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Rizaeddin Fakhretdinov's Islamic Biographies

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Networks, Narratives and Nations

*Transcultural Approaches to Cultural Nationalism
in Modern Europe and Beyond*

Edited by

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6 The Nation as a Network

Rizaeddin Fakhreddinov's Islamic Biographies

Michael Kemper

Abstract

This chapter discusses the biographical work of the well-known Tatar historian, publicist and Islamic authority Rizaeddin Fakhreddinov (1858–1936). I focus on Fakhreddinov's biographical compendium *Āthār* (Monuments), and suggest that Fakhreddinov understood the Tatar nation as a network of an Islamic elite with overlapping religious, family and business links. I then go on to analyse the fate of the third volume of *Āthār*, which Fakhreddinov could not publish during his lifetime and to which he added materials and notes up to the last years of his life. *Āthār* III began in 1906/11 as a celebration of the pious Tatar nation, but it soon reflected Fakhreddinov's despair over the Bolsheviks' destruction of the Muslim elite – and of Islam.

Keywords: Muslim biographies; Volga-Ural region; Imperial Russia; Tatar historiography; Muftiate; Soviet nationality policy

A Web of Pious Biographies

For historians of Muslim societies in eastern Europe, collections of Islamic biographies are a major source of information. Among the Tatars of the Volga-Ural region, this genre became fashionable in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Husayn Amirkhanov's *Tavārīkh-I bulghāriyya* (Volga-Bulghār Chronicles), published in Kazan in 1880, contained legends but also biographical sections on personalities of the nineteenth century.¹ The first book that completely focused on biographies of Islamic personalities

¹ Amirkhanov, *Tavarikh-e bulgariia*.

from the Volga region – imams, shaykhs and authors of religious works, mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – was the second volume of *Mustafād al-akhbār* (Useful Information), composed by the Kazan theologian and historian Shihābaddīn al-Marjānī (1818–1889) and published posthumously in 1900.²

Rizaeddin Fakhreddinov (Riḍā'addīn bin Fakhraddīn, 1858–1936) was clearly inspired by Marjānī, whom he regarded as his model in critical Islamic scholarship and historical text analysis. In his multivolume biographical compendium *Āthār* (Monuments), Fakhreddinov significantly enlarged Marjānī's scope and source base, as well as choosing a different format. Marjānī, working in Kazan, had clustered his biographies according to the village communities where the respective imams and teachers worked, thereby essentially producing a history of Muslim communities of the Kazan area through the lives of their imams. Fakhreddinov included many more personalities, and he arranged his material not geographically but chronologically, by years of death. As a result Fakhreddinov's *Āthār* covers a wider geographical area, with more philological detail and historical depth.

Āthār reflects Fakhreddinov's two roles in Islamic public life: that of a functionary working at the Muftiate (1891–1906 and again 1918–36) and that of a publicist whose mission was to educate his nation. The Muftiate (Orenburgskoe Dukhovnoe Upravlenie Musul'man, or Orenburg Spiritual Assembly of Muslims) was Imperial Russia's institution for leading and controlling Russia's mosque communities. All kinds of documents from Russia's Muslim communities came together here: population registers from the mosques that documented births, marriages, divorces and deaths; correspondence about imam appointments and dismissals; conflicts, litigations and negotiations; travel accounts and diplomatic reports; and historical narratives. Fakhreddinov spent much time studying these items in the Muftiate's dusty archive, which he then copied into his volumes of *Āthār*.

After Russia's 1905 Revolution the Muslims of European Russia received permission to start publishing Tatar newspapers, and in 1906 Fakhreddinov quit his job at the Muftiate to become a journalist in Orenburg. With financial support from a Tatar merchant family, he founded and edited the famous Muslim journal *Shūrā* (Consultation), for which he also wrote hundreds of articles on Muslim historical personalities.³ As editor he now enlarged his professional network, corresponding with contributors, readers and informants.

2 Marjānī, *Al-Qism al-thānī*.

3 For Fakhreddinov's life and work, see Baishev, *Obshchestvenno-politicheskie*; Türkoglu, *Rusya Türkleri*; Farkhshatov, "Fakhreddinov."

