



The Conversion of Polish-Lithuanian Tatars from Islam to Christianity in the Nineteenth Century. A Typology and an Effort to Evaluate the Phenomenon

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to present the problem of abandoning the Muslim religion in favor of Christianity. The article is based on materials collected and stored in the archives of Russia (Saint Petersburg), Lithuania (Vilnius), and Belarus (Grodno). These mostly contain either surviving records of baptisms sent to the consistory or police reports. The cases of conversion among nineteenth-century Muslims in the territory of the Russian Empire cited in the article have served as the basis for this phenomenon's typology in the Muslim Tatar community. Moreover, they have provided the basis for analyzing whether it is possible to fit them into pre-existing conversion models in social sciences. The examples quoted in the text show the kinds of life problems that prompted Muslim Tatars to abandon the religion of their ancestors, e.g., terminal illness, the issue of marriage, or the likelihood of rejection by one's group. It should be mentioned that there had already been conversions among Muslim Tatars in the early period of their settlement. However, this trend has never taken on a mass character, as evidenced by the relatively good condition of the Muslim community living in the former territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Keywords: Tatars, Muslims, conversions, Islam, Christianity, Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Russian Empire

Słowa kluczowe: Tatarzy, muzułmanie, konwersje, islam, chrześcijaństwo, Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie

1. Introduction

Conversion to Islam, primarily from Christianity, and Muslim proselytism has recently evoked strong emotions in Europe¹ and elicited the interest of researchers.² However, it is valuable to note the contrary movement, which occurred in the past and continues to this day, namely conversion from Islam to Christianity. One such case concerns Muslim Tatars living in a Christian environment in the territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) from the end of the fourteenth century onwards and in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after 1569. During that time, some of them, for various reasons, decided to abandon Islam in favor of Christianity. This article will present such conversion cases in the nineteenth century. Their representation is a result of the archival investigation into documents from that period. The author will also attempt to outline a specific typology of this phenomenon in the aforementioned case of Polish-Lithuanian Muslim Tatars in the nineteenth century with respect to the models of conversion existing in social sciences.

2. Conversion and Tatars: a terminology

The phenomenon of changing religion, present in traditional cultures for centuries, has evolved, creating new religious structures, a living and vital element of social culture. When considering the issues regarding changing religion, one should always consider several perspectives: not only that of the person changing their religion but also those of both of the religious communities concerned – the adopted and the abandoned one – since all of these parties are involved in this highly intimate process. What is also important is that a researcher tackling the analysis of this phenomenon should strive to maintain far-reaching research objectivity because sometimes, especially in the case of the past, the source material is merely fragmentary.

Typically, an act of changing religion is termed “conversion.” Is this term appropriate for Muslims converting to Christianity? In the sphere of religion, the term “conversion” often describes a change within Christian denominations, particularly the conversion to Catholicism.³ A “convert” is a person who changes one Christian

¹ See “Znak” 2017, 2 (741), issue *Islamofobie*; E. Kaleta, *Polacy coraz częściej przechodzą na islam. Dlaczego?*, “Polityka” 2015, 5, 27.01.2015 (2994), p. 22; M. Ryszewska, *Polskie muzułmanki. W poszukiwaniu tożsamości*, Toruń 2018, pp. 99–103; A.J. Dudek, *Poddaję się. Życie muzułmanek w Polsce*, Warszawa 2016; B. Rogowska, *Muzułmanin ubiera choinkę (Życie Polaków nawróconych na islam)*, “Więź” 2018, 4 (674), pp. 149–160; *eadem*, *Wpływ Polaków nawróconych na islam na społeczności lokalne w Polsce* [PhD thesis], Łódź 2017, <https://dspace.uni.lodz.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11089/25290/doktoratBlankaRogowska.pdf> [access: 10.09.2021]; K. Pędziwiatr, *Conversions to Islam and Identity Reconfigurations among Poles in Great Britain*, “Studia Religioznawcza” 2017, 50 (3), pp. 221–239.

² For instance, A. Köse, *Conversion to Islam. A Study of Native British Converts*, London–New York 2014; E. Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe*, Princeton 2015; S. Kaiser, *Die neuen Muslime: Warum junge Menschen zum Islam konvertieren*, Wien 2018.

³ *Słownik wyrazów obcych*, E. Sobol (ed.), Warszawa 1995, p. 596.

denomination for another, again, in particular, for Catholicism.⁴ However, in Poland, the literature on the subject quickly adopted the term “conversion” for Muslim Tatars. On the other hand, the term “convert,” which has a similar meaning and connotation, has not been adopted for Muslim Tatars who have already changed their religion to Christianity; instead, they have been referred to as “neophytes.” Hence, in this text, the author uses the commonly accepted term “conversion,” understood as changing one’s religion from Islam to Christianity.

