

CHAPTER 12

Imperial Complicity

Finns and Tatars in the Political Hierarchy of Races

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Abstract

Finnish and Tatar intellectuals shared a position of subordination and relative privilege in the Russian Empire from the early 19th century onward. They did not simply accept or reject Western racial knowledge production, which was increasingly used to justify colonialism and imperialism toward the end of the 19th century; they appropriated it and created a localized version of racial hierarchy, subverting derogatory racial stereotypes to sources of vitality. Within that framework, the heritage of another empire that had managed to menace the white West, the Mongol Empire, had an undeniable attraction to Finns and Tatars, who shared the experience of middle-men minorities providing experts and services to a multi-national empire, while aspiring for empires and colonies of their own.

Keywords: race, racism, stereotypes, whiteness, empire, civilization, nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, national identity, Finns, Tatars, Turks, Outside Turks, Turanism, Turkism, Panturkism, Mongol Empire, Genghis Khan

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Introduction

The starting points of my chapter build on questions raised by Suvi Keskinen on the role of and relationship between colonialism and imperialism. In the discussion on Nordic “colonial complicity” in overseas colonialism, Keskinen (2019: 164) has noted that Finland belongs to those countries “at the margins of Europe” that occupy ambiguous positions in relation to Europeaness. However, the crucial period of the formation of the Finnish nation-state, almost a century of constitutional autonomy as a Grand Duchy directly under the Russian monarch, has often been overlooked in the current discourse on colonial complicity (Keskinen 2019: 167 n. 1).

I use a comparative, genealogical approach to show how two “nationalities” in the Russian Empire, both irrevocably shaped by imperialism handled these contradictory legacies in the early 20th century. Finns and Tatars share not only a controversial relationship with 19th-century empire-building, but also a complicated racial identity, the product of contemporary linguistic, anthropological and geopolitical ideas. In the early 20th century, this heritage was used to justify attempts at political cooperation, as well as fantasies of future alliances for geopolitical power in Eurasia.

As noted by Keskinen (2019: 178), a multi-level spatial model is necessary in the historical study of colonialism and imperialism. Attention must also be paid to temporal perspectives. Finland as a nation-state cannot be projected anachronistically backwards in time; instead, tracing the genealogy of ideas can show how the nation was ideologically constructed through colonizing and imperialist practices. Our idea of “Finnishness” today is unthinkable without these processes. Modern Tatar national consciousness also emerged in the Empire. Intellectuals and politicians identified and identifying as Tatars or Turks in the Russian Empire used historical and racial arguments, partly derived from the works of European authors, to prove that their peoples constituted potentially state-bearing nations. Finnish intellectuals, too, internalized and utilized hierarchical models of race. Controversially, a generation of scholars in the first half of the 19th century had established a theory of interrelatedness between the Finns and the Turks, the Mongols and the Tungus-speaking peoples—the so-called Altaic or Turanian peoples. This genealogy became a political problem in the late 19th century.

The primary sources used in this chapter consist of newspapers, pamphlets and other printed materials published in Finland and abroad in the late 19th century until the mid-1940s. A wide variety of secondary literature is also used to cover the Tatar diaspora’s republic of letters during this period, from Helsinki, Berlin and Ankara to Harbin and Tokyo, in contrast with the relatively provincial reach of the contemporary Finnish debate on nation and race.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, a brief historical background surveys the ideas behind the racial stereotypes that

influenced Finnish and Tatar nationalism. The second section focuses on the fear of a decline in Western civilization in the early 20th century, which coincided with a re-evaluation of previously maligned “noble savages,” including Genghis Khan and the Mongol conquests. The third section delves into the problem of racialized phenotypes. The fourth section analyzes two tropes in early-20th-century journalism and popular fiction: a conspiracy of oppressed nations against Russia, and the “coming race war,” a product of racial Darwinism.

Struggling with the racial hierarchies established by Western European scholars, both Finnish and Tatar intellectuals set out to prove that their peoples were state-bearing nations, despite Western racial prejudices. Ideas about race connected to the fear of what I call the racial stigma among Turkic and Finnish intellectuals. The intention was not to refute hierarchies, but to promote a hierarchy with the in-group as leaders among the nations of color, and worthy partners of white nations. In this context, the relationship to the “Mongol race,” whether it was imagined to be historical, linguist or racial, presented a dilemma for both Finns and Tatars. Although the Mongols were considered to belong to an inferior and obsolete civilization, their historical empire provided an exception to the rule of white European invincibility.

This chapter explores and contextualizes works of fact and fiction that nevertheless embraced a connection—real or imagined—between the Finnish-speaking Finns on the one hand, and the Turkic- and Mongolic-speaking peoples on the other. Both Finnish and Tatar intellectuals handled the crises of the early 20th century by imagining the Mongols as warlike ancestors. The chronology of this chapter stretches from the late 19th century’s imperial lull, through the interwar era of nation-states and young republics like Finland and Turkey searching for a unifying ideology in race lore and ending with the catastrophe of the Second World War.

Studies on racial discourse in the Republic of Turkey have shown the special role that Tatar emigrant intellectuals from the Russian Empire played in its formation (Ergin 2017: 72). Previous research on race and Finnishness has focused on racial categories, especially Asian ones, as something imposed on the Finns from outside (Isaksson 2001: 20). Pekka Isaksson and Jouko Jokisalo have considered the “Mongolian theory” of Finnish origins to have “rescued” Finnish anthropology from racism, because it caused Finns to view physical anthropology and racial theories with skepticism. This claim rests on a narrow definition of racism as active persecution, which Isaksson and Jokisalo also recognize: “with a few exceptions, Finns usually did not refute the claim that the Mongols were inferior but strove to liberate themselves from the Mongol reputation” (Isaksson, Jokisalo and Abdulkarim 2018: 215–16).

Attempts of subordinated groups claiming more dominant positions within colonial hierarchies have sometimes been described as “the pyramid of petty tyrants” (Keskinen 2019: 176). Instead of outright refuting notions of white supremacy, many sought to prove that they fulfilled Western criteria of

civilization and culture. The reason was political. As Murat Ergin (2008) has shown in his studies on race and Turkishness, colonialist empires used race to defend their right to rule over people of color, while the right of white minorities to assert national independence became increasingly accepted after the First World War and the break-up of multi-national empires in Europe.

A few clarifying words on ethnonyms are in order. This chapter features many examples of individuals (re)defining themselves as Tatars, Turks and Muslims, and creating networks to promote multiple, complementary identities. I hope that I have been able to contextualize each instance to show how national, ethnic and racial identities are historically contingent and situational.

Historical Background: The Racial Stigma and Enduring Stereotypes

In the early 19th century, Finnish scholars were searching for a place for their newly autonomous nation among the world's great civilizations. Linguist and explorer Matthias Alexander Castrén (1813–1852) located the ancient birthplace of the Finno-Ugric, “Samoyedic,”¹ Turkic and Mongolic peoples in the Altai mountains. Similarities between Finno-Ugric, Turkic (including Tatar) and Mongolian languages had inspired philologists to theorize about their interrelations since the 18th century (Kemiläinen 1998: 65–66). Based on these discoveries, Castrén conducted field studies to confirm the theory that these agglutinative languages all belonged to the same “Altaic” group and to elevate the marginalized “Finnish tribe” to global significance through the connection to this great family. Castrén was certainly aware of Western prejudices against the “despised Mongols.” He saw the difference between the Caucasian and the Mongolian races as a gradient, where the Finns and the Turks took an intermediate position (Isaksson 2001: 200).

