# “Zuleikha, Take off your Veil!”: Representing Muslim Women in The Soviet and Post-Soviet Space

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University

2022

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Abstract

This paper explores the collective memory of Guzel' Yakhina in her novel *Zuleikha opens her eyes* (2015). In 2020, the novel was transformed into a television series where it reached an even larger audience. The representation of Tatar Muslim culture in this work of contemporary Russian literature and television will be analyzed. Yakhina negotiates between historical memories and old stereotypes as she frames Zuleikha's story of acceptance into her Siberian labor camp and Soviet society. Although the Soviet Union does not exist as a physical space anymore, in recent years, Russia has developed historical memory projects that focus on the period of Stalinism (1927-1953) as a source of national pride. The positive depiction of exile seen in both the novel and television series is problematic because it promotes deculturalization and continues to erase the Muslim identity in Russia. First, analyzing the representation of a Tatar Muslim woman on television revealed a trope of unveiling held onto by the Russian contemporary audience. They linked Zuleikha to the negative stereotype of Muslim women as victims of their cultural and religious identity. The television audience saw the repeated motif "Zuleikha opens her eyes" as a call to take off Zuleikha's veil. Secondly, the scene in the tv show where the Hagia Sophia dome is removed and replaced with the new Stalinist-style dome monument reveals an erasure of ethnic and religious identity. Finally, Zuleikha's connection to her past ethnicity and religion is severed when the identity of

Zuleikha's son, Yusuf is transformed. His name is changed to the Russian name: Iosif Ignatov. Using the historical context of the 1930s as a teleport, contemporary media establishes Russian nationalism as the only pathway to belonging for minorities in post-Soviet Russia. Ultimately, in both the television series and novel, one's Tatar Muslim identity is declared obsolete and must be removed. Such memories contribute to the growing influence of Russian nationalism and the development of a pan-Russian ideology.

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the people who believed in me when I did not believe in myself. In these moments, we need reminders that tell us that you are not late, you are not early, you are simply on time. Thank you to my family and my mentors.

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# Introduction

Over the past thirty years, post-Soviet Russia has dealt with significant loss and change. The dissolution of the Soviet Union meant that Russia's borders shrank considerably and the economic and political chaos that followed has only begun to stabilize under the neo-tsarist regime of President Vladimir Putin. In the meantime, Soviet history looms in the lives of Russian citizens and in the landscape and architecture of the cities they inhabit. To cope with its tragic history and build a stronger future, Russia has in recent years focused on historical memory projects. These projects include monuments that commemorate the Soviet victory in the Second World War.[1]

Although monuments and memorials are nothing new for post-Soviet citizens, these new memorials avoid negative criticism of Iosif Stalin's leadership and repressive polices such as collectivization and dekulakization, a brutal aggression against ethnic groups who lived in rural territories of the Soviet Union.[2] In *Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union*, Andrej Kotljarchuk and Olle Sundström describe these policies as the ethnic terror unleashed by Stalin. Although the Communist Party was initially afraid of the power of Russian nationalism, local nationalism was seen as an even more dangerous enemy.[3] As a result, nationalities including Tatars, Bashkirs, Udmurts, Mordvins and Maris, to name a few, were targeted by the Soviet state.

According to Kotljarchuk and Sundström, these repressive campaigns reflected the Soviet state's hostility towards religious and ethnic minorities.[4]

Very little attention has been paid to the stories and collective memories of these repressed people and their national trauma. In 2015, Guzel' Yakhina, a Tatar author, challenged this memory gap with her debut novel *Zuleikha Opens her Eyes*.[5] In this fictional work, she brought Tatar Muslim culture into contemporary Russian discourse. Inspired by the story of her grandmother, Yakhina documents the memory of dekulakization, a campaign that resulted in the arrest and deportation of millions. Through her protagonist, Zuleikha, she explores the role of language, culture and religion in forming identity in contemporary Russia. Ultimately, Yakhina creates a Muslim, Tatar literary heroine who survived this dark moment in early Soviet history. Writing in 2015 for a contemporary audience, Yakhina's story negotiates between historical memories and old stereotypes. In 2020, her novel was adapted to television and the television show, *Zuleikha Opens her Eyes (Zuleikha),* aired on Russia's state sponsored channel: Channel One.

Historical memory projects like Yakhina's novel are important to building the Russian nation and reflect the rise of Russian nationalism in post-Soviet Russia. One of the most widely referenced scholarly works written about nationalism is *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson. Anderson defines a nation as a socially constructed community that is imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of that group.[6] According to Anderson, the image of a community exists in a member's mind and therefore this socially constructed group does not require members to meet one

another. Today the dominant mediums of communication are social media and television. Both modes of communication are key in building nationhood in Russia's imagined community today.

As Yakhina showcases Zuleikha's journey to survival, she highlights key points in her journey where she must "open her eyes" and confront the conditions around her. This includes seeing the confining nature of the traditional and religious culture of her early life in her village. In this paper, I will first present Zuleikha's story as an example of collective memory and uncover Zuleikha's negotiation of her identity. Secondly, I will evaluate how Russian media portrays the Tatar Muslim identity in the landscape of post-Soviet Russia. The novel's transformation into a television series added a layer of visibility to Zuleikha and her veil. The trope of a Muslim wife as a victim of her husband and of her religion becomes a key stereotype that is used by both Yakhina and the director of the tv series. Both present Zuleikha as a victim and the trope of unveiling is later referenced by the Russian audience in their critical reviews. Ultimately, I will argue that the representations of Muslim minorities and other marginalized groups is static in contemporary Russian literature and television. Russian television relies upon negative stereotypes and negative representations of ethnic minorities to show that they do not fit the image of pan-Russian nationalism which remains hostile towards ethnic and religious minorities.

Chapter 1. Constructing a National Memory of Collectivization

## The Tatar Home

White curtains adorned with red tambour embroidery invite viewers to look through a window into the space of a Tatar home. The dark figure of man standing in the hall creates a double frame that guides viewers into the once private living quarters. The camera slowly reveals layers of the home's decadence. Its rooms are overly decorated and filled with satin embroidered sheets, large pillows, colorful bed coverings, rugs, and textiles with intricate stitching. Light from the window shines on a painting held by a soldier inside the room. The shot is framed by the doorway to the inner room and directs the viewer's gaze towards this realistic painting.

The dome of the Hagia Sophia Mosque surrounded by four towering minarets (Figure 1) stands out in the first episode of the television series *Zuleikha*.[7] The Hagia Sophia painting is an object that is reproduced for this space. There is no mention of Turkey and certainly there are plenty of mosques in Russia that could have been on this painting. However, the choice to include the Hagia Sophia, an object that is highly recognizable to the contemporary audience foregrounds the Muslim identity of this family and ties it to this object. Its double framing bridges two worlds: the historical and the contemporary. Although this Tatar home closely resembles a contemporary museum exhibition of a traditional Slavic home, the presence of the Hagia Sophia Mosque shows

the viewers its ethnic aspect and reveal a different history. The Tatar Muslims are somehow attached to this object and suddenly the viewers reconsider the familiarity of this home. The home is no longer a Slavic one, it is marked as foreign. This visible marker of culture is a symbol for the religious community of Tatar Muslims in Russia. Within the border of the second frame, the Hagia Sophia stands out as an allusion to an Islamic past. Its presence in the Tatar kulak home Orientalizes this village. Thus, the tv series highlights that one must be taken outside of this space in order to belong to a new community.

Figure 1. The Hagia Sophia Dome in *Zuleikha Opens her Eyes*.

**The Hagia Sophia Dome**

The Hagia Sophia has an iconic status for people of many faiths, including Russian Orthodox Christians and Muslims. The building itself has a complicated past and remains one of the most influential domes studied by architects worldwide. First built as a Church in the sixth century, the Hagia Sophia was then converted to a mosque by the Ottomans in 1453. In the 20th century, it was desacralized and turned into a museum. Finally, in 2020, it was reinstated as a mosque and held congregation prayers once again.[8]

Figure 2(a). Hagia Sophia Dome in Turkey, "Dome of Hagia Sophia". (b) Christ Pantocrator, in Saint Sophia Cathedral Dome (left to right).

