INTEREST IN REGIONAL

HISTORY AS AN INDICATOR OF THE EMERGENCE OF ETHNIC AND REGIONAL IDENTITIES

EL INTERÉS EN LA HISTORIA REGIONAL COMO INDICADOR DEL SURGIMIENTO DE IDENTIDADES ÉTNICAS Y REGIONALES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of interest in regional history as a significant factor in the formation of ethnic and regional identities. A multi-method approach was employed, integrating an analysis of regional media publications, expert interviews with historians, museum workers, and cultural representatives, as well as a survey of 2,510 respondents from Tatarstan. Findings indicate that interest in regional history is closely tied to identity formation, with 37% of respondents expressing high levels of engagement. Tatar respondents demonstrated a significantly higher interest compared to Russian respondents, influenced by the prominence of Tatar historical narratives. Key motivations for historical interest included a desire to understand personal identity (44%) and a commitment to preserving cultural heritage (54%). Conversely, lack of time and perceived irrelevance were cited as primary reasons for disinterest. This study highlights the significance of historical narratives in shaping ethnic and regional identities. Social memory serves as a mechanism for fostering interethnic cohesion and strengthening regional consciousness.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Identity, Multiculturalism, Education, Memory politics, Social memory.

RESUMEN

Este estudio explora el papel del interés por la historia regional como un factor significativo en la formación de identidades étnicas y regionales. Se empleó un enfoque multi-método, integrando un análisis de publicaciones de medios regionales, entrevistas a expertos con historiadores, trabajadores de museos y representantes culturales, así como una encuesta a 2.510 encuestados de Tartaristán. Los hallazgos indican que el interés por la historia regional está estrechamente vinculado a la formación de la identidad, con un 37% de los encuestados expresando altos niveles de compromiso. Los encuestados tártaros demostraron un interés significativamente mayor en comparación con los encuestados rusos, influenciado por la prominencia de las narrativas históricas tártaras. Las motivaciones clave para el interés histórico incluyeron el deseo de comprender la identidad personal (44%) y el compromiso de preservar el

patrimonio cultural (54%). Por el contrario, la falta de tiempo y la irrelevancia percibida fueron citadas como razones principales para el desinterés. Este estudio destaca la importancia de las narrativas históricas en la formación de identidades étnicas y regionales. La memoria social sirve como un mecanismo para fomentar la cohesión interétnica y fortalecer la conciencia regional.

Palabras clave: Etnicidad, Identidad, Multiculturalismo, Educación, Políticas de la memoria, Memoria social.

INTRODUCTION

The common historical background is a central characteristic used by most researchers when describing an ethnic group. However, based on constructivism as a theoretical framework, it can be concluded that the common historical past of group members is not an objective indicator, but rather a social construct accepted in the community (Altanian, 2017). It is not the historical facts themselves that are of consequence; rather, it is the conviction of group members that these facts are genuine and that this "shared past" should serve to reinforce the community in the present (Hui, 2017). Education occupies a distinctive position in the formation of such social constructs.

The functions of social memory for the group are twofold: firstly, to increase the level of social integration and, secondly, to improve the possibilities of social interaction (Menes, 1985). One of the first theorists of memory studies, Halbwachs (1992), posited that there is a close connection between the social dimension of memory and group identity. The German sociologist observed that "each group formulates the memory of its own past, justifying the unique identity of the group".

The category of "identity" is a pervasive concept in sociology, social psychology, social philosophy, and anthropology. The issue of identity has become a prominent focus in the analysis of contemporary societies, as they undergo a process of transition from more rigid social structures, institutions, and descriptive statuses. This is largely attributable to the processes of industrialization and urbanization, which have resulted in the dissolution of traditional local communities and the diminution of the influence of religion on the everyday lives of the majority of the population. The concept of identity is becoming an integral part of modern sociological theory, with a variety of conceptualizations emerging as a fundamental aspect of this field of study (Noel, 1968).

