

Traces of Islam in Western Ukraine

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The origins and the history of the Muslim community in Volyn



The Tatar tower in Ostroh. The dense Tatar community used to live around it

When we think of Islamic presence in Ukraine, Crimea is the first place to come to mind. The Crimean Khanate, which lasted for more than three centuries, ruled not only over the peninsula, but also over vast territories in Southern Ukraine, including parts of today's Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts. The influence of the Ottoman Empire covered Mykolayiv and Odesa oblasts which at the end of the 18th century were home to the Nogai Horde. These lands were called Bucak (between the Danube and the Dniester) and Yedisian (between the Dniester and the Southern Bug). Some historians would also recall the Kamyanets Eyalet, which existed during the Ottoman rule in the south of the modern Khmelnytsky Oblast, the west of Vinnytsia Oblast and a part of Chernivtsi Oblast (1672–1699)—all in South-Western Ukraine. Today, Islam is mostly associated with the South-East of Ukraine, since the largest Muslim communities are left in the annexed Crimea and in the Donbas, and even migration to other oblasts has not changed the situation dramatically.

However, there is another page of Ukraine's history that is directly related to Muslims, but is rarely men-

tioned by the local academics. No textbook on the history of Ukraine today mentions the "Muslim nation" of the Polish or Lithuanian Tatars (the term "Western Tatars" is also used, while they called themselves Lipka Tatars). They lived in the territory of what is now South-Western Ukraine for over 500 years. Some villages and towns in the oblast had mosques where the texts of the Quran and other sacred books were copied, observed religious holidays, and developed unique folk traditions up until World War II. While Poland, Belarus and Lithuania have special research centers and publications dedicated to the heritage of the Western Tatars, in Ukraine the study of this nation's heritage is limited to several local studies. The opening in 2015 of an exhibition at the Books and Printing Museum in the city of Ostroh, Rivne Oblast, was probably the only special event in the years of independence. However, as is often the case with provincial cultural events, it received no publicity, even though some of the exhibits were rare and significant.

How did the Tatar settlements appear in the Ukrainian land, especially in the period when Islam was perceived as a threat as a result of aggression by the Horde's khans and later the Ottomans, Crimean Tatars, and Nogais?

There was another side to this coin. Despite the fact that in Ukrainian culture, the "infidels" were generally perceived as enemies, this was not always the case. Few historians would take seriously the famous "Letter of the Zaporozhian Cossacks in Reply to the Sultan of Turkey," knowing how Bohdan Khmelnytsky kowtowed to the Ottoman Caliph, praising him in his petitions and giving assurances of allegiance and other manifestations of respect. The authors of the 16–17th centuries, such as Ivan Vyshensky and Vasyl Surazky, found that Ottoman Muslims were less damaging to the Orthodox people than Catholics, and that the "Turks are more honest to God in at least some truth than the christened residents of the Commonwealth of the Two Nations" (Ivan Vyshensky, "Knyzhka" (Book)). The outright discrediting of Islam and the Muslims started after the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654, when a part of Ukrainian intellectuals became actively involved in building up Muscovy's imperial policy. The first anti-Islamic work of those times, the "Alkoran" by Ioanykiy Halyatovsky (Chernihiv, 1683), which contains various "prophecies" about the Tsar relieving all Orthodox churches of the rule of "Turks," carries a dedication to the Moscow tsars Ivan V and Peter I.

THE ORIGINS OF MUSLIMS IN UKRAINE

Earlier, in the 14–16th centuries, the perception of the Muslims in Ukrainian lands was somewhat different.

One of the evidences was a series of joint actions against Poland by Khan Uzbek, the Muslim ruler of the Golden Horde, and Prince Boleslav Yuri II of Galicia–Volhynia in 1337–1340. Later, when Khan Tokhtamysh of the Horde (died in 1406) rebelled against Tamerlane and asked the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas for asylum, his troops fought several battles alongside the Ruthenian magnates, including the battle of the Vorskla River (1399). One of Tokhtamysh's sons, Jalal ad-Din, took part in the Battle of Grunwald (1410), and the other, Haji-Girey, was put by the Lithuanians and Ruthenians on the Crimean throne, which gave rise to the Crimean Khanate as an independent state.

It is with Tokhtamysh and his troops that the history of the Muslim community in Ukraine begins. The supporters of this Khan spent some time in Kyiv province, and some Tatar garrisons began to settle down in the cities of the Right-Bank Ukraine, even Ukrainians were still fighting their brothers in faith elsewhere at that time (Princes Olelkovychi of Kyiv devastated the nearby Horde *ulus* in the mid-15th century). By the end of the 15th century, some Tatar settlements emerged in the territory of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Northern Ukraine, with their own ways of life and various privileges. Their communities tried to develop their own culture in a new place. This was a relatively easy task, since for a nomadic nation, relocation to a new land was more of a routine. Moreover, given the military significance of these settlers, they did not have to undergo forcible Christianization.

