TATARNESS REIMAGINED: LANGUAGE, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY IN POST-CIVIL WAR TAJIKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transformation of ethnic identity among the Tatar community in Tajikistan in the wake of the Tajik Civil War. Drawing on in-depth interviews, it analyses how the war and subsequent dispersion and migration have reconfigured Tatar ethnic ties and fostered the emergence of a hybrid identity. The findings reveal a complex process of identity formation, where the loss of homeland and language intertwines with the development of a Tajikistani national identity and the experience of differentiation through labour migration. The paper argues that the Tatar community's self-definition as 'Tatar of Tajikistan' epitomises the resilience of people navigating multiple contexts and transcending conventional categories of ethnicity and migration. It offers insights into the dynamics of identity politics amidst post-socialist transition and war.

Keywords: Ethnic identity, Tajik Civil War, Tatar diaspora, Language shift, Labour migration.

INTRODUCTION

Increased international migration is one of the most pressing issues facing the contemporary world. As of mid-2022, there were approximately 281.7 million migrants worldwide, and the number continues to grow steadily each year (International Organization for Migration, 2022). Among them, refugees who have been forced to flee their homelands due to war or conflict often find themselves in challenging circumstances. By the end of 2022, the global refugee population reached 89.4 million, far surpassing the levels seen in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023).

In response to this situation, recent years have seen growing academic interest in the experiences of refugees. There has been a shift towards viewing refugees as complex subjects with multifaceted backgrounds, moving beyond the traditional notion of refugees as mere objects of protection (Gatrell, 2015; Sigona, 2014). Specifically, research is being conducted to re-examine the label of 'refugee' and to strive for a more nuanced understanding based on individual experiences.

Building upon these concerns, this paper attempts to reframe the experiences of refugees over a prolonged period. Specifically, focusing on the Tatar people living in Tajikistan, we examine their experiences of becoming refugees due to the civil war and subsequent migration to the 'historical homeland' based on the narratives of those involved.

The history of large-scale Tatar migration to Central Asia can be traced back to the Russian Empire's conquest of the region in the late 19th century. At that time, Tatars from the Volga-Ural region, with diverse backgrounds as merchants, artisans, and officials, moved to Central Asia in search of new markets (Komatsu, 2005). They expanded their presence into the territories of present-day Tajikistan and Afghanistan, working primarily as traders and interpreters (Parviz, 2015). However, the full-scale settlement of Tatars in the present-day territory of Tajikistan began only in the 1930s. Numerous Tatars migrated to Central Asia to escape agricultural collectivisation. Moreover, some of them relocated to the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic pursuing a more favourable climate and urban lifestyle, enabled by the liberalisation of internal migration policies during the Khrushchev era in the 1950s (Abdullaev, 2018). As a result, Tatars became an integral part of Tajikistan's multiethnic society.

According to the 2010 census, the Tatar population in Tajikistan was approximately 6,000, accounting for about 0.1% of the country's total population (Statistical Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2010). Although a relatively small minority group, Tatars have played a significant role in Tajikistan's social, economic, and cultural life.

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan plunged into severe political and social turmoil. The Tajik Civil War erupted between 1992 and 1997, resulting from intensified regional conflicts, power struggles, and a quagmire of war (Akiner, 2001; Heathershaw, 2009). This civil war severely damaged the country's political system, resulting in an estimated 100,000 deaths and 1.2 million internally displaced persons (Foroughi, 2002). The Tatar community was one of the many ethnic groups caught up in this devastation. Many Tatars

were forced to become refugees and flee to neighbouring countries. While some chose to remain or return, the economic hardships in the post-war period compelled them to seek employment as migrant workers in the 'historical homeland' of the Republic of Tatarstan in Russia (Sakurama, 2021).

This paper aims to examine these experiences of war and migration from the perspective of the transformation of Tatar ethnic identity. Previous studies on immigrants and refugees have often explained the adaptation process of immigrants in terms of a dichotomous framework of assimilation or separation (Alba and Nee, 2003; Portes and Zhou, 1993). However, the experiences of Tatars in Tajikistan paint a complex picture that such a binary approach fails to fully encapsulate. This paper aims to elucidate how the Tajik Civil War severed the ethnic ties of the Tatar community and how new identities were generated in becoming refugees and migrating through a qualitative analysis of narratives obtained through interviews.

Furthermore, this paper also focuses on the narratives surrounding the inheritance of the mother tongue. Language is an essential element that represents ethnic identity (Fishman, 1991) and is an indispensable subject of analysis for understanding the experiences of refugees. Examining the dynamic process of conflict and reinterpretation surrounding the inheritance of the Tatar language amid the drastic changes in the linguistic environment caused by the Tajik Civil War sheds light on the manifestation of refugee agency through the lens of language. Thus, this paper also attempts to rethink the nature of identity among immigrants and refugees in an era of accelerating human mobility.