The concept of identity was initially explored primarily within the context of personality theory and classical theories of social action. However, by the end of the twentieth century, the social, cultural, ideological, and economic conditions of societies had undergone significant transformations. The structure of industrial production (and of capitalism in general) had also undergone significant transformation, which resulted in the dissolution of the traditional class structures prevalent in early modern societies and the emergence of a 'soft' or 'fluid' form of modernity (Garrett, 2012). These processes give rise to an increase in social and cultural uncertainty, which has a profound impact on the individual. Indeed, as modern sociologists have emphasized, they serve to actualize the study of individual and group identities (Poole, 2008). As Z. Bauman posits, the modern world is not a settled and stable entity, which alters the conceptualization of identity. Identity, he asserts, becomes a prism through which numerous salient features of modern life are viewed, evaluated and studied (Polyakova, 2016).

In order to elucidate the phenomenon of ethnic and national identity, this paper employs the metaphor of the "imagined community," as postulated by Anderson (2006). The author posits that nations emerge from the perception of individuals as members of a collective. This concept can be employed to examine the formation of ethnic identity. The portrayal of images from the past plays a pivotal role in the formation of perceptions pertaining to one's ethnic group, encompassing its distinctive attributes, values, and traditions, as well as the delineation of identity boundaries. These boundaries are defined by the contrast between the characteristics attributed to the "own" and "foreign" groups. The concept of social memory serves to justify the consolidation of an 'imagined' or otherwise constructed community.

The past plays a pivotal role in the formation of group identity, primarily as a source of ideas about the group's ancestors. A conviction in shared ancestry engenders a perception of a collective historical experience and an understanding of the importance of cultural cohesion in the present, thereby enhancing the level of group solidarity. Weber (1980), the significance of the belief in common descent as a crucial factor in the formation of ethnic groups. However, given the inherent challenges in tracing real kinship in the context of large social groups, a form of 'artificial kinship' is often constructed, giving rise to the creation of a specific genealogical myth.

The manner in which an ancestor is portrayed in the collective cultural memory of a given ethnic group has a significant impact on the image that the group itself projects in the present day. It is crucial to recognize that the relationships between the ancestors of an ethnic group and those of other ethnic groups are frequently used as a basis for understanding contemporary interethnic relations. By re-representing relations with other ethnic groups on

the basis of reference to historical conditioning, memory politics can be aimed at three distinct yet interrelated objectives. Firstly, it can be used to interpret the group's properties to its members, thereby strengthening the sense of solidarity. This may be achieved, for instance, by elucidating certain traits of 'folk character'. Secondly, memory politics can be employed to reduce the level of intolerance towards other ethnic groups. Thirdly, it can be used to foster a more nuanced and complex understanding of the group's identity and its relationship with other ethnic groups. Furthermore, memory politics plays a pivotal role in shaping the external image of the group, which is presented to other communities and groups. In the context of the Republic of Tatarstan, this is particularly pertinent, given the region's multiculturalism and the long-standing and dynamic interaction between its two predominant ethnic groups, the Tatars and Russians (Eflova et al., 2024).

It is important to recognize that in the everyday lives of ethnic group members, both in mono-ethnic and multicultural regions, ethnic identity is not the sole or dominant basis of self-identification. It is not always the case that members of an ethnic group perceive themselves as a unified entity, nor do they necessarily recognize the distinction between their own ethnic group and others. In many instances, the most significant differentiating factors in everyday life may be less related to ethnicity, such as one's position in the hierarchy of power or income level (Anderson & Miller-Idriss, 2017).

In order to gain insight into the ways in which ethnic identity is shaped by and embedded in the lives of modern individuals, and how it is influenced by the representations of an ethnic group in social memory, it is instructive to turn to the theory of Brubaker (2009), presented in his work 'Ethnicity without Groups'. As the sociologist observes, the characterization of ethnic groups as internally homogeneous, distinct from other analogous groups by impermeable boundaries, although it may be expedient, does not align with the actuality of any extant society. The author justifies the need to move from the study of identity to the study of identification, from groups to group creation projects, and from common culture to categorization, by employing constructivist metaphors of 'fluidity' and 'multiplicity' of identity. In the view of R. Brubaker, ethnicity, race and nation are not external entities; rather, they are modes of perceiving, interpreting and representing the world at the everyday level.