Fakhreddinov's professional networks are reflected in *Āthār*, his continuing collection of information and materials about Muslim authorities from the Volga-Ural region and adjacent territories. Between 1900 and 1908, he published fifteen fascicles of *Āthār*, which he grouped into two volumes. *Āthār* was an enormous enterprise: in these two volumes, Fakhreddinov offered no fewer than 465 entries on Muslim personalities from the Volga-Ural region – mostly imams and madrasa teachers but also Sufi masters – from the tenth century to 1873. In each biographical entry, Fakhreddinov discussed the individual's genealogy as well as his teachers and students.⁴ He furthermore paid special attention to the writings of the respective personalities – which mostly fell into the fields of Islamic law, theology, Sufism, poetry and historiography – and analysed their positions in contemporary controversies about Islamic ritual and reform. While all the biographies in *Āthār* were devoted to men, Fakhreddinov also discussed the fate of prominent wives and daughters, often referring back to the biographies of educated Muslim women from the region that he had published in a separate volume *Māshhur khatinnar* (Famous Women) in 1903.

Nation and Country

With these hundreds of interwoven biographies, *Āthār* reflected an expanding Tatar Muslim network that crossed central Eurasia. Many of the personalities had spent years at the feet of professors in Bukhara and Samarkand, the traditional centres of persophone Islamic learning in what is today Uzbekistan. After returning to the Volga-Ural region, these graduates obtained licenses from the Muftiate in Ufa, and started to work as imams and madrasa teachers in the villages and towns of their wider region. Volga Tatar imams also settled among the Bashkirs in the Urals and in Siberia and the Kazakh Steppe south of Orenburg. Their mosques and madrasas were often financed by Volga Tatar merchants who made their fortunes by trading with central Asia, Siberia and Kazakhstan.⁵

Danielle Ross has recently described this Muslim network of pious and trading families from the Volga region as a "Tatar Empire" that operated in the shadow of the Russian Empire.⁶ As Ross shows, Volga Tatar imams and merchants acted as junior partners in the Russian colonial expansion,

4 On the structure of *Āthār* see Baibulatova, "Asar."

5 Frank, *Bukhara*.

6 Ross, *Tatar Empire*.

benefitting from the security and stability brought by the Russian military and administrative advance into the Urals, the Kazakh Steppe and, from the 1860s to the 1880s, central Asia. The Russian administration benefitted from the Tatar religious and trade networks, and Catherine the Great established the Muftiate in Orenburg (staffed mainly by Tatars) to facilitate the Tatar pious penetration of the Kazakh communities. The Tatars fully embraced this role and used imperial Russian protection to establish Tatar settlements, mosques and schools throughout the broader region, and to build close relations with the Islamic teachers and muftis in Bukhara. Starting around 1800 this led to a boom not only in the spread of basic literacy but also in the production of Islamic high literature in various languages: for the Volga Tatars, Arabic served as the language of Islamic law and theology, Persian was much used for poetry, and Tatar for historiography and correspondence. In his biographical compendia, Fakhreddinov reproduced documents in all three languages.

Fakhreddinov's *Āthār* bears the subtitle "Biographies of the Islamic Scholars of Our Own Country."⁷ But what was this "country," and who were the "we" implied by this title? Fakhreddinov did not use the term "Tatar" to clarify the ethnic background of the personalities whose memory he preserved. In the first two volumes of *Āthār*, he still referred to the Volga region as Bulghār; in fact, until the late nineteenth century most authors of Islamic treatises from the Volga area had called themselves al-Bulghārī, in the sense of "coming from the region of the former Bulghār Khanate on the Volga and Kama rivers," a political entity that was destroyed in the 1230s by the Mongols.⁸

In the Muslim world, the word "Tatar" had traditionally designated the infidel Mongol conquerors who had destroyed many flourishing Muslim city states in central Eurasia before eventually accepting Islam and assimilating with the local Muslim elites. But by the late nineteenth century, the Muslims of the Volga area started accepting the name "Tatar"; as the above-mentioned Shihābaddīn al-Marjānī had argued, if the Russians and all the world know the Volga Muslims as "Tatars," then it is time that they themselves accept this term, and drop the self-designation "Bulghārīs" (the latter also being confusing given the recent establishment of an autonomous Bulgaria in

7 *Āthār: Öz mämläkätomezdä ulghan islam 'ulamalarining täjümü-i hälläre vä tabaqaları, tarikh-i väladät vä väfatları vä bashqa ähvalları haqqında yazılmış ber kitabdır* (Monuments: A book written about the Islamic scholars who lived in our country, with the dates of their births and deaths and other information about them). Here and in what follows all translations from *Āthār* are mine.