RESEARCH DATA AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research data

The data analysed in this paper were initially collected to examine the linguistic situation of Tatars living in Tajikistan. The author's doctoral dissertation (Sakurama, 2021) primarily considered the data within that context. However, during the survey, narratives related to the Tajik Civil War were collected beyond initial expectations, and the doctoral dissertation did not sufficiently analyse them. Therefore, this paper revisits the narratives surrounding the Tajik Civil War and seeks to deepen the examination of its impact on the Tatar community in Tajikistan.

Research participants and methods

The survey was conducted between October 2018 and August 2019. From October to December 2018, a preliminary survey was conducted with the cooperation of Tatar-Bashkir Cultural Centre. Subsequently, from December 2018 to July 2019, semi-structured interviews were conducted using questionnaires. The interviews were conducted online (mainly via Viber and Telegram), and the snowball sampling method was used, where each research participant introduced the next participant. The languages used were Russian, Tajik, Tatar, Uzbek, or a combination thereof, and the author switched languages to match the participants' speech. Finally, supplementary research was conducted from July to August 2019 to collect missing data.

Attributes of research participants

The research involved 76 participants (37 males and 39 females), with an average of 3-4 hours of interview data obtained per person. The total duration of the interviews amounted to 299 hours and 44 minutes. While all interviews followed a semi-structured format, many unfolded non-structurally, centring on the participants' life histories. Most of the data analysed in this paper is derived from these non-structurally developed life histories. The participants' ages spanned a wide range from teens to 80s, and they held various occupations. All participants had Tatar ethnicity (*natsional'nost'*) on their documents, but their self-perceptions varied, such as 'Tajikistani' or 'Tatar of Tajikistan.'

Research ethics and data management

In this paper, only data from research participants who consented to its use for purposes other than the initially intended doctoral dissertation were included in the analysis. This paper's possible analysis subjects are the 14 individuals who mentioned much about the war. We received explicit consent from 13 individuals to use their narratives in this paper, excluding one who is deceased.

To protect the privacy of research participants, this paper does not disclose any information that could identify individuals. When quoting narratives, pseudonyms and identification symbols (DU01-DU76) are used to identify each research participant. Furthermore, strict security measures are taken to manage audio data, transcripts, and personal information. Specifically, the data is encrypted and stored on a password-protected hard disk, and access is limited to the author. In addition, field notes containing personal information are all stored and locked in a safe.

Moreover, in writing this paper, additional feedback was obtained from the research participants by reporting and consulting with them on the data to be used per their requests. Recounting experiences from the Tajik Civil War and revisiting those memories may trigger traumatic recollections. In consideration of the potential mental and physical strain on the participants, they were informed of their right to withdraw consent for data use at any point, even after providing responses, should they experience discomfort or fatigue. None of the research data used in this paper was withdrawn.

Characteristics of the research data

The narratives obtained in this research exhibited the following three notable characteristics:

> 1. As mentioned earlier, experiences of the Tajik Civil War were recounted with a frequency and depth beyond initial expectations. Many participants shared vivid memories of family members torn apart by the war and the sense of loss, and these narratives constituted a significant portion of the research data.

> 2. Narratives firmly asserting a Tajikistani identity were prominent. The participants widely shared the perception that the collective narrative of

rebuilding Tajikistan intersects with their personal narratives of rebuilding their own lives.

3.The experience of working in Tatarstan served as an impetus for reconsidering ethnic identity. By articulating their differences from Kazan Tatars, the participants emphasised the distinctiveness of Tajikistan's Tatars and tended to redefine their identity.

These characteristics suggest that the historical experience of the Tajik Civil War triggered a dynamic negotiation process between the ethnic identity of Tatars and the national identity of Tajikistan. The narratives obtained in this research vividly depict this multilayered process of identity formation. Therefore, this paper extracts the narratives of 13 participants who provided rich accounts of their memories of the Tajik Civil War and migration and carefully attempts to interpret the meaning of their experiences.

Analysis method of the research data

The narrative data obtained through interviews are qualitatively coded. Particular attention is given to narratives about the war, and inductive analysis is conducted following the procedures of the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

First, verbatim transcripts of the interview data are prepared, and narratives related to the Tajik Civil War are extracted. Second, the extracted narratives are closely examined, and keywords and contexts indicative of the Tajik Civil War's impact on Tatar society are meticulously coded. The coding results are compared and organised to identify common themes and concepts. Fourthly, the relationships between the identified themes and concepts are examined, and the process of transformation brought about by the Tajik Civil War on the ethnic identity of Tatars is described as a storyline.

Through these procedures, three analytical concepts were derived: (1) dispersion of relatives due to the Tajik Civil War, (2) formation of a 'Tajikistani' identity, and (3) experience of being 'differentiated' in the destination of labour migration. These concepts shed light on the process of disruption and reconfiguration of the ethnic ties of Tatars triggered by the Tajik Civil War.