The issues associated with researching conversion in social sciences, including sociology and especially the sociology of religion, relate to the multi-layered view on this profoundly delicate matter. One may find them in research on the issues of the theology of conversion, philosophy of conversion, history of conversion, psychology of conversion, anthropology of conversion, and, finally, the sociology of conversion.⁵ On the other hand, a historian relies on the sources, analyzes them, and when presenting the findings, rarely goes beyond the scope of the source material itself, using the available literature on the subject. However, historical research on changing religion requires the employment of methods used in social sciences to find the causes and circumstances surrounding the conversion and to systematize the questions based on the sociological findings regarding the conversion models. This technique will facilitate following a historical narrative and examining how these contemporary models relate to nineteenth-century society.

Social sciences have developed several dozen models related to conversions, but this text will refer to a select few. One of them is Józef Koziński’s model based on the phenomenon of transgression. Conversion can often be an expression of rebellion against the current lifestyle; it becomes a new challenge and a stimulus for further development. Transgressive conversion is based on the willingness to self-realize one’s self-image to fulfill one’s ambitions.⁶ One should also add another aspect of conversion, namely the change of identity.⁷

Following Max Heirich’s theory, the author will focus on three models within which one can navigate an examination of the causes of conversion:

- searching for reasons for conversion in stressful circumstances,
- searching for the cause of conversion in pre-existing socialization conditions,
- searching for determinants in interactions, social influences that change the understanding of one’s own experience [in this context, religion].⁸

Within the models above, the author will try to present the source material related to changing religion from Islam to Christianity by the Tatar community residing in

⁴ E. Hałas, *Konwersja. Perspektywa socjologiczna*, Warszawa 2007, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 30–39. See S. Freud, *Człowiek, religia, kultura*, Warszawa 1967; S. Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory*, New York 1999; *Religia i polityka. Zarys problematyki*, P. Burgoński, M. Gierycz (eds.), Warszawa 2014; *Socjologia religii*, W. Piwowarski (ed.), Kraków 2003.

⁶ H. Grzymała-Moszczyńska, *Religia a kultura. Wybrane zagadnienia z psychologii religii*, Kraków 2004, pp. 119–120. More on transgression and conversion, see J. Koziński, *Transgresja i kultura*, Warszawa 1997.

⁷ More on this subject, see *ibidem*, pp. 97–104. For a review and more extensive discussion of the philosophical-sociological models of conversion, see M. Ryszewska, *op. cit.*, pp. 63–75.

⁸ E. Hałas, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

the territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the nineteenth century, emphasizing the Tatars living in the Russian partition. This choice is not accidental: the vast majority of the descendants of the former Tatar settlers lived in the areas that became part of the Russian Empire after the partitions of Poland (which ended in 1795).

3. Description of sources

The vast majority of this article is based on the results of inquiries carried out in Russian archives. Because the entire administration of the Russian Empire was extensive, a sizeable amount of source material has been preserved. Primarily, these are reports sent from or to the religious consistory,⁹ informing about the willingness to change religion or confirm the baptism of new converts. In the nineteenth century, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire strictly controlled changing religion. Conversions required approval from the town police and the Roman Catholic religious consistory in the case of conversion to Catholicism. Similarly, conversion to Orthodoxy required relevant consent from the Orthodox religious authorities. The surviving documents authorizing the conversion contain a note that tsarist officials should heed, or perhaps persuade, Polish-Lithuanian Tatars who wanted to change their religion to “come to the Orthodox Church and not to the Catholic Church.”¹⁰ Tatars’ choice of a new religion followed a consistent pattern: there were far more conversions from Islam to Roman Catholicism, while only a small percentage chose Orthodoxy.¹¹ Among Tatars, Catholicism was synonymous with Polishness and, consequently, a connection to Polish culture. If they decided to change their religion, baptism in the Roman rite seemed more natural.¹²

The documents concerning the change of religion by the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars mostly come from the Roman Catholic religious consistory, especially the one in Vilnius,¹³ which had jurisdiction over most of the lands historically settled by Tatars. Today, these reports are kept in the Central State Historical Archive of Saint Petersburg in the fonds regarding spiritual matters.

The subject literature on the history of Tatars, including their abandonment of Islam in favor of another religion, supplements the article. The religiousness of Tatars, especially the issue of a change of religion, has already been researched to some extent. However, the works of Stanisław Kryczyński from the interwar period, and

⁹ A former term for the bishop’s curia (consistory of bishops).

