

# Converting the Middle Volga Peoples in the 18th Century

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Questa breve introduzione alla storia della conversione di massa dei popoli allogeni del Medio Volga intende rispondere ad una duplice esigenza della storiografia relativa alla formazione dello Stato russo nel XVIII secolo. Da una parte vuole integrare la conoscenza della politica dello Stato assoluto nei confronti delle popolazioni delle varie etnie della regione del Medio Volga, dall'altra soddisfare l'esigenza di uno studio più approfondito della storia dei popoli non russi nel XVIII secolo: un periodo storico caratterizzato essenzialmente dalla campagna per la conversione religiosa della famiglia dei popoli di lingua ugrofinnica (Mari-Ceremisi, Mordvini, Udmurti-Votjaki) e di origine turca (Tatari, Ciuvasci).

La storia dell'assimilazione dei popoli non russi e della loro conversione all'ortodossia e alla cultura cristiana ha ricevuto una particolare attenzione nella letteratura sia da parte della storiografia tradizionale che di quella religiosa. Ma nonostante questo, la storia della regione del Medio Volga nel XVIII secolo, dal punto di vista storico-etnologico, è stata relativamente poco studiata. Per tale motivo questo articolo, basandosi sulle fonti documentali e sugli ultimi contributi storiografici, rappresenta un primo tentativo di studiare il fenomeno della conversione delle popolazioni allogene.

Il territorio del Medio Volga nel periodo che va dalla metà del XV al XVI secolo faceva parte del Chanato mussulmano di Kazan'. Dopo la conquista del Chanato da parte dello Zar di Mosca nel 1552, nel corso del XVI e XVII secolo, le popolazioni che popolavano la regione (i Tartari che erano mussulmani; i Mari, i Mordvini, gli Udmurti e i Ciuvasci che praticavano il paganesimo), furono solo in piccola parte convertite al cristianesimo e poste, a partire dal 1555, sotto la giurisdizione della Diocesi di Kazan'.

La professione della fede cristiana divenne obbligatoria per tutti i sudditi del paese e rappresentò un valido pretesto per la conversione dei popoli non russi all'ortodossia. Tuttavia, nel corso del XVI e XVII secolo, né i numerosi decreti dello zar né l'estesa rete delle chiese e dei monasteri russi ortodossi portarono ai risultati attesi. L'assoluta maggioranza della popolazione non russa del territorio del Chanato di Kazan' restò fedele al paganesimo o alla religione mussulmana.

La situazione iniziò a mutare sostanzialmente nel XVIII secolo. Nel periodo delle riforme petrine del primo quarto del XVIII secolo, la campagna di conversione dei popoli non russi divenne parte integrante della riforma religiosa.

La cristianizzazione delle popolazioni non russe del Medio Volga nel XVIII secolo è, comunque, legata all'attività del Dicastero delle nuove conversioni (1740-1764). Nel corso di un quarto di secolo venne attuata la campagna di conversione di massa sancita dal decreto dell'11 settembre 1740 "Sull'invio dell'Archimandrita con un certo numero di servitori nei diversi governatorati per l'insegnamento della fede cristiana ai neoconvertiti e sui privilegi accordati loro". In questo documento programmatico erano contenuti i fondamentali indirizzi di un'impresa che, attuata su larga scala, doveva condurre alla conversione di tutte le popolazioni allogene dell'Impero russo. Nel programma rientravano tutte le popolazioni non russe del Medio Volga insediate nei diversi distretti dei governatorati di Kazan' e di Niznnyj Novgorod.

Предложенная тема имеет несомненный интерес, с одной стороны, с точки зрения изучения политики абсолютистского государства по отношению к этнически и конфессионально разнородному крестьянскому сословию регионов Среднего Поволжья, как составной части Российского государства; с другой стороны, с точки зрения исследования истории нерусских народов на одном из переломных этапов их этнической истории в XVIII столетии, связанном с христианизацией народов финно-угорской языковой семьи (мары-черкесы, марды, удмурты-востки) и тюркского происхождения (татары, чувашы).

История христианизации и приобретения нерусских народов России к православной вере и христианской культуре получила известное освещение в светской и церковной литературе. Вместе с тем, применительно к региону Среднего Поволжья XVIII века эта тема не имеет целостного отражения с учетом современных достижений исторической науки, главным образом изучением "этнической истории" своих народов. Поэтому в этой статье мы делаем упор, в первую очередь, на документальные источники и современные исследования и находить в обобщенном виде ранее виденные этой проблемы.

Следует сказать, что территории Среднего Поволжья в середине XV-XVI вв. относились к мусульманскому Казанскому ханству. После покорения православным Московским царством Казанского ханства в 1552 г. народы, населявшие Казанскую землю (татары-мусульмане; мары, марды, удмурты, чуваш-язычники) лишь в слабой степени во второй половине XVI-XVII вв. были приобретены в Казанском сарае (с 1555 г.) к православной христианской вере.

Государственное вероисповедание приравнивалось для всех жителей страны абсолютным и служило решающим идеологическим мотивом и оправданием обращения нерусских народов к христианству. Вместе с тем, на многочисленных царских указах, мы разорванную сеть русских православных монастырей в языческом регионе не привнес и очевидным результатом. Абсолютное большинство нерусского населения территории бывшего Казанского ханства в пределах Казанской столицы оставалось стойким приверженцем язычества или мусульманства.