The painting of the Hagia Sophia in the television series evokes the history and architectural wonder of this monument. The central dome of the Hagia Sophia (Figure 2a) served as a blueprint for the construction of mosques across the Ottoman empire as well as Orthodox churches in the Slavic world. One example is the Saint Sophia's Cathedral in Kyiv, Ukraine (Figure 2b) which is named after the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.[9] Mosaic

panels in the Hagia Sophia still feature icons such as the Pantocrator mosaic, which can also be found in the Saint Sophia's cathedral.[10] The golden decadence in the great dome ceiling is a feature shared by both religious monuments. The harmony of design elements indicates that both Ottoman and Slavic architecture were influenced by the Hagia Sophia, which remains a recognizable structure today.

Clearly, this painting is a visual marker that represents the religion practiced by the Muslim minority community of Tatars living in Russia. It is positioned on the wall, hidden in the private space of the home, and presented as a religious icon. In the scene, the Red Army soldiers are carrying out Stalin's policy of collectivization.[11] As they loot the Tatar family home, one of the soldiers slowly raises his head. He glares at the painting of the Hagia Sophia on the wall. He does not recognize the object and asks what the foreign scribblings on the painting are. While the viewer does not actually see any letters or inscriptions on the painting, it is implied that they are foreign scribblings of Islamic calligraphy. A second soldier explains that this is what "they*"* have instead of icons. The use of "they" creates a vivid separation that marks the Tatars as other and makes the space of this home quite foreign to the Russian audience.

Understanding the history of the Hagia Sophia adds to the significance of the scene we encountered in *Zuleikha*. The television series is based on a historic moment in Soviet history: the events which took place during Stalin's repressions. The contemporary Russian television series revisits this historic period to acknowledge the collective memory of exile labor camps and the repressive policies which displaced millions of people. The television series also outlines the reach of Russia's imagined community.

Much like the positioning of the Hagia Sophia within a frame, Russia frames minority religious and ethnic as other to exclude them from the collective memory of a dark period in Soviet history. Their story never makes it outside of the frame. The family's link to the Hagia Sophia becomes a threat and ultimately, they are removed from this village and their home.

The home's traditional village aesthetic is completely overturned if one considers the cultural history of the Hagia Sophia painting. This new layer of religious difference introduced in the first episode of the television series marks the Tatar Muslim minority as other. As a result, this historical memory project that is supposed to revisit a tragic moment that affected all citizens of Russia is not inclusive. Instead, this minority community is declared as oriental, backwards and incompatible with modernity. The familiar object, the dome of the Hagia Sophia, becomes a marker used to delineate Tatars from the Russians and show that Tatar Muslims do not belong to Russia's imagined community.

**Trompe l'oeil: The New Dome illusion**

The symbol of the dome reappears in episode seven of the television series. In the new exile settlement named Semruk, the state commissions Ilya Ikonnikov, an exiled artist from Saint Petersburg, to create an exhibition that would represent their community. The settlement has been recognized by the Soviet government as a successful model of leadership and collaboration. Our protagonist Zuleikha, the woman exiled from her Tatar home where the dome of the Hagia Sophia once hung, is included as one of the four founding members of this community (Figure 3).[12] She and the other exiles celebrate

their survival of the harsh winter and their first successful year. The camera captures every corner of the ceiling of the main event hall covered with a painting of four figures. Each figure reaches their hand outward and points towards a center that is illuminated by the beams of light entering through the windows. Behind them are beautiful clouds and an even brighter light shines at the focal point of the art piece. The four founding figures are in a circle, surrounded by ornate columns that reveal a dome structure with a focal point. Each one reaches for the middle, stretching out their hands, but it is unclear what they are reaching for in the center. This center point is problematic, and is later questioned by the authorities. The artist, Ikonnikov quickly explains that each figure represents a founder of the settlement who sacrificed themselves for the better of the community. The artist describes his work of art to be a representation of Soviet society. It is an allegory featuring the soldier who represents the might of the Soviet army, the mother with a baby in her hand to symbolize the strength of Soviet women, the expert agronomist who produces food for the nation, and the doctor who symbolizes Soviet scientific achievements.

Figure 3. The four founding figures and the new dome in *Zuleikha*.

The image (Figure 3) shows the vantage point where this encirclement and the dome shape is formed. Interestingly, the dome is inside a building built in the style of a Soviet vernacular wooden structure. The space is designed to be functional and serve as the gathering place for the exiles. The building's plainness draws the viewer's eyes to the extravagant dome ceiling. The grandeur of the dome and the columns echoes the grandiose style of Stalinist Architecture that was meant to be a marvel for the rest of the world. It has been superimposed with the vernacular architecture of the wooden building to make a hybrid architectural structure that is both extravagant and functional. The walls of the building are left in the periphery and only the light from the windows is visible. The untreated wood gives the impression that the building is new and has been quickly constructed. The windows that surround the focal point allow for light to come in and shine directly towards the center of the dome. The abundance of windows is key for enlightening the dome painting and points to the constructed, ahistorical rendition of condition of exile camps. The walls of the building are made using thin wood slabs cut by sophisticated machinery that could not have been around in this Siberian labor camp. The architecture in the set design of the factories and the homes reflect a new log cabin style that makes the buildings seem artificial. This shows an edited reality on the part of the television producers who are recreating this historic memory. Together with the fresco painting, this labor camp feels both like a glamorized settlement and a mass-produced housing complex that has yet to be inhabited.

Looking more carefully at the architectural framework, the viewer notices that this glamorized building has tall, unfinished, wooden beams that reach into the ceiling and intersect the ornate columns which create the extravagant dome structure. While the wooden building itself is supported by the large wooden beams, the ornate marble columns stand out both in their style and position. The columns are arranged in a circle that helps to create an image of a real dome that would match the Hagia Sophia. This is an example of a *trompe l'oeil* illusion, meaning deceive the eye in French, that is designed to trick the viewer by altering the material reality of the object.[13] The illusion is visible at the point where the structural wooden beams intersect the Doric style Greek columns.[14] Columns are meant to be structural and hold the building upright, but these columns do not hold the foundation of the physical building. Instead, they are painted on and are very ornate, reflecting the influence of European classicism in the history of Russian architecture.

It is important to understand that prior to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the creation of Stalinist architecture, Russian architecture was deeply rooted in European classicism. Neoclassicism in Russia was developed following the accession of Catherine the Great to the throne in 1762.[15] Her vision was to align Russia with Europe and link Russia's capital of Saint Petersburg to ancient Rome. In 1770, Catherine the Great wrote in a letter, "Augustus said that he found Rome built of brick and would leave it built of marble; I say that I found Petersburg virtually wooden and will leave its buildings dressed in marble."[16] Indeed, the fresco successfully disguises the building of the labor exile camp with an extravagant aesthetic. In her analysis of Russian and Soviet architecture,

Elena Borisova writes that in most European countries, nineteenth century architecture was quickly transitioning from classicism to romanticism. According to Borisova, classicism remained popular in Russia for longer because it was a visual expression of the most autocratic aspects of Tsarist rule in the 1830's.[17] This changed, however, under the period of Stalinist Architecture (1922-1952) where architects were encouraged to construct a Soviet national identity.[18] Part of the Stalinist dogma was to create an image of a strong Soviet Union that would be independent of the West and cultivate a unified national heritage.

Looking at the new dome with the four founding figures of Semruk, the inconsistencies in the dome's physical structure are clear. Suddenly, one realizes that this artist has painted a false dome on the flat ceiling of a building. As a historical memory project, the new dome is a monument that represents the inclusion of the four individuals into a larger Russian history. At the same time, its optimism signifies a bright outlook and future for the exiles in the Siberian labor camp. The radiant faces of the characters are light and open. They stand in front of a background of beautiful clouds, almost as though they are in heaven. Victims of Stalin's collectivization were forced laborers. However, they are shown as leaders of their new collective community. Each of them represents an aspect of socialist reality and the aspirations of socialist realism. While, a religious fresco does not fit the rhetoric of socialist realism and contradict the atheist state-sponsored ideology, here the function of the new dome is to rewrite the past. Using sacred architecture and religious iconography, it references the old world and echoes the Catherinian era. Its use of the trompe l'oeil technique mark it as an illusion of a unified

Soviet national identity. Looking two domes together, this new dome is clearly a Stalinist era monument designed to overshadow the domes of the Hagia Sophia and the Saint Sophia Cathedral.

This trompe l'oeil illusion in the set design of *Zuleikha* creates an image of contemporary Russia that has modified its historical ties to European classicism. It reinstates a Stalinist-style architectural monument that is both nationalistic and an illusion of the utopian exile community. In the next chapter, we explore this illusion further in the representation of the Tatar Muslim culture in Guzel' Yakhina's novel.

