

Eastern Europe

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An Old Muslim Community of Poland: the Tatars

The Muslim community in Poland is one of smallest religious-ethnic groups in the country. The main Muslim group comprises the Tatars, or more precisely Poles of Tatar origin. They have been a part of Polish history and its cultural and religious tradition since the 14th century. The case of the Polish Muslims provides a useful model of how Muslim communities can relate to the wider national communities to which they belong, for instance in Europe, and how, in doing so, they retain their own culture and identity, and contribute positively to these wider communities.



Mosque in Bohoniki

There are substantial discrepancies in data concerning practising Muslim believers in Poland, but it is possible to gain reasonably convincing insight into the numbers involved from attendance of religious ceremonies and membership in relevant religious, cultural and social organizations. On the basis of this, one should conclude that the most accurate figure of practising Polish Muslims is probably around 5,000 – most of whom belong to the Sunni tradition. The overwhelming majority of Polish Muslims are Tatars¹ although the group also includes a number of recent Polish converts to Islam.

Soldiers and artisans

The Tatars arrived in the Lithuanian part of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania in the 14th century. In the subsequent centuries, many Tatars from the Volga area and, in particular, Crimea followed earlier arrivals. Some came as prisoners of war, but most were recruited as mercenaries. Renowned

and experienced warriors, they served mostly in special Tatar units with either the royal forces or the local magnates' own private armies. Tatar nobleman legally enjoyed the same privileges as the Polish nobility. In return for their services to the crown they acquired large estates and land titles. Those of more humble origin established themselves in villages and small cities, becoming known as excellent horse breeders, horse traders, gardeners, horticulturists and artisans.

In 1569, the parliament (*sejm*) of nobility gave formal permission for the construction of mosques and Tatar schools. The number of Tatars in 1591 was estimated at between 60,000-70,000, and mosques counted 400.² A 1631 census listed more than 100,000 Tatars in Poland.

The Tatars enjoyed religious tolerance and maintained contacts with Islamic centres abroad. Many Tatar customs became part of Polish tradition, especially among the Polish nobility; their traditional long robe (*kontusz*), fur cap (*kolpak*) and curved sword (*karabela*) were imitations of the garb worn by the Crimean Tatars.

The Tatars lost their language most likely sometime in the 17th century, and began using the local Polish or Byelorussian vernacular. Although most had lived in their ethnic enclaves, they became Polonized through inter-marriage and the slow adoption of values of the Polish majority. This process was undoubtedly accelerated by the rising religious intolerance towards the end of the 17th century and the prohibition on the construction of mosques. In 1795, when the Polish state ceased to exist, the Tatars joined the Poles in the fight for the country's independence. The Tatar fighters swore their allegiance to Poland on the Koran in the presence of their imams. They played an important role in Napoleon Bonaparte's Russian campaign in 1812 and the two national uprisings (1830 and 1863) against the Russians, for which they were to be bitterly persecuted by the Tsarist regime.

When, in 1918, Poland regained its independence and statehood, only a small number of Tatar enclaves in the northeastern provinces remained within the Polish borders. The total population of Tatars in these areas was little over 5,000. In 1925 the first nation-wide congress of Muslims took place in Vilnius, with Jakub Szynekiewicz being elected the Chief Mufti of Poland. Also in 1925, the Socio-Cultural Association of Tatars was formed with its headquarters in Warsaw. The Association published *Rocznik Tatarski* (*Tatar Annals*) and a periodical *Zycie Tatarskie* (*Tatar Life*). By 1936, 19 Muslim congregations and 17 mosques were under the religious supervision of the Chief Mufti. Each community was built around a parish council with its imam and had, as a rule, its own mosque and an appropriate religious cemetery.

During the Second World War, most of the Tatar intelligentsia was exterminated by the Nazis in retaliation for the gallant fight of the Tatar detachment against the invading German armies in September 1939. After the war, only two Tatar villages (Bohoniki and Kruszyniany) remained within the bor-

ders of Poland. Some Tatars from these former Polish territories were resettled in present western and northwestern Poland. This of course meant that a vital part of their religious and cultural heritage, including mosques, cemeteries, and schools, was left behind.