In mid-19th-century Finland, linguists, philologists, and ethnographers dominated research on human prehistory, and Castrén's theories were initially well received (Isaksson and Jokisalo 2018: 209–10). In 1871, even a popular song was published, beginning with the words: *Aasiast' on alku tälle kansalle* (“The origin of this people is in Asia”)² (Vilkuna 1970: 20). Castrén was posthumously dubbed the “father” of Pan-Turanism—an ideology advocating a common political goal for these nations. His scholarship was invaluable in the political knowledge production of the Finnish-language national movement, but it had to be handled with care.

Finns and Tatars soon found that their ranking in Western racial hierarchies was determined by the fact that their nations were not politically sovereign. However, they were not easily classified as “savages.” In their autonomous Grand Duchy, the Finns enjoyed the protection of their own constitution in the Russian Empire. Tatars, while lacking such political freedoms, maintained a level of education that enabled them to take on a leadership role among the Empire's

Muslims as interpreters, religious and cultural specialists, and businessmen. As noted by historian Danielle Ross, Tatars became “a distinctive colonizing force within the larger Russian expansion” (Ross 2020: 2). Beginning with the 1773 edict of “Tolerance of All Faiths” by Catherine the Great, Muslim life was revived in the Empire. The *‘ulamā* (the religious educators and interpreters of sharia law) were integrated into the imperial system with the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly as a central state-controlled administrative organ (Bekkin 2020b; Frank 1998: 33–34). Tatars and other Turkic peoples, such as Bashkirs with their traditions of military service, could reach relatively important positions in the imperial administration.

Finnish officials, scholars and soldiers also served in the political, administrative, military and scientific expansion of Russia’s Empire from Siberia and Alaska to the Caucasus and the Balkans. While the Finn Gustaf Mannerheim explored Russian and Chinese Turkestan on behalf of the Russian General Staff in 1906–1908, the Bashkir Ravil Syrtlanov was sent to study the political loyalties of the Mongol and Turkic peoples in the area (Marshall 2006: 84–85). As Danielle Ross (2020: 2) maintains, “the construction of the Russian empire ... was made possible only through the participation of imperial subjects of many ethnicities and confessions, and these subjects felt a degree of ownership over the empire.” Castrén, too, had conducted his research in the east on behalf of the Imperial Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences (Salminen 2016: 287). The predicament of both Tatar and Finnish intellectuals in the service of the Empire was strikingly similar:

At the same time, they were colonizers engaged in the establishment of settler communities, the creation of powerful transregional and international commercial firms that enabled them to employ and exploit members of other ethnic groups, and the compilation of orientalist knowledge. Through these activities, they imagined a geographic space that belonged to them. Within that space, they articulated a hierarchy of peoples with themselves at the top. (Ross 2020: 6)

During the 19th century, a shift in race and civilization theory alienated Finns from the potentially empowering sense of kinship with Turkic and Mongolic peoples. Although the Grand Duchy of Finland possessed the main attributes of a state, the racially determinist justification of colonialism endangered its potential for independence. Western scholars judged the “Mongolian race” to be evolutionarily stagnated. If Finnish-speakers were classified as a non-white race, they would be destined to live under Russian imperialism and Swedish paternalism. In the 1870s and 1880s, the originally linguistic “Turanian theory” was gradually taken over by the discipline of physical anthropology. Finnish scholars, too, began to collect biometric information on the population of Finland, in particular the Indigenous Sámi, to solve the “Mongolian question” (Isaksson, Jokisalo and Abdulkarim 2018: 212–13).

Unlike the Finns, whose past remained obscure, Turkic Muslims in the Russian Empire were haunted by the loss of a golden age (Tuna 2015: 149). A Tatar author wrote to his friend in 1901: “I was born either a little too early or a little too late. I am now neither a European nor an Asian” (Ross 2012: 348). The glory of Asia was buried in the past, and the young intellectuals were in a hurry to catch up with Europe. This frustration followed decades of already fervent activity. The language schools and the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly had provided institutions that supported political identity formation (Ibrahim 2004: 60–61). The dominant role of Tatars in the Spiritual Assembly worried Russian authorities to such an extent that the Kazakhs were removed from its jurisdiction in the 1860s (Bekkin 2020b: 100, 108 n. 146).

Russian officials used the term “Tatar” for Muslims speaking Turkic languages in the Volga region, the Urals and Siberia, but also Crimea and the south Caucasus. However, the term carried troubling connotations. As a historical term, it was loosely applied to the pagan Mongols, which made many Muslims resent it (Ross 2020: 131–32). However, numerous oral histories and traditional chronicles in Central Asia described Genghis Khan as a Muslim ruler and culture hero. Although the Muslim peoples of the Volga-Ural region had been violently incorporated into the Mongol Empire, the Mongols’ religious tolerance had facilitated the spread of Islam in Central Asia (Frank 1998: 17). Muslim chronicles and literary epics included the Mongols among the descendants of “Turk, son of Yafet, son of Noah,” and combined shamanist folklore and Islamic tradition to depict Genghis Khan as “the progenitor of the tribal political and social order” (Biran 2007: 126–27).

Historian and theologian Shihabuddin Merjani (1818–1889) recognized the unifying potential in the exonym “Tatar” precisely because it had been coined during the Golden Horde and the Kazan Khanate, states ruled by Muslim khans claiming descent from Genghis Khan (Frank 1998: 158–69). Merjani taught at the Russian-Tatar Teachers’ School in Kazan, founded in 1876 to train teachers to the Muslim population. Despite its assimilationist objective, the school produced nationally conscious graduates, such as statesman Sadri Maksudi (Arsal)³ (1880–1957), Pan-Turkist publicist ‘Ayaz İshakî (1878–1954) and revolutionary Mirsaid Sultangaliyev (1880–1940) (Rorlich 1986: 139, 301). As a historian, Merjani encouraged his compatriots to identify as “Tatar.” Without the term, the enemies of their faith and nation would just find other terms of abuse. Echoing the sentiment behind a famous Finnish nationalist slogan (“Swedes we are not, Russians we shall not become; let us then be Finns”; see Marjanen 2020), Merjani stated: “You are not Arab or Tajik or Nogay; you are still less Chinese or Russian or French or Prussian or German. If you are not Tatars, then who are you?” (Ross 2020: 131).

Ironically, this development in national consciousness was spurred by the fact that Russian authorities had become increasingly suspicious of the Muslim intellectual networks that the Empire itself had created and supported (Ross

2020: 2). Between the Russian and Ottoman Empires shuttled radicals, such as the intrepid Yusuf Akçura, who had been involved in pre-revolutionary politics in both empires. Most importantly, Jadidism, a movement in Islamic education, emerged in the 1880s. Starting with a “new method” (*usul-i jadid*) of teaching the Arabic script used to write the native tongue, it grew into a movement of progressive reform within Islam in Central Asia (Khalid 1999: 89–93). The Jadidists embraced Turk and Tatar identity and promoted the debate on Genghis Khan and his legacy (Gündoğdu 2020). In 1913, a Kazan Tatar author counted both Genghis Khan and Suyumbika, last queen regent of the Kazan Khanate, among his forebears (Ross 2012: 367).