## Chapter 2. "Zuleikha, Take off your Veil!": Representing Muslim Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Space

### Zuleikha's Collective Memory

Guzel' Yakhina's novel, *Zuleikha Opens her Eyes*, is a collective memory narrative based on the lives of real people who survived Stalin's policy of collectivization.[19] At the age of seven, Yakhina's grandmother and her family were exiled to a small labor settlement camp called Pit-Gorodok located on the Angara River in Siberia. Raisa Shakirova, Yakhina's maternal grandmother, lived there from 1930-1946 and trained as a teacher. In the process of learning Russian, she forgot her native Tatar language. This is the starting point for Yakhina to examine the position of women in the Soviet system and simultaneously revisit Soviet representations of Tatar Muslim culture. Yakhina's protagonist, like her grandmother, is no longer defined nor restricted by her ethnicity, native language, or religion as she searches for her new identity.

The novel was met with great success both internationally and within Russian literary circles, winning numerous awards including: the Big Book, the Yasnaya Polyana, and the Best Prose Work of the year. It was also shortlisted for the 2020 Read Russia prize. This positive recognition in the world of literature shows that Yakhina's narrative was met with approval from the literary community. The use of Tatar folklore and the native Tatar language mark her novel as authentic, ethnic literature. In an interview about her novel, Yakhina said, "The Tatar theme is very strong, and I did try to pour much of

what I know about Tatar mythology, culture, and cuisine into those first chapters of the novel."[20] For most readers, the use of Tatar words "sandugach" (nightingale), "urman" (forest), and "ubyrly karchy" (Vampire Hag) mark the novel as foreign. Together these elements evoke folkloric meaning and help establish this authentic Tatar village from the 1930s as the setting to activate collective memories for her Tatar readers. Interestingly, the choice to avoid translating these terms helps maintain the contrast between the Tatar village and the labor camp, which Zuleikha is exiled to.

In a study of Russian collective memory of the Second World War, James Wertsch defines the term collective memory to mean a representation of the past shared by a generation or nation-state as they recount a narrative in a sociocultural context.[21] He found that the Russian audience's collective memory of the Russian Revolution (1917) and the Russian Civil War (1918-1922) has undergone significant change over time. However, to his surprise, the audience's recollection of the Second World War (1939-1945) remains unchanged. He found that there is an overall positive memory of the Soviet victory and of Stalin's leadership. Wertsch argues that events in Russian media, such as Victory Day parades, have led to the growing influence of spontaneous Russian nationalism.[22] This is important because different communities in Russia certainly have varying collective memories of that period and are competing to take control of this dark historical moment. Thus, the novel and television show both utilize this historic moment to cope with a tragic past and look onward to the future as a post-Soviet state.

**Zuleikha's Identity: Muslim, Tatar, Woman**

At its core, Yakhina's novel begs to be classified as Russian historical fiction. However, it does not read like the memoirs or prison narratives shared by many exiles and victims of Stalin's Great Terror, nor is it a story about loss.[23] The novel is set about ten years after the Russian Revolution in 1917. Zuleikha, an obedient woman, lives in a small Tatar village near the Volga River. She is portrayed as a fearful, traditional and silent wife who is abused by both her husband and mother-in-law.

Throughout the novel, and especially in the first chapters, Yakhina uses the repeated motif of "Zuleikha opens her eyes" to structure her narrative and to underline her protagonist's spiritual and physical transformation. Zuleikha's life in the Tatar village and her deportation to Kazan form the events of the first part of the novel and are featured in the first episode of the television series. Both locations are in Tatarstan, a majority-Muslim autonomous republic in Western Russia. During her journey into exile, Zuleikha gradually opens her eyes to the three aspects of her identity as a Muslim, a Tatar and a woman. Focusing on the first chapters, we will uncover the representation of Tatar women and their active engagement with religion in the early 1930s.

First, Yakhina insists that Zuleikha must open her eyes and realize the physical abuses she faces at the hands of her husband, Murtaza, and her mother-in-law. Both characters are portrayed as devout Muslims, which creates an even greater contrast between the protagonist and them. In her husband's home, her role as a wife is analogous to that of a slave. She is afraid of Murtaza's gaze and his aggression, which forces her to work harder, faster and more diligently. She must show that she is not a bad wife and is

worthy of being in his home. When the Vampire Hag tells her son that Zuleikha was disobedient, Murtaza is enraged and violently beats his wife. Murtaza yells, 'Lie still, woman!', as he begins lashing her. Zuleikha remains still, as her husband ordered, and thinks to herself, "A broom on the back isn't painful. It's almost like a bundle of birch leaves."[24] Zuleikha's religious and cultural upbringing taught her to be patient and endure her husband's abusive and violent behavior. She goes on to make excuses for her abuser, even thanking the Almighty for being blessed with a good husband. When Murtaza calls for his wife at night, she remains on her knees with her eyes closed. She knows that he will force himself on her. If Zuleikha's position is taken as the norm, then Yakhina is telling the reader that a Muslim woman is a victim, on her knees and regularly abused by those around her.

For Zuleikha, the Muslim faith is reduced to her own forced silence, her mortal fear of her husband and her belief in her mother-in-law's recounted dreams. When Zuleikha is ordered by her husband to prepare the steam bath and bathe the Vampire Hag, she battles through her exhaustion and obeys. The Vampire Hag calls her lazy bones and taunts her, saying, "You'll die soon: it was in my dream. Murtaza and I will stay in the house, but three fiery angels will fly here for you and bring you straight to Hell […] And you're silent even then, your green eyes wide open."[25] Zuleikha's mother-in-law emphasizes that even in death she will remain silent and powerless. Zuleikha cannot defend herself against her mother-in-law's taunts. Rather, she believes in this prophecy because the Vampire Hag had foretold the deaths of all four of Zuleikha's daughters. She also claimed that Zuleikha is cursed, and that her family line will end with her. Zuleikha

no longer trusts that she has a spiritual connection of her own. She has taken her mother-in-law as a holy intermediary that enables the Vampire Hag to subjugate her.

Interestingly, Yakhina presents two female characters: Zuleikha and the Vampire Hag. The mother-in-law functions as a female oppressor and represents darkness. Yakhina highlights this difference to emphasize Zuleikha's need to be detached from this environment to break this prophecy. This prophecy does not fit the Muslim faith. It is a superstitious element introduced by Yakhina to further alienate this Tatar village. In Islam, like in many other religions, children are seen as blessings from God. However, Yakhina chooses to focus on the superstitions of the mother-in-law which have penetrated Zuleikha's beliefs. Her mother-in-law stresses that Zuleikha has failed in her role as a woman because she remains childless. Yakhina's answer to this form of abuse is to call on her protagonist: "open your eyes". The first inhibitor of Zuleikha's identity was the controlling patriarchal nature of her village and abuse she faced from her husband and mother-in-law.

The shift in her relationship with her mother-in-law occurs when Zuleikha begins to question her surroundings and negotiate her identity as a Muslim woman, and her connection with the Almighty evolves. In the past, when Zuleikha attempted to understand her religious practices and engage with her faith, she was still fearful of her religious educator, her husband. This fear blocked her prayers and as much as she prayed, her prayers seem to remain unheard and unanswered. In a lowered voice, she asks Murtaza, "they say prayers don't work in the urman (forest). It's all the same- you die whether you pray or not. What do you think? Are there places on earth that the

Almighty's gaze doesn't reach?"[26] Yakhina shows readers that Zuleikha is questioning her faith in her shifting environment. This is the first time Zuleikha speaks. Though illiterate and lacking a formal education, she questions the Almighty's reach and whether prayers work. In the village, before the Red Army's attack and Zuleikha's exile, she says her prayers often, believes in her mother-in-law's prophetic dreams and obeys her husband.

Beyond her religion, Zuleikha seeks comfort in Tatar folk stories and performs spiritual rituals. For example, she engages in a veneration of the dead by bringing fruit leather, a luxury, to the cemetery's spirit so that it will watch over her dead daughters and keep their link strong. Yakhina emphasizes that Zuleikha relies on folklore to find her strength and survive the physical abuse from her husband, her mother-in-law's curse, and the loss of her daughters. Zuleikha adopts somewhat of a double belief, combining religious customs and superstitious folk elements. Yakhina's protagonist realizes that there is a world that lies outside the borders of her village. As she encounters a new space, she can physically leave her past behind. The village was a place that limited her identity, forced her silence, and made her powerless in front of her husband. Yakhina highlights that Zuleikha had been imprisoned by her oppressors and this is framed as the reality for a Muslim woman prior to the events of collectivization. The image of the Tatar village created in Yakhina's novel is damaging for the Tatar community as their traditions and religious practices are linked to Zuleikha's abuse.