Rebuilding the community

It was only in 1969 that steps were taken towards rebuilding the organizational structure of the Muslims in Poland. That year, the Polish government permitted the holding of the first post-war Congress of Polish Muslims, which created the Muslim Religious Union of Poland. By 1971, the Office for Religious Denominations created a new legal basis for religious work among the Muslims. Since then, the mosques in the two oldest Tatar areas, Bohoniki and Kruszyniany, have been restored with grants from the Arab Gulf states. In September of 1984, the foundational stone was laid for the construction of a new mosque in Gdansk-Oliwa. The complex also has a library and facilities for the teaching of Arabic, in addition to its normal religious functions. The mosque is located in the close proximity of a Roman Catholic church. The sound of the imam's call to prayer often mixes with the ringing of church bells, calling the faithful for the celebration of the mass.

Also during the 1980s, the Polish Muslims began to establish closer contacts with the Islamic world. In 1984 the Chief Mufti of Lebanon, Hasan Khaled, visited Poland for the first time. His visit was followed by a delegation from the Organisation of Islamic States, headed by the IOS Deputy Secretary General Sheikh Mohammed Naser Al-Abudi. The delegation visited all the Muslim communities in Poland and apparently was most impressed by the mosque in Bohoniki (see photo). As a result of the visit, the first group of Polish Muslims was able to take part in the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Some scholarships for Islamic studies in Saudi Arabia were also made available. In August 1988 the Secretary General of the OIS, Dr Abdulah Omar Nasif, visited Poland. Polish Muslims have treated attempts by foreign Muslims to court them with polite reserve. There has always been a healthy theological relationship with the nearest Muslim Academy in Sarajevo, but visits by Middle Eastern leaders have had only symbolic rather than cultural significance.³

In 1992 the Union of Polish Tatars was re-established. Its programmatic declaration speaks of the long tradition of the Tatar communities in Poland. It also offers interesting insight into the ideology of the Polish Tatars and their links with Poland. According to the document, the Union is re-constituted as a 'commemoration and continuation of the history of our Tatar and Muslim ancestors who settled in the Republic six centuries ago. She gave them land and nobility and assured them freedom of profession and all civil rights ... she became our motherland. Forever loyal to her, the Polish Tatars dedicated their services to the augmentation of her splendour not only in military craft but in all spheres of national life, including science, diplomatic service, agri-

culture and the arts. Loyal to the memory of our fathers, their deeds of love for this land we restore the Union of Polish Tatars.'⁴

Most Polish Muslims today live within six congregations (parishes). The oldest include Bohoniki, Kruszyniany, and Warsaw. New congregations were formed in Gdansk-Oliwa, Szczecin and Bialystok, the latter being the largest (Local sources maintain that it has 3000 members). Many of the Muslims, especially among the younger generation, have migrated from the countryside to towns. They, however, maintain their tradition and links with their original communities, returning to their villages at times of Islamic festivals. The Polish Muslims have several separate organizations. The oldest is the Muslim Religious Union of Poland, with its headquarters in Bialystok. Most of the other organizations belong to the Shiite tradition of Islam and its membership consists of recent migrants from the Muslim world, expatriates and converts.

The survival and rejuvenation of the Muslim community in a predominantly Roman Catholic country, ruled for over forty years by a polity whose ideology was avowedly atheistic, is remarkable. The Polish Muslims consider their position as very special within the wider context of Muslim minorities in East Central Europe. They contend that by combining certain elements of Eastern and Western culture they can contribute to the moral revival of Europe and Islam. They hope to become the mediator between Poland and the Islamic countries. According to them, history shows that Polish relations with Turkey and other Muslim nations have always been good. Some of the Tatars emphasized that Poland 'is the greatest European country not to be blemished by colonialism', a country that has 'the glorious tradition of religious tolerance'. ♦

Notes

1. The name today applies to several related, but spatially disparate peoples. Modern Tatars cannot be regarded as direct descendants of the Tatar Mongols of Manchuria who overran much of Eurasia in the 13th century. They are distant scions of the Turkic-speaking Volga-Kama Bulgars, to whom they owe their Islamic heritage.
2. Leszek Podhorodecki, (1971), *Tatarzy* (The Tatars). Warsaw, Książka i Wiedza, p. 365.
3. Simon Miles, (1993), 'Diminishing Tatars'. *The Guardian* 2. 29 October, pp. 20-21.
4. *Status Związku Tatarów Polskich Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*. (The Statutes of the Union of Polish Tatars in the Polish Republic), quoted after Katarzyna Warmińska. 'Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Equality in the Ideology of the Polish Tatars'. (unpublished paper). pp. 189-190.

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Cemetery in Bohoniki



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