Furthermore, narratives surrounding the inheritance of the Tatar language are also examined from three perspectives: (1) memories of Tatar language use before the Tajik Civil War, (2) changes in the linguistic environment caused by the Tajik Civil War, and (3) the pursuit of 'Tatarness.' The dynamic relationship between language and identity is also considered.

As a theoretical foundation for the analysis, constructivist approaches to identity research (Hall, 1996), insights from diaspora studies (Safran, 1991; Vertovec and Cohen, 1999), and discussions on language and identity (Fishman, 1991) are referenced. The concepts derived from the data are connected with existing theoretical insights.

In this way, this paper aims to elucidate the influence of macro-level social changes on the subjective identity formation of minorities from a bottom-up perspective at the micro-level of interactions by interpreting the world of meanings entrusted to the narratives of Tatars surrounding the Tajik Civil War. The methodological focus of this paper lies in approaching the complex aspects of minority identity politics through a meticulous analysis of narratives rooted in individual experiences.

TRANSFORMATION OF ETHNIC TIES DUE TO THE TAJIK CIVIL WAR

How did the Tajikistan civil war transform the ethnic ties of the Tatar community? Let us trace the process of the destabilisation and reconfiguration of Tatar ethnic identity from three perspectives: (1) the dispersion of relatives due to the Tajik Civil War, (2) the formation of a 'Tajikistani' identity, and (3) the experience of being 'differentiated' in the destination of labour migration.

Dispersion of relatives due to the Tajik Civil War

The interview data indicates that many Tatar families were dispersed during the war. Alsu (born in 1992, female, healthcare worker / DU20, interviewed on 8 January 2019) describes the impact of the Tajik Civil War as follows:

'My grandparents and relatives knew the Tatar language well, but my grandparents passed away early, and my relatives fled abroad during the war, so my family had no opportunity to be exposed to the Tatar language. The war scattered our relatives, but if it were not for the war, I might have known at least a little bit of the Tatar language and culture by now.'

Similar narratives were heard from Ilyas (born in 1982, male, technician / DU28, interviewed on 23 May 2019) and Ilmira (born in 1982, female, occupation not disclosed / DU29, interviewed on 22 June 2019). Ilyas fled to Russia during the war and continued to work there for a long time. He reflects, *'there were no Tatars around me, so I grew up without developing a sense of being Tatar.'* Ilmira also says, *'some of my relatives might have spoken Tatar, but many of them were scattered to Russia and Europe during the war.'*

These narratives indicate that the Tajik Civil War was experienced as an event that physically severed the ethnic ties of the Tatar community. The change in the linguistic environment is a prime example. Before the Tajik Civil War, the Tatar language was used daily within and outside the home, serving as a foundation for ethnic identity. However, this foundation was lost due to the dispersion. Shamil's (born in 1972, male, physician / DU40, interviewed on 17 April 2019) words vividly illustrate the fragmentation of the community:

'The war destroyed the peaceful coexisting society. Many ethnic groups left Tajikistan, and now only a small number of each minority group remains. In the impoverished and devastated society after the war, there was no room to preserve the languages and cultures of ethnic groups.'

However, these narratives also reveal a counterfactual way of thinking. As Alsu says, *'if it were not for the war, I might have known at least a little bit of the Tatar language and culture by now.'* These words not only highlight the sense of loss caused by the Tajik Civil War and suggest a desire for the continuity of Tatarness.

At this point, it is pertinent to consider the debates surrounding diaspora. Safran identified the severance from the 'homeland' and the impossibility of 'return' as defining characteristics of diaspora (Safran, 1991). However, the narratives of Tatars in Tajikistan suggest that the 'homeland' or 'home' torn apart by the Tajik Civil War cannot be easily specified. The fact that they express nostalgia not for Tatarstan but for Tatarness suggests that it is a 'homeland' that has been lost yet remains yearned for.

The younger generation of research participants also voiced the desire for a 'revival' of the Tatar language and culture. Kamila (born in 2001, female, student / DU03, interviewed on 27 May 2019) prefaces by saying:

'On paper, I am Tatar, so when asked about my ethnicity, I say I am Tatar, but I do not have a strong sense of being Tatar. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to learn the Tatar language but that might not be all there is to it. After the war, my parents deliberately returned to Dushanbe and devoted themselves to rebuilding this land. I am very proud of that. Moreover, I want to live here forever.'

Here, Kamila expresses a sense of belonging to Tajikistan rather than Tatarstan. However, the words *'on paper, I am Tatar'* suggest that Tatarness has not been wholly lost. For her, being Tatar is inseparable from the experience of her parents, which is a source of pride.

In this way, the dispersion of relatives due to the Tajik Civil War severely damaged the ethnic ties of the Tatar community. However, it also served as an impetus for rediscovering Tatarness. The Tatarness that became yearned for through its loss intertwines with the sense of belonging to Tajikistan, forming the seeds of a new ethnic identity.

Formation of a 'Tajikistani' Identity

The reconstruction of Tajikistani society after the war significantly impacted the ethnic identity of Tatars. In particular, the formation of a national identity as 'Tajikistani' is a characteristic commonly found in the narratives of many participants.