The second eye opening moment takes place after Zuleikha is taken as a prisoner and transported to the distribution point in Kazan. At the beginning of the novel, Zuleikha

wakes up in the women's quarters of her husband's home. Yakhina shows this gender separation to highlight Zuleikha as an impotent victim. She has been taught not to interact with the opposite gender, told to exhibit shame in her behavior and to silently fulfill her household responsibilities as a wife. After the Red Army soldiers invade the Tatar village, they kill her husband. Under the policy of collectivization, private land ownership was forbidden and as a result, Murtaza was punished for owning livestock and private property. Yakhina writes, "In the middle of February 1930, the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic will approve the decree on the liquidation of the kulaks, wealthy-land owning peasants."[27] Zuleikha is declared a counterrevolutionary and is taken prisoner. She is horrified at her husband's death but does not show her fear. Instead, she takes initiative and rides her husband's horse-drawn sledge, under the yoke of the Bolsheviks, out of her small town.

When Zuleikha joins the hundreds of other exiles in Kazan, she is in awe of the vastness of her surroundings. Her forced exile is not a threat to Zuleikha's identity, however, and instead her transition into her new Soviet collective community renews her desire to live. By describing Stalin's repressions and Zuleikha's imprisonment along with thousands of others, Yakhina awakens these memories and wounds for her readers. We will see that Zuleikha's transformation is strongly reliant upon negatively stereotyping her religious and cultural past.

Zuleikha enters the mosque for the first time in her life, now that it is occupied by the Soviet State, and is herded into the men's section, a place where she was not allowed

to enter as a part of her religious practices. Zuleikha must adjust accordingly since the Islamic tradition of gender division is incompatible with the new Soviet values. While separate living quarters existed in most peasant homes, including Russian ones, Yakhina demonstrates that such divisions facilitated Zuleikha's abuse as a Muslim wife. Zuleikha realizes that some of her previous values, like exhibiting shame and not interacting with the opposite gender, will have to fall by the wayside in her new life. The mosque she stays in has been transitioned to a collective farm, with people in one section, sheep in the other. The place where men like her husband would have gone for worship has been desacralized by state power.

Yakhina emphasizes that this mosque is no longer a holy space and that Zuleikha's identity must be rooted in something else. Zuleikha had been kept from being an active participant in the daily and weekly rituals of her Muslim faith. Further, she was deprived of a formal education and was illiterate in both Russian and Arabic. Zuleikha comes to understand that orthopraxical faith cannot be the only thing that guides her anymore and that she must step outside of this space as she journeys further into exile.

A theme that emerges is that Zuleikha must rely on herself first to survive in her new environment. Her obedience and kindness, her ability to work hard, and her gratitude and spiritual connection with the food and resources, even when they are quite scarce, define her triple identity as a Tatar Muslim woman. Zuleikha is moved to a remote labor camp on the Angara River where she finds new opportunities to build a life for herself. Under her husband's yoke she was abused, both physically and mentally. The Soviet system forces her into harsh working conditions, but is framed as the saving force which

removed her from her abusive environment. Zuleikha's past is established as one where she was oppressed at the hands of her religion. Thus, the need for her to break free and join another community is highlighted by this collective memory that continues to build hostility towards the Muslim faith.

**The New Heroine**

The transition of Zuleikha into a positive heroine is marked by the news of her pregnancy. She is on a train with thousands of exiles from Kazan headed to Siberia. A German surgeon and former professor at the Kazan University, Volf Leibe, diagnoses her condition. Reported as a political enemy and exiled along with Zuleikha, Dr. Leibe's character is central to understanding Zuleikha's growth. Though he is known as a luminary physician, he believes that "The patient's body saves itself on its own. The doctor only helps, directing the body's strength to take the proper course, sometimes removing something extra, unnecessary, and obsolete."[28] This is precisely the vision of empowerment that Yakhina shares with her audience. In Yakhina's eyes, emancipation can only come from herself, underlining the urgency for Zuleikha to open her eyes and see the world around her. I find that the doctor's message is an analogy to the Communist regime, which removed what was deemed obsolete: religion and cultural identities.

Zuleikha is one of the twenty-nine prisoners who survive the journey to Siberia. They are immediately ordered to work under the command of comrade Ignatov, the commanding officer in charge of the exiles . Zuleikha applies what she learned from Islam and Tatar tradition into the Socialist system and becomes a conscious, empowered woman. She takes on the responsibility for cooking and preparing the settlement's meals.

Further, she uses her spiritual connection to communicate with the forest as she forages for food to feed the survivors and her growing child. Yakhina shows that the displacement of peasants from their homes distanced them from their cultural and religious roots and in a way, allowed for this new utopian society to emerge in their diverse settlement. Zuleikha fails to find strength in her cultural and religious roots and begins to view the labor settlement as an idealized model of Soviet multiculturalism. Through her hard work, she becomes a valued member of her community and is chosen as one of the four key leaders of their new settlement, Semruk (seen in figure 3). The abuse that Zuleikha faced from her husband and mother-in-law, the realization of her separation from the Muslim faith and her belief in her mother-in-law's curses are moments where Yakhina demonstrates that conservative faith is incompatible with the new people's collective. Thus, these moments are highlighted by Yakhina as places where her protagonist must open her eyes and see her Tatar village, her religion, and her family as inhibitors of her identity. As a result, Collectivization, the repressive historic policy, is reframed as a positive experience for Zuleikha.

This historical memory project takes away from the memory of the victims who were displaced, spent their life in exile, and died because of Stalin's repressive policies. Riding a wave of ethnic literature, Yakhina attributes the rebirth of Zuleikha to her choice to embrace Soviet modernity. She aligns her protagonist's new identity with the erasure of her past. The Siberian labor camp is presented as an equalizer, a place to restart Zuleikha's life. Yakhina shares a collective historical memory that aims to fit into Russia's imagined community. However, the new Tatar Muslim identity of her

protagonist is neither Tatar, nor Muslim. Thus, Zuleikha's former religious community is represented as the inhibitor of her freedom. Ultimately, she joins Russia's imagined community after leaving behind markers of her culture and religion.

In the next section, I will explore several critical responses to the film and novel among the Russian audience to understand how ethnic and religious minorities are included (or not) in the post-Soviet present.

**Critical Reviews of *Zuleikha***

Yakhina originally conceived her story as a film script while studying at the Moscow School of Film. Five years later Zuleikha's story aired on Russian national television as an eight-part television series. Although Yakhina surrendered her script and did not have control of the screenplay, the director of the television series maintains that this historical melodrama promotes Tatar culture and is a catalyst for the country to contend with its past and cope with Stalin's era of repressions.[29] Russian viewers reacted strongly to Zuleikha's story on screen. In my analysis, I categorize their reception into two groups: Tatar activists and Russian nationalists.

**The Tatar Activists**

Yakhina's choice to open Zuleikha's eyes to her oppressive, religious past and embrace a more positive fate brought by the Soviet state was met with uproar from Tatar activists. This group includes members of the Tatar community who fear that this example of assimilation will lead to a further loss of language, as well as cultural and religious identity. Tatar activists were angered by the representation of the Tatar women and their community. They claimed that the director of the television series and Yakhina

both present their cultural history as rural and backward. This audience does not support Yakhina's image of an assimilated Tatar woman who fits Russia's imagined community, nor do they want this kind of representation. Tatar activists, including clerics, historians and scholars, are urgently fighting to affirm their validity as an autonomous republic of Russia.

