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Memoir of a Tatar Prince

Ismail ibn Ahmed

Donald Ostrowski

The fictional author of this memoir, Ismail ibn Ahmed, is a composite character created from evidence of historical Tatar princes between 1480 and 1552. Ismail's relationship with his sons is based on that of an earlier Tatar prince, Melik-Tagir, who came over to the Muscovites in 1487 but remained Muslim while his two sons, Fedor and Vasilii, converted to Christianity. The parallel of Ismail's asking asylum in the Ottoman empire is with Sheikh Ahmed, the last khan of the Jochid ulus, who had asked Sultan Bayezid (1481–1512) for asylum but was refused. Having an intermediary write a letter to the Muscovite ruler on one's behalf was done by Said Mehmed in 1502, who asked the Nogai prince Azika to do so. Azika, as does Musa in the memoir, also sent his letter with a junior kinsman, Kanbar mirza. For most of the historical parallels on which this account is grounded, I drew on the documents in volume 41 of Sbornik Imperatorskogo Russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva *(SRIO), 148 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1867–1916). Ismail's dislike of bells has a historical parallel in Ibn Battuta's* Rihla *where he claimed he found the Christian practice of ringing bells to be aesthetically offensive. All the poetry that Ismail cites would have been available to him at the time (see "Suggestions for Further Reading"). His age (seventy years old) when writing this memoir is a little unusual at a time and place when most people did not live beyond their fifties. We do have evidence, however, of some individuals surviving longer, into their seventies and eighties in the sixteenth century. I have taken the liberty of adding explanatory footnotes as though I were editing a text from the time.*

In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate, I, Ismail ibn Ahmed, write down these reminiscences of my long and varied past during the seventieth year of my life, for I do not know how many more days I will live to see. It is with mixed feelings that I watch as my two beloved sons, Kalil and Hasan, may God preserve them, ride off in the army of the Russian tsar and grand prince to attack my birthplace, Kazan. It was I who spoke the sacred words, "La ilaha illa Allah"

Drawing by M. V. Gorelik of a heavily armed Tatar cavalryman, based on archaeological finds from the field at Kulikovo where a battle took place involving Rus and Tatar forces in 1380. Tatar weaponry and armor did not change much by the sixteenth century, and so Ismail ibn Ahmed, the composite Tatar prince of this chapter, would probably have been accoutered like the individual depicted on the horse when going into battle.

three times in their little ears when they were born.[1] I could not bring myself to attend their baptism to become Christians, which they did when they entered the service of the Muscovite ruler, but I did not act to prevent it. Both they and I realized the faith of their forefathers was an obstacle to their advancement in the realm of the Christian grand prince.[2]

I was born in the third year of the reign of Khan Ilham.[3] We had many troubles in the realm (*ulus*) of Ulug Mehmed.[4] During most of my early years in Kazan, the khan was Mehmed Emin, who was the son of Ibrahim ibn Mahmud and the famous (some say, infamous) Nur Sultan.[5] She had been previously married to Ibrahim's older brother Halil while he was khan.[6] After Ibrahim died, she left Kazan to marry the dastardly Mengli Girey, khan of the Crimea.[7] Thus, in the eyes of my family, she went from being a princess heroine to being the wife of Kazan's archenemy. The Holy Qur'an teaches us that "good women are obedient" (4:34), but Nur Sultan did not obey God's will. Or, in the words of our poet Muhammed Yar:

> The country girl had turned into a beast;
> White bones remained the remnants of her feast.

Her son Mehmed Emin was corrupt, and I blame Nur Sultan's meddling for the evils of her son.[8] The assembly (*quriltai*) deposed him twice,[9] but each time, after an all too brief lapse of time, the assembly, at the behest of the council of state (*qarachi beys*), restored him to the throne.

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[1] The Muslim practice is to say the *shahada*, "There is no god but God and Muhammed is his messenger," three times in the ears of a newborn to set the infant on the proper path in life. What Ismail reports here in Arabic is the *tawheed*, the first part of the *shahada*.

[2] Ismail is referring here to the system of precedence (*mestnichestvo*), which ranked clans according to proximity to the ruler and individuals within each clan, all of which was dependent on their being of the Russian Orthodox faith.

[3] Ilham reigned twice, 1479–85 and 1486–87. The "third year" apparently refers to the first reign and would place Ismail's birth in 1482.