The beginning of the 16th century marked the new era in the history of the Muslim population of Volyn. In 1512, defeated by Prince Kostyantyn of Ostroh near Vyshnevets, a large group of Perekop Tatars was taken captive. Already having some experience of providing asylum to Tatars escaping for various reasons, including internal conflicts, from the Crimean Khanate, the Prince actually turned them into allies by settling them in his lands and providing certain guarantees. At the beginning of the 17th century, according to some historical sources (such as the account of the papal nuncio Fulvio Ruggieri, "The Division of Ostroh" between the sons of Vasyl-Kostyantyn of Ostroh in 1603, inventories, etc.), Tatars had several settlements in that area—first and foremost, in the city of Ostroh, where they had a mosque, a cemetery and land plots, and where their community lived in the Tatar Street. Tatars also lived in the nearby villages of Khoriv, Rozvazh (in the modern Ostroh County, Rivne Oblast) and Pidluzhzhya (Dubno County, Rivne Oblast). In addition to that, the records for the late 17th century mention dense Tatar communities in what is today Khmelnytsky Oblast: in the villages of Novolabun (Polonne County) and Yuvkivtsi (Bilohirya County) and the towns of Polonne and Starokostyantyniv. There are also accounts of the "Tartar priests" and "Tatar hetmans." The former were obviously the imams of the mosques, who, besides the purely ceremonial responsibilities, also performed a rather broad variety of social functions, while the latter were local officials, who were responsible for the community to the Prince. A 1620 inventory enumerates the obligations of the Tatars: "To defend the lands, forests



Rare evidence. A tombstone on the Muslim cemetery in Ostroh

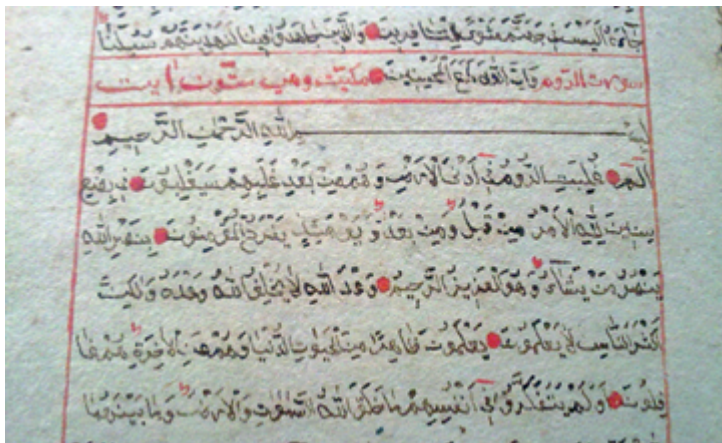
and borders and, if commanded by the elder, to stand guard in case of raids." Starokostyantyniv in 1636 had 60 Tatar houses, that is, several hundred people (since the town had a few thousand residents, this amounted to 5–10% of its population). The "Lutsk City Book" also mentions these people (under the year 1619), recounting those who served the family of the Ostroh princes. Small Tatar groups lived in the villages of the region, taking advantage of the protection provided by the princely house. In 1669, Polish king Michal Wisniowiecki issued a special charter, which confirmed the Volhynia Tatars' titles of nobility, and preserved the names of some of their community leaders, including an Ostroh resident Romodan Milkomanovych, who petitioned for the support of his brethren in faith.

In 1600, the Latin-language writer Simones Pecalides thus described the customs of the Tatars: "...Here in Ostroh they came to settle. Near Horyn, the rocky river, they set their camp. And also in other places, and already plow the fields, without abandoning weapons... They celebrate very loudly the day of Bayeran: they all convene to the Mosque from the fields that are scattered around..." ("De bello Ostrogiano," translated into Ukrainian by Volodymyr Lytvynov). This is a description of the celebration of *Bairam*, either the Uraza Bairam or the Kurban Bairam, two major Muslim holidays. The mosques that were built in Ostroh and several other places, unfortunately, did not live to our days. Presumably, they were of the same "simple" style that was used by the Lipka Tatars living in Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland. Those were typical wooden houses with the addition of one or two minarets that differed from small churches or chapels only by their orientation towards Mecca and the absence of crosses. Dozens of such mosques can still be found in the villages of Bohoniki and Kruszyniany (Poland), in the towns of Iyve and Novogrudok (Belarus) and other settlements. Local Tatars also

BY THE END OF THE 15TH CENTURY, SOME TATAR SETTLEMENTS EMERGED IN THE TERRITORY OF POLAND, LITHUANIA, BELARUS, AND NORTHERN UKRAINE, WITH THEIR OWN WAYS OF LIFE AND VARIOUS PRIVILEGES

had their own cemeteries, mazars. The last graves of a *mazar* preserved in Ostroh date back to the 1920s.