The Russian federation has continued to target and control the communities of ethnic and religious minorities living within its boundaries. In recent events, the Russian parliament abolished the title of president in the autonomous Russian republic of Tatarstan and passed a bill that restricts teaching the Tatar language in schools.[30] The constitution in theory protects the right of republics to have their own state languages, however, these events prove that Russia is targeting the Tatar language.[31] To understand why, we must revisit Anderson's definition of nationalism in *Imagined Communities*. In his research, Anderson reveals that Soviet authorities launched an anti-Islamic campaign to eliminate the use of Arabic orthography in the alphabets of many nationalities that occupied in its borders.[32] In the 1930s, Stalin implemented compulsory Cyrillization of all languages that were spoken by ethnic minorities including Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Tatar, and many others. In response, Tatar activists are especially sensitive of the deculturalization and defamation of their community and thus, are critical of how it is represented in the television series. The first episode contains motifs that mock Tatar Muslim traditions. In the eyes of the Tatar activists, this show represents a deliberate effort by the filmmaker to damage the image of the Muslim faith. They also argue that it undermines the Tatar culture and questions their right to exist in contemporary Russia.

The representation that was cited as most offensive to the Tatar community is the depiction of Zuleikha's husband, Murtaza, as a violent and abusive man. Looking at Murtaza's character, we see that his character strongly resembles a kulak from a real poster of collectivization from the Soviet era (Figure 4). Such propaganda posters called the class of land-owning peasants kulaks (fists), to accuse them of greed and selfishness and justify the violence that was exhibited towards them. The television series relies on this vilification of the husband to construct a negative image of the culture and religious communities. For these Muslim communities, violence is portrayed as endemic, and their villages remains backwards and incompatible with Soviet values. They television show utilizes this portrayal and the Tatar activists pointed out that this is not an authentic representation of their family values, upbringing and traditions.


Figure 4. Poster titled "Down with the kulak from the collective farm" (1930). Shot of Murtaza and Zuleikha in *Zuleikha*, episode 1 (left to right).

Another scene that angered the Tatar activists is the scene when the Tatar exiles enter the mosque in Kazan for the night. Seeing herds of sheep inside the holy space, they

are hesitant to enter this desecrated place. Comrade Ivan Ignatov, the man in charge of transporting the kulaks, declares, "It's about time you rid yourselves of religious superstitions. In the future, there will no mosques. Just one unified Soviet Power."[33] For the Tatar activists, the vivid representation of the mosque awakens their national trauma and memories of the Soviet anti-religious campaign. The Tatar activists claim the television series is ridiculing authentic Tatar traditions, contaminating their holy spaces, and creating a false representation of a Tatar family. Alfrid Bustanov, a Tatar historian, noticed the deculturalization in how Zuleikha was represented. In his review he writes, "Over the past century, the Tatars have learned to speak other languages so well that they have begun to forget who they are and who their ancestors were."[34] Bustanov further points out that painting the Tatar community as primitive misrepresents their culture and gives a false impression of illiteracy among Tatar women in the twentieth century. According to Bustanov, a woman of Zuleikha's background would most likely have had a formalized education, could write poetry and letters, and read Arabic scripture. The scenes in the mosque are filmed in a real mosque in Tatarstan that is "a symbol of Muslim revival in the Volga region at the end of the eighteenth century."[35] For Bustanov, the filmmaker's choice to film the scene in a historical and landmark mosque is even more offensive than the average viewer might perceive.

One of the stark differences between the first episode of the television series and the novel is the reappearance of Zuleikha's deceased mother-in-law, veiled and wearing the color black. As she appears in the mosque at night, her dark shadow resembles a shadow looming over Zuleikha. Viewers are reminded of the mother-in-law's position as

subjugator as she tells Zuleikha, “My dream is coming true, you are already being taken to the underworld, that is the road you are destined for.”[36] In the tv series, the Vampire Hag is a manifestation of Zuleikha’s conscience and represents a connection to her past abuse. For the Tatar viewers, she represents a culture that instilled fear and blocked Zuleikha’s path to happiness.

Thus, Zuleikha’s deculturalization occurs much quicker on television. As observed by Bustanov, her veil is taken off and then disappears in the later episodes entirely. Zuleikha stops not only speaking in the Tatar language, but also observing the Muslim faith. Yakhina’s repeated motif of “Zuleikha opens her eyes” becomes a marked physical transformation that is associated with Zuleikha’s religious covering, the veil. The must open her eyes to these inhibitors and undergo a transformation. Tatar activists claim that her Tatar identity is being erased because of the losses of her religion and language, vehicles for preserving independent culture and ethnicity of the Tatar people.

The spiritual leader of Muslims in the Republic of Tatarstan, Kamil Samigullin, was outraged by the director’s choice to show the desecration of the mosque in the first episode. He said, “It is designed to remind us of the monstrous policy of militant atheism in the recent history of our country.”[37] The religious leader does not want this desacralization of the mosque and mocking of congregational prayers to continue to negatively depict the Tatar Muslim culture in mainstream media. While one may think that he should want everyone to remember that the Soviets perpetrated militant atheism on Tatar Muslim believers, this is a moment of national trauma for the Tatars that is neither restorative or reflective on the part of the television show. More importantly, he

identifies this memory project as a positive depiction of Stalin's repressive policies. In fact, the show's use of motifs that mock the faith of Tatar Muslims marks Islamic practices as other and promotes hostility toward this marginalized group in contemporary Russia.

**The Russian Nationalists**

On the other side of the spectrum, the Russian nationalists were also outraged by the television series for a very different reason. The Russian nationalists represent right wing Russia and believe in the dominance of Russian identity over other ethnic minority identities living in Russia today. Furthermore, these nationalists are frequently Stalinists, supporters of the memory of Stalin and his regime.

This group criticized the television show for desecrating history and the memory of Stalin. They claim that the show criminalizes Russians in its portrayal of collectivization and dekulakization. The Communists of Russia, a political party that is still active today, demanded that the series be cancelled and those behind it punished. Maxim Suraykin, the spokesperson for the party, claimed that "Any lampoon of the Soviet past is spitting in the face of our entire Russian people."[38] He calls the creators of the series anti-Soviet, which is apparently for him anti-Russian. For this audience, the history of contemporary Russia relies upon the valorization of Soviet history. The pilot aired just a month shy of May 9, 2020, celebrated as Victory Day in Russia and in other post-Soviet states. Some viewers called Yakhina's collective memory of dekulakization an indictment of Stalin's leadership and a deliberate effort to raise ethnic tensions in Russia, thus sabotaging national pride on the eve of Victory Day. This commemoration

of Stalin's legacy in post-Soviet Russia shows the repressive leader has been rehabilitated. In 2019, the independent Levada Centre conducted a poll which revealed that 70 percent of Russians believe that Stalin played a positive role in the country's history, a record high approval compared to previous years.[39]

Another strong critic of Yakhina, Dmitry Puchkov, claims that the purpose of the novel and series is to incite national division on the territory of the Russian federation. His video critique received more than six hundred thousand views in 2021, with 79 percent of his viewers liking the video. His audience claims that this show attempts to make Tatars the victims of trauma and blame Russians for the suffering of this minority group. While this is neither the filmmaker's nor the author's official message, this conspiracy has stuck with the audience and continues to gain traction. Puchkov tells his viewers, "This show is about how the inhumane Russians impersonated by the Communists carried out the genocide of the Tatar people killing innocent Tatar men, women, old people and children."[40] This skewed reception shows that the Russian audience cannot accept ethnic and religious minorities as a part of the post-Soviet landscape of Russia. They believe that any remembering of Soviet history that does not valorize Stalin is anti-Russian.

The Russian nationalists take issue with the film for making it only about the suffering of the Tatars. This negative response reveals that the depiction of a Tatar Muslim family on television invalidates their overall collective memory of collectivization. The historical memories which focus on this period are therefore very one-sided and must avoid negative criticism of Stalin's repressions. It is interesting that

this group accuses the creators of the television series of promoting Russophobia by showing the Tatar community as victims of Stalin's repressions. However, Russian nationalists support the positive revival of Stalin's image. They were outraged that this story was told from the perspective of a Tatar woman, calling it an attack of Russian history. Although this history is shared, the split audience reveals that the collective memory shared by the television series neither satisfies the Russian nationalists nor the Tatar activists. This large group of Russian nationalists would disagree with Kotljarchuk and Sundström who described policies of Collectivization and dekulakization as an extension of Stalin's ethnic terror.[41] The dominant rhetoric chooses to remain oblivious to the suffering of minority communities. This is evidenced in a case heard by the Russian Supreme Court regarding Stalin's policy of dekulakization on March 30, 1999.[42] The court officially declared collectivization as a harsh political repression applied administratively and carried out by the communist party's executive authorities. Despite this official acknowledgement, however, we see that there is no official mention of the targeting of ethnic groups. As a result, the Russian television audience is unsympathetic and cannot include the Tatar Muslim community in this collective memory.