Dilyara (born in 1992, female, graduate student / DU19, interviewed on 3 March 2019) states, '*on paper, I am Tatar, but I do not think of myself as ethnically Tatar, Russian or Tajik. I do, however, feel Tajikistani.'* When asked about the reason, she explained as follows: *'Why? Because I was born amidst the war and raised amidst the reconstruction... Especially as I witnessed the country developing, that feeling grew stronger.'* This narrative articulates a 'Tajikistani' identity that transcends ethnic categories, underpinned by a sense of belonging as a member of the nation-state, which extends beyond ethnic boundaries.

A similar narrative was heard from Gulya (born in 1990, female, healthcare worker / DU26, interviewed on 1 February 2019). Gulya, whose 'parents both spent their youth in Dushanbe and had an attachment to it,' says:

'After the war ended, my family moved to Dushanbe. We deliberately returned to this place, and our family history is intertwined with the reconstruction of this city. We worked hard to learn the Tajik language. That is why my family and I have a strong sense of being Tajikistani, even though our ethnicity is Tatar.'

Here, too, the sense of belonging to Tajikistan takes precedence over the ethnic identity of Tatar. The narrative that intertwines '*the reconstruction of this city'* with *'the history of our family'* indicates that the story of national rebuilding is deeply rooted in personal experiences.

This formation of a 'Tajikistani' identity is compatible with the constructivist understanding of identity discussed earlier. As Hall suggested, identity is not a fixed and singular entity but a multilayered one constantly generated through discursive practices (Hall, 1996). The identity of Tatars in Tajikistan has also been dynamically reconstructed through experiences such as the Tajik Civil War, national rebuilding, and labour migration. This process compelled them to fundamentally question their sense of belonging, from the loss of identities such as 'Soviet citizens' to the destabilisation of ethnic categories accompanying nation-state formation.

The emergence of the new identity category of 'Tatars of Tajikistan' is particularly suggestive. It expresses a hybrid identity rooted in place, distinct from Kazan Tatars and Tajiks. This points to the limitations of reducing the nature of identity to given ethnic categories and illuminates how a complex sense of belonging is generated at the intersection of multiple contexts.

Experience of being 'Differentiated' in the destination of labour migration

The experience of labour migration is another aspect that cannot be overlooked when considering the identity of Tatars in post-civil war Tajikistan. Driven by economic hardship, many Tatars went to Russia for work, particularly to the 'historical homeland' of the Republic of Tatarstan. This experience has had a significant impact on the reconfiguration of ethnic identity. Rishat (born in 1991, male, technician / DU21, interviewed on 21 May 2019) describes his experience of working in Tatarstan as follows:

'When I went to Kazan for work, I also worked with local Tatars. They mix Tatar words into their Russian, while I mix Tajik words into my Russian. We are supposed to be the same Tatar people, but there were many aspects we could not relate to. Our ways of thinking were different. Although we belong to the same ethnicity, we have different backgrounds. They are Kazan Tatars, and I am a Dushanbe Tatar, or rather, a Tatar of Tajikistan.'

What is articulated here is the experience of differentiating between 'Kazan Tatars' and 'Tatars of Tajikistan.' Tatars, presumably sharing the same ethnic origins, are perceived as having different language use and ways of thinking. Ilyas, who appeared in section 4.1, also reflects on his working life in Kazan:

'Although we looked identical, Kazan Tatars seemed to have completely different ways of thinking and everything else. However, Tajiks mocked my poor Tajik language skills. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience of feeling in lim-

bo, being told I was so Tatar on the one hand and having my Tatar identity denied on the other. It may feel more fitting to be called a Tatar of Tajikistan.'

This narrative reveals the identity conflict between being Tatar and being Tajik. The outcome is the hybrid identity of 'Tatar of Tajikistan.'

The narrative of Marat (born in 1975, male, designer / DU36, interviewed on 31 March 2019) is also intriguing. Marat has an ethnically diverse background, having spent his childhood in Bayramali (currently Turkmenistan) and moved to Dushanbe in his youth. For Marat, the encounter with Kazan Tatars became an impetus for rediscovering his identity.

"When I went to Kazan for work, I met Tatars similar to me. I felt more like I was with relatives than with my Tajik migrant worker companions. I am not sure what made me feel that way. Probably the similar faces, the similar sensibilities... Ah, I thought, I am Tatar after all. However, there were times when my behaviour differed from Tatars who were born and raised in Russia, and I was told things like, 'You know, those guys from Tajikistan...' It is frustrating, but the fact that I am from Tajikistan is an undeniable truth, and the experiences I have gained while being born and raised in this society shape who I am today. Different from Kazan Tatars, but also different from Tajiks. I came to think of myself as a Tajikistani and a Tatar of Tajikistan.'