Both Tatars and Finns had achieved a position of “manageable” and relatively privileged minorities in the Empire, but those privileges could be taken away. Russian ethnographers and anthropologists often evaluated subject nations according to their perceived potential for assimilation (Geraci 2009: 174–76; Issiyeva 2021: 66–67). The Tatar ethnographer ‘Ainuddin Akhmarov attacked such ideas concerning the Mishärs, a sub-group of the Volga Tatars. Russian anthropologists claimed that the Mishärs, as a “Tatarized” Finno-Ugric people, distinguished themselves favorably from other Tatars by their appearance, health and temperament. Akhmarov denied any significant Finnic influence in Mishär culture. They were a nomadic Turkic people that had possibly arrived at the Volga even later than other Tatars (Geraci 2009: 179–80). The Finno-Ugricization of the Mishär Tatars may have been connected to Imperial Russian perceptions of Finns as easier to assimilate than Turkic Muslims. In the mid-19th century, a movement of Finnish linguistic nationalism challenged the dominant position of Swedish as an administrative and elite language in Finland. Russian support of this movement was motivated by the belief that Finnish, as a more “primitive” language than Swedish, would be easier to replace with Russian (Polvinen 1984: 171–72).

Despite Castrén’s sympathetic ideas about Ural-Altai kinship, fears of Tatar expansionism caused concern in Finland, too. With the establishment of railway connections between Russia and Finland in the 1870s, Tatar merchants connected the Grand Duchy to their transnational trading network (Wassholm 2020: 14). Although these merchants were Mishär Tatars from the Middle Volga region, theories about the Mishärs’ Finno-Ugric origin did not influence Finnish public opinion in their favor. Foreign traders were generally viewed with suspicion in the newspapers that tended to reflect the political opinions of local business and authorities (Wassholm and Sundelin 2018: 13). Tatar traders became targets of racist “Yellow Peril” caricatures and accusations of collaboration with the Russian authorities (Elmgren 2020).

The racial stigma and its consequences for a nation’s political rank influenced Finnish views on minorities and each other. Finnish-speakers considered it gravely insulting to be called Tatar by Swedish-speakers, especially in front of foreigners (Elmgren 2020: 28). Classifying minorities like the Sámi, Finnish

anthropologists used the same theories about racial hierarchies that they contested when foreign anthropologists ranked Finns unfavorably (Isaksson 2001: 20). In this, Finnish scholars and intellectuals were not very different from their Russian colleagues. Russians subscribing to their Empire's civilizing mission could agree with the writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky: "In Europe, we are Tatars, but in Asia we, too, are Europeans" (Kappeler 2013: 208). The imperial and colonial project could elevate the state-bearing nation to a higher racial rank, at least symbolically.

Latecomer nations that lacked an empire of their own could perhaps only hope to profit from cataclysms that threatened already existing empires. In the late 19th century, visions of future wars increasingly took the form of a "race war," amplified by real-life events such as the rise of Japan as a military power, the defeat of Italy in Abyssinia and the Boxer Rebellion in China (Isaksson, Jokisalo and Abdulkarim 2018: 244). After the First Sino-Japanese War in 1892–1894, Finnish independence activist Konni Zilliacus (senior) predicted that Japan would soon make use of the slogan "Asia for the Asians" to further its own interests (Zilliacus 1896: 53). Asia, previously thought to be a dying civilization, was now imagined as a volcano ready to erupt. The Russo-Japanese war in 1904–1905 confirmed this belief. The Japanese victory became a turning point in the perception of Japan among Turkic nations (Dündar 2017: 199). According to Yusuf Akçura, a Turkey led by nationalists could emulate Japan's model of leadership (Worringer 2014: 189).

The effect of the Russo-Japanese War on the Russian Empire was twofold: first, the suffering of the common soldiers in the Russian army created a shared resentment among all imperial subjects, fueling revolutionary movements. Second, Japan became a role model to subject nationalities (Friederich 1998: 94). Muslims discussed rumors that the Japanese were about to accept Islam, including the Emperor Meiji himself (Dündar 2017: 206; Togan 2012: 37). An enterprising religious scholar, 'Abdürrësît Ibrahim, took advantage of the political climate by participating in the foundation of a political organ, the All-Muslim Union, in 1905 (Meyer 2014: 84–85). Traveling to Japan, Ibrahim enthusiastically argued that Islam would open the way for Japan into Asia—all the way to the Urals (Georgeon 1991: 57; Ibrahim 2004: 172). Ibrahim reported that Japanese luminaries welcomed their "older brothers, the Tatars, descendants of Genghis Khan," or expressed their admiration for Tamerlan (Ibrahim 2004: 134, 140). He reciprocated with statements of solidarity, for example in the foreign affairs journal *Gaikōjihō* in 1909:

... Asians are disgusted by the Europeans. ... I am sure that bringing about the union of Asian peoples to stand up to Europe is our legitimate means of self-defense. We Tatars do not hesitate to respect Japan as our senior, and we hope to send our youth to study in Japan. (Komatsu 2017: 147)

Like Ibrahim, Finnish activist Zilliacus became a Japanese asset. During the Russo-Japanese War, Zilliacus was supplied with money by the Japanese agent

Motojiro Akashi to finance revolutionary movements against the Russian Empire (Akashi 1998). Unlike Ibrahim, Zilliacus did not claim any blood relationship between his nation and the Japanese. As a Swedish-speaking Finn, he probably felt little reason to do so. A new generation of Finnish linguists like Gustaf John Ramstedt (1873–1950) denied the existence of a Ural- Altaic language family altogether (Ramstedt 1919: 41–42). Because of the conflation of race and language, this result was thought to disprove any racial affinity between Finns on the one hand and Turks and Mongols on the other. However, Ramstedt was an unprejudiced supporter of Asian independence movements. In 1912, his services were requested by a committee from Mongolia that had arrived in St. Petersburg to negotiate Russian support for their national independence movement (Halén 1998: 168–69). Through Ramstedt’s work, modern Mongolians became aware of a shared genealogy connecting Mongolian and Turkic peoples (King 2019: 86).

Ramstedt also established personal relationships with Tatar nationalists like statesman Sadri Maksudi (Ramstedt 2011). Exiled in 1918, Maksudi was welcomed in Finland by Ramstedt and other allies, although the attitude toward non-Finno-Ugric refugees was generally indifferent or hostile (Leitzinger 2018: 90). In a reception with high-profile politicians and intellectuals, Maksudi held a speech where he praised the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, as an achievement of the entire “Ural-Altaic” race (Halén 1998: 205; Raevuori 2011: 164). Finland continued to serve as an escape route and a meeting place for Turkic emigrants until the Second World War (Bekkin 2020a; Zaripov and Belyaev 2020). Scholars and politicians in exile, such as Akçura, Maksudi and the playwright ‘Ayaz Ishaki, regularly communicated with the Muslims in Finland (Bai-bulat 2004: 84). Bashkir revolutionary Zeki Velidi (Togan) also cultivated contacts with Finnish Tatars (Togan 2012: 113, 446–47, 461–62, 469–71).