Puchkov appeals to his nationalist viewers and reflects Russia's contemporary hostility toward religion. Russia today experiences heightened anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.[43] The Russian nationalists continue to challenge the validity of other religions and mock religious customs and traditions in the post-Soviet era. His followers support his claim and resort to xenophobia and Islamophobia in their comments. Puchkov and his viewers are interested in rejecting Islamic tradition and culture that is still deeply

rooted in Tatarstan today. The nationalists continue to view the Tatar Muslim culture through an Orientalist lens.[44] In one scene of the tv show, Murtaza is angered after he receives a note threatening that the kulaks will be eliminated. He grabs his axe and goes to the stable to kill their livestock. As he raises his axe and rushes towards their horse, Zuleikha attempts to stop him. Enraged, Murtaza turns to her with his axe in hand ready to strike a blow. This scene validates his barbarism and represents the Tatars as angry, abusive people with conservative religious values who needed to be reformed. Zuleikha is marked as a victim of abuse and in need of Soviet emancipation. In the next section, we will discuss the connection Russian viewers made with the tv series, *Zuleikha*, and a popular Soviet comedy filmed fifty years prior.

**The Women of the East[45]**

While over thirty years have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both the nationalists and activists still reference the stereotyped Soviet representation of Muslim women as captives of their husbands and victims of their religion. Zuleikha's story directly parallels the Soviet representation of women of the East, thereby reinforcing old stereotypes rather than dispelling them. On the Russian online film review site Kinopoisk, one viewer published a review entitled, "Zuleikha, Take off your veil!". This highlights the link between the modern novel/television film and the Soviet understanding of the plight of Muslim women.[46] This phrase is very familiar to the Russian audience, as it is one of the most famous quotes from the 1970 Soviet film: *White Sun of the Desert(White Sun).*

*White Sun* explores the violent Soviet campaign that aimed to liberate Central Asian women through the act of unveiling, called the Hujum.[47] The film is set in a remote desert in Central Asia during the early years of the Russian Civil War (1918-1922). The Russian hero of the film, Fyodor Sukhov, a Red Army soldier, embarks on a journey to protect a harem that was captured from the leader of an anti-Soviet revolutionary movement. The nine Muslim women each wear a paranja, a traditional veil that covers the face, head and entire body.[48] Sukhov promises these women a bright future and the freedoms that come with Communism. He says to them, "Comrade Women, the Revolution has set you free. You don't have a master now...forget your cursed past… you will freely work."[49] Sukhov, who embodies Soviet power, promises the wives of the harem freedom from the oppression of their past. As the film progresses, the women begin calling Sukhov their new husband and compete for his attention and gaze. They lower their protection, lift their clothing and remove their veils.

The famous scene where the phrase "Take off your veil" arises is close to the end of the film where the Red Army soldier persuades Gulchatai, one of the wives in the harem, to take off her veil. The liberation of the women of the East and revolutionized gender roles in their patriarchal society is realized through this symbolic unveiling. As a result, the contemporary Russian audience expects to see a similar physical act that marks this transition to modernity and separation from religion and culture in the television series, *Zuleikha*. *White Sun* is a cultural text that is shared by post-Soviet citizens and continues to frequently be shown on state television. It represents Muslim women of the East as helpless and lacking agency. This is until their veil is taken off for them. The

performative gesture of unveiling has been internalized by the Russian audience who see the veil as an artifact of oppressive Muslim culture and removing the veil as the only path to liberation.

In a review of Yakhina's novel, Nuria Fatykhova, the founder of a feminist organization based in Moscow, called Zuleikha and Gulchatai "literary sisters". She saw the eye-opening metaphor in Yakhina's novel to be an allusion to the same unveiling experienced by Gulchatai. Fatykhova writes about Gulchatai, saying "She is not a woman, but a trophy, a thing that perceives every man in her life as a master who takes patronage over her."[50] In *White Sun,* Gulchatai is uneducated, covered, and disabled by her religion. These qualities are emphasized to show that she is incompatible with Russian values. A Russian soldier who takes an interest in her wants to convert her into a Russian. The similarity between our protagonists Zuleikha and Gulchatai continues. The film also shows Muslim women as victims of violence. These literary sisters both have abusive husbands and are being saved by Russian men. This exchange suggests that Muslim communities continue to be framed as inferior to Russian culture and in need of being saved from their backwards practices. The 2020 television series and 1970 film both code these abusive family dynamics as a phenomenon only found in the Muslim community. This serves to reinforce the negative representation of Muslim women.

What is fascinating is that even fifty years after *White Sun* was produced, audiences in 2020 connect the old Soviet representations of Muslim women to the contemporary representation of a Tatar woman. Despite Zuleikha's story being one of survival and self-reliance through Stalin's repressions and collectivization, a greater

battle meets the eyes. The Russian audience focuses on the Tatar Muslim patriarchal repression. This repression is visible in both the novel and television series. Ultimately, Zuleikha's need to fight for female empowerment and her journey to becoming a strong individual is a battle that is won by removing her veil— the physical marker of oppression represented in both films—and opening her eyes. As in the plot of *White Sun*, the audience sees that Zuleikha must reject her traditional Tatar past and her religious identity to achieve equality. As she transitioned to Kazan, she opened her eyes to the incompatibility of religion with the new collective life, and in exile, she has become a new Soviet woman. The transformation of Muslim women into Russia's imagined community becomes a visible phenomenon marked by the removal of the veil in both the series *Zuleikha* and the film *White Sun.* This was the case in the Soviet Union fifty years ago, and it remains the case in contemporary Russia.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the television adaptation of Yakhina's novel produced two strongly critical receptions for opposite reasons. The Tatar activists were outraged because Zuleikha's emancipation only came with an erasure of her Tatar identity. This erasure is evidenced by the reappearance of the well-recognized phrase from the Soviet film: "Take off your veil". The Russian nationalists' response suggests that Tatar culture has no place in today's Russia. Any idea of an integrated Tatar Muslim identity is incompatible with Russian society. Interestingly, neither of these reactions address the impact of these repressive policies which led to the deportation, imprisonment and targeting of numerous ethnic minority communities. Both sides fail to highlight what is

missing in this production of Russian media: a critique of the violence of Soviet power against its civilians. The early 1930s is a period full of tragedy for the people of Russia and Central Asia. Efforts to heal this trauma are severely lacking. Civil war, famine, repressions, and collectivization are historic moments that are used in both literature and television as catalysts to help build a new Soviet identity and power. The collective memories of this period are traumatic for some, but those stories do not have a chance to be told. Instead, they are modified to fit the pan-Russian imagined community and further fuel a strong Russo-centric ideology. Our analysis reveals that historical memory projects are just monuments of nation-building. The strong focus on history as a source of nationalism continues to build Russian chauvinism and target local nationalism.

While the prominence of Yakhina and her heroine Zuleikha in Russian media and literary discourse brought Tatar women onto the contemporary scene (and indeed into living rooms all over Russia), we found that new representation cannot be separated from past stereotypes. This study reveals that the post-Soviet citizen still references Soviet stereotypes of Muslim women as victims. As a result, the audience encounters a new representation like Zuleikha's story and concludes that she too is need of unveiling. Any representation does not mean good representation; this is the case for Russian media today. Russian media continues to stereotype religious and ethnic minorities as it establishes a dominant pan-Russian nation.

## Chapter 3. Creating a pan-Russian identity in Contemporary Russian media

In the Soviet Union, local nationalism was seen as an even more dangerous enemy than Russian nationalism. In this final chapter, I will look at how the Tatar Muslim community is targeted in contemporary Russian media and what the pathway to joining Russia's imagined community looks like in television.

My research initially focused on identifying contemporary representations of Tatar culture in the television series. However, as was discovered in the previous section, Russian viewers could not "see" the Tatar Muslim woman of the 1930s being portrayed in 2020. Instead of accepting her as a new representation of an ethnic minority, the Russian audience made a connection to a negative cinematic representation of Muslim women as oppressed victims of their religious community. Scholars like Adeeb Khalid have identified the Soviet campaign for the emancipation of women as a forceful effort by the government that aimed to target local nationalism and restructure the power dynamics of these regions.[51] As a result, in Soviet films, Muslim women were generally represented as lacking agency and as victims of their traditional and backwards culture.[52] The efforts of the Soviet state to repress these ethnic minorities were successful. The old representations of Muslim women as agentless victims remain influential in contemporary Russian media and are referenced by the Russian audience. One of the major findings in our research is that the representation of Muslim women and minority

ethnic communities is static in Russian television, and the Russian audience is unable to accept new representations. Resurrecting the trope of unveiling in *Zuleikha,* the filmmaker reestablishes ethnic minorities as other and highlights the ways in which they must be transformed.