Политико-коренным образом изменилось в XVIII в. В период петровских реформ первой четверти XVIII века политика христианизации нерусских народов стала составной частью церковной реформы.

Христианизацию нерусских народов Поволжья связали с деятельностью Новокрещенской конторы (1740-1764). В течение четверти века были проведены тысячи христианизации, осуществленная на основе указа от 11 сентября 1740 года об отпращивании архимандрита с некоторым числом священнослужителей в разные губернии для обучения новокрещеных христианскому закону и о преимуществах новообращенным дарованных. В этом программном документе абсолютистского государства содержались основные направления, формы и методы, средства и характер кругооборота государственного морального, растительного и животного из грациозно всех народов Российской империи. Миссионерской деятельностью были в основном охвачены нерусские народы Среднего Поволжья, населявшие различные уезды Казанской и Нижегородской губерний.



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This brief introduction to the history of the mass conversion of the native peoples of the Middle Volga aims at meeting two needs of the historiography on the formation of the Russian state in the 18th century. It is necessary, on the one hand, to integrate the knowledge of the policies of the absolutist state in regard to the populations of the various ethnic groups of the Middle Volga region; on the other, to satisfy the need for a deeper study of the non-Russian peoples of the 18th century: a period characterised essentially by the campaign for the conversion of the family of peoples speaking Ugro-Finnic languages (the Mari-Cheremiss, the Mordvinians, the Udmurt-Votjaks) and of those of Turkic origin (Tatars, Chuvash).

The history of the assimilation of the non-Russian peoples and of their conversion to Orthodoxy and to Christian culture has received particular attention in the literature pertaining to both traditional historiography and religious historiography<sup>1</sup>. But notwithstanding this, the history of the region of the Middle Volga in the 18th century, from the historical-ethnological point of view, has received little attention. For this reason, this chapter, based on documentary sources and on the most recent historiographical contributions, represents a first attempt at studying the phenomenon of the conversion of the native peoples of this region.

The territory of the Middle Volga in the period that goes from the middle of the 15th to the mid 16th century was part of the Muslim Khanate of Kazan'. After the conquest of the Khanate by the Tsar of Moscow in 1552, in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, only a small part of the populations that lived in the region (the Tartars who were Muslim; the Mari, the Mordvinians, the Udmurts and the Chuvash who practiced paganism), had been converted to Christianity and placed, from 1555 on, under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Kazan'.



Fig. 1  
Mari people making hay. A drawing from the volume by Adam Oleari, 17th century.

The profession of the Christian faith became mandatory for all the subjects of the country and represented a valid pretext for the conversion of the non-Russian peoples to orthodoxy. The autocratic will of the tsar constituted the only source of authority in religious questions. However, neither the numerous decrees of the tsar nor the broad network of Russian Orthodox monasteries, of churches and parishes in the Russian cities of the district and in the larger villages, nor, indeed, the conversion to the Orthodox faith of a small number of members of the feudal aristocracy, the *Murzi* of the non-Russian populations, brought about the desired results. The absolute majority of the territory of the Khanate of Kazan' remained faithful to paganism or to Islam <sup>2</sup>.

The situation began to change substantially in the 18th century. The missionary policy of the state in this century became more carefully focussed. In the period of Peter the Great's reforms during the first quarter of the 18th century, the campaign to convert the non-Russian peoples became an integral part of the religious reform. Peter I was informed about the missionary policy of European countries and of the Roman Catholic Church; he was informed by the philosopher Leibniz, his personal counsellor on the subject of the introduction of concrete measures for the conversion of the non-Orthodox populations in Russia. The reformer borrowed from the West the organizational forms of missionary propaganda, placing it at the service of the State. By decree of the tsar, servants of the *Kasanskij archierejskij Dom* (the Episcopal See of Kazan') were sent into the houses of those

who continued to be linked to the ancient religious traditions, with the task of propagating the Christian faith.

The conversion campaign, as a State and Church enterprise, was regulated by the decrees of the tsar and was led by the Metropolitan of Kazan', Tichon, and by the Episcopal See of Kazan'. According to the communication of 1719 to the governing Senate, by the order of the hieromonk Metropolitan Aleksej Raifeskij in 1701-1705, 3686 individuals were baptised.

Among the converted, the absolute majority were Mari peasants, subject to the *jasak* (a tribute in skins or money) from the districts of Carevokokshajsk, Carevosanchursk, Jaransk, Urzhum and Kazan'. The proportion of new converts among the Chuvash, the Mordvinians and the Tatars was very small. This situation continued until the end of the first quarter of the 18th century, notwithstanding the publication of a series of decrees on the temporary exemptions from payment of the direct and indirect taxes and the obligation to provide army recruits; among these the decree of 3 November 1713, "On the baptism of the Muslims of the governorships of Kazan' and Azov" was particularly important <sup>3</sup>.

The second phase in Christianisation, which goes from the middle of the 1720s to the end of the 1730s, was characterised by an intensification of missionary activity. In this period, the empress Anna Ivanovna (1730-1740) was forced to deal with the ideological role and with the great influence of the clergy. The Manifest of 17 March 1731 underlines very strongly the intention of the government to defend Christian-Orthodox law and to convert the "diverse populations" to the orthodox faith. With this purpose in 1735, in the framework of the "programme for Christian education", in many places in the Governorship of Kazan' – Kazan', Elabug, Civil'sk, Carevokokshajsk – it was thought use-



**Fig. 2**  
Mari sacrificing to their gods in the sacred forest, from Adam Oleari, 17th century.

ful to open schools for the education of “children of other confessions”. The results, however, obtained by those institutions were very scarce, for one thing because of the difficulties deriving from the fact that parents refused to allow their children to attend the schools. The number of conversions in these years was insignificant.