It can be argued that ethnic identity is not a fixed and unchanging concept; rather, it is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. The content of an individual's ethnic identity is subject to constant modification and refinement as a result of their engagement with the cultural practices and norms of their own and other communities. Conversely, ethnic identity is not an active construct at all times; rather, it is actualized and reinterpreted on each occasion in response to external informational stimuli (Bates & Rassam, 2023; Brodowicz, 2024; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Highmore et al. (2024).

The narratives of an ethnic group's past serve as a catalyst for the actualization of their identity. Such narratives may be expressed in a variety of forms, including songs broadcast on the radio, posters announcing performances in the Tatar language, online posts about new regional history textbooks, or references in politicians' speeches. In addition to reflecting on the past, these narratives also serve to actualize a sense of belonging, reflecting on the importance of ethnic context for individuals and the representation of ethnic groups in historical contexts. Conversely, as the social and information space becomes increasingly saturated with ethnic content, the content of an individual's ethnic identity tends to become more formalized (Nagel, 1994). The social memory and interest in question exert a direct influence on the frequency of actualization of ethnic identity among group members, and in many respects shape its content.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article employs a multi-method approach, utilizing materials from regional media publications devoted to the historical heritage of the Republic of Tatarstan. This is complemented by a series of expert interviews with specialists involved in the processes of constructing and transmitting images of the past of the Republic of Tatarstan. These include archaeologists, professional historians, museum workers, guides, local historians, representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic, cultural workers and artists. In total, 36 individuals were interviewed. Additionally, the perspectives of museum visitors were also considered. This included visitors to the museum-reserves Ostrov-grad Sviyazhsk and Velikiy Bolgar, with a total of 33 individuals participating in this aspect of the study. Ostrov-grad Sviyazhsk and Velikiy Bolgar represent the most significant historical landmarks of the Republic of Tatarstan, and are the focal points of numerous practices pertaining to the actualization of historical memory in the region.

The construction of historical narratives in the republic does not occur solely in relation to these two sites. Rather, these cases are saturated with actualization practices (including those that are institutionalized) in culture, education, science, as well as in tourism and religious life. This allows us to study the strategies and mechanisms of social actors at different levels regarding the construction

of the image of the past and its actualization in connection with ethnic identity and ethnic and cultural policy.

Furthermore, the study is based on the findings of a representative survey of the population of the Republic of Tatarstan (n=2510 individuals, multi-stage sampling, with quotas based on region of residence, gender, age, ethnic and confessional self-identification). The survey was conducted using a formalized questionnaire, with preliminary testing on a pilot group of respondents to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument. The data from the survey was processed using a combination of coding and the creation of a unified data set, which was then subjected to statistical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An understanding of the mechanisms through which social memory affects society and particular social groups enables a more profound grasp of the multifaceted social reality, the nuances of interethnic and interfaith relations, and the development of effective social design and forecasting. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the multinational and multicultural space of the Russian Federation. In recent decades, the Republic of Tatarstan has been pursuing a leading status among the regions of the Russian Federation and the designation of 'third capital', in addition to its aspiration to become the center of Tatar culture and Islam in Russia. The presentation of Tatarstan as a distinctive region in terms of culture, social interaction and the economy is largely due to a specific policy of memory. The past is used as the most important resource in determining the nature of the formation and development of Tatar identity, intercultural relations in Tatarstan and beyond, as well as the tourist attractiveness of the region. Tatarstan is a region with a diverse ethnic population. In 2023, the Republic of Tatarstan was home to eight nationalities, with a total population exceeding 10,000. The most numerous ethnic groups are Tatars (53%) and Russians (40%). In the context of the region's multiculturalism, the historical interactions between these groups serve as a source of attitudes that inform contemporary interethnic relations.