The social life of the local Tatars is of particular interest. The first settlers were 100% men, therefore, the only way for them to procreate was to marry locals: the Ostroh inventory of 1621 mentions common Ukrainian female and male first names of the time (Bohdana, Nalyvayko, etc.) with the second name of "Tatarchyn." These, obviously, were the members of the local Tatar families. The inevitable assimilation at some point caused a number of Muslims to convert to Christianity. This was the case, for example, with the grandfather of the famous Ukrainian orientalist and Ukrainianist Agatangel Krymsky, who belonged to the family of the "converted Tatars." »



Keeping the records. Pages of the Quran copied in Ostroh in 1804

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE GALLANT AGE

The linguistic evolution of this Tatar community is rather interesting. Already in the 16–17th centuries, local Tatars virtually lost their language. During that period, in all areas of their life, except for the religious rites, where Arabic was used, the local language dominated. Most researchers emphasize that the Lipka Tatars used mostly Old Belarusian with a few polonisms, in which they wrote using Arabic and Persian alphabets. However, in 2006 in a study published in Slavonic and Eastern European Review, Ukrainian-American researcher Andriy Danylenko proved that at least a part of the old Tatar texts was written in the "Polissya dialect," that is, a creole combining the Belarusian and Ukrainian languages. Only in the 18th and 19th centuries did the Volyn Tatars finally switch to Polish, and the Belarusian ones to Belarusian. However, one of the three preserved 19th century Volyn *ketabs* (the term used for the written heritage of the local Tatars, from the Arabic word "Kitab" for "book"), alongside the Polish vocabulary also uses Ukrainisms. These ketabs included Qurans, which often contained translations of the Arabic text, *hamayils*, or "collections of prayers," and various medical texts such as herbal recipes, charms, etc. Ostroh State Historical and Cultural Reserve has an Arabic Quran copied in 1804 by Mustafa Adam Aliy. A family descending from the Yuvkivtsi Tatars preserved a hamayil written in 1870, which has a Ukrainian translation of several suras of the Quran, written down in Arabic script.

After leaving the military service as the armed guards of the magnates (which was already irrelevant in the 18th century), local Tatars became small landowners and merchants. In 1708 in Ostroh, for example, there was a "bakery" (as evidenced from the city register) that manufactured "products suitable for consumption," which were obviously the halal food. Similar enterprises also existed in other cities of Volhynia. Some of the Tatars even had serfs (up until 1861).

ASSIMILATION

After the events of 1792, when, following the second partition of Poland, Volyn found itself in the Russian Empire, the life of the local Tatars in general did not change significantly: they remained a privileged group, and sometimes even worked in public institutions (according to the historical documents, the Russian authorities es-

pecially appreciated their indifference to alcohol). The mosques still operated, and their relationships with the Muslims from other regions of the empire, including the Crimean and Kazan Tatars, became closer. Now in their homes, the Lipka Tatars could read not only the handwritten Arabic Qurans, but also the printed ones published in St. Petersburg, Kazan and Crimea; among their preserved relics, other printed religious literature can be found, mostly of the Kazan origin. Another issue is that in the 19th century, few local Tatars could read in Turkic languages. However, the imams of the mosques of the North-Western Ukraine, who in the imperial times were formally subordinated to the Taurida Spiritual Muslim Directorate, would go to Crimea to study. It is also possible that some fulfilled their religious obligation to perform Hajj or umrah, which was much easier at the end of the 19th century due to the development of transport. The pilgrims usually left by sea from Odessa to Istanbul, from where they sailed on special Turkish ships through the Suez Canal to the Arabian Jeddah.

In the early 20th century, Volyn had a rather large group of population who identified themselves as "Mohammedans." According to the first census of the Russian Empire (1897), in the Volyn province they included 4,703 males and 174 females; out of them, 3,703 men and 114 women believed their mother tongue to be Tatar, while another 1,000 spoke Bashkir and Chuvash languages. This gender disparity is probably due to the fact that a large proportion of Muslims stayed there temporarily, perhaps coming on business or for other purposes. Therefore, it can be argued that the size of the "indigenous Tatar" population of Volhynia did not exceed a few hundred people (the "General Description of Volyn province" compiled a century earlier provides the figure of 90). Despite the small number of the descendants of the Lipka Tatars who remained faithful to Islam, some mosques still operated in the 1910s in Ostroh and some nearby villages. It is interesting to note that during the World War I, the mosque in the village of Yuvkivtsi came under scrutiny of the secret police after the Tatars who had visited the Ottoman Empire arrived there. According to the documents of the Central State Historical Archive (Kyiv), the authorities suspected these "emissaries" of calling the local Tatars for an anti-Russian uprising ("Correspondence between the police directorate and the assistant director of the district department on collecting information and placing under surveillance the members of the Muslim religious sect Zhdanovych and Mukhlyo, residents of Volyn province. February 19—July 14, 1915," code No. 1335. Op. No. 31. D. No. 1899).

For the last time, the activities of the Tatar communities (both religious and cultural) were mentioned when Volyn was part Poland, in 1922–1939. In 1936, Islam was even "officially" recognized in Warsaw, and Muslim organizations were allocated funding from the state budget. In those years, the cemetery in Ostroh was still visited by the Tatars from Belarus (including Minsk and other cities) who had relatives there, but they were no longer seen after the World War II. Today, only some representatives are left of those large communities, while others were effectively assimilated and for the most part lost their original religious and cultural identity. Hopefully, one day this issue will attract attention of not only individual enthusiasts, but also of a serious research project that would result in creating a real or at least virtual museum of the history and culture of the Volyn Tatars. ■