It is true, however, that in the 1730s, missionary activity was progressively controlled by the central power (specifically by the administrations of the governorships, and of the provinces, and by the *voevody* the districts); and the organism for the Administration of the questions of the converts –which was named “Commission for the affairs of the new converts” – was reinforced. It was located in Svijazhska in the Bogorodickij Monastery; later it was known as the “Department for New Conversions”<sup>4</sup>.

The third phase of the Christianisation of the non-Russian populations of the Middle Volga is linked to the activities of the “Department of the New Conversions (1740-1764)”. In the course of a quarter of a century a campaign of mass conversion was carried out, sanctioned by the decree of 11 September 1740, “On sending the Archimandrite with a certain number of servants in the different governorships for teaching the Christian faith to the newly converted and on the privileges granted to them”. In this programmatic document were contained the fundamental lines of an enterprise, which, carried out on a broad scale, was to lead to the conversion of all the native peoples of the Russian Empire. The programme included all the non-Russian populations of the Middle Volga settled in the different districts of the governorship of Kazan’ and of Nizhnyj Novgorod<sup>5</sup>.

It is interesting, in this connection, to observe the way this campaign of Christianisation was carried out; it was characterised by the institution of new parishes of the newly converted in the territories inhabited by the different ethnic groups, by social opposition and by the protest of the non-Russian peoples towards forced conversion.

We must underline that the major part of the Mari people up until 1740 strenuously opposed baptism and continued to practice the tradition pagan rites which were tightly linked to the popular customs, to the culture, to the original language and the national self-awareness<sup>6</sup>. The situation changed brusquely in 1740. The tsar’s decree of 11 September of that year enacted a policy of mass conversion of the non-Russian peasants. Its execution was entrusted to a specialised corps of preachers, of *popi*, of functionaries and military personnel of the Department of the New Conversions. The conversion campaign, carried out mainly with coercive measures, and the formation of new parishes in the villages of the newly converted in the 1740s and 1760s, meant that the Mari people were forced to submit to the Russian national yoke.

In their dispatches to the Senate Commission, presided over by A.I. Svechin (1763-1764), the Mari informed the competent authority of the fact that the Orthodox preachers frightened them with threats of forced deportation from their birthplaces if they did not consent to being baptised. Therefore, “because they were afraid of leaving their homes, many accepted baptism”. In 1746 the Archimandrite of Svijazhska, Selivester, along with the monks of the Monastery of the Saviour, converted the Mari and the Chuvash of the Koz’modem’jansk district to the Orthodox faith “not by their desire, but with force” and using deceit, according to the testimony of the peasants themselves, who complained about the fact that “of the compensation promised, in money, clothes, shoes and icons, which were to be distributed in all the houses, nothing was given to them”.

This picture of the mass conversions was typical for other districts populated by the Mari as well. Some religious persons, such as for example Afanas'ev in the Kokshajsk district, introduced the new Christian faith "beating [the Mari] to death with rods". In 1748-1761 the Archimandrite of Svijazhska of the Bogorodckij Monastery, Evmenij, visited the Mari peasant villages in the district of Kazan' each year with sacristans and soldiers in order to teach them prayers, beating without scruples those who did not know the Christian ceremonies and forcing them to give him "gifts of fox and ermine".

The Department of the New Conversions, with the pretext of "teaching the Christian law", gave some of the converted Maris to the functionaries and landowners. The archbishop of the Monastery of the Ascension of Svijazhska, A. Koz'min, distributed the property deeds over to the Mari to the functionary in charge of the Kukarskij court *sloboda*. The officers of the military squadron, whose declared purpose was to "defend the new converts from offence" from the local functionaries, notwithstanding their mandate, harassed their protegés in every possible way, systematically exacting 'gifts' from them. This behaviour was similar to that of the "elected" officials in the parishes who used threats and beatings to force their fellows to work for them and confiscated money, bees, honey, fish, lard and grain.

The campaign of mass conversion of the native populations in the 1740s and 1760s contributed to worsening the situation of the Mari peasants drastically. In the course of the three years of exemption that the newly converted enjoyed from payment of the poll tax and other taxes, in fact, the fiscal burden came inevitably to fall on those who had refused to be baptised and on those who had already embraced Christianity. Precious testimony on this situation is offered to us by the example of the peasants of the Carevokokshajsk district. Wishing to use the three year exemption period, in 1742 "all the Cheremiss of the district, even the infants, decided to convert to the Orthodox faith". But the payment of their taxes fell to the lot of the "old converts" of the Podgorod district who had converted to Orthodoxy in 1720-1722. It is not surprising that such an increase in the taxation and in obligations made the natives fall into a situation of "extreme poverty". Almost all of them were thrown into prison because they had not paid what was due. In 1750 the governor of Kazan' informed the tsar that because "of the great poverty and continuous vexations", many members of the native population sought refuge in the forests. The peasants who continued to refuse to be baptised, including the Mari, were subject to such heavy taxation that they were ruined <sup>7</sup>.

Thus the threat of economic ruin for the peasants turned out to be one of the most important factors in carrying out the campaign to convert the Mari, in that for most of them conversion had a purely formal character, because they continued to be tied to their faith and their pagan concepts.