Accordingly, 56% of respondents from Tatarstan primarily identify as Russians, 28% as Tatarstan residents (i.e., as regionally oriented individuals), and 12% as residents of their respective cities or settlements. Conversely, the selection of the dominant identity is contingent upon the ethnic group to which the respondent belongs. Among Russian respondents, 81% opt for "Russian" as the primary identity, whereas among those of the Tatar ethnic group, this option is chosen in 37% of instances. The regional identity "Tatarstanets" is the primary identity for 49% of

Tatar respondents, whereas only 7% of respondents from the Russian ethnic group identify with this identity.

Concurrently, the respondents indicated a notable interest in the history of the region. A high level of interest in regional history is indicated by 37% of respondents, while the average level of interest is reported by 41%. A mere 13% of respondents indicated a low level of interest, while only 3% indicated a low level of interest. A further 7% of respondents indicated that they found it challenging to provide an assessment. Concurrently, respondents of Tatar ethnicity are 18% more likely than ethnic Russians to indicate a high level of interest in regional history. A review of the media and interviews indicates that these discrepancies can be attributed to the perception of the region's history as predominantly ethnically labelled, with a greater emphasis on Tatar narratives. The existence of the modern Tatarstan region is perceived as relatively recent, with a duration of just over a century.

Another significant factor influencing the formation of interest in the history of the region is the confessional affiliation of respondents. The most striking contrasts are evident between the two most populous confessional groups (those who adhere to Islam and those who profess Orthodoxy). Therefore, it can be observed that individuals adhering to Islam demonstrate a higher level of interest in the history of the region, while those who adhere to Orthodox Christianity demonstrate an average level of interest. Conversely, no notable discrepancies were observed in the responses of respondents from different confessions in the groups with low or no interest (Figure 1).

Fig 1. The level of interest in regional history among respondents of different confessions.
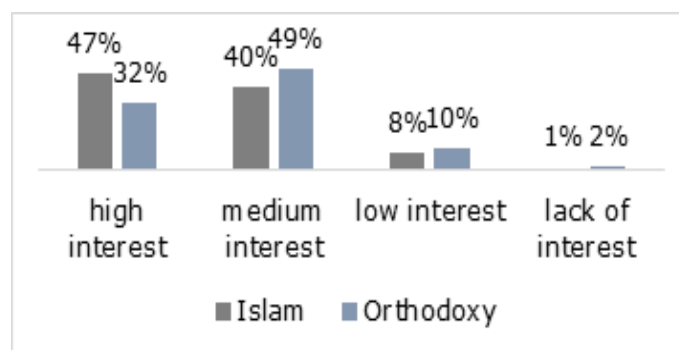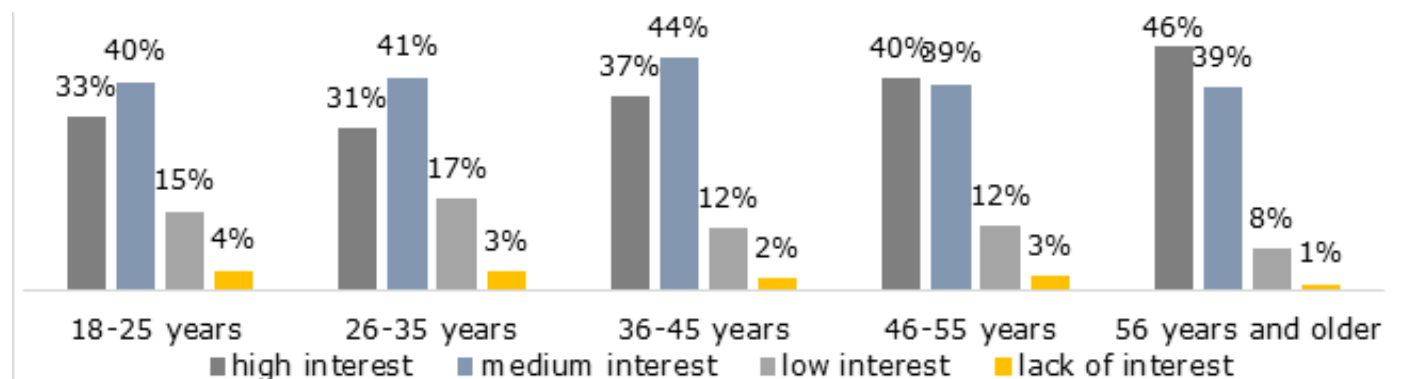