[4] Ulug (or Ulu) Mehmed founded the khanate of Kazan by 1445. He had been ousted as khan of the Jochid ulus (also sometimes called the "Qipchaq khanate" or, incorrectly, the Golden Horde by his cousin in 1435). Ulug Mehmed fled north, battled the Muscovite army at Belev in 1437, and subsequently settled in Kazan. The term *ulus* refers to his realm, also called *yurt*.

[5] She was a Nogai princess and a great-granddaughter of Edigei, who had besieged Moscow in 1408.

[6] Halil had been khan of Kazan from 1466 to 1467. When he died, Ibrahim, who had been chosen to succeed his brother, married Nur Sultan to secure his position.

[7] That would have been either in later 1486 or early 1487.

[8] Ismail seems to be overstating the case here in regard to Nur Sultan's influence, although she did in fact write a letter to Ivan III in August 1498 complaining about his support for another of her sons, Abdullatif, over Mehmed Emin and pleaded with him to do what he could to get Mehmed Emin restored to the throne. *SRIO*, 41: 272. What effect that letter had in getting him restored, we cannot say.

[9] That would have been in 1486, when he was replaced by Ilham for a year, and in 1496, when he was replaced by his brother Abdullatif for five years. Abdullatif then fled

At one point, Mehmed Emin turned treacherously on Muscovy and, driven by greed, attacked Muscovite merchants in Kazan, who were there under a safe-conduct decree.[10] He confiscated all their wares, killed some, and sold the rest into slavery. Not only was this in violation of the *shari'a*[11] and his own promises, but also it led to immediate hardship for our people as the unsettled conditions kept merchants away from our city, which in many respects depends on the trade along the Idel.[12] Shortly after that, Vasilii ascended the throne of Muscovy and, along with Kudai Kul, sought just retribution for this cowardly attack.[13] I was a young man at the time[14] and was called out to protect Kazan for what Mehmed Emin had done. Fortunately I did not have to fight Kudai Kul, for I was assigned to the southern flank to defend against a possible attack from the Nogais in collaboration with the Muscovites.

Somewhat to my dismay, Mehmed Emin defeated the Muscovite forces and remained on the throne for many years.[15] How appropriate and how ironic to recall the words of a poem he is reputed to have written:

> The world was ruined; Islam lay broken, shattered,
> And tears like rivers flowed down every cheek.
> Now what will be his answer before God
> When he is questioned for his evil deeds?

When this corrupt son of Nur Sultan died, the assembly and council of state were fed up with the influence from Mengli Girey's successor, the Crimean khan

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to Moscow. The *quriltai* was an assembly of notable men who advised the khan on significant matters concerning the khanate and who had the power to depose a reigning khan and select a new khan. One notes that Ismail consistently writes that the assembly of Kazan selected the khan. This is in contrast, on the one hand, to Muscovite sources, which say that the grand prince chose the khan, and, on the other, to the Crimean khans, who insisted they chose the khan of Kazan. The *qarachi beys* were the heads of the four most prominent clans in the khanate. Collectively, they acted as a council of state.

[10] That would have been June 1505.

[11] The *shari'a* is the ethical and moral code of Islam based on the Qur'an and the Sunna (the example of the Prophet, literally means "the path").

[12] Idel was the Tatar name for the Volga. In Arabic, it was Itil.

[13] Kudai Kul was the son of Khan Ibrahim and Ibrahim's first wife, Fatima, and the younger brother of Khan Ilham and Melik-Tagir. He left Kazan in 1487 and was held incommunicado by Ivan III for eighteen years. Under Vasilii III, Kudai Kul converted to Christianity, taking the baptismal name Peter, married the grand prince's sister, and became the second most powerful individual in Muscovy.

[14] Ismail would have been twenty-three or twenty-four years old.

[15] In contrast, the Muscovite sources report that the Muscovites defeated the forces of Kazan in this war, which ended in 1507. Mehmed Emin died in 1518.

Mehmed Girey. They chose as khan a candidate who was friendly to Muscovy and a close kinsman of the khan of Astrakhan.[16] But he was only a boy and no match for the political machinations of those who were won over by the Gireys with promises of wealth and influence. After three years, the assembly met again, deposed the boy khan, and placed Sahib Girey on the throne.

I go into some detail about these political developments because it is directly related to the most important decision of my life—to place myself in exile from my homeland and begin helping the Christian grand prince of Moscow. That happened thirty-one years ago. Much to my dismay I find myself still in exile and missing more than ever the sights, sounds, and aromas of Kazan, the hustle and bustle of its marketplace, the call to prayer of the muezzin, and the powerful solemnity of its Friday mosque where I had gone to worship each week.

