and has not made any significant headway opening additional cities to missionary work within the past seven or eight years. The Europe East Area presidency has implemented a conservative centers of strength policy within this period that has concentrated mission resources into a handful of the most populous cities in an effort to establish stakes and consolidate smaller branches to create ward-sized units. These efforts have yielded few improvements in church growth within targeted locations, and at the expense of delaying the opening of additional cities to proselytism where no LDS gospel witness has ever been extended. As the Church in Russia has not yet extended specialized outreach among ethnic minority groups, missionary efforts among the Tatar will most likely result from the Church opening additional cities within the Tatar homeland to missionary activity that indiscriminately proselyte the population as a whole. Complicated and laborious foreign missionary visa requirements that require foreigners to leave the country every 90 days have posed ongoing challenges for the Church to maintain its missionary force in Russia, which, in addition to policies that have deterred national outreach expansion, pose even bleaker prospects for the Church to open additional cities within Tatarstan to missionary work. The lack of self-sufficiency in the Russian full-time missionary force has resulted in serious difficulties for the Church to make progress in expanding outreach when the number of foreign missionaries assigned cannot significantly increase due to the logistical demands incurred by current visa requirements. The Church in Russia has thus far been almost entirely unable to achieve any expansion of its operations to new frontiers without the assistance of full-time missionaries or American expatriate families. Complications and opposition from local government leaders for religious groups to register congregations in new locations further discourages mission and area leaders from taking a more proactive stance to national outreach expansion efforts within the Tatar homeland.^[9]

The LDS Church may experience low receptivity even if specialized outreach that targets Tatar populations is extended. The Tatars have resisted Orthodox Christian missionary efforts to convert for centuries, with little success as these Christianization efforts were intimately intertwined with Russification efforts to integrate the Tatars into the Russian Empire.^[10] As a result of this history, the Tatar have become obstinately fixed in their identity as Muslim despite decades of secularization and Russification during the Soviet era. Additionally, the resurgence of Islamic identity and practice over the past three decades has further solidified many Tatar in their identity as Muslim. The LDS Church has yet to develop teaching and missionary

approaches tailored to non-Western cultures, specifically in Eastern European societies where most adhere either to Orthodox Christianity or Islam.

The Church has not translated any materials into the Tatar language. With the resurgence of the Tatar language and culture since the 1980s, the Church will likely need to translate basic proselytism and gospel study materials into the Tatar language in order to convey a sense of cultural compatibility with the Tatar people.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church has essentially made no noticeable inroads among traditionally Muslim peoples who reside in the former Soviet Union. The only ethnic minority groups in Russia with more than a handful of Latter-day Saints include the Buryats in Siberia, Armenians, and foreigners residing in major cities such as Moscow. However, with the exception of an English-speaking ward in Moscow, the Church in Russia does not operate any specialized congregations for ethnolinguistic minority groups.

Evangelicals are the largest nontraditional Christian group among the Tatars, although this denomination maintains a very small presence as only 0.40% of Tatars are estimated to be evangelical.^[11] Jehovah's Witnesses appear to maintain a tiny but self-sufficient presence among the Tatar people within their homeland and in nearby locations. Many Tatar-speaking congregations operate in this area, although it is unclear how many function in Tatarstan as Witnesses did not report congregational data for most of this administrative division as of mid-2014.^[12] Witnesses have translated their official website into Tatar.^[13] The Seventh Day Adventist Church in areas where Tatars traditionally reside has experienced a significant decline in the number of members within the past decade, although there has been a slight increase in the number of congregations. Adventists appear to have only a small number of Tatar members. In 2002, Adventists reported 64 churches (large congregations), 28 companies (small congregations), 7,056 members, and 512 baptisms within the four republics of Chuvashia, Mari El, Mordovia, and Tatarstan, and the two regions of Kirov and Nizhny Novgorod, whereas in 2012 Adventists reported 65 congregations, 41 companies, 4,812 members, and 91 baptisms in these six administrative divisions.^[14] Adventist have translated publications into Tatar for many years.^[15]

Limitations

The Church does not publish a breakdown of its membership by language usage or ethnicity. The Church does not publish a list of languages in which it has translated materials, or which it intends to translate materials. It is unclear how many Tatars have ever joined the Church since missionary work began in the former Soviet Union during the early 1990s. The Church does not publish membership statistics by administrative division in Russia. Data on member activity and convert retention rates are not available for public consumption. The Church does not publish information on the location and number of member groups. Consequently, it is unclear whether any member groups currently operate in traditionally Tatar areas of Russia.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth and missionary work among the Tatar people is bleak as no expansion of missionary activity within the Tatar homelands has occurred since the initial establishment of the first branch in 1997. Only a handful of Tatars have appeared to join the Church and the Church has not translated any materials into the Tatar language. Strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam also pose challenges for missionary work and indicate that even specialized outreach among the Tatar will generate few converts. The Church in Russia has yet to conduct any specialized outreach among indigenous ethnic minority groups. The current situation of inconvenient and disruptive foreign missionary visa regulations and the lacking self-sufficiency of the Russian full-time missionary force indicate that there is little promise for the Church to experience any noticeable increase in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Russia, let alone to areas where the Tatar people traditionally reside. Additionally, the conservative interpretation of the centers of strength policy that has disfavored national outreach expansion and has concentrated missionary efforts on a handful of the largest cities within the Russia Samara Mission suggests that there is little indication the Church will seriously consider opening additional cities to missionary work within Tatarstan, especially in light of limited religious freedom throughout the country.

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