Source: own elaboration

Nevertheless, the level of interest in the history of the region is also contingent upon the socio-demographic status of the respondent. The gender, age and income level of respondents were identified as key indicators. It is

noteworthy that the level of education did not have a statistically significant impact on the respondents' self-assessment of their interest in regional history.

It is noteworthy that the older the respondents are, the higher their interest in the history of their own region (Figure 2).

Fig 2. The level of interest in regional history was investigated in groups of respondents of different ages.
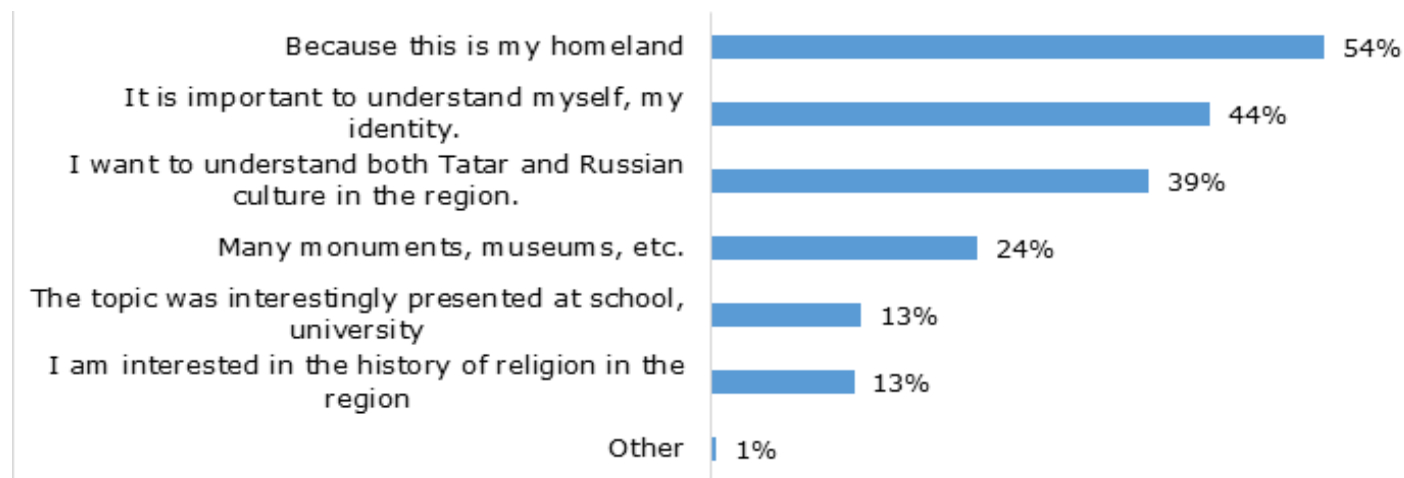

Source: own elaboration

The analysis of the interview data enables us to elucidate these discrepancies by demonstrating that older respondents perceive the history of the region with a pronounced emotional dimension (for instance, there is a narrative about 'great ancestors' to whom one should adhere), and frequently associate ethnic and religious identity. This results in the formation of their own identity around these ethno-religious complexes. Consequently, for older respondents, an interest in the history of the region is inextricably linked to an interest in their own identity.

Another characteristic of respondents related to interest in regional history is income level. Those respondents who are among the least well-off are twice as unlikely as those who indicate average and high income to demonstrate interest in the past (20% and 40% respectively).

Additionally, the survey identified the most significant factors of interest in the history of Tatarstan (respondents could select multiple appropriate answers). The most frequently selected reasons were "I want to know the history of Tatarstan because it is my homeland" (54% of respondents), "It is important to understand myself, my identity and my roots" (44% of respondents), and "It is important to understand both Tatar and Russian culture in the region" (39%). The least common reason for interest in the region's past was the engaging presentation of the topic at university or school (13%). The data are presented in figure 3.