8 Frank, *Islamic Historiography*.

the Balkans). Marjānī opposed the "Bulghār" identity also because it was cemented in anachronistic Islamization legends and hagiographies. Marjānī's Muslim "Tatar" identity came with a critique of these "Bulghār" legends, shrines and hagiographies, and with a rational historiography that relied not on miracles but on the critical analysis of documents.

What, then, is "Our Own Country" in the subtitle of Fakhreddinov's *Āthār*? The term he employed, *mämläkät*, can mean "country" and "state" as well as "empire." It is not unthinkable that Fakhreddinov meant the Russian Empire – all the communities that Fakhreddinov covered through his biographies were, at the time of writing, subjects of the Tsar. But it is more likely that he imagined this area of Tatar Muslim settlement – from Nizhni Novgorod in the west to Tobolsk in Siberia, and from Kazan in the north to Tatar diasporic neighbourhoods among the Kazakhs – as an alternative, Islamic *mämläkät*, one that lacked statehood but that existed through networks of religious scholars, bound together by overlapping student-master relations, correspondence, family relations and business, as documented and cherished in Fakhreddinov's biographical works. Even though, according to Fakhreddinov, only three out of five of all the personalities mentioned in *Āthār* were really outstanding, taken collectively the biographies were meant to serve as models for improving the social situation (*ijtimä'i hälläre*) of the nation and people (*millät vä qäüm*).⁹

From Memory to Obituary of Islam

The culmination of Fakhreddinov's biographical work was his third volume of biographies, which however remained unpublished. The manuscript (today preserved in the Ural National Center of Sciences in Ufa) discusses around 200 personalities who died after 1873.¹⁰ The fact that Fakhreddinov had been acquainted with many of these men gives *Āthār* III a new quality. More than the previous two volumes, *Āthār* III reflects the personal contacts, concerns and preferences of its author and compiler.

An analysis of the manuscript evidence suggests that *Āthār* III grew in stages and that Fakhreddinov made several attempts to bring it to press. It

9 Riḍā'addīn b. Fakhraddīn, *Muqaddima*, pp. 10 and 13.

10 Riḍā'addīn b. Fakhraddīn, *Āthār* III, MS 112-S, Fakhreddinov fond, Nauchnyi arkhiv UNTs RAN. See Bulgakov, "Kratkii obzor." Fakhreddinov also prepared a fourth volume, consisting of additions to *Āthār* I–III. The third and fourth volumes were published in 2010 in the form of a transliteration into modern Tatar, without comments: Rizaeddin Fakhreddin, *Asar*.

should be noted that *Āthār* III came down to us in two manuscript volumes, one containing the corpus of the book – the individual biographies as well as an index – and the other containing the Introduction (*Muqaddima*) to *Āthār* III (as well as including other materials). The cover of this latter manuscript has in its header “part 16,” and bears a note of the Imperial Censor Vasiliĭ D. Smirnov, professor of Turkology at the University of St Petersburg, dated 6 February 1906, to grant permission to publish.¹¹ From this we must conclude that Fakhreddinov initially intended to publish *Āthār* III not as one coherent volume but in parts (with the first fascicle of *Āthār* III running as part 16, that is, as a direct continuation of the first fifteen fascicles that together constitute the first and second volumes). What prevented Fakhreddinov then from publishing the first fascicle of *Āthār* III (part 16) already in 1906? We must remember that this was the year when Fakhreddinov resigned his post at the Muftiate and became a journalist, which must have absorbed much of his energy. At the same time Fakhreddinov was still busy publishing the last fascicles of *Āthār* II, and perhaps he did not want to publish the first fascicle (part 16) of *Āthār* III before the last fascicle of *Āthār* II (part 15, Orenburg 1908).

In 1911 Fakhreddinov again intended to publish *Āthār* III, and by this time the manuscript had already grown into a coherent volume for which he now designed a separate *muqaddima*, dated 10 February 1911.¹² But again his plan was thwarted: as he later noted in the same manuscript, in the same month of February 1911, the Russian police searched his apartment in Orenburg in the middle of the night and confiscated the manuscript of *Āthār* III and other items from his library. *Āthār* III was returned to him only after a year.¹³ We do not know what prompted this police raid; it is possible that one of Fakhreddinov’s Muslim critics denounced him to the Tsarist authorities.