What is demonstrated in this narrative is the formation of a multilayered and composite identity. Recognising the differences between the Tatars of Tatarstan and Tajiks enables the coexistence of a national identity as Tajikistani and an ethnic identity as Tatar of Tajikistan. This experience of 'differentiation' resonates with Nagel's theory of ethnicity. Nagel conceived of ethnicity as a dynamic phenomenon that emerges in group interactions (Nagel, 1994). The identity of Tatars is also constructed through interactions with Kazan Tatars and Tajiks, where differences are recognised, and new self-definitions are generated. What is important here is that the 'Tatar of Tajikistan' identity is not a mere combination of ethnic categories. It is the product of strategic self-identification amidst complex social contexts, such as the war experience, participation in national reconstruction, and 'differentiation' through labour migration.

In this way, the experience of labour migration has brought a new dimension to Tatars' identity. Differentiation from Kazan Tatars has fostered the emergence of a new identity as 'Tatars of Tajikistan.' This identity also expresses a hybrid identity different from Tajiks but is Tajikistani. Tatars living in post-civil war Tajik society have developed a complex self-definition that transcends multiple ethnic and national categories through the experience of mobility in labour migration.

Storyline of 'the hybrid identity of Tatars born from the Tajik Civil War'

Based on the analysis thus far, the concepts and theories regarding the transformation of ethnic identity among Tatars in Tajikistan can be summarised as follows.

Table 1. *Hybrid identity of Tatars born from the Tajik Civil War*

Concept	Definition	Example
Dispersion of relatives due to the Tajik Civil War	The physical fragmentation of Tatar families due to the war, which damaged the ethnic ties of the community	*'My relatives fled abroad during the war, so my family had no opportunity to be exposed to the Tatar language'*
Loss and yearning for Tatarness	The sense of losing the Tatar language and culture due to the dispersion, while simultaneously fostering nostalgia and an impetus for rediscovery	*'If it were not for the war, I might have known at least a little bit of the Tatar language and culture by now'*
Formation of a Tajikistani identity	The development of a sense of belonging as a Tajikistani national, transcending ethnic categories, through participation in post-war national reconstruction	*'Even though our ethnicity is Tatar, we have a strong sense of being Tajikistani'*
Differentiation from Tajiks	The perception of being Tajikistani as distinct from the ethnic majority of Tajiks	*'I am not Tajik. I am a citizen of Tajikistan'*
Experience of being 'Differentiated' in the destination of labour migration	The recognition of differences between Kazan Tatars and Tajiks during labour migration to Tatarstan, leading to the generation of a new self-definition	*'Different from Kazan Tatars, but also different from Tajiks. I came to think of myself as a Tatar of Tajikistan'*

Source: From the storyline of 'the hybrid identity of Tatars born from the Tajik Civil War'

Tatars in Tajikistan experienced the (Dispersion of relatives due to the Tajik Civil War). This experience of dispersion gave rise to an ambivalent consciousness of (Loss and yearning for Tatarness). In other words, losing contact with the Tatar language and culture led to a sense of losing Tatarness. At the same time, it also fostered nostalgia for what was lost and an impetus for rediscovery.

Participation in the post-war national reconstruction promoted the (Formation of a Tajikistani identity). This national sense of belonging transcends ethnic categories and is accompanied by (Differentiation from Tajiks). In other words, being Tajikistani is self-defined as a different existence from the ethnic majority of Tajiks.

Furthermore, the (Experience of being 'Differentiated' in the destination of labour migration) in Tatarstan fosters the emergence of a new identity. Amidst the awareness of differences between Kazan Tatars and Tajiks, a hybrid self-definition of Tatar of Tajikistan is generated.

In this way, the identity of Tatars transcends essentialist ethnic categories and emerges in a complex manner, traversing multiple contexts such as (Dispersion of relatives), (Loss and yearning for Tatarness), (Formation of a Tajikistani identity), (Differentiation from Tajiks), and (Experience of being 'Differentiated' in the destination of labour migration). It is the product of strategic self-identification by Tatars to survive in the post-civil war Tajik society.

NARRATIVES ON MOTHER TONGUE INHERITANCE

Furthermore, let us consider the impact of the Tajik Civil War on the linguistic identity of Tatars, using their narratives on mother tongue inheritance as a clue. Here, we will trace the process of loss and regeneration of the mother tongue from three perspectives: (1) memories of Tatar language use before the Tajik Civil War, (2) changes in the linguistic environment caused by the Tajik Civil War, and (3) the pursuit of Tatarness.

Memories of Tatar language use before the Tajik Civil War

The interview data unveils rich memories of Tatar language use before the Tajik Civil War. Azat (born in 1955, male, pensioner / DU59, interviewed on 15 May 2019) recounts his childhood memories as follows:

'When I was a child, I often spoke Tatar with my parents, and the surrounding houses were also multiethnic. It was like that throughout the Soviet period, but the war changed everything. Many minorities moved abroad. As a result, most of the people who remained in this country were Tajiks, so to continue doing business amid hardship, it was necessary to learn the Tajik language. Ultimately, there were no more opportunities to speak Tatar with anyone, and I completely forgot it.'