Imperial Longings and the Reluctant Heirs of Genghis Khan

Before the 1860s, Muslims in the Volga-Ural region identified as Muslim first, although local identities and language played an important role. The exonym Tatar was adopted with the rise of cultural and political nationalism partly for historical reasons, partly “for reasons of convenience” (Frank 1998: 5). The modern Tatar identity can thus be defined as a product of Empire—the contemporary Russian Empire, and the production of historical consciousness about other empires in the past that had belonged to real or imagined ancestors.

As among the early Pan-Turkists, many of the intellectuals participating in the creation of a new historiography for the Republic of Turkey were Volga Turk emigrants. Sadri Maksudi (1930) addressed the question whether Turkic peoples were capable of civilization to prove that Turks were a state-building race “despite their Asianness.” This question was actualized by the threat of the Western colonial powers seeking to divide the Ottoman Empire among

themselves and Greece in 1918–1922. Nevertheless, Turkish historians needed a dialogue with Western historians to affirm the state-bearing character of the Turkish nation. Some placed the Turks in the “Alpine” sub-group of the white race and searched for their roots among populations in the ancient Near East, recognized as the cradle of civilization also by Western scholars (Erdman 2017: 213). Emigrants from Russia promoted an alternative historical view of a state-building Turkish civilization that included the Central Asian Turks (Khalid 1999: 198).

In the folk traditions of the Volga Turks, Genghis Khan was a legitimizing culture hero. Pan-Turanists integrated Genghis Khan in a grand narrative about Turkic statecraft with the help of Western authors, such as the swash-buckling tales of French novelist and popular historian Léon Cahun (Berkes 1998: 315–16; Ergin 2017: 72–74). Some Anatolian Turkish nationalists found Cahun’s characterization of the ancient Turks as “noble savages” problematic (Aziz Basan 2010: 5–7). The older Ottoman view of the Mongol Empire had been hostile or ambivalent. Young Ottomans initially rejected “an ideology based on the Turk—who was believed to be either a peasant, or a *Kızılbaş* (heretic), or a heathen Mongol, or a despised Tartar [sic]” (Berkes 1998: 317). Ottoman prejudices against Tatar appearance and accent were challenged by the nationalist and feminist author Halide Edip Adıvar, who depicted young Tatar women as ideal, modern Turks (Güven 2020).

Emigrants from the Russian Empire tended to argue on behalf of an Asian-oriented definition of Turkishness. Tatars and Bashkirs found common ground in the claim that Genghis Khan was a Turk (Togan 2012: 463–64). Yusuf Akçura introduced Cahun’s positive view on Genghis Khan in his Pan-Turkist journal *Türk Yurdu* in the 1910s. He explained that Genghis Khan had wanted to unite all the “Turanian nations,” including the Mongols, the Turks and the Tatars (Dumont 1974: 325). Even though Genghis Khan was sparingly used as a symbol of Tatar nationalism, it is interesting to note that the Muslim Committee of the Kazan garrison, during the short-lived Tatar-led Idel-Ural republic, published a nationalist, anti-Bolshevik newspaper under the title *Ciñiz balasy*, “Genghis’ children,” in 1918 (Bennigsen and Lemerrier-Quelquejey 1964: 190).

The opinion on Genghis Khan’s heritage seemed to vary greatly according to the writer’s target audience. In 1933, nationalist author and politician ‘Ayaz Ishaki promoted Tatar separatism in the Volga-Ural region to a Western readership. Ishaki argued that while the Mongols were not Turks as such, their empire was built on Turkic traditions of statesmanship and with Turkic nations as its military and administrative backbone. He stated that the “Turkish race” ought not to be confounded with “the Yellow Race,” which the Turkic nations resembled only distantly (Ishaki 1933: 5). In 1941, Zeki Velidi Togan argued in the pamphlet *Moğollar, Çingiz ve Türkler* that Western scholars had mistakenly conflated the historical Mongols, the Turks’ brother nation, with the completely unrelated Chinese and Japanese (Erdman 2017: 216, 223; Togan 1941: 1–5).

Although internationally recognized as an expert in his field, Togan became marginalized in Turkish academia in the 1930s. In 1944, Togan was accused of Turanism, racism and conspiracy against the state, and was imprisoned for more than a year (Bergdolt 1981: 13–14). There was a pragmatic reason for the official rejection of the Central Asian orientation in Turkey. The Turkish government wanted to assure the Soviet Union that it did not nourish irredentist ambitions (Erdman 2017: 181).

Meanwhile, in the newly independent Republic of Finland, Genghis Khan, Mongols and Tatars were generally associated with the negative qualities of Oriental despotism. However, while Finnish-speakers protested the use of the term Tatar as an insult, they could self-ironically refer to Finns as Tatars, Mongols, Turanians or Asians. Some aspects of the “noble savage” stereotype could be reinterpreted paradiastolically (from the rhetorical technique *paradiastole*, “re-describing the vices as virtues”; Skinner 2007). In the early 20th century, “barbarian” characteristics of the Finns began to be idealized as signs of strength and purity in contrast to decadent Western civilization, especially the Swedish-speaking population (Elmgren 2016). Nationalist author Kyösti Wilkuna wrote in his diary during the Libyan war 1911–1912:

Up, Mongols! If only, Genghis, you would return once more and drown in blood the European lackey civilization, and like an alpine gust sweep away this generation sick of mental diarrhea, ruled by hysterical women and spiritually fed by market advertisements. Come, and I will rush to meet you like a Mongol; when I hear the snort of your steeds and the jangle of their bits, I will meet you and join your ranks. (Railo 1930: 272–73, my translation)

Stereotypes of warlike barbarians were a tempting cure for the emasculating decadence of fin-de-siècle Western civilization. In Russia, poet Vladimir Solovyov ambiguously conjured a frightening, yet seductive “Pan-Mongolism” in 1895, inspiring Alexander Blok’s “The Scythians” (1918) and other “exotisms of the Self” (Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2010: 215–22). Hierarchies were not easily overthrown by rhetoric. Without emotional or knowledge-based investment in imagined origins, the use of the paradiastole became a superficial show of self- or autoexotism (Savigliano 1995) or “self-racism” (Apo 1999). This paradiastolic reading of racial stereotypes remained a subversive, ironic strain in the public discourse in Finland.

Racial Anxieties in the Eye of the Beholder

The troubled birth of Finnish national independence in the turmoil of civil war and the Finnish Whites’ fateful alliance with the Central Powers in 1918

actualized the need to prove the Finns' racial right to sovereignty. Ramstedt, already engaged on behalf of the Tatar cause, attempted to solve the Finnish racial problem. Earlier, Ramstedt (1915) had stated that the Finno-Ugric peoples were by their appearance altogether more blond and white-skinned than the "motley crew" of the European nations. On the other hand, Ramstedt refuted the theory of permanent racial hierarchies and cited the Japanese as proof of the Asian race's potential. If Finns could keep their independence, they would also soon contribute to human culture. Then—but only then—the question of racial origins would be moot (Ramstedt 1919: 40–44).