An additional consequence of the mass conversion campaign, beside the arrival of religious personnel, was the construction among the Mari population of churches and ecclesiastical buildings. All the burdens relating to the construction and maintenance of the churches and the sustenance of the ecclesiastical personnel fell on the new converts. In that period, more than 30 churches were built in the area populated by the Mari. To each priest they had to assign parcels of their common lands and of their best pastures, as well as a tribute in money and in kind. And in exacting what was due to them, the clergy was in no way more tender than the bureaucratic functionaries. They were particularly cruel in persecuting, through the functionaries, anyone who continued to be faithful to the traditional 'idol-

atric rites', and they did not shrink from using corporal punishment. In this way, for the Mari, the clergy became, alongside the other representatives of the central power, one of the emblems of feudal oppression.

The Mari peasants were decidedly opposed to the campaign of religious conversion, and notwithstanding the threats of the missionaries, they continued to remain faithful to the traditional beliefs of their forefathers. In some parishes of new converts attempts at revenge against the local clergy occurred. The Mari, too, did not attend church, they did not pay the tribute, and they refused to allow the clergy to use their common lands.

In substance, the baptism of the Mari turned out to be a forced conversion, and did not convince them to abandon their traditional pagan world.

According to Mordvinian researchers, the mass conversion of their people was one of the elements in the national policy of the tsars <sup>8</sup>.

Because it was carried out through the use of force, it caused the protests and the dissatisfaction of the Mordvinian people. Social conflict, caused by the conversion of the non-Russian peoples, turned out to be an important part of the nationalisation process in the Middle Volga. The attack against the native feudal nobility was a hard blow for the Mordvinians' economy, for their way of life and their world view, and they reacted as best they could. The new wave of violence against those who refused to be converted, carried out using clergy, functionaries of the chanceries and the regular army, started with the enactment of the decree we have already mentioned, of 11 September 1740. But already in the fall of 1742 a decree was enacted by the Senate "On forbidding the construction of mosques in the governorship of Kazan' and on entrusting to the governors and the vovody the control of the new converts who had abjured the Christian faith in order to embrace the Muslim religion". On the basis of this decree those guilty of apostasy were hunted down without mercy not only in the governorship of Kazan', but also in those of Simbirsk, Astrachan', Nizhnyj Novgorod and Voronesh.



**Fig. 3**  
The arrival of  
Pugachev, painting  
by E.  
Atlashkin.

Furthermore, the mass conversion to Orthodoxy of those who had not been baptised began. The secular powers and the Department of the New Conversions, directed by Dmitriy Sechenov, bishop of Nizhnij Novgorod and Alatyry, were forced to deal with the strenuous opposition of the Mordvinian peasants of the Terjushev region, who on various occasions took up arms in order to defend their pastures and beehives from the robberies of the landlords and the monasteries. In April 1743 the Mordvinians of eight villages meeting in assembly sent a petition to their landlord to seek help from him “so that no one receive permission to enter the lands of the Terjushev district”. In case of forced conversion they drew a dark picture: “we will go so far as to burn down our houses and courtyards and we will kill ourselves by throwing ourselves into the fire or in any other way”. And these were not empty threats because “those who were baptised against their will in the Arzamas district killed themselves by hanging”.

After having ignored the requests of the peasants, the secular and the ecclesiastical powers were forced to accept the idea that the Mordvinians were firmly decided to defend their faith. The savage behaviour of the bishop Dmitriy Sechenov, who on 18 May 1743 in the village of Sarlej ordered that “the wooden fences around the tombs that the un-converted Mordvinians consider sacred places” be burned down, was too much. Some thousands of Mordvinians took up arms. Nesmejan Vasil’ev, Dmitriy Canaev and Atres Pladikin guided the peasants’ revolt and rose up not only against the ecclesiastical authorities but also against their master and the landowners. Very swiftly army units were concentrated in the region to carry out a punitive expedition and to convert the Mordvinians by force. The tsar’s squadrons under the command of captain Makov and the lieutenants Galapin, Kuz’minskij and Chripunov took up quarters in the villages of the districts. The attempts of the missionaries to convert the inhabitants to the Christian faith were fruitless. They succeeded in converting only the recruits, the sick and the disabled. In summer 1743 in the Terjushevskij region “to convert and instruct in the law of God two igumens were sent, the rector of the Department of the New Conversions, of the Erzja nationality, Neofit Duchovskij, and the igumen of the monastery of Kazan’ Avramij with their servants”. All the Mordvinians of the region “left their houses with their women and children, they abandoned their cattle and taking their horses or on foot, they fled to the forests”. In the village of Maloe Seskino the missionaries found only “an old blind Mordvinian woman and a sick man”. The sick man was baptised while the old woman refused to abjure her traditional faith. The impositions, the harassment by the soldiers and the functionaries, along with the levy and the gathering of the taxes brought the Mordvinian region to ruin. On 16 November 1743 commander Barataev “for illegal acts and supplementary exactions of taxes” was relieved of his charge. In his place captain Maevskij was given the command. But this certainly was not sufficient to change the situation of the Mordvinians and the conversion policy. In the region of the uprising a large force was sent under the orders of Major General Junger and Major General Streshnev. On 7 December 1743 near the village of Lapshikhi the peasants were defeated. 74 people were killed, 30 wounded and 130 peasants were made prisoners and taken to Nizhnij Novgorod. Many of them died in prison.