Fakhreddinov therefore had no nostalgia for the Tsarist times when the February Revolution of 1917 put an end to Romanov rule. After the Bolsheviks seized power in October, Lenin abolished all privileges held by religious authorities: starting with the Russian Orthodox Church, but the Muslim communities were not targeted until later. Liberated from the constraints of imperial rule, in 1917–18 the Muslims of Russia – Tatars, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Azers and many others, among them Fakhreddinov – participated in all kinds of congresses to discuss projects of Muslim cultural and religious autonomy. The Bolsheviks indeed gave Russia’s minorities their ethnic homelands, including

11 Riḍāʿaddīn b. Fakhraddīn, *Muqaddima*, cover page (paginated as “page 2”; see note 14).

12 Riḍāʿaddīn b. Fakhraddīn, *Muqaddima*, pp. 3–19.

13 Riḍāʿaddīn b. Fakhraddīn, *Muqaddima*, p. 20.

the Tatar and Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics in the Volga-Ural region that hosted most of European Russia’s Muslim communities. They also allowed Russia’s Muslims to elect their own Mufti – before the Revolution the Mufti had been selected and appointed by the Tsarist administration.

As the Islamic publishing industry collapsed in 1918, Fakhreddinov resumed work at the Muftiate. In 1921 the elected Mufti under whose authority he worked, his friend ʿĀlimjān Bārūdī, passed away, and Fakhreddinov succeeded him in the office of Mufti. He would remain in this position until the end of his life. Perhaps Fakhreddinov hoped that at the helm of Russia’s Islamic establishment, he might be able to steer the Muslim mosque communities through difficult times. In these years he continued to enlarge his manuscript of *Āthār* III. By 1924 he had added another thirty-three entries on persons who died after April 1911. He also produced a table of contents which comprised all entries up to those of 1924.¹⁴ This suggests that in 1924 he made a third attempt to publish *Āthār* III. But the Bolsheviks did not tolerate a revival of Islamic publishing; the only Islamic outlet that Fakhreddinov could still use for placing short articles was the meagre newsletter of the Muftiate, and by 1928 this was discontinued as well.¹⁵

It seems that between 1925 and 1929 Fakhreddinov did not have time to work on his *Āthār* III: the surviving manuscript contains no biographical entries about personalities who died in those years. This period must have been sobering for Fakhreddinov. We know that during the great famines of the 1920s when the Volga Tatars were in desperate need of humanitarian aid, Fakhreddinov was forced to sign political statements blaming Great Britain for the hunger of the USSR’s Muslims. In 1926, Fakhreddinov was allowed to undertake a Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, and this was a personal highlight of his time as Mufti; but here again he was on a political mission, for the primary goal of the trip was to head the Soviet delegation at an

14 The manuscript volume as it has come down to us has two paginations: one from page one to the end (obviously added by archivists) and one that goes in reverse direction, that is, against the logic of the reading direction of a book written in the Arabic script. I assume that this last “European” pagination was added (in numbers not handwritten but stamped onto the manuscript pages) in 1924 for the printing house to offer orientation to functionaries not familiar with the Oriental tradition. Curiously, in Fakhreddinov’s handwritten index the individual biographical entries are linked to the “reverse” page numbers, thereby assigning the highest page numbers to the personalities who appear in the beginning of the volume. The last person included in this index (the one with the lowest “reverse” page number) died in 1924, which allows me to assume that Fakhreddinov composed the index in that year, as the last step before submission. Biographies of personalities in *Āthār* III who died after 1924 are not included in the index. There is no external information to corroborate this assumption.

15 Kemper, “From 1917 to 1937,” p. 164.

Islamic Congress in Mecca about the Caliphate question – to demonstrate the USSR's benevolent support of Islam and to denounce the British who were lending organizational support to a rival congress in Cairo at this time.

By the end of the 1920s, during the course of collectivization, the Bolsheviks closed down almost all mosques, expelling, exiling or imprisoning their imams and caretakers. Mufti Fakhreddinov repeatedly complained to the authorities in Moscow, but to no avail. He became sidelined, cut off from the mosque communities he was supposed to direct and coordinate, and fearful of arrest. It is in this grim situation that Fakhreddinov once again turned to the *Āthār* III manuscript to add new biographies.