According to Ramstedt, Finns ought to be called—based on their actual phenotype—"the world's whitest race." The phrase gained a life of its own in popular newspapers (*Länsi-Uusimaa* 1925; "Kustaanpoika" 1931; "Vanha Matti" 1934; "Rip" 1964). The need to prove Finnish whiteness to the West could be compared with the defense of national independence. Insinuations of non-white racial origins were considered insults to Finnish sovereignty. Such claims also endangered Finns living in countries that practiced racial segregation, such as the United States. The spread of "false testimony" of race was thought to cause "willful damage" (Salamooni 1933: 4). The racial stigma directed the discourse on race in Turkey, too. To teacher and historian Afet İnan, counting the Turks among the "Yellow Races" was nothing but "slander" (Erdman 2017: 194, 211). She defined Turkish racial characteristics with an emphasis on purity and whiteness, while still placing the Turks' ancient origins in Central Asia (Ergin 2017: 133).

As biometric studies on race collected greater amounts of data, it became increasingly difficult to pinpoint which should be interpreted as significant. Since many of the phenotypic features associated with the "Yellow Race" appeared among other populations, the so-called Mongol eyelid or epicanthic fold became focus of scientific interest and poetic fancy. What Ramstedt (1919: 42) had described as "eyelids half shut in a strange fashion," was a cluster of elusive traits, sometimes only present in the eye of the beholder. Finnish nationalists in the interwar era wanted to prove that Finns were not only white, but free of the stigma of the epicanthic fold. A photo of beauty queen Ester Toivonen, winner of the title Miss Europe in 1934, accompanied the headline "We are not Mongols" in a popular pictorial magazine. The author insisted on the most important piece of evidence: "We are not slant-eyed, and we have no folds in our eyelids" (H. J. V. 1934: 22).

In the era of modern mass communications, sports competitions and beauty contests became arenas for global promotion of the image of a racially acceptable Finn or Turk. When Keriman Halis won the Miss Universe beauty pageant in 1932, President Atatürk declared confidently: "... historically the Turkish race is the most beautiful race in the world" (Ergin 2017: 121). In Finland, the tone was more defensive. The whiteness of the "world's whitest race" was not self-evident. Finns had to "graphically demonstrate, until our scientists can produce binding proof, that we are a people with many good qualities"

(H. J. V. 1934: 22). Those who did not conform to the ideal had to be hidden away. The Finnish ambassador to Washington requested that official promotional material produced for the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles 1932 leave out photographs of Finnish wrestlers, who might look too “Mongolian” to a white American audience (Lähteenkorva and Pekkarinen 2004: 220–25).

Physical evidence was unreliable. The archaeologist and Social Democrat politician Julius Ailio argued that facial features, skin color and hair structure were “lesser external characteristics” in modern anthropology. Instead, anthropological anatomy studied “the build of the skeleton and the differences of the inner organs” (Ailio 1921). A researcher who had conducted biometric studies on the Sámi people for a decade had to concede that the more data one had collected, the less one could say with certainty about racial classifications (Isaksson, Jokisalo and Abdulkarim 2018: 306). Professor of anatomy, Väinö Lassila, became a dedicated anti-racist while conducting scientific measurements that Ailio considered to be the state of the art in racial anthropology (Schoultz 2021). “Comparative anthropology has proven the astonishing uniformity in the mentality of all peoples, and anatomical research reveals a profound unity in the physique of all human groups,” Lassila wrote (1936: 54). However, it has been observed that the sheer impossibility of disproving the various claims and shifting definitions produced by racial anthropologists made the discipline paradoxically resilient against scientific criticism before the Second World War (Isaksson, Jokisalo Abdulkarim 2018: 313).

The threat of a coming world war encouraged speculations of possible alliances transgressing racial boundaries. The Japanophile Pan-Turkists had already heralded this change. As historian Renée Worringer has noted, “despite temptation to identify with the ‘superior’ races because of their own elite status ... they did not sympathize with the rampant paranoia of ‘Yellow Peril’ emerging in Europe about Japan” (Worringer 2014: 135). Around the world, the Turkish victory in the War of Independence in 1923 was celebrated or condemned similarly to Japan’s in 1905 as an “Asian” victory over Europe.⁴ In the end, the mutually accepted definition of a civilization’s right to self-determination was pure military power. This pragmatic key would open the lock on the Finnish “Asian complex.”

The Conspiracy of Nations and the Coming Race War

This section focuses on two tropes prevalent in Finnish and Tatar narratives on the future of their nations. The first trope, “the conspiracy of nations,” was based on what I will call “arithmetic pragmatism”—the calculation that the minority nations of the Russian Empire or Soviet Russia together would outnumber the “Great Russians.” Therefore, they would be able to unite and successfully defeat Russia, which would be divided into national republics. The vision depended on a simplified assumption—often based on imagined racial

difference—about the interests and motivations of different groups making up the population of Soviet Russia. Even so, a possible conspiracy of nations was advocated deep into the 1930s by Finns and Finnish Turks (the then-preferred ethnonym among Tatars in Finland).

The “conspiracy of nations” trope stood in a complicated relationship to the second trope, the “coming race war,” a commonplace trope in political journalism and popular fiction in the early 20th century. The racial Darwinist idea of a necessary struggle for survival between the races had been used to justify colonialist expansion until the early 20th century (Isaksson, Jokisalo and Abdulkarim 2018: 244–45). The idea of a global race war, fueled by the horrors of the First World War, replaced the hitherto prevalent notion of the extinction of the “weaker races” under white domination (Barder 2021). Many authors assumed that an uprising against the white race would begin in Asia, and some Finns welcomed the rise of Japan as an antidote to Soviet power in the East. One columnist adapted an episode in *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic, in which a small man rises out of the sea to cut down a great oak that obscures the sun and the moon: “A small, yellow, patient, deliberative [man], with sinews of steel and iron heels” could perhaps awaken the “camel drivers and drinkers of mare’s milk” of the steppes (Johannes 1932). Who would be the middle-man of this new empire in Asia? Not coincidentally, some of the driving forces behind this trend were Tatars:

As is known, the Turks of Russia fled to other countries after the Bolshevik revolution. Some of them, about 2,000 souls, moved to Japan ... The Muslims of Japan have enthusiastically produced propaganda against the Bolsheviks, with the hope of liberating Russia from Soviet power. (*Aamulehti* 1938)

In the spring of 1938, a festival for the Muslim nations was held in the Japanese capital to celebrate the opening of the Tokyo Mosque. The event was covered in Finnish newspapers, which also speculated in the spread of Islam in Japan (*Uusi Suomi* 1938; *Uudenmaan Sanomat* 1938; *Jääkäri* 1938). The martial and disciplined mentality of Islam supposedly appealed to the Japanese (Matias 1938). Indeed, the Japanese government displayed its political support of the event with a celebration for the international guests, including a military show. Reportedly, some “Turkish inhabitants of Finland” also attended the festival (*Aamulehti* 1938).