The impoverishment of the peasants influenced the conditions of their owners as well. Working together the authorities and the functionaries of the Synod and the Department of the New Conversions designed a more flexible policy in order to achieve the desired objective. After Nesmejan Vasil’ev was punished by being burned at the stake as a heretic

near the village of Sarlej, the policy of the ‘big stick’ began to be replaced by that of the ‘carrot’. Shortly after that, all the Mordvinians were baptised. The attempt to defend their faith by Mordvinians of the *volost* of Terjushev ended in defeat.

The decree of 11 September 1740 confirmed the concessions made by previous decrees to the Chuvash too. Among these were exemption from paying tribute and from the obligation of furnishing recruits for the army for three years, the distribution of crucifixes, compensation in money and clothes. But the central power went much farther, promising to free the newly baptised from feudal dependency and from their debts towards landowners, functionaries and merchants.

The government operated according to the principle of *divide et impera* [divide and rule]. The burden of paying tribute and of furnishing recruits from which the new converts were freed was placed entirely on the shoulders of the un-baptised. In reality, this was a clear strategy designed to weaken the peasants’ opposition to the tsarist autocracy by separating them into two groups, Christian and non-Christian.

The functionaries of the Department of the New Conversions, the preachers and the *popi* [priests] escorted by army squadrons settled in the villages and forced the peasants to accept baptism. Thus, in May 1745, the Chuvash peasants of the Jadrino and the Kurmysh districts, denounced the builder of the Neofit Monastery, the archpriest of Kurmysh, S. Kuprijanov, the *pope* of Jadrino V. Michajlov and all those who arriving in the Chuvash villages in groups of 20 to 40 persons, were baptising by force hundreds of Chuvash, not hesitating to beat them “with rods” and to “keep them tied up and in chains 24 hours a day”. In the popular memory even today the legends relating to forced baptism are alive. The use of the “carrot and the stick” methods, in the course of a decade, in spite of resistance, lead almost the entire Chuvash population to conversion.



**Fig. 4**  
18 th-century Mari woman in her summer clothing.



**Fig. 5**  
Frontispiece of the first Mari grammar.

In the first year of activity of the Department of New Conversions 838 Chuvash of both sexes were baptised; the following year 8,357; whereas 12,360 were baptised in 1742. After that the number baptised each year grew. By 1752 almost all the 200,000 Chuvash had been converted.

The policy of Christianisation was accompanied by fiscal measures. As we have said, the payment of tribute to the State not paid by the new converts had to be paid by those who were not baptised. In 1749, when the annual tax to be paid amounted to one ruble and 10 kopecs, in the governorship of Kazan' the debts of each un-baptised male 'soul' came to 4 rubles. It is natural therefore that in their petitions the un-baptised asked that this norm be abrogated, as we can see in the petition sent to the empress in 1747 by the delegates of almost all the Tatars, Chuvash and Mordvinians of the governorships of Kazan' e Voronezh that had decided not to abandon their traditional faith.

In the same year the unbaptised Chuvash and the Tatars of the Svijazsk district wrote to the Senate to complain about the fact that they had paid 1638 rubles for the new converts as well, "selling almost all their property and cattle, and coming out of that taxation so exhausted that to avoid the payment of the poll tax not only for the new converts but for themselves as well they are forced to flee, abandoning their houses". In 1764 the lieutenant colonel A.I. Svechin, who had studied the situation of the populations of the Middle Volga, wrote: "those who have not wanted to abandon their ancient beliefs and for this reason have had to pay the poll tax for all those who have been baptised have been brought by the state of extreme poverty and indigence in which they had fallen to accept against their will the rules of the orthodox religion".

Obviously the central power was careful not to abide by its own promises to distribute compensation for baptism. In 1742 the Synod had asked the Department of the New Conversions to abolish the provision for payments and gifts, and in 1743 the members of the Department had begun to gather declarations of the baptised Chuvash that promised not to ask to be paid for their conversion. In 1763-1764 the Chuvash peasants of ten villages informed A.I. Svechin's commission that they had never received the crucifixes, clothes and money promised them, adding that as a matter of fact they had received damage amounting to 20-30 kopecs.

In the very first years of the mass conversion in the Chuvash, Mordvinian and Mari villages construction of churches was begun at the expense of the population. To obtain the necessary supplies of wood and for the construction work both the new converts and those who had refused to embrace Christianity were called upon. Money was gathered from the population to purchase the bells. In 1748, in the village of Torasvo in the Jadrin district the peasants contributed 120 rubles for the purchase of a bell. In 1766 in the Svijazhsk diocese there were 91 churches, served by 107 *popi*, 55 deacons and 153 sacristans; in the Cheboksary diocese there were 57 churches, 88 *popi*, 37 deacons, 126 sacristans; in the Koz'modem'jansk diocese there were 22 churches, 28 *popi*, 15 deacons and 46 sacristans; in the Alatyř, Kurmysh and Jadrino districts there were 259 churches, 317 *popi*, 227 deacons and 625 sacristans.