In this final chapter, I propose that while representations of Muslim women remain static, there is a dynamic, step-by-step transformation that presents a way for ethnic and religious minorities to join Russian society. The television show presents the transformation of Zuleikha and her son into valuable citizens of Russia's imagined community. However, this transformation of the Tatar Muslim into a productive member of society requires one to physically remove their ethnic and religious identity and proves that the inclusion of minorities is an illusion. This dynamic transformation reveals that Russian nationalism is the only pathway to joining this group.

**Replacing One Name with Another**

Using the historical context of the 1930s, this historical memory project teleports viewers to the past and recreates an alternative reality for post-Soviet Russia. The final scene in the last episode of *Zuleikha* establishes a passage for Tatar Muslims into modernity in the post-Soviet era.[53] This scene demonstrates that to be visible you must leave the restricting nature of your past and join the larger body of the Russian nation by changing your identity and name. Here, we will look at the importance of the next generation through the adoption of Zuleikha's son by a Russian man. In these scenes, we will observe how media threatens the existence of minorities in the Russian empire and,

ultimately, forges a new Russian identity for the next generation. This new identity is free of any connections to cultural, religious and ethnic traditions.

As a document, a passport is used to regulate mobility and maintain borders.[54] The Soviet red passport documented the ethnicity of its citizens. Labeling citizens by their nationality is problematic because it opens the potential for discrimination, creates ethnic division, and denies access.[55] A Jewish immigrant from the Soviet Union writes, "Everybody somehow knew whether we were Jewish even without opening our passports […] but when they did open our Soviet passports they would see a very important line on those documents, the one labeled 'Nationality'".[56] The line that indicated nationality was synonymous with one's ethnicity. This official encounter with ethnicity and labelling is also evident in *Zuleikha*. In the final scene of the television series, Zuleikha's son, Yusuf, is given a new Russian name by comrade Ignatov. Ignatov realizes that this is the only way to ensure safe passage for the next generation and open the young boy's access to educational and economic opportunities. Ultimately, Yusuf's safe return to Kazan in the end of the episode is attributed to this new identity that is placed upon him a representative of the Soviet state who becomes his "adoptive" Russian father.

In the scene, the audience sees a list that contains the names of the hundreds of exiles and kulaks who have died along the way to the labor camp (Figure 5a). Ignatov kept a record of all survivors of the exile journey. Almost all names are crossed off and only the name of the first citizen born in their settlement camp remains. At the bottom of the list is Yusuf Valiev, Zuleikha's son. The tragedy of this historical moment is swept

aside, and the camera shifts focus to a blank birth certificate that gets filled out by Ignatov (Figure 5b).


Figure 5. a) List of Exiles names b) Baby Yusuf's birth certificate in *Zuleikha*.

Comrade Ignatov wants the young boy to have the freedom and opportunities that he could not have as the child of a Tatar family. The boy's last name is Valiev, a common Tatar surname. Knowing this, Ignatov creates a new birth certificate and gives the boy his own Russian last name. Yusuf Valiev has been transformed into Iosif Ignatov. The two papers are placed on top of one another; one containing the list of the exiles and the other a falsified document, the new birth certificate. Most of the names on the list are crossed out because most of the Tatar people did not survive in the labor camp. Thus, the best passage to survival, especially for a member of the community who strives to leave it, seems to be the changing of one's identity. In this case, this new identity is not chosen by Yusuf. Instead, it is placed upon him by a powerful Russian Soviet officer. This ensures that Yusuf will fully assimilate into his new imagined community. He will be safe, unlike the hundreds of other exiles whose names were crossed-out because they survive.

**The dynamic path for the next generation**

The television series crafts a pathway for ethnic minorities and Tatar Muslim women like Zuleikha to integrate into modern day Russia's imagined community. However, it comes with a price. The motif of "Zuleikha open your eyes" and "Gulchatai, take off your veil" evoke the same prescribed behavior. Both heroines must part with their traditional ways to attain freedom and join contemporaneity. The removal of the painting of the Hagia Sophia from Zuleikha's home, depicted in the first episode of the television series, parallels the protagonist's ultimate removal of her veil. Both scenes are created in the tv series and do not happen so vividly in the novel. Both removals are necessary for Zuleikha to assimilate into her Soviet community.

The dramatic unveiling scene which marks the completion of Zuleikha's step by step transformation in episode five of the tv series is worth a closer look.[57] In the scene, Baby Yusuf is asleep and holds on to the end of her veil. Zuleikha does not want to wake her baby, so she tugs at little Yusuf's hand (Figure 6). His hand is clenching to it so tightly that Zuleikha is left with no choice but to take off her veil. Here the filmmakers choose to use her son to take off Zuleikha's veil. Thus, it is an action completed by the next generation who has no tie to the former religious community. Comrade Ignatov happens to walk into the room and notices Zuleikha as a beautiful woman at this exact moment. Zuleikha becomes the object of Ignatov's desire as soon as the veil, the object which marked her as an outsider, was removed. This unveiling and the coincidental encounter with Ignatov is another example of a physical transformation which marks Zuleikha's transition into a new community. As Zuleikha's veil is removed, her

assimilation is complete. She is no longer visibly tied to Islam and the removal of her veil allows her to be seen by a Russian man.

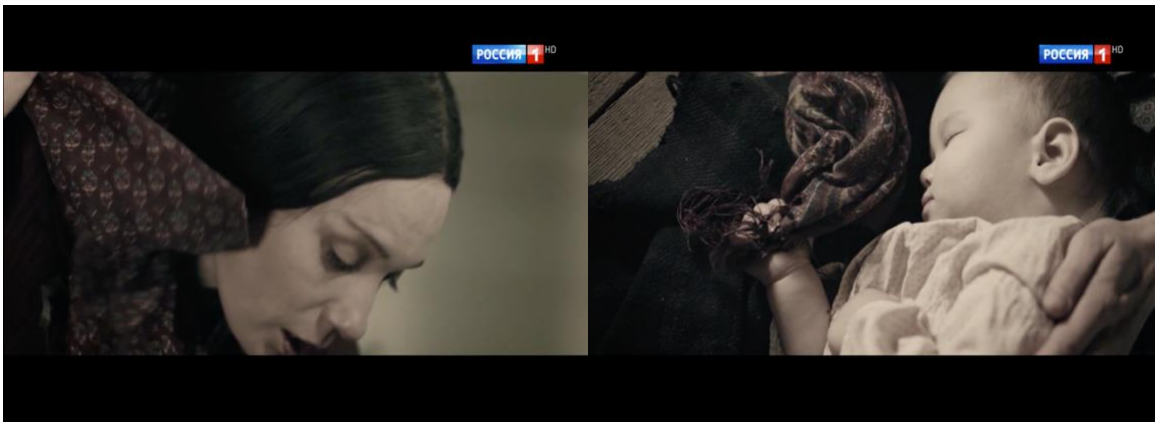


Figure 6. Yusuf removes Zuleikha's veil in *Zuleikha*.

She was the silent wife of a Tatar kulak and a victim of his abuse. Much like Yusuf did not have a choice in changing his name, Zuleikha too is transported to a labor camp in Siberia by force. However, the narrative is constructed in such a way as to tell readers that this was a necessary step. As she moved further away from her Tatar village, she was able to find love and happiness. She becomes a mother and falls in love with Ignatov. Her empowered role is in her ability to raise the next generation and contribute to an optimistic future for him. Ignatov adopts Yusuf as his own son, a reward for Zuleikha's transformation and unveiling. He is given a Russian name that will ensure his safe passage to Leningrad and his future opens to new opportunities.

Looking at these transformative events in the television series, we see that the possibility for dynamic growth and escape from static representations is only achieved

after removing visible markers of culture. Essentially the new Tatar woman can only integrate into Russian society by changing her language, removing religious markers such as her veil, and eventually changing the name of her son to fit into the Russian imagined community. Zuleikha's son is initiated into Russian society through his new birth certificate. And the Tatar culture is erased from this next generation. The illusion of the idealized model of the Soviet multiculturalism suddenly falls apart.