For some time before I actually left Kazan, I had been considering the possibility of doing so. Following Kudai Kul's rise to the highest position of power within the princedom of Muscovy just behind the grand prince, I was tempted to come over to the Muscovites. Kudai Kul, who had taken the baptismal name Peter, after whom my own eldest son took his baptismal name, tried to convince me to join the Muscovites with the hope of restoring just rule to Kazan. But I could not bring myself at first to side with Christians against my homeland. My alternatives were to go over to the Ottoman sultan or the khan of Astrakhan. I never really considered the khan of Sibir, for his crowd was not highly regarded by those of us who think of ourselves as part of the civilized descendants of Chinggis Khan. Nor could I consider the Crimean court, for my family had a falling out with the Gireys, and we objected to the Gireys' influence in the realm of Ulug Mehmed.[17]

I opposed the candidacy of Sahib Girey both because my family and the Gireys had been on unfriendly terms and because I knew Mehmed [Girey], who was khan of the Crimea, would use his brother's position to expand his own influence and to oppress the Kazanian polity. Little did I realize how quickly he would do so. When the assembly and divan decided in favor of Sahib, I began to make alternate plans. One plan was to flee to the Ottomans by begging the protection of the sultan, Suleiman the Lawgiver. But the sultan declined on the basis that Mehmed Girey was his vassal and his granting asylum to me might be misunderstood. Apparently he had advisers who were aware of my family's difficulties with the Gireys. I decided against applying to the khan of Astrakhan because he was a puppet of the Gireys.

So I finally yielded to the blandishments of Kudai Kul. I asked Musa, a prince

[16] That was the thirteen-year-old Shah Ali (Shigalei), who at the time was ostensibly the khan of Kasimov.

[17] It is not immediately apparent which clan Ismail belonged to, but this statement that his family did not get along with the Gireys may point to his belonging to the Shirin clan, one of the largest in Kazan. They and the Gireys were antagonists for many years.

of the Nogais, to write a letter on my behalf to the Christian ruler.[18] He wrote it and sent it to the grand prince of Muscovy with a junior kinsman of his, *mirza* Ulan. Apparently, as I found out later, the grand prince of Muscovy, Vasilii Ivanovich, was concerned that his granting asylum to me would adversely affect his already worsening relations with Mehmed Girey, for he wrote a letter to Mehmed telling him what he was about to do. He did not want to provoke Mehmed into thinking he was doing something on the sly. Relations between Vasilii and Mehmed shortly thereafter disintegrated completely, so Vasilii then seems to have felt he no longer owed any obligation to try to stay on friendly terms with Mehmed. Or perhaps he just wanted to trumpet the fact that more Jochid princes were coming over to him.

The next thing I knew I received a return message from Musa that the grand prince had granted my request. I think also Kudai Kul intervened on my behalf. During the time when Kudai Kul had been held by Ivan Vasilievich, the father of Vasilii, under strict restrictions,[19] Kudai Kul and Vasilii had become "blood brothers" (*anda*). I later found out that Vasilii had convinced Kudai Kul to convert to Christianity and give up the teachings of the Prophet (may God's prayer and Peace be upon him). Vasilii was in the grips of his own struggle for the succession and prevailed upon him with the argument that the fate of the principality of Muscovy hung in the balance. He admired Kudai Kul, as did Kudai Kul him, and believed he would make a better ruler than any of his own brothers, should anything happen to him. But the old man, Ivan Vasilievich, would not allow it. He still had hopes of using Kudai Kul as a bargaining chip in the three-cornered diplomatic game among Muscovy, Kazan, and the Crimea. Vasilii's father was a shrewd player of that game and could easily, on the one hand, have sold out Kudai Kul to Mengli Girey or, on the other, supported his candidacy for khan of Kazan and, through him, have greater influence on Kazanian policy. Kudai Kul could become khan only as long as he remained faithful to the teachings of the Prophet, for the divan and assembly could be counted on to resist a Christian khan.

When Ivan Vasilievich died, Vasilii came to the throne and immediately granted Kudai Kul's petition to be baptized into Christianity. Not long after his baptism, Kudai Kul married the sister of Vasilii.[20] This marriage secured Kudai Kul's position in the hierarchy of Muscovy. But his becoming a Christian virtually eliminated his chances of ever becoming khan of Kazan. Nonetheless, I heard it said, after I came over to the Muscovites, that Vasilii had hopes that Kudai Kul would succeed him as grand prince and perhaps then unite the realm of Muscovy with that of Kazan, because, after all, Kudai Kul was a descendant of Chinggis Khan.