The clergy sent to the Chuvash villages caused great difficulties to the peasants. The village was supposed to distribute to the missionaries a part of the arable land which usually was leased. The clergy preferred in fact to be maintained directly by the peasants from whom they received bread, meat, butter, eggs, money etc. The clergy did not distinguish themselves in any way from the functionaries in extorting money from the peasants. The *pope* of the village of Chochasevo of the Padrino district, I. Alekseev, "in 1745 ploughed 6 strips of fallow fields of Egil'da Terent'ev, has planted spring crops for 15 haystacks; has taken grain from the storeroom of Dmitrij Mimotkin; has enchained and shut Enserov in the stable; has taken Alekseev's axe, has unleashed the dogs and massacred Mikusin by beating with sticks;... has ordered the guardian of the church to gather a *grivna* from each peasant household". The parish priest of the village of Sotnikov of the Kokshajsk district, S.Ivanov, and the sacristan S.Afanas'ev in the 1750s and at the beginning of the 1760s in their parish managed in different ways to become the owners of 100 *pud* of grain, several bulls, sheep and pigs. In the same period the *pope* of the village of Jadrin in the Jadrin district, Gavril Michajlov, and his son, the deacon Grigorij Gavrilov, made the parishioners pay 1 ruble or a ruble and 50 kopecs for baptising babies, for marriages and for funerals; they took bribes, they confiscated the peasants' horses, their cows, sheep, beehives, honey, cereals, clothes and quilts; they forced the peasants to work in their private courtyards, striking them or arresting them. The deacon went so far as to kill the daughter of the peasant Tozubaj, hitting her on the head with a stake. In 1762 the parishioners filed a complaint about the *pope* and the deacon to the ecclesiastical consistory of Nizhnij Novgorod, and in 1763 they did the same to the Synod. The question went on until 1767. But the Synod did not accuse the *pope* and the deacon, but rather the parishioners and those who had filed the complaint, Il'dugan and Tozubaj, were punished and whipped. The sources show us various cases of similar abuses by the clergy in the Chuvash villages. In the documents regarding inquiries carried out by the consistories of Kazan' and Nizhnij Novgorod and by the

Synod in the mid 18th century we find hundreds of complaints by the new converted regarding the behaviour of the clergy.

The clergy controlled the Chuvash peasants constantly and punished them cruelly when they did not obey the rites of the Orthodox church. Thus, in June 1748, the pope of the village of Sorma, P. Ivanov, beat to death the peasant Vamandej because he had not baptised his youngest son.

During the campaign of mass conversion in the Chuvash districts officers were sent with small groups of soldiers with the pretext of “defending the new converts from offence and stealing”. In the *volosti*, for the same reason, mayors and heads of the hundreds “were elected” in order to “put order in the disputes that arise between the converts and the natives who are faithful to paganism”. These figures depended directly on the officers of military detachments. The officers examined the complaints filed by the newly baptised and they tried to settle the controversies.

Thus Major Larionov, who held this office in the Jadrino and Kurmysh districts, forced the Chuvash peasants to work on his estate, exacting illegal tribute from them in money and in grain. The Major, furthermore, defended the functionaries and the clergy who the peasants were complaining about. In the Koz'modem'jansk district, Sokol'nikov acted in the same way.

In March 1764 A.I. Svechin communicated to the Senate that those charged with the defence of the new converts did nothing without being paid for it, ruining the peasants. Without any reason, they were exacting from 1 to 4 kopecs per person as “gifts”, they travelled with the new converts and “for their pleasure they take lambs, chickens, grain and everything they need without paying anything”.

In the course of the conversion campaign and after it, the government tried to create discord between the non-Russian populations of the Middle Volga. To this end, a special



Fig. 6

decree forbid the Chuvash to give their daughters as wives to Tatars or to marry Tatar women. A careful survey of all irregular marriages, which had been blessed, between Chuvash and Tatars and between Mordvinians and Tatars was carried out.

At the beginning the converts could be called Christian only in name. The government saw only one way to educate the baptised in Christian ways, and that was to transfer them to Russian villages or to settle them in separate villages. Their transfer was entrusted to the army officers and their squadrons. In 1742 the forced transfer of the new converts to villages inhabited by Russians or by already baptised Chuvash, generally near the borders of the Chuvash lands, began. By 1749 449 converted Chuvash had been deported. Subsequently the deportations were abolished. Actual experience showed that it was not possible to entrust the religious education of the converts to the Russian peasants. In the Russian people it was impossible to find any trace of religiosity. The preachers and missionaries complained to the authorities of the Department that the Russian peasants, when they went among the Chuvash to purchase grain, wood and so forth, "spread evil words"; "spreading such ill sayings that for us, poor beings, it has become not only difficult to convince them of the contrary, but even impossible, since they absolutely do not want to receive from us any advice that would be good for their souls". As a consequence it was decided to deport the unconverted, but this too was never actually accomplished.

In the course of a decade, the Chuvash, although externally they had accepted the Christian faith, in reality they had not accepted the Christian ideology. The Chuvash thought that conversion was particularly burdensome. The clergy, holding to the policy of forced Russification, made propaganda for the Christian faith in Russian. They fought Chuvash paganism and traditions using corporal punishment, fines and incarceration. Furthermore the clergy and the central powers carried out legal trials against the Chuvash peasants for not observing Christian rites.

In March 1769 priests and clergy of the Church of the Ascension of the village of Krasnye Chetaj of the Kurmyshk district, sent to the bishop of Nizhnij Novgorod and of Alatyř a supplication in which they write that the converted Chuvash did not attend church, they did not observe fasts, they held pagan ceremonies, they continued to have relations with Russian peasants who swore in the conversations they had together; they refused to receive preachers. In 1770 a squadron of the army under the orders of a major and with a *protoierej* to carry out the inquiry was sent from Nizhnij Novgorod to Krasnye Chetaj.