But the pious nation that *Āthār* was meant to celebrate had already ceased to exist, and Fakhreddinov's additions of the early 1930s reveal his despair. Now convinced that his manuscript would never see the printing press, Fakhreddinov saw no reason to hide his personal reflections. A telling example can be found in his biography of a certain Muḥammad-Fātiḥ b. 'Abdannaṣīr (d.1875). Describing how he had obtained a collection of letters written by this person, he wrote:

These letters were sent to me from the village of Şaşnā by 'Abdalḥaqq Afandi b. Dīyā'addīn. I initially wanted to include these letters into *Āthār* and therefore made complete copies of them, and sent the original letters back to the owner. *But then the world changed, and our hopes turned out to be mere phantasies.* There was no longer any reason to include the letters word-for-word. *It is doubtful that there is anybody left in this country [māmlākāt] who would now read our writings, nor even the Noble Quran.* We are from God, and to God we will return. For this reason we cut the letters at many places, and will now only present a few parts of them.¹⁶

This passage reflects Fakhreddinov's practice of securing the trust of his informants by always sending the letters back, and by including the materials as close to the original as possible. But at the time of writing, this enthusiasm had given way to the conviction that all his efforts were in vain. If nobody reads his works, nor even the Quran, then the Islamic nation is dead, and what remains is to write its obituary.

Fakhreddinov now also documented Bolshevik violence – never systematically but in his biographies of individual personalities. About a certain Muḥammad-Şādiq bin Shāh-Aḥmad he noted:

16 Riḍā'addīn b. Fakhraddīn, *Āthār* III, fol. 44 (emphasis mine).

[While he was serving as imam in Kazan] the Bolsheviks threw him into prison, and afterwards sent him into exile. He passed away on the twelfth day of the month Rabī' Awwal 1351 [16 July 1932], in the city of Prisher. In addition to being a virtuous and knowledgeable person he also produced perfect poetry.¹⁷

A certain Aḥmad, son of Hāfizaddīn from the village of Paranga, passed away in 1924. Around 1912 this person had produced a history of the Muslim village of Paranga,¹⁸ and Fakhreddinov must have felt much sympathy for this man who, like he himself, attempted to document the heritage of his nation. While the biographical entry is written in black ink, Fakhreddinov later made an addition to it, for which he used purple ink to mark the later date of this addition: "When I heard of his death I was sad and happy at the same time. [...] Happy I was because [by dying early, in 1924] he was untouched by the oppression and outrage, and was spared the calamity that befell other pious and fine personalities."¹⁹

About Muḥammad-Najīb Tüntārī (d.1930) – one of his closest colleagues in the Muftiate, and like Fakhreddinov himself a proponent of Islamic reformism – he reported:

In the context of the general catastrophe that fell on the heads of the Islamic scholars of this *māmlākāt*, and of the unprecedented calamity and disaster, [Tüntārī] was imprisoned, and he was forced on a march, at gun point, in the cold days of January. People say he did not recover from that cold, and died.²⁰

Conclusion

Āthār III has several layers: (1) the original first fascicle of 1906 ("part 16" in the overall *Āthār* project), for which he received permission from the censor; (2) the expanded text of 1911, now already a whole volume to which he added a hopeful introduction; (3) new biographies that Fakhreddinov had added to the corpus by 1924, again in the hope of publishing this volume; and then, after a gap of several years, (4) the final additions and desperate

17 Riḍā'addīn b. Fakhraddīn, *Āthār* III, fol. 63r.

18 Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions*, p. 29.

19 Riḍā'addīn b. Fakhraddīn, *Āthār* III, fol. 290r.

20 Riḍā'addīn b. Fakhraddīn, *Āthār* III, fol. 327r.

notes of 1929–32. In this last period Fakhreddinov ceased to write for an audience, and did not need to please any censors. If *Āthār* III began as the culmination of nation-building through the biographical documentation of a network of pious leaders, towards the end of his manuscript Fakhreddinov documented the elimination of that very network and thereby of the Islamic nation it had formed and maintained.

Āthār III is more than a valuable source of information on the Volga Tatar religious network. The manuscript also deserves attention as an autobiographical document that reflects Fakhreddinov's personal thought, documenting how the fundamental changes in the state and society impacted him. What started as a celebration of the nation, in a virtual country (*mām-lākāt*), ended as an obituary of that nation's foundational elites, the Islamic scholars. Fakhreddinov passed away on 11 April 1936. Shortly thereafter the Bolsheviks closed the Muftiate and arrested his remaining colleagues.²¹

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