Preface

This book explores a crucial dimension in the history of late tsarist Russia: the consciousness of the empire's ethnic diversity and attempts to lessen it so as to produce a united Russian "nation." I focus on controversies—pedagogical, religious, political, and scholarly—that reveal how Russians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries viewed the cultural ramifications of their country's expansion in "the East." Though its narrative concludes with the eve of World War I, the book has been profoundly shaped by momentous changes taking place in Russia during the last decade of the twentieth century. To a degree that I can no longer recall precisely, my settling on the relationship between Russian nationality and tsarist imperial rule as a research topic in 1989–1990 came from my awareness of changes afoot in the Soviet Union and in external perceptions of it, in addition to issues that had long interested me in American life. But I certainly did not know just how timely the project would become as I carried it out, nor the degree to which my work on it would benefit from the eventual dismemberment of Communist rule and of the Soviet empire.

When I applied in 1990 to do research on this topic in the Soviet Union, I proceeded uncertainly. My mind was set on approaching the history of Russian national identity from the perspective of Kazan, nineteenth-century Russia's "window on the East," because of that city's relevance to the ideology and machinery of cultural integration for an enormous portion of the empire, on the one hand, and for the conceptual multifacetedness a regional focus would allow, on the other. Yet for all I knew, I might never be able to set foot in Kazan, let alone gain access to the research materials I needed there. At that time, foreign researchers in the USSR were typically allowed to visit provincial cities for several weeks at most, and had often been denied meaningful access to archival documents in such places—sometimes even in Moscow and Leningrad. Though it appeared in 1990 that restrictions had begun to loosen,

their eventual lifting exceeded my wildest dreams in its rapidity and extent. A couple of weeks before I was to leave for a nine-month stay, the failure of the August 19, 1991, coup against Mikhail Gorbachev precipitated the disintegration of central control in many areas of public affairs. In the realm of daily life, the loosening of control worked to my considerable disadvantage. In the realm of research, however, I gained virtually unrestricted access to materials in the archives of St. Petersburg (as it was renamed not long after my arrival) and Moscow, as well as to aids that until then had been guarded jealously. Most important for this project, I found that it was now possible, with few questions asked, to go to the capital of the Tatar Autonomous Republic (or Tatarstan), stay as long as I wanted, and be welcomed with open arms by research institutions there. Thus I was one of the first foreigners in the Soviet Union to be granted unlimited use of materials in both central and provincial archives. All told, I spent about half of 1991–92 in Kazan and half in Petersburg and Moscow. I extended my stay in Russia (the Soviet Union having ceased to exist at the end of 1991) to a full year, a limit imposed not by the Russian government but by the U.S. airline on which I held my ticket. In subsequent years I returned for three shorter visits to complete research for the book.

Besides these changes in formal conditions, I benefited immensely from the emergence in Tatarstan (though markedly less in the Russian capitals) of widespread public interest in precisely the issues I was researching. In the late 1980s, Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika had already made way for relatively open discussion of interethnic tensions and rivalries, cultural repression, and political and economic regionalism within the country. Central to all these discussions, of course, was growing awareness of and access to the history and cultures of the Russian empire in its pre-Soviet as well as Soviet forms. Since 1991, in Kazan I have witnessed the reopening of churches, mosques, and religious organizations, the republication of tsarist-era ethnographic and religious books, the emergence of popular historical magazines, a congress uniting members of the Tatar diaspora from all over the world, scholarly conferences reexamining (and arguing fiercely over) the nature of the Russian empire and the ethnic history of the middle Volga region, cultural events revisiting and reinventing Tatar traditions, street demonstrations for the political autonomy of the region and the cultural autonomy of the non-Russian peoples, and even a referendum (March 1992) in which some 60 percent of voters in the autonomous republic called for Tatarstan to be declared an independent, sovereign state. That vote was taken at roughly the same time as other largely Muslim regions in postcommunist Eastern Europe (Bosnia) and in the Russian Federation (Chechnya) made declarations of sovereignty that were later met with horrific retaliation. Fortunately, such developments have so far been avoided in Tatarstan. In February 1994 the republic signed an internal treaty with Moscow that has diminished the political and economic appeal of secession from the Russian Federation. No less impor-

tant, it has resisted any temptation to define itself in ethnonationally narrow or exclusive terms, instead emphasizing the fundamental legitimacy, inevitability, and even ultimate desirability of diversity.

The research and writing of this book were also influenced by my observations in the realm of private life during this time of change. In Tatarstan I watched friends, acquaintances, and even strangers as they renegotiated the more personal aspects of ethnonational consciousness: language use, religious faith, scholarly judgment, political affiliation, recreation, kinship, child rearing, education, and so on. I am well aware that experiences of contemporary life and change can distort historical understanding as often as they enhance it, and that controversies about nationality and ethnicity in contemporary Russia differ enormously from those of a century ago. Indeed religion, one of the key parameters of group identity in tsarist times, is an immeasurably weaker force today, owing to systematic Soviet repression as well as larger historical processes. Moreover, this book is mostly about the history of conceptions of "Russianness," while my observations of developments focused more immediately on Tatar than on Russian identity. Nonetheless, some dimensions of the book—in particular my emphasis on the psychological ramifications of ethnonational divisions and on the inconsistencies and tensions in all attempts to assign or transform group identities—owe much to my opportunity to observe life in Tatarstan and Russia at close range during the 1990s. I like to think that those experiences have made this a better book.

In the many years since I began this project, an enormous number of individuals and institutions have helped it along in both direct and indirect ways. First, I thank Reginald Zelnik, Yuri Slezkine, Nicholas Riasanovsky, and Alan Dundes for their help on its first draft. I am especially grateful to Reggie and Yuri for many years of shared wisdom and generous support.

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I cannot possibly enumerate all the other friends—in the East, the West, and many places in between—who have given their moral support, kept me company, and tolerated my fascination and preoccupation with a subject that for many of them was rather obscure (I hope it will be so no longer). I thank them collectively. I extend special gratitude, however, to Michael Gorman, Patrick Patterson, Scott Hunter, Franny Nudelman, Marion Rust, and Evinrude, who did the most to keep me sane during critical periods in the writing of this book (though perhaps they don't think they succeeded). They knew when to lend their interested and sympathetic ears and when to throw up their hands (paws, in one case) and distract me from my work instead. Finally, I thank my parents for supporting and taking interest in my education at every stage, and ultimately for making this project possible. I dedicate the book to them.

ROBERT P. GERACI