The inquiry, carried out using corporal punishment, was protracted over a long period of time during which all the parishioners were interrogated. All this however did not help the church much. Only in the second half of the 18th century, with the introduction of the mass in the Chuvash language and the publication in Chuvash of breviaries and ecclesiastical books, did Christian ideas begin to spread within the local population.

In comparison with that of the 'pagan' peoples of the Middle Volga, the mass conversion of the Muslim Tatars had specific characteristics<sup>9</sup>. The Tatars who were subject to *jasak* in case of conversion were to receive a copper cross, a shirt, pants, a kaftan in rough cloth, a cap, mittens and stockings. The Tatar *Murzi* instead received a silver cross and clothing and utensils of greater value. Furthermore, the three years' exemption for new converts from paying taxes and fulfilling service obligations was confirmed (those payments and

obligations as usual fell to the lot of those who refused conversion). It was also recommended the education of the converts be organised on the principles of the Orthodox religion and marriages between new converts and Russians were to be encouraged.

According to the degree promulgated by the empress Anna Ivanovna on 11 September 1740 the conversion of the Tatar population was not to be carried out using violence: "It is prescribed, instead, to follow the apostolic teaching, with calm and mildness, without recurring to threats or punishment so that the native peoples will not be given any reason for complaining". But in practice recourse to violence was common. With particular zeal and very widely, the Department of the New Conversions availed itself of methods of constriction in spreading Orthodoxy and in persecuting Muslims when it was under the command of Luka Koneshevich, archbishop of Kazan' and Svijazhska.

The missionaries, escorted by soldiers, were sent into the Tatar villages where they herded the inhabitants toward the river and baptised them. In case of opposition, they hit the peasants. The peasants were taken in the streets, pushed into the churches, baptised and declared Christian. Even the youngest sometimes did not succeed in avoiding such treatment. The new converts who did not observe the Orthodox rites were shut up and subjected to torture, or thrown into chains. On the Muslim feast days the Orthodox clergy organised religious processions in the Tatar villages. The ancient Muslim cemeteries were profaned and destroyed, while the tombstones were used as foundations for the churches which were being built.

In part because of the influence of the fanatic missionary Luka Koneshevich, the Russian empress Elisabeth Petrovna, in 1742, had signed a decree "On forbidding the construction of mosques in the governorship of Kazan' and on entrusting to the governors and *voevody* the task of investigating the passage to the Muslim faith of the new converts". The decree gave orders "to tear down all the mosques built recently in the governorship of Kazan' and to forbid the construction of new ones". Later some other decrees were enacted. They ordered churches to be built "in all villages where there any baptised persons living".

In two years in the Kazan' district and in the city itself 418 mosques were destroyed. After a fire in 1749 Luka Koneshevich succeeded in obtaining the transfer of part of the inhabitants of the Starotatarskij sloboda in a new place close to the village of Popovko. In this place the New Tatarskaja sloboda had arisen. In 1752 at the request of Luka Koneshevich a new decree was enacted "on the voluntary tearing down by the Tatars of Kazan' of the mosques built". The activities of the Department of the New Conversions under Luka Koneshevich were transformed into a large scale attack of a nationalistic and religious kind against the Tatars. The archbishop himself acquired a bad name with the local population and received the nickname *Aksak Karatun* [the lame monk].

In the capital of the Russian Empire complaints regarding forced baptism and vexations against the Muslim populations arrived continuously. The people were ready to take arms to defend their faith and that circumstance had a fundamental role. In 1750 the Synod approved the resolution "On the not forced conversion of the pagans to the orthodox faith". In the matter of the conversions the government used other methods too. Thus in the 1750s there were some schools for the new converts which were later transferred to

Kazan' in the Starotaraskaja sloboda. The number of those pupils in these schools between children of Chuvash, Tatars, Mari, Mordvinians and Udmurts reached 205 in 1758.

In contrast to the Mari, Mordvinians, Udmurts and Chuvash the number of converted Tatars was very small. In the entire period of activity of the Department of the New Conversions the missionaries succeeded in converting only 8,400 Tatars to Orthodoxy. The Tatar population of the region in its majority continued as in the past to remain faithful to Islam.

In conclusion we wish to underline that the later decades were characterised by a progressive weakening of missionary activity and in hunting followers of paganism and Islam. This explains the superficial character of the Christianisation that took place and the mass participation of the newly converted Mari, the Mordvinians, the Udmurts and the Chuvash in the revolt of Pugachev.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> P.A. Malov, *O Novokreshchenskoj kontore*, Kazan' 1878.
- <sup>2</sup> D.M. Makarov, *Samoderzhavie i christianizacija narodov Srednego Povolzh'ja (XVI-XVIII vv.)*, Cheboksary, 2000, pp. 17-133.
- <sup>3</sup> RGADA, f. 248, op. 14, kn. 796, d. 1, ll. 2-49.
- <sup>4</sup> PSZ, t. VIII, n. 5518.
- <sup>5</sup> PSZ, t. XI, n. 8236.
- <sup>6</sup> A.G. Ivanov, *Ocherki po istorii Marijskogo kraja XVIII veka*, Joshkar-Ola 1995.
- <sup>7</sup> RGADA, f. 16, op. 1, d. 717, ll. 1-10; RGIA, f. 796, op. 33, d. 223, ll. 67-74.
- <sup>8</sup> N.V. Zaparjuchin.
- <sup>9</sup> G.F. Islaev, *Pravoslavnye missionery v Povolzh'je*, Kazan' 1999, pp. 3-126.