To understand the appeal of race war narratives in Finland, we must consider the post-independence understanding of Finland’s former position in the Russian Empire as an effect of the so-called Russification policies that threatened the Grand Duchy’s constitutional autonomy from 1899 onward. The Finnish national movement was initially reactive, aiming to preserve autonomy. However, some activists embraced a total break with the empire and found

inspiration in recovered and reinterpreted documents from the past. One of these documents was a letter from the explorer M. A. Castrén, dated October 1, 1844. In this letter, uncharacteristically for his time, but timely enough for readers at the turn of the 20th century, Castrén envisioned future national independence for Finland. This goal would be achieved by piggybacking on a greater uprising:

The Russian will eventually collide with the Turks, who are supported by the Kyrgyz, the Tatars, and the whole of Caucasia. Poland is merely waiting for a chance to take up arms. Then we too shall shout woe over the Muscovite from Finland's bogs. But, until then, I think we ought to save our breath ... (my translation; Castrén 1994: 622)

First published in fragments in the original Swedish by explorer and independence activist Kai Donner (1919), and later in its entirety (Schauman 1923), Castrén's letter was often paraphrased and abbreviated in Finnish translations to focus on the militant message in the years after independence. Castrén's vision was not a war between races as such, but implied an understanding between oppressed nations with a common enemy. By imagining themselves benefiting from the initiative of Turks, readers of Castrén's letter could imagine the Turkish nations as more than "the sick man of Europe," or nomadic savages—they could imagine them as leaders and freedom fighters.

Hopes for such an alliance were rekindled when the Finnish Civil War ended in May 1918. The Finno-Ugrian Society, a learned society dedicated to the study of Uralic and Altaic languages, awarded honorary membership to an unexpected individual: Mehmet Talaat Pasha, Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire. He was chosen due to his role as a leader of the Turanist movement that strove to unite the whole Ural-Altaic "tribe." Although the Society usually distanced itself from Turanism, political expedience prevailed (Salminen 2008: 101). Philologist Jalo Kalima (1918b) enthusiastically described a "Turanian chain" strangling Russia, with Finland as its "last link." The Central Powers alliance died with the Entente victory in November 1918, but the image of an "iron chain" survived for the duration of the Russian Civil War (*Uuden Suomen Ilta-lehti* 1919; *Liitto* 1919; Jaakkola 1920). In the nationalist and interventionist journal *Suunta*, an anonymous Tatar source, reportedly involved in the Tatar national movement, outlined an unusually ambitious geopolitical plan: "Mongolia, too, will be involved in the solution of the [Tatar] question, for the Tatar plans include the inclusion of its Tatar regions into the whole tribe" (*Suunta* 1919: 103–04).

Seeking regular diplomatic relations to stabilize its geopolitical position in the interwar era, few Finnish politicians utilized the rhetoric of Turanism in a "tribal" or racial sense. A rare example, a 1924 letter from President Lauri Kristian Relander to President Mustafa Kemal in its Turkish translation

referred to the common origin of Finland and Turkey with the term *ırk*, race (Küçük 2011: 33). This word seems to have been introduced into late Ottoman Turkish by Tatar emigrants (Bazin 1985; Hanioglu 2001: 67; Turhan 1995: 282). Considering the opinions of contemporary Finnish scholar-diplomats, the letter's phrasing should perhaps be taken with a grain of salt. Diplomats recommended that whether the Turanian theory was true or not, Finns ought to play along with it, if it was advantageous to them (Kalima 1918a; 1918b; Salminen 2008: 101).

There was good reason to be cautious about adventurous foreign alliances after the ill-fated attempt to install a German prince on the Finnish throne in the fall of 1918. Germany's defeat had been a shock to many Finnish Whites, who felt deep gratitude for the German intervention against the Socialist uprising in the Finnish Civil War. Many believed that the fate of Finland would remain connected to German civilization in the future. Hence, models for adventure and heroism in the coming struggle between races were borrowed from German speculative fiction. In the German author Hans Dominik's novels, Europe's white nations often battled an Asian-led enemy in a global war (Hermand 2003: 50; Maltarich 2005: 313). Dominik's 1923 novel *Die Spur des Dschingis Khan* ("The Track of Genghis Khan") featured European engineers cultivating the lands beyond the Urals with cutting-edge inventions. Asians and Africans attack, but German technology prevails. "The dream of a world ruled by the Mongols is forever buried under snow and ice," according to the publisher's advertising copy (*Kajaani* 1924).

Dominik's reputation as an "engineer-writer" made him attractive to a Finnish readership with military interests. Civil war veteran and popular author Aarno Karimo picked up some of Dominik's themes in his novel *Kohtalon kolmas hetki* ("Third Moment of Destiny"; serialized in 1926–27, first complete edition in 1927, second edition in 1935). Set during a war of annihilation between Finland and a restored Russian Empire, the novel subverted genre conventions with an unexpected *deus ex machina*: A Tatar warlord, descendant of Genghis Khan, leading millions of Mongols in panzers. Tatars also rescue the novel's damsel in distress, a feat that usually belongs to the hero. Nevertheless, the superior technological innovations of Finnish engineers play a decisive role in the defeat of Russia. As in Dominik's novels, Karimo's hero's success "is not merely the triumph of an individual," but represents "that of the society and race," with the aid of "the prized scientific and technological resources" of his country (Fischer 1984: 218–19).

The differences between Dominik's and Karimo's novels stem from the Finnish national context and its imperial preconditions. The figure of the Russian Emperor, a crypto-Jew and an antisemitic caricature, is used to prove that Russians are inherently destined to be ruled by others. However, the novel depicts Asians in a positive light. Karimo's Finnish hero discovers an anti-Russian conspiracy of the Empire's minority nations under Tatar-Mongol

leadership. Calculating that the minorities together outnumber the Russians, the underdogs combine their forces (Karimo 1935: 197–200). In the final chapter, the Finnish heroes are pondering what the future will bring:

Hundreds of millions have awakened in Asia, and they know now that Europe is but a peninsula on the Asian continent. They want to follow the footsteps of Genghis Khan and other world conquerors. There will be a struggle for power between the white and the yellow race ... The European nations have already exhausted their spiritual and physical capital. Will they endure the coming giant struggle, or will their dusk arrive ... (Karimo 1935: 377–78, my abridged translation)

A sequel, tellingly titled *Between Two Fires*, set in the year 1990 and culminating in a war between Europe and Asia, was never published (*Hakkapeliitta* 1927a; 1927b). However, a scene in the published novel hints at the “key role” that Finland would have played in the sequel. The Tatars present the Finnish hero with a talisman, the golden wheel of Genghis Khan, which “will open the way anywhere” in the Tatar Empire. This might allude to a *paiza*, a type of passport used in the Mongol Empire and familiar in the West through the works of Léon Cahun and Marco Polo (Cahun 1888: 332; Polo 2016: 51, 56–57).

Karimo may have found inspiration in the adventures of his brother-in-arms, Georg Elfvengren, a former officer in the Imperial Russian Army, who had fought in Crimea in the early phase of the Russian Civil War (Karimo 1928: 155–60; Pyykkönen 2004). Elfvengren claimed that he had successfully led the Crimean Tatars against the Bolshevik onslaught, until he returned to Finland to join the Finnish Whites in the spring of 1918. In the popular imagination, Elfvengren as “Khan” of the Crimean Tatars joined the ranks of earlier imperial adventurers, such as the mercenary E. W. G. Becker, known as “Becker-Bey” in the Balkans and Maximilian August Myhrberg, aka “Murad Bey,” a volunteer on the Polish side in the November uprising 1830–1831 (Aro 1939: 15).