This narrative indicates that Tajikistan during the Soviet era was a linguistically diverse society where multiple ethnic groups coexisted. The Tatar language was used daily, both within and outside the home, serving as a foundation for ethnic identity.

These memories evoke Fishman's concept of diglossia (Fishman, 1991). Fishman referred to the state of functional segregation as diglossia, in which the minority language is used daily in the home and community while the majority language is used in the public sphere. It can be said that Tajikistan during the Soviet era was in a stable state of diglossia, with Russian being used as the language in public spaces. In contrast, each ethnic language was maintained in the home and local community.

Ironically, however, this stability of diglossia later became a factor that promoted language shift. The limited use of Tatar in the home made it challenging to transmit to the next generation, as opportunities for its use in public spaces diminished. Zulfiya's words, *'I still remember just a little bit,'* suggest that Tatar's intergenerational transmission was already on the brink of a crisis.

Here, we can recall previous studies on language shift in the former Soviet countries. For example, it has been pointed out that the elevation of the social and legal status of titular ethnic languages after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the decline of minority languages (Wertheim, 2003; Laitin, 1998). The experiences of Tatars in Tajikistan also reflect these changes in the linguistic situation brought about by de-Sovietisation.

The pursuit of 'Tatarness'

However, losing the Tatar language has ironically become an impetus for pursuing 'Tatarness.' Although they cannot freely use the Tatar language, many participants shared narratives seeking connection with 'things Tatar-ish.'

For instance, celebrating traditional festivals such as Sabantuy, listening to music imbued with Tatar sentiments, preparing Tatar cuisine, and donning Tatar skullcaps were mentioned as cultural practices affirming Tatarness.

It is particularly striking that the Tatar language's memory of being spoken before the Tajik Civil War is articulated as a resource that sustains Tatarness. Zulfiya (born in 1961, female, housewife / DU53, interviewed on 1 July 2019) nostalgically recounted her childhood memories of speaking Tatar with her parents and relatives.

'Most of my relatives who spoke Tatar moved abroad during the war, and for a long time, no one nearby spoke Tatar, so I completely forgot it. Even so, I still remember just a little bit. Isänmesez (hello), xälläregez niçek (how are you), barısı da yaxşı bulır (everything will be fine) ...'

The words of greeting that were once exchanged daily can no longer be fully recalled. However, their fragments speak more eloquently than anything else about Zulfiya's identity as a Tatar. This could be interpreted as an endeavour to construct a new identity triggered by language loss.

The effort to maintain an ethnic identity despite losing the mother tongue underscores the existence of Tatars as an 'imagined community.' Even if they cannot speak the Tatar language, tracing its vestiges reweaves a sense of belonging to the history and culture of the ethnicity anew. However, we cannot overlook people like Damir, introduced in section 5.2, who says they have *'completely forgotten'* the Tatar language. For them, the identity as Tatar may have no choice but to be imagined as an abstract Tatarness now detached from the language.

In this way, the narratives surrounding the inheritance of the mother tongue among Tatars highlight the complex transformation process of linguistic identity. The erosion of the linguistic foundation due to the Tajik Civil War made intergenerational transmission of Tatar difficult. However, simultaneously, it also prompts the pursuit of Tatarness through new cultural practices different from those of the mother tongue. While the inheritance of the mother tongue holds significant meaning for maintaining ethnic identity, its loss does not necessarily signify the loss of identity. The creation of new cultural practices enables the construction of ties that do not rely on language. The effort to maintain a Tatar identity despite losing the Tatar language can also be viewed as a product of their strategic adaptation to navigate the intricate situation in the post-civil war period.

Storyline of 'being Tatar even after losing the Tatar language'

Based on the analysis thus far, the concepts and theories that have become evident from the narratives of Tatars in Tajikistan regarding the inheritance of their mother tongue can be summarised as follows.

Table 2. *Being Tatar even after losing the Tatar language*

Concept	Definition	Example
Memories of Tatar language use before the Tajik Civil War	The recollection of the Tatar language being used daily both within and outside the home during the Soviet era in Tajikistan, serving as the foundation for the ethnic identity of Tatars	*'When I was a child, I often spoke Tatar with my parents, and the surrounding houses were also multiethnic'*
Changes in the linguistic environment caused by the Tajik Civil War	The destruction of coexistence between ethnic groups and the undermining of the foundation of minority languages due to the outbreak of the war	*'The war changed everything. Many minorities moved abroad'*
Becoming refugees and dispersion	Tatars being cut off from their linguistic environment due to becoming refugees and dispersing to other countries during the war	*'Most of my relatives who spoke Tatar moved abroad during the war'*
Language shift to Tajik	The inevitability of learning the Tajik language for survival due to the Tajikization of Tajik society after the war	*'To continue doing business amid hardship, it was necessary to learn the Tajik language'*
The pursuit of 'Tatarness'	The endeavor to seek connections with 'things Tatar-ish' through cultural practices, even if one cannot readily use the Tatar language	*Celebrating traditional festivals such as Sabantuy, listening to music imbued with Tatar sentiments, preparing Tatar cuisine, and donning Tatar skullcaps.*
Memory of the Mother Tongue and identity	The Tatar language, once exchanged daily, serving as a resource that sustains the Tatar identity, even if only fragments remain	*'I still remember just a little bit. Isänmesez (hello), xälläregez niçek (how are you), barısı da yaxşı bulır (everything will be fine)...'*