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## SOURCE

13 January-15 June 1764. Excerpts from the petition of the Mari of the Koz'modem'jansk district sent to A.I. Svechin's Senate Commission to protest against the way their conversion is being conducted.

*1764 году января 13 дня. Кушадельянского уезду Алтарельной сотни деревни Цезибекемы по выбору оной сотни от всех марских людей выбраны ис черемис панаокраиен Пухон Михаиле де оной же волости - деревни Крайскя Шеннери редкой ис черемис новоокраиен Михаиле Семиверстия явились и сказали.*

*1. Прими христианна в олтность их в множестве явились с них рекрутские поборы, при которых поборам вытлы в рекруты, любыва от пою и не тотя лишиться дома, многие христианна. Которым же то христианна дельвак от вытлы в рекруты освобождени, потому, видя оны оставили такую свободу по тому ж отбыли рекрутского побору и доставляем восприним налог греческого исповедания, имеет тому дат с 17. В котором налог приняе бывши в Сивиску архимандрит Семиверст. А не то восприниме как оны, так и другие той же сотни новоокраиены с земли их и жаты по силе указов делового миграциска не по одной колони, также поить и обуч, кроме красоя, которая посят на пароз и по 1 нгого в каждую дом, ничего не получали. И после оного христианна вывочисленой архимандрит оны в их новоокраиенски дельвак для обучени мнши и брл как под себя, так и не касаются при нем служительной работой по 8 и по 10 без платовой прогой, так же сбестные христианна и не лишней оны и оны беднякы...*

*1764 году июня 15 дня. Кушадельянского уезду Алтарельной сотни деревни Цезибекемы новоокраиены ис черемис всеяе оны Федор Сидоров по-черемиски Явончя, полуботаник Василе Сивислов по-черемиски Маркя, Андрей Михайлы по-черемиски Андрей, редкой Иван Сидоров по-черемиски Рубышка, Борис Сидоров по-черемиски Боркис, Шитя Сивислов по-черемиски Карандя сказали, что в налог православного веры греческого исповедания принесямы оны бывшии сивисским архимандритом Семиверстом имеет тому дат с 18*

**НА ДНЪТЪ НА ДВАДЕСЕТЪ ЛЪТЪ, ПО НЕ ПРАВИЛОСНИ ТОГО АРХИМАНДИТЕ, ЗА КОТОРОС  
ВОСПРИЕТИС ПРАВИЛОСНИТЕ ВЪРЪ ПО СЪВЪ УКАЗА КАКЪ ТЪ, ТЪКЪ И ДВАТЪ И  
ОБУШЕ, КРАМО КРОСТА, КОТОРЫЕ НОСИТЪ НИ ВЪРСКИ, ТЪЛЕСЪ И ТЪ ОДНО  
МЪЛО ВЪ ДОНЪ, АНГЪСТЪ ДЪВЪНО ТЪ БЪЛО.**

**ШТАДА, №248, стр.10, стр.545,  
д.1, л.373, 638. Подписана.**

On the 13th of January of the year 1764 ... from the sotnja ['hundred': an administrative grouping of one hundred households] of Akpars of the Cenibekovo village in the Koz'modem'jansk district, the deputy elected by the sotnja with the approval of the entire community of the newly baptised Cheremiss [Mari], Lukojan Michajlov, and the simple soldier of Cheremiss origin, Michail Semiverstov, of the Krajnie Sheshmary village of the same volost' came before us and said...

1. Before accepting baptism, the natives were subject to the obligation of the draft. Those who were enrolled accepted conversion in order to avoid being recruited and abandoning their homes. Those who converted were freed from the obligations of the draft. For this reason, others too converted to Orthodoxy, 17 years ago, in order to enjoy the same liberty. The conversions were the work of the Archimandrite Seliverst of Svijazsk. For those conversions, however, both those of whom they speak and other newly baptised persons of the same sotnja with their wives and children have not received anything of what was promised by the ukazy [decrees]: neither the payment in money nor the clothes nor the shoes. They have been given only the crosses that they carry in their hands and an icon for each house. After baptism, the above mentioned Archimandrite appeared in the houses of the Cheremiss to teach them the prayers and he confiscated for himself and his servants 10 carts, food and hay for the horses without paying anything.

On the 15 of June 1764 ... the newly converted Cheremiss of the forests and the head of their hundred Fedor Sidorov ('Iscmacki' in the Cheremiss language), along with the heads Vasilej Onisimov (in Cheremiss, 'Markej'), Andrej Michajlov and the simple soldiers Ivan Sidorov (in Cheremiss, 'Vanjushka'), Boris Sidorov (in Cheremiss 'Boriska'), Nikita Stepanov (in Cheremiss 'Karandaj'), of the sotnja of Akazino of the village of Pajdulino of the Koz'modem'jansk district inform... that they were converted 18 years ago to the Orthodox faith of the Greek religion by the ex-Archimandrite of Svijazsk, Seliverst, and that that happened not according to their will but because of the violence used by the Archimandrite. Furthermore, for that conversion to the Orthodox faith, notwithstanding the decrees, they received neither clothes nor shoes: nothing



**SEE PLATES 13-19**



except the crosses they carry in their hands and an icon per house.