**Replacing One Dome with Another**

Using Benedict Anderson's model of imagined communities, we can revisit the fresco dome reveal scene from episode seven of *Zuleikha*. In this scene, one culturally significant object that belongs to the Tatar community, the Hagia Sophia Dome, is replaced by another object. This scene marks a physical transformation and parts with an old traditional and religious identity. The removal of the painting of the Hagia Sophia from Zuleikha's home, which we saw in the first episode of the television series (though not included in the novel by Yakhina), can be paralleled to the protagonist's ultimate removal of her veil.

The realist-style painting of the dome of the Hagia Sophia Mosque, hanging in Zuleikha's Tatar home, is an easily recognizable object for viewers both in Russia and around the globe that could even be mistaken for a souvenir. The image of Hagia Sophia, drawn on souvenir plates, painted on canvas or cardboard, printed on postcards and matchbooks, has become legible to Muslims and others across the world as a universal symbol of the Muslim faith. Indeed, I have a souvenir Hagia Sophia plate in my home, which led me to question its placement in the television series *Zuleikha*. Why was this

object there in the Tatar home? What did the filmmakers have in mind in choosing this image to characterize the Tatars and to exclude them as victims of Stalin's repressions?

An analysis of this scene can help uncover how post-Soviet Russia chooses to frame its relationship with Islam, a religion practiced by ten percent of Russian citizens.[58] The history of the Hagia Sophia and its status as a sacred site in Muslim geography establishes it as an object of difference. When the painting hangs on the walls of Tatar home, it suggests that Tatars, a Turkic minority, are oriented towards Turkey and Islam. The soldiers removing the object identify it as a version of an icon, thus giving it even more religious significance. Hagia Sophia marks the Tatars as Muslim and as other. Thus, they become differentiated by ethnicity and religion from the other victims of Stalin's dekulakization campaign.

The historic ties of Tatars as a Turkic people to other Muslims are relevant for Zuleikha and her fellow villagers. These ties remain until the painting of the Hagia Sophia dome is removed. Eventually, Zuleikha finds a new dome to look towards in her exile camp. As Zuleikha navigates her new identity in the Siberian settlement, she holds on to the folk tales of her childhood, but her religious practices less so. For the television drama, the removal of the Hagia Sophia painting from the walls of her home foreshadows the elimination of Islam from the lives of Zuleikha and her son. In exile, neither Zuleikha nor the other settlers can look to history, collective memory, or shared foreign spaces to imagine themselves as part of a global religious community. These people who have been exiled now look towards a new dome.

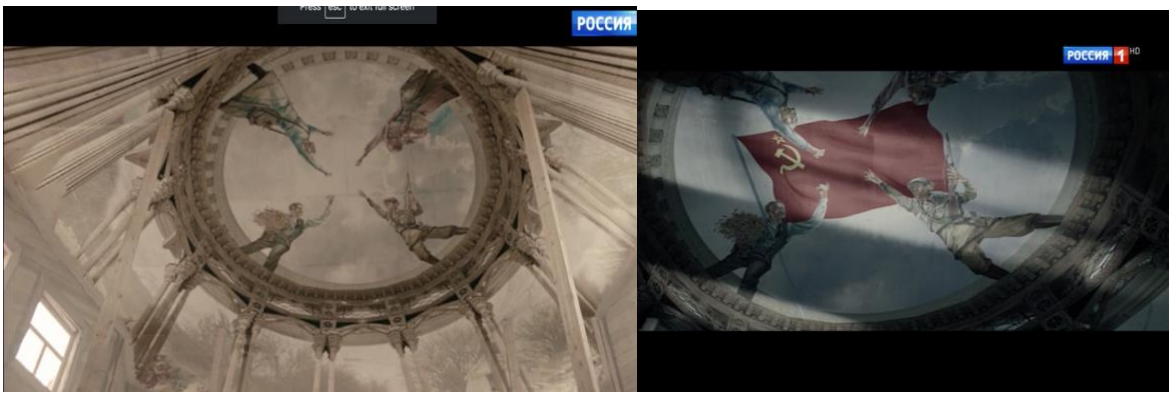


Figure 7. The New Dome with the addition of the Communist Flag in *Zuleikha*.

The new dome illusion is an artifact that we return to because it heavily draws upon architecture from European classicism. The fresco painted on the ceiling of the common gathering room in the Siberian exile village resembles the work of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. The artist paints four central figures of their community in its center.[59] However, it also functions as a monument of Stalinist architecture. Ultimately, the red Communist flag is imposed into the center and fills the void created by the outstretched hands (Figure 7). In a way, the artist is recasting the myth of European culture that once thrived in Russia. The myth is of Russia being a place that is neither European, nor does it belong to any single culture. As he reinvents the exile space, he maps the identity of these exiled laborers and illuminates a pathway to modernity, like Ignatov's creation of a safe passage for Yusuf. Using the trompe l'oeil technique, the new dome tricks the eyes of the viewer. It resembles the extravagant structures of the dome of the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev and the Hagia Sophia Dome in Istanbul. However, this icon has no ties to any religion, and it is only an illusion of a monumental dome. The new dome is created to replace the Hagia Sophia, a cultural object which linked the exiles

to their past. For the next generation, the link to a religious community is severed. The illusion is ultimately one where the policy of collectivization, a crime that targeted millions of people including Tatars and other minority groups, is turned into a celebration of a pan-Russian federation citizenship.

**Conclusion**

Stalin's Russia removed ethnic, religious, and cultural identities that did not fit the national rhetoric. Both the television series and the novel *Zuleikha Opens her Eyes* exhibit a similar removal. The Tatar Muslim protagonist, Zuleikha and her son must undergo a physical transformation to join Russia's imagined community. As a result, all objects which connect a person to their religious community are erased. This is seen in the removal of the Hagia Sophia painting from Zuleikha's home, Zuleikha's unveiling, and the changing of Zuleikha's son's birth certificate. The removal of the sacred Hagia Sophia dome severs the link between Zuleikha and her global religious community. The new birth certificate transforms Zuleikha's son, the next generation of Tatars, into a Russian citizen with a Russian name. Finally, the new dome replaces the Hagia Sophia and establishes allegiance to the pan-Russian imagined community. Its focal point is not Orthodox or Islamic iconography, but a secular, communist version of a religious symbol: the Communist flag of the Soviet Union. This image appears in 2020 and becomes an icon of contemporary Russia's pro-Stalin memory.

Ultimately, Muslim minorities, ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups who do not fit contemporary Russia's vision of a pan-Russian federation continue to be excluded and rejected in Russian literature and television. Relying on the trope of

unveiling, Zuleikha is marked as other. The only way to assimilate and join the community of her labor exile camp is to remove this marker of her religious and cultural identity. The Russian audience saw a Tatar woman in a veil, and concluded, very similarly to the conclusion made in a Soviet film over 50 years ago, "Zuleikha, Take off your veil!". As a result, the television show portrays that the only optimistic future for the Tatar minority is one where you remove your cultural past, or you remain out of view.

When Russia crossed the border into Ukraine, we were reminded that history often comes full circle. Once again, the borders of Russia's imagined community are in flux. Russia continues to rewrite history and uses nationalism to justify its imperial goals. As we walk in the shadows of history, we observe that Russia's Imperialist aggression is being excused by Russian media and dressed up as a nationalist movement. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian symbols of nationalism have spread rampantly on state-run news sites and in social media. The new "Z" symbol is ironically being used to promote national unity and has been spotted on Russian military vehicles and flags.[60] The Ukrainian identity is being subsumed by all sides. Whether fueled by the agenda of the NATO alliance in the West or the pan-Russian savior coming from the East, the war prevents us from listening to the voices of the people caught in the crossfire. The Soviet Union once targeted local nationalities and as a result, the collective memory of ethnic and religious minorities remains lost. The Ukrainian identity is now caught between the narratives of the West and East, and once again there is the threat of deculturalization and the loss of collective memory of a minority group. The identity that needs to emerge is the voice of the Ukrainian people without the imposition of Russian chauvinism. Pan-

Russian nationalism eliminated the chance for Zuleikha to keep any part of her Tatar Muslim identity. Ukraine has a larger population than Tatarstan, and the results of the current war are not known yet. However, we are still in danger of never hearing the stories and collective memories of marginalized groups, like the Tatar Muslims, who were victims of Stalin's repressive policies.

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