As the self-proclaimed “youngest white nation,” Finns reserved their nation the mercenary’s privilege to switch sides and ally with rising Asia, invariably led by Japan. Journalist Risto Vuorjoki (1936), from a family of right-wing independence activists, argued that the Finno-Ugric nations would become “the last representative of the power of the white race,” which would build civilization along with the Japanese. “From the perspective of the white race,” the Finns had “a tragic but noble task.” The reward would be worthwhile: Greater Finland would become a geographical and a historical fact. Like in Castrén’s vision, Finland would successfully piggyback on a civilizational catastrophe and avoid the fate of the senior members of the white race. Beyond that, it would be rewarded with an empire of its own. Vuorjoki envisioned a leading position for Finns in the hierarchy. Apart from the admired Japanese, “perhaps

even the Kyrgyz and the Tatars” would reach the rank of a civilization, but only in a distant future (Vuorjoki 1936: 9).

Chiming in with Karimo’s speculative fiction and Vuorjoki’s geopolitical visions, young nationalist poets in the 1930s dreamed about a future dominated by youthful, aggressive masculinity. Eastern fantasies provided an escape from the melancholy of the aging, effete West, represented by the victors and the neutrals in the First World War. Similarly, Imperial German political rhetoric had positioned German “barbarism” as a positive source of vitality and power vis-à-vis “decadent” French civilization (Jeismann 1992). The Romantic “fellow tribesmen” motif enabled German nationalists to identify with Native Americans and appropriate some of their imagined “unspoiled” affinity to nature (Usbeck 2015: 39). For some Finns, the Sámi people played this role. However, they lacked the warlike qualities of the fantasy Finno-Ugrians, imagined as a warrior tribe from the Ural Mountains. Matti Kuusi, who would later become a respected folklorist, conjured the spirits of Genghis Khan and Attila:

Come, flurry from Asia’s steppes, come: the fells are still standing! Break
the border of the sick country of the Old, o hailstorm and lightning!
Open the gates of Attila again, forge the road of Genghis Khan, End
tottering Europe’s curse, bring the dreams of the Ugrians to victory!
(Kuusi 1935: 93, my translation)

Praising Kuusi’s visions of “the boundless steppes of the East,” the poet Paavo Hynynen complained about Finnish poetry focusing on past and peaceful glories, while “in the flurries of Asia, the Japanese is gazing toward the West, rifle in hand” (Hynynen 1935; 1938). The metaphysical catastrophe of global race war required action. As defined by Maldonado-Torres (2016: 22), a “metaphysical catastrophe refers to transmutation of the human, from an intersubjectively constituted node of love and understanding, to an agent of perpetual or endless war.” In a worldview based on the inevitability of catastrophe, identifying with the Other as a warlike barbarian became an opportunity, rather than a threat. In the poem “Apollo of the Urals,” Hynynen imagined a “will-strong race” rising against Europe:

O, bards! Genghis Khan has pulled his battle-axe. Over the dusky con-
tinent, the riders of Asia are storming. It is time for the desert to sing
songs of might, For a frosty will to emerge from the drifts to the stars!
(Hynynen 1935: 11, my translation)

Paavo Hynynen was killed in battle during the offensive phase of the Continuation War in the summer of 1941. In the words of a fellow poet, he fulfilled his “severe ideal” as a soldier of a “strong, rising race” (Kajava 1943: 148).

It is doubtful whether the apocalyptic visions of Hynnen's and Kuusi's poems were appealing to Tatar emigrants, who had already experienced the traumatic loss of their native land. Among the younger generation that had been raised in Finland, some participated in public discourse on racial geopolitics. They were often engaged in business, religious and political activities, and intellectual pursuits at the same time, serving their community as "middle-men" in multiple public arenas. Their identification extended beyond the local or national level of the minority community, and their international adventures were not limited to speculative fiction. They located themselves in a transnational community of Turks, linking together such faraway places as Tokyo, Harbin, Istanbul, Warsaw and Berlin. Metaphorically speaking, they already possessed the golden talisman that seemed to open the doors to a vast, albeit fragile and ephemeral, empire.

In the early 1930s, a significant number of Tatars in Finland were increasingly preferring the ethnonym Turk in public discourse, but they continued to pay respects to their native lands along the Middle Volga. In 1930, 'Ayaz Ishaki visited Finland to promote the common cause of all non-Russian nations on Soviet territory. In an interview, Ishaki explained that the Soviet census of 1926 underestimated the amount of non-Russian nationalities (Russians 52 percent, others 48 percent). In many regions, such as Turkestan and Idel-Ural, Russians were an "insignificant minority." Ishaki's exercise in arithmetic was optimistic. All the "Turko-Tatar" nations together constituted approximately 30 million people, and the Finno-Ugrians a similar number. From the Volga to the Altai, the struggle against "red imperialism" was supported by the Paris-based Prometheus Society, Ishaki promised (*Uusi Suomi* 1933: 16).

A Finnish branch of the Prometheus Society was soon established with businessman and author Ibrahim Arifulla as a founding member. In his writings, Arifulla revised the negative image of the Golden Horde and its successor state, the Kazan Khanate. In the anti-Bolshevik discourse, the legacy of these states' rule—the "Tatar yoke"—was often used to explain the supposed "Oriental despotism" of the Russian state and the submissive character of the Russian people. The "Tatar yoke" was a product of 19th-century Russian historiography, recycled by anti-Russian Western propaganda (Bilz-Leonhardt 2008). In contrast, Arifulla (1933a: 10–12; 1933c: 15) described the heir to the Golden Horde, the Kazan Khanate, as an advanced civilization that had been ruthlessly crushed by Ivan the Terrible in 1552. According to Arifulla, the Golden Horde had treated its "alien nationalities" more liberally than "some modern great powers in their colonial politics," and it provided fundamental education in statesmanship to its subjects, including the Russians (1933a: 10–12).

Neither Ibrahim Arifulla nor his brother Sadri Arifullen (1936) mentioned biological kinship between Finns and Turks in their articles and interviews for a Finnish audience. However, they emphasized the historical, social and political connections between Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples: "For centuries,

we have had the same oppressor: Russia. It has bound us together with warm ties of brotherhood, for both nations, the Finns and the Turks, love freedom” (Arifullin 1936). Rather than reclaiming past glories, Ibrahim Arifulla (1933b: 43) wanted to prove that the potential state of the Tatars was materially and spiritually advanced enough to decide its own fate: “Idel-Ural is second only to Japan ...” Arifulla claimed to have discovered a real-life “conspiracy of nations,” eerily similar to Aarno Karimo’s fictional one: After the foundation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Tatarstan in 1920, a secret organization of “Turkish Nationalist Communists” gained positions of power in “almost all of the Turkish republics.” Their goal had been to build a Turko-Tatar republic “on the ruins of the Union of Soviet Republics.” This secret organization negotiated with Ukrainians, Georgians, Belarusians and Armenians to create a united front. In 1929, the conspiracy was revealed and liquidated, but Arifulla (1933b: 43) remained hopeful that rebellion was brewing in Tatarstan.