Source: From the storyline of 'being Tatar even after losing the Tatar language'

In Tajikistan during the Soviet era, the Tatar language was used daily both within and outside the home, and (Memories of Tatar language use before the Tajik Civil War) served as the foundation for the ethnic identity of Tatars. However, the outbreak of the war brought about (Changes in the linguistic environment caused by the Tajik Civil War), destroying the coexistence between ethnic groups and undermining the foundation of minority languages. (Becoming refugees and dispersion) cut off Tatars from their linguistic environment, and (Language shift to Tajik) became inevitable for survival.

The Tajikisation of Tajik society after the war made intergenerational transmission of Tatar difficult, but it has ironically become an impetus for (The pursuit of 'Tatarness'). Although they cannot readily use the Tatar language, they seek connections with 'things Tatar-ish' through cultural practices such as celebrating traditional festivals and preparing Tatar cuisine.

Furthermore, the (Memory of the Mother Tongue and identity) itself, the Tatar language once exchanged daily, functions as a resource that sustains the Tatar identity. The fragments of the Tatar language serve as a catalyst to re-weave a sense of belonging to the history and culture of the ethnicity anew.

The endeavour to be Tatar despite losing the Tatar language is a product of their strategic adaptation to survive the complex situation in the post-civil war period. (Memories of Tatar language use before the Tajik Civil War) were inevitably interrupted by (Changes in the linguistic environment caused by the Tajik Civil War), but amidst experiences such as (Becoming refugees and

dispersion) and (Language shift to Tajik), new identity construction is being sought through (The pursuit of 'Tatarness') and (Memory of the Mother Tongue and identity). While the inheritance of the mother tongue bears significant meaning for maintaining ethnic identity, its loss does not necessarily equate to the loss of identity. The construction of ties that do not rely on language is also emerging as a new ethnic identity.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we will summarise the analysis thus far and discuss the theoretical implications that can be derived from the Tatars' experiences in Tajikistan.

The emergence of hybrid identity: from the context of Post-Civil War transition

This paper has revealed that the identity of Tatars who lived through the Tajik Civil War and transition has taken on a complex nature that fluctuates between multiple senses of belonging. This process is not a unidirectional shift from an ethnic identity as Tatar to a national identity as Tajikistani; rather, it is characterised as a composite formation where the two intersect and sometimes conflict.

This aligns with the constructivist turn in identity research. As Hall suggested, identity is not an essential attribute but is constantly generated through discursive practices (Hall, 1996). The identity of Tatars in Tajikistan has also been dynamically reconstructed through experiences such as the Tajik Civil War, national rebuilding, and labour migration. This process compelled them to fundamentally question their sense of belonging, from the loss of identities such as 'Soviet citizens' to the destabilisation of ethnic categories accompanying nation-state formation.

The emergence of the new identity category of 'Tatar of Tajikistan' is particularly revealing. It articulates a hybrid identity rooted in place, distinct from the Tatars of Tatarstan and Tajiks. This points to the limitations of reducing the nature of identity to given ethnic categories and illuminates how a complex sense of belonging is generated at the intersection of multiple contexts.

Transformation of diaspora: beyond the dichotomy of 'Homeland' and 'Country of Settlement'

The dichotomy of 'homeland' and 'country of settlement' presupposed by conventional concepts of diaspora does not fully capture the experiences of Tatars in Tajikistan.

As proposed by Tölölyan's case study of the Armenian diaspora, the emergence of such hybrid identities can be interpreted as a manifestation of the creativity inherent in diasporic cultural practices (Tölölyan, 2005). The 'Tatar of Tajikistan' category can also be positioned as the seed of a new cultural identity, neither a simple return to the homeland nor assimilation to the country of settlement.

However, it is crucial to recognise that this category is also a construct shaped by the historical context of the Tajik Civil War. Instead of expressing a universal diasporic condition, it is a product generated by the political and social dynamics specific to the post-socialist world.

De-essentialising and reconfiguring ethnicity: the legacy of the Soviet Union and the dynamics of majority/minority

Furthermore, through the case of Tatars in Tajikistan, this paper also underscores the importance of a perspective that views ethnicity not as an essential attribute but as a product of the dynamic interplay between institutions and practices. In light of this, the legacy of Soviet ethnic policy cannot be overlooked. The Soviet Union institutionalised the category of ethnicity (*national'nost'*) on one hand while aiming for the ultimate fusion into 'Soviet citizens' on the other. As a result, minorities were subjected to the double bind of ethnic categories and Soviet identity (Brubaker, 2009). The collapse of this institutional foundation accompanying the dissolution of the Soviet Union compelled people to reconsider the meaning of being Tatar. However, at the same time, it also became an impetus for the rediscovery of Tatarness.

