CHAPTER 9

THE NATIONAL IDEA

There is an idea, which is not without its advocates, that a vigorous Executive is inconsistent with the genius of republican government. The enlightened well-wishers to this species of government must at least hope that the supposition is destitute of foundation; since they can never admit its truth, without at the same time admitting the condemnation of their own principles. Energy in the Executive is a leading character in the definition of good government.

James Madison, American President, The Federalist Papers

No man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country – thus far shalt you go and no further.

Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–1891), Irish national leader

When, in the immediate wake of the celebrations of Kazan’s millennium I asked President Shaimiev, why he was so confident in the future of his country, he suddenly told me about his visit to Malaysia, one of his many visits abroad during his long presidential tenure. He told me how, looking out of the window of the office of the then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad, he told him how he was impressed by the towering landscape of the business quarters of Kuala Lumpur and expressed a wish that the Tatarstan economy could develop as rapidly as the ‘Asian tiger’ economies of that pre-1998 era. Interestingly, Mahathir Muhammad turned to him and said, ‘And I would dearly like to have the same level of public education and the educated, qualified workforce, you have in Tatarstan and Russia.’

Indeed, the well-educated workforce is one of the major assets of Tatarstan in the age of globalization. This, however, is one of the healthier legacies of the Soviet period, which, in Tatarstan’s policy of continuity of the best features of her history, needed a lot of attention and investment at the time of transition. Kazan was one of the most developed centres of education and scientific exploration in the entire USSR, a position which was heavily boosted during the Second World War. During the war, along with many strategic USSR enterprises, one-third of all scientific institutes and well-known scholars of the USSR Academy of Sciences, along with its presidium, came to Kazan led by the vice-presidents of the Academy, the academicians O. Y. Schmidt and E. A. Chudakov. Jointly with Kazan scientists, the evacuated scholars did work of colossal defensive importance, and this highly creative atmosphere and rapid scientific development prompted the opening, in 1945, of the Kazan branch of
the USSR Academy of Sciences headed, from 1945 to 1965, by the outstanding chemist, academician A. E. Arbuzov. During the war, 300 important scientific results were obtained at Kazan University, about 380 at the Institute of Chemistry and Technology, and 100 in all at the Institute for the Professional Development of Physicians and the Institute of Microbiology. During the war, at Kazan University a discovery was made of truly worldwide significance: in 1944, E. A. Zavoysky discovered the phenomenon of paramagnetic resonance. In Kazan high schools their scientific and educational activity never ceased: in the war years approximately six thousand expert mathematicians, physicists, chemists, weather forecasters, geologists, biologists, teachers, doctors and many other experts of the highest skill graduated from the university and other educational institutions.

After the war, the momentum of Tatarstan’s educational and scientific activities only increased, propelled by the start of the full-scale extraction of oil and the overall scientific boom in the USSR with its pioneering outer space programme. In Kazan, there were then eleven higher educational establishments and three branches of various central institutes, in which, at the end of the 1970s, 50,000 students of more than forty nationalities studied. Teaching in high schools was led by about 5,000 professors and teachers, among whom there were 250 doctors of sciences and 2,500 candidates of sciences.

Today, besides Kazan University, which celebrated its famous bicentenary in November 2004, there are thirty high schools and twenty-three educational institutions in Kazan alone, in which 120,000 students now study. Up to 10,000 young men and women graduate from the high schools of Kazan annually. And this educational and scientific development also rests on historical tradition and is, therefore, highly maintained and purposeful.

We can easily appreciate that well-developed skills in chemistry were essential in the establishment of the petrochemical complex of Tatarstan, but this was far from all among scientific achievements of the republic in view of its unique ‘can-do’ culture. When President Shaimiev, in respect of the immense tasks lying ahead, says ‘we can do it’, pointing to past achievements of the Tatarstan model, sceptics may ask – and what about the rocket science, can you do that as well? Well, Tatarstan has been doing it since the very beginning of the Russian space exploration programme. Kazan Aviation Institute, turned today into Kazan Technical University, was and remains one of the main scholarly bases for the all-Russia Space Exploration Programme in developing the engines for Russian launch rockets, which continue to give Russia a unique edge in world space exploration. There are many other scientific education centres in Tatarstan, covering all the principal spheres of the contemporary economy and fundamental research beginning with the Institute of Construction and the Economic Institute to the Agricultural Institute, from which President Shaimiev graduated in 1959. The crown of Kazan’s educational glory is, however, the renowned Kazan University, founded in 1804, which celebrated its bicentenary in 2004.

The main building of the university, with its three classical porticoes along the whole façade, was built under the supervision of its great rector, the father of a new and revolutionary type of geometry, Nikolai Lobachevsky in 1822. In 1832–41, all other university buildings were constructed to a design by the