Indeed, in 1929, Finnish newspapers had publicized Soviet trials against activists promoting “Turanian supremacy” (*Uusi Suomi* 1929). According to the Soviet press, Tatar Bolshevik leader Mirsaid Sultangaliev had claimed that the Turks and the Mongols had mastered the concept of dialectic materialism—as Sultangaliev phrased it, “energetic materialism”—hundreds of years before the Western proletariat (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1979: 49). He was accused of conspiring with a variety of bourgeois nationalists against Soviet power, although he had organized openly in separatist associations during the revolution, according to the accepted policy at the time (Shnirelman 1996: 17). A crucial detail in the charges seems to have been true: In 1923, Sultangaliev had tried to establish secret contacts with Bashkir, Persian, Crimean and Turkish Communists. In one of the letters discovered by the GPU, Sultangaliev had suggested contacting the Bashkir nationalist Zeki Velidi (Togan), who was thought to be well connected among anti-Bolshevik rebels in Central Asia (Baker 2014: 603).

Sultangaliev, like Maqsudi and Ishaki, wanted to prove that Eastern nations were autonomous historical subjects, just as the Western nations. However, Sultangaliev’s goal was internationalist. He identified the driving force of world revolution in the colonized nations in the East, not the Western industrial proletariat that remained complicit in imperialism and colonialism (Baker 2014: 605–06). After the purge of Sultangaliev and other National Communists in 1928–1929, Tatar historians in the Soviet Union had to avoid glorification of the Golden Horde (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1979: 89–92; Shnirelman 1996: 7). In Soviet historiography, the integration of Tatar lands into the Russian Empire appeared a historical necessity, although Tsarist policies against Muslim populations were denounced as “cruel colonialist policy” (Halikov 2011: 87).

The Prometheus Club that provided a prestigious platform for the ideas of Ibrahim Arifulla had been maintained with financial support from the Polish state. When Germany occupied Poland, activities had to cease (Copeaux 1993: 29). A new opportunity to improve the public profile of Tatars or Finnish Turks

came in 1941, when Finland joined Germany's Barbarossa offensive to regain territories lost in the Winter War (1939–1940). Tampere businessman and publisher Zinetullah Ahsen (Böre) had a letter to the editor published in the largest newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, two months into the offensive. The purpose of his piece was to promote the agency of Turkic nations. They were not passive victims of the Bolsheviks, who had split them with promises of national autonomy. Together with Greater Germany and Greater Finland, a Greater Turkey would guarantee peace in Europe (Ahsän [sic] 1941). Soon, Finnish opinion pieces echoed the ideas of Ahsen and Arifulla (*Asemies* 1941; Timo 1941), and historian Kaarlo Iivari Karttunen (1941) described Tatars fighting side by side with the Finnish tribes against an "Asiatic" Moscow, "heir to the Mongols."

With his letter, Ahsen tried to promote goodwill for the Tatars and the Turks in the event of a German victory, and to protect them against stereotypical associations with Russia and the East. The idea of a common destiny also helped legitimize the presence of Tatars in Finland at a time when citizenship applications were dependent on often arbitrary character evaluations by local authorities (Leitzinger 2006: 212, 215–18). This came at the expense of a connection to Asia that Tatars have often been loath to miss.

Both Finns and Tatars approached the "racial stigma" of their respective nations with delicacy. Both wanted to clarify a historical legacy that defied attempts to force it into oppressive and determinist racial hierarchies formulated by scholars and scientists in a plethora of disciplines since the late 18th century. But Tatars had less motivation to abandon their connection to the Mongols. The acceptance of the ethnonym "Tatar" is perhaps the strongest piece of evidence. After all, it connected the Volga Turks to one of the greatest empires in world history, an empire that had put the fear of God into proud Europeans and left them in atavistic terror of the East.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored imperial middle-men and fellow travelers, Finns and Tatars, mainly from the perspective of experts and scholars—but also popular authors and political activists—who aimed to influence the positions of their nations within and against Empire. While all had to relate to what the dominant global ideology—colonialism—treated as an objectively verifiable racial and civilizational hierarchy, their ambitions went beyond accepting their collective place. Despite the racial stigma, the Mongol Empire proved to be a tempting past to claim. In creative hands, the notion of dynamic nomad warriors destroying a decadent civilization could provide comfort in times of crisis. Old Europe seemed to be running out of time, but the noble steppe savage kick-started a new cycle of progress. Identification with potential relatives was conditioned by pragmatic calculations and immediate needs in the present.

Besides personal sympathies, mutual generosity was prompted by “arithmetical pragmatism.” The numbers of non-Russian minorities in Soviet Russia were calculated to be higher in sum than the number of the majority nationality. Finnish supporters of Tatar independence returned to this argument in the hope that the minorities could unite their forces in an uprising of apocalyptic dimensions. Authors of the interwar era imagined a future alliance between Finns, Turks and Mongols against the common enemy, often including the Japanese and other Asian nations as an “iron chain” surrounding Russia. This sympathy rarely translated into beliefs of racial affinity.

Arguably, it was the Tatars’ warlike reputation that made them acceptable as allies to the Finns, just as the myth of Genghis Khan was too powerful to be discarded by Turkic intellectuals. In both cases, one can speculate how the mediating power of German geopolitics, romanticism and national identity, as well as the uniting power of a common enemy, Russia, and the rise of Japan as a military power, served to make the racial stigma less of a taint and more of a badge of honor.

Between discourses on white-dominated racial hierarchies on the one hand and culturally pessimist predictions of the “decline of the West” on the other, an auto-exotic identification with warrior tribes opened a way out from the quandary. This explains the attraction of Genghis Khan’s legitimizing lineage. An alliance with Asians against the West became an attractive fantasy for some Finnish nationalists, especially those with military experience and knowledge about the multi-national army of the Russian Empire. For Tatar intellectuals, stereotypes had to be tamed with historical narratives that did justice to the Islamic history of their native region. The brothers Ibrahim Arifulla and Sadri Arifullen’s interventions in Finnish public discourse had a multiple didactic purpose: to educate the Finnish public about the plight of their community, to disconnect it from negative associations with Russia and to connect it to modern Turkey, while holding on to the legacy of the ancient states that legitimized the claim to an independent state. In times of crisis, the warlike narratives could be utilized to show allegiance to the cause of the host state, or to propose a cooperative project that would re-center the national project of the Volga Turks themselves.

The imperial experience provides a sometimes-hidden ideological framework for both Finns and Tatars in their aspiration for future empires of their own—a Greater Finland, a united Central Asian Turkestan or a Greater Turkey. The race narratives in this study are never only stories about the past—they are projections of fears and hopes onto an apocalyptic future that might open windows of opportunities, just as the two world wars did.

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Notes

- ¹ Obsolete term for the Enets-Nenets, the Nganasan and the Selkup peoples.
- ² The melody can be accessed in the collection Suomen Kansan eSävelmät (the Finnish electronic folk song database): <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/30616>
- ³ Emigrants settling in Turkey followed the surname law of 1934 and adopted new surnames. I include the post-1934 surname in brackets when referring to events before 1934.
- ⁴ In India, the Turkish victory was celebrated as “an Asian victory over Europeans” (Heptulla 1991: 71).

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