Furthermore, the configuration of ethnicity in post-civil war Tajik society is shaped by the dynamic interaction between the majority and minorities. While the identity of Tatars is constructed through differentiation from Tajiks, it also generated new logic of inclusion and exclusion.

Drawing on the discussions of Barth and Brubaker, ethnicity should be understood not as objective cultural differences but as the practice of boundary-making based on subjective senses of belonging, which is situationally defined as a dynamic process (Brubaker, 2002; Barth, 1969).

These insights highlight the significance of a perspective that regards ethnicity as a product of the dynamic interplay between institutions and practices. They also unveil the complex identity politics manifested at the intersection of majority and minority positionalities. Ethnicity, too, should be captured within the dynamics of emergence and transformation amidst the forces woven by the legacy of Soviet institutions and the presence of post-socialism.

In this way, this paper's findings can be positioned as an attempt to connect the empirical realities of people living in the post-civil war era to debates surrounding identity, diaspora, and ethnicity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the impact of civil war and post-socialist transition on the identity formation of ethnic minorities, drawing on the narratives of the Tatar community in Tajikistan.

Firstly, it has become evident that the experience of the Tajik Civil War and the subsequent dispersion and reconfiguration significantly undermined the

existing ethnic ties of Tatars. The loss of 'homeland' meant a fundamental shaking of the linguistic and cultural foundations. Secondly, the nation-building of Tajikistan after the war necessitated a new positioning of Tatar as a minority vis-à-vis Tajik. Thirdly, however, what emerged in the process of this reconfiguration was the seed of a hybrid identity of 'Tatar of Tajikistan,' which is neither Tatar nor Tajik.

These findings provide a perspective that calls into question the nature of identity among ethnic minorities. It defies being subsumed under predetermined categories of 'X people' and illuminates how a complex sense of belonging is continuously renegotiated at the intersection of multiple contexts. Amidst the destabilisation of ethnic categories, how do people redefine their own identities and seek new ties? This paper can also be one of the attempts to approach such issues empirically.

Admittedly, this paper has several limitations. First, while the discussion is developed based on the case of 'Tatars of Tajikistan,' the comparative perspective with other former Soviet countries is weak, and there is a lack of discussion on the extent to which this case can be generalised. It is necessary to develop a broader scope of discussion while distinguishing between issues common to the post-socialist world and contexts specific to Tajikistan. Second, the perspective of longer-term historical changes is weak. Although the focus is on changes before and after the civil war, the longer-term process from the Soviet era to the present is not sufficiently discussed. It is essential to situate the transformation of ethnic identity within a longer time span. Third, the positioning of other differences that influence identity formation, such as gender, generation, and class, is not adequately examined. Further consideration is required on how these differences intersect with the transformation of ethnic identity, and the introduction of an intersectional perspective is desirable. Addressing these issues will be an important task for future research.

Furthermore, it is imperative to emphasise that the Tajik Civil War, as a state of exception, ruptured the ethnic ties of Tatars in Tajikistan and eroded their linguistic and cultural foundations. However, at the same time, such experiences also had aspects that fostered the emergence of a new identity as the 'Tatar of Tajikistan.' These findings are not limited to the description of a particular case. They also provide universal implications for considering the impact of war and unexpected migration on the identity formation of minorities. Currently, conflicts continue unabated in various parts of the world, and many people are being forced to flee their homes and become refugees. The experiences of war and evacuation have become a universal problem not limited to specific regions.

What this paper proposes is that such extreme situations can not only sever the existing ethnic ties of minorities but also act as a catalyst for seeking new identities. The self-definition of 'Tatar of Tajikistan' suggests the possibility of a hybrid identity that transcends the dichotomy of homeland and place of evacuation/country of settlement, generated at the intersection of multiple contexts. By shedding light on a more complex sense of belonging that is neither reducible to ethnic categories of 'X people' nor a monolithic grouping

of immigrants/refugees, a path may be opened to grasping the multifaceted experiences of war and displacement.

In this regard, this paper also attempted to derive universal theoretical insights from a specific case. Driven by the ravages of war and deprived of the foundation of identity, this paper also sought to capture the experiences of people who were once placed in such situations and to discern universal suffering and hope. The self-definition of 'Tatar of Tajikistan' epitomises the resilience of people navigating multiple contexts, transcending the conventional categories and experiences of refugees and immigrants.

Even now, conflicts persist in various parts of the world, and innumerable people face critical junctures. While acknowledging differences as they are, we must strive to foster an inclusive horizon of coexistence that transcends such distinctions. The narratives of Tatars in Tajikistan also entrust us with such hope. We sincerely hope this paper will contribute to the understanding of resilient identity formation amidst the turbulence of war.

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