Fig 3. The following factors are of interest in the context of regional history.

Source: own elaboration.

It is noteworthy that the primary motivations for pursuing regional history are associated with the respondents' comprehension of their own identity and that of other residents of the region. The focus on the history of both one's own ethnic group and other ethnic groups within the region suggests the significance of the attitude towards tolerant interaction. As several respondents observed during the course of the interviews, "Even if I am not interested in the history of either the Tatars or the Russians, I will refrain from discussing it, as it might cause offence to others, which I am keen to avoid" (female, Russian, 24 years old).

History frequently serves as a foundation for narratives that validate contemporary relations between ethnic groups. "We Russians and Tatars have the right to coexist peacefully" (Male, Tatar, 56 years old).

It is noteworthy that the factors pertaining to identity, associated with the development of interest in history, were selected 21% more frequently by Tatar respondents, whereas the factors pertaining to the significance of comprehending other cultures were chosen slightly more often (by 12%) by respondents of the Russian ethnic group.

In addition to investigating the motives underlying an interest in regional history, this study also sought to ascertain the factors that contribute to a lack of interest in the past. The two most frequently cited reasons for a lack of interest in the region's past are that the information is not perceived as being important (selected by 36% of respondents who indicated a lack of interest in history) and that there is a lack of time to engage with it (selected by 34% of respondents who indicated a lack of interest in history). The respondents were least likely to select options that indicated a low assessment of the importance of regional identity in general. These included "I do not feel part of the republic" (14%) and "It is not such an important part of history; I am more interested in the history of Russia and the world" (11%).

The analysis of empirical data leads to the conclusion that social memory is most often focused on images of events and historical figures with unambiguous positive or negative connotations, which serve as symbols of social memory and significant symbols of group identity. Memorable images of victims or heroes, events that are perceived as either tragic or triumphant, and other significant occurrences are the most readily recalled and most vividly represented. These create a conceptual framework that shapes the collective memory of a group and its associated identity. The emotional evaluation of the experience of ancestors serves as the foundation for determining current situations and patterns of response in defining one's own identity and interacting with other groups. These aspects of the past are of particular interest to the population and are also regarded as being of importance to the wider regional community.

CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that the ethno-cultural situation in Tatarstan is characterized by a high degree of richness in instances of interethnic and interfaith interaction. The maintenance of harmony in Tatarstan, a region characterized by its multiculturalism, hinges on several key factors. These include historical memory, traditions, shared objectives and the value placed on amicable relations between individuals of diverse nationalities. This is reflected in the formation of interest among the republic's residents in the history of the region.

The politics of memory does not so much create an image of the past, but rather employs it as a means of influencing the audience to engage in specific actions and evaluations. In the context of ethnic identity construction, it is connected with the actualization of identification as a member of a group and reflection on the traits inherent to one's community. Firstly, the politics of memory populates the social context with representations of the past in a variety of forms, thereby increasing the frequency of actualization of ethnic identification. Secondly, it offers the average person interpretations of how the conventional 'ancestors' of an ethnic group and the content of the identity of its members today should be connected. To illustrate, the image of ancestors is associated with the necessity to adhere to their teachings and traditions.

Cultural memory is constituted by a multitude of elements, including museums, films, music, and so forth. These elements serve to represent the experiences of an ethnic group's ancestors, thereby sustaining the collective imagination of the group's distinctive features and boundaries. The manipulation of memory is, in effect, the manipulation of identity, and an interest in the past is, in essence, an interest in identity.

In many ways, social memory plays a pivotal role in enabling members of an ethnic group to define their current social situation and determine their response to the actions of other groups or their own members. Furthermore, social memory can facilitate the process of ethnic identification. This may occur, for instance, by imbuing events from ethnic history with emotional significance and a sense of special meaning, thereby appealing to the individual's sense of belonging to the history of their people.

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