I did not think it possible then that a non-Muslim would ever rule in Kazan, but

[18] Most likely Ismail thought it would have been too risky to write such a letter himself and send it from Kazan. If it were intercepted, he would have some serious explaining to do.

[19] Ismail is referring here to the period 1487–1505.

[20] Kudai Kul/Peter married Evdokiia, the sister of Vasilii III, on January 25, 1506, just over a month after his baptism in the Moscow River (December 21, 1505).

now I find in the twilight of my life, that this very thing I said over and again could never happen is now about to happen with the Christian khan, Ivan of Moscow. It is sometimes difficult for us mere mortals to comprehend the ways of God. Yet especially when we do not comprehend His ways, His will must be done. We are required to obey and not to be led astray by unfounded doubts or idle questioning.

In any case, my worst fears concerning Sahib Girey were confirmed shortly after he came to the golden throne. His brother Mehmed began sending Crimean forces northward, took over control of the city of Kazan, and used the city as a base of operations to attack Moscow. My first role in support of the Muscovite grand prince was to lead a contingent of horsemen to harry Mehmed Girey's forces on their way from Kazan. Kudai Kul took charge of the defense of Moscow while the Christian grand prince fled for his own protection.[21] Thanks be to God, Mehmed Girey did not succeed in taking Moscow. I won't be so bold as to claim that my harrying tactics decided the outcome of the campaign. Other Jochid princes aided the Christian grand prince; and most of all, Kudai Kul's staunch defense of Moscow led Mehmed to realize he was overmatched. After demanding and receiving agreement from the Muscovites to pay him annual tribute, Mehmed took his forces back to the Crimea. Yet he continued to dominate and oppress Kazan even after his brother Sahib died three years later.

The transition to supporting the Muscovite ruler was not easy, and there were many times I was tempted to return to my home in Kazan. Most of those in the Russian court I found to be rather rude and uncultured, although I did have some interesting conversations with a certain Dmitrii Erasmus.[22] Kudai Kul was around in the beginning to remind me of why I had come over to the Muscovite grand prince. Although the Muscovite grand prince was not without his faults, he did seem interested in restoring just rule to my homeland. Kudai Kul assured me that I would not need to convert to the Russian faith, for he saw that I could not leave the faith of my fathers and my fathers' fathers. But I never thought I would be with the Muscovites so long that my own sons would grow into manhood here and want to convert. I had a number of heated arguments with them. I explained that when we returned to Kazan their Christianity would prevent their advancement. I quoted the Holy Qur'an and threatened them with eternal damnation for turning away from God. I even repeated to them the words of the poet Kol Sharif:

> My soul! Do not yield to the world.
> The world is forever constrained;
> And all those who live in this world
> To the goblet of death are chained.

[21] According to the Muscovite chronicles, Vasilii III repaired to Volok, just to the west of Moscow, to await the outcome of the battle for Moscow.

[22] That may well have been Dmitrii Gerasimov, who had traveled to Italy in 1525–26 and knew Latin.

Yet they countered my every argument as well as my every plea, and always brought up Kudai Kul and his conversion. They knew how much I admired that great champion. They also seemed to want to forget what they considered the "old" ways; they wanted to adopt what, from their point of view, are the "new" ways of Muscovy. During this period of dispute with my sons, I wished many times for my sons' sake that I had never left Kazan.

My dream in coming over to the Christian ruler of Muscovy was both to escape the oppression of the Gireys and to work for the establishment of justice. I had hoped that a khan of great capability and humanity could ascend to the golden throne. I did not see the possibility of that occurring under Girey rule and dominance. Instead, I saw only death and destruction for Kazan unless I and others like me took action. It was incongruous that I should look for life and constructive efforts in a Christian realm. We always had contempt for the Christians. True, they were people of the Book and we tolerated their religious practices, except for that awful ringing of bells that they are prone to—nothing like the sublime beauty of our call to prayer.[23] We Muslims should be grateful for the purity and grace of Islam. That cacophonic din in Moscow is one of the reasons I have been there only twice, both times to affirm my allegiance on the Holy Qur'an they keep in their citadel for such purposes. The first time I went to Moscow was when I first affirmed allegiance to Vasilii. The second time was to affirm allegiance to his son Ivan the current ruler when he was crowned tsar a few years ago. I have been fortunate to be able to spend most of my time in the countryside near Murom so much like the countryside of my homeland. I tend the estate and villages that the present ruler's father so generously granted me for my support. I read the literature of my homeland and take solace in the Holy Qur'an and in our great poets. The beginning of one poem, in particular, by Muhammed Yar comes to me now as describing my life here:

> One day as I was sitting in my room
> And drinking deeply from the cup of gloom,

[23] Ismail is referring here to the Islamic call (*adhān*) to prayer (*salat*), which the *muezzin* acclaims five times a day. The words of the *adhān* translated into English are

> God is great! God is great! God is great! God is great!
> I bear witness that there is no god but God.
> I bear witness that there is no god but God.
> I bear witness that Muhammed is the messenger of God.
> I bear witness that Muhammed is the messenger of God.
> Come to prayer! Come to prayer!
> Come to prosperity. Come to prosperity.
> God is great! God is great!
> There is no god but God.

Burnt in the fire that blazed within my heart,
A trembling prisoner, grieved and torn apart,

I cried: "My heart, be calm. Do not torment
My soul. Now give me peace. Relent!"

My heart replied: "Remember, God commanded
That I should rule you. Thus it was demanded."

Although I have been to the Friday mosque in Kasimov many times, for it is only 70 versts [75 kilometers] away, I don't have much to do with Khan Shah Ali and his crowd there, who are merely puppets of the grand prince.[24] They do not realize that the Christians have nothing to offer us; and, besides, we are better fighters in battle and superior in techniques of the bow, which they do not practice sufficiently. Yet I saw observance of the ways of my fathers and my fathers' fathers diminishing. I sought solace in the words of the poet Saif-i Sarai:

The morning breeze will always chase the fleeting clouds;
The wind of grief will ever blow throughout the land;
But let brave men still speak their fathers' noble tongue
And on their horses vie and triumph hand in hand.

The grand and glorious Abode of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*) with its many accomplishments and achievements in science, mathematics, medicine, and art was now receding from us under the oppressive practices of unjust rulers. The magnificent Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Lawgiver expressed concern for Kazan and even claimed it as his part of his realm (*yurt*),[25] but he was far away and had his own struggles with the Persians. The only hope I saw was that we could ally with the Muscovites, and they would help us to restore just rule to our land.

Now my own sons have adopted the infidel's cult, and they go off with the Christian tsar to conquer my (and not just my, but their) homeland for him. My only consolation is that their army is commanded by Prince Ivan Mstislavskii, the grandson of Kudai Kul. Yet only God knows when the Muslims of Kazan will be free to rule themselves again. God is great.

written 27 Jamadilakhir 959 A.H. (July 20, 1552)

[24] Ismail is referring to the khanate of Kasimov, which was set up under the auspices of Ivan III.

[25] That occurred in 1524 when Iskander, an envoy from Suleiman, made the claim.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Historical Anthology of Kazan Tatar Verse: Voices of Eternity. Edited and translated by David J. Matthews and Ravil Bukharaev. Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2000. Provides the full texts of the Kazanian Tatar poetry quoted in the text.

Keenan, Edward L. "Muscovy and Kazan: Some Introductory Remarks on the Patterns of Steppe Diplomacy." *Slavic Review* 26, no. 4 (1967): 548–58. Discusses Muscovy and Kazan within the context of steppe diplomacy.

Khodarkovsky, Michael. "Taming the 'Wild Steppe': Muscovy's Southern Frontier, 1480–1600." *Russian History* 26, no. 3 (1999): 241–97. Focuses on the relationship of Muscovy and Kazan.

Martin, Janet. "Muscovite Relations with the Khanate of Kazan′ and the Crimea (1460s to 1521)." *Canadian–American Slavic Studies* 17 (1983): 435–53. Discusses the economy of the khanate of Kazan.

Ostrowski, Donald. "The Extraordinary Career of Tsarevich Kudai Kul/Peter in the Context of Relations Between Muscovy and Kazan′." In *States, Societies, and Cultures East and West: Essays in Honor of Jaroslaw Pelenski*. Edited by Janusz Duzinkewicz et al. New York: Ross, 2004, 697–718. Discusses the tsarevich Kudai Kul/Peter.

———. "Ruling Class Structures of the Kazan′ Khanate." In *The Turks*. 6 vols. Edited by Hasan Celâl Güzel, C. Cem Oğuz, and Osman Karatay. Ankara: Yeni Türkiye, 2002. Volume 2: *Middle Ages*, 841–47. Recreates the social and political structure of the khanate of Kazan.

Pelenski, Jaroslaw. *Russia and Kazan: Conquest and Imperial Ideology (1438–1560s)*. The Hague: Mouton, 1974. Analyzes the relationship of Muscovy and Kazan.