¹⁰ Lithuanian State Historical Archives in Vilnius (hereinafter LPAH), F. 378 series 1852, subseries 2038, c. 1-1v. See L.B. Marek, *Działalność misyjna Rosyjskiej Cerkwi Prawosławnej w XIX wieku*, “Kultura – Media – Teologia” 2017, 31:4, pp. 105–121.

¹¹ CSHA, F. 822 series 2, subseries 9369, c. 7; F. 822 series 2, subseries 10944, c. 9, F. 822 series 2, subseries 11229 “a,” c. 9. F. 822 series 3, subseries 12807, c. 8. F. 822 series 3, subseries 13771, c. 4.

¹² A. Konopacki, *Życie religijne Tatarów na ziemiach dawnego Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego w XVI–XIX wieku*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 182–183.

¹³ In the Russian Empire, it was the denominations department.

later, Jan Tyszkiewicz, Jacek Sobczak, Andrzej Zakrzewski and Piotr Borawski, discussed the earlier years of Poland and did not really cover the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Artur Konopacki paid a little more attention to these issues in his research.¹⁵ It should be noted that, in principle, the nineteenth-century community of Polish-Lithuanian Tatars has not been researched regularly, either in Lithuania or in Belarus, where Tatars have also traditionally settled. Hence, the literature used in the article is primarily Polish.

4. Historical background

Apart from the central considerations, it is also necessary to sketch the history of the Muslim Tatar settlement in the former territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), which became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after 1569.¹⁶ The first Muslim settlements in the territories of the GDL emerged as a result of the settlement started by the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas in the fourteenth century. These settlers, who had come from the Golden Horde, were to constitute an army that would support Lithuania militarily. Thus, they were under the protection of successive Lithuanian dukes. Under the rights and privileges granted, Tatars were guaranteed to operate freely on Lithuanian territory. Tatars had the right to preserve and practice Islam, erect mosques, establish their own cemeteries (*mizars*), and maintain their traditions. While they had lost their language and, to a large extent, the steppe tradition very early on, it was the religion that remained this group's unique bond. This bond precluded its members from disappearing into the society of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.¹⁷

Separated from larger Muslim groups, Tatars naturally succumbed to cultural diffusion: some with greater awareness, others unknowingly. Edward Burnett Tylor first introduced the concept of cultural diffusion into science, characterizing this phenomenon as the interpenetration of elements between at least two cultures through the contacts between their members. Moreover, the process may be completely spontaneous, and the donor may not be acting deliberately.¹⁸ Among Tatars, the process

¹⁴ There have been publications on conversion. However, they mostly discussed the earlier years of Poland, between the tenth or eleventh century and the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A.B. Zakrzewski, *O asymilacji Tatarów w Rzeczypospolitej w XVI–XVIII w.*, [in:] *Tryumfy i porażki. Studia z dziejów kultury polskiej XVI–XVIII w.*, M. Bogucka (ed.), Warszawa 1989; *idem*, *Osadnictwo tatarskie w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim – aspekty wyznaniowe*, “Acta Baltico-Slavica” 1989, 20, pp. 137–153; P. Borawski, W. Sienkiewicz, *Chryścianizacja Tatarów w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim*, “Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce” 1989, 34, pp. 87–114.

¹⁵ A. Konopacki, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ See *Kultura Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego. Analizy i obrazy*, V. Ališauskas, L. Jovaiša, M. Paknys, R. Petrauskas, E. Raila (eds.), Kraków 2006.

¹⁷ More on settlement, see S. Kryczyński, *Próba monografii historyczno-etnograficznej*, Warszawa 1938 (reprint Gdańsk 2000); J. Tyszkiewicz, *Tatarzy na Litwie i w Polsce. Studia z dziejów XIII–XVIII w.*, Warszawa 1989; K. Grygajtis, *Osadnictwo Tatarów gospodarskich w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim XIV–XVIII w.*, “Rocznik Tatarów Polskich” 2003, 8.

¹⁸ See *Słownik etnologiczny, terminy ogólne*, Z. Staszczak (ed.), Warszawa–Poznań 1987, pp. 63–65.

was manifested in, among other things, the adoption of certain behaviors, including linguistic ones, and the acquisition of the local (Christian) population's customs, up to and including the change of religion. It is impossible to estimate the extent of this phenomenon accurately. The purpose of this study is to present the collected source material on the conversion of Muslim Tatars in the nineteenth century, as it contains much information, e.g., about the factors contributing to the departure from Islam.

5. Determinant factors and reasons behind the conversion among Tatars

The nineteenth century was a crucial period in the life of the Muslim Tatar community in the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. On the one hand, the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the period of partitions, accompanied by significant socio-economic changes, contributed to the declassing of the Tatar settlers. Small Tatar estates could not operate following the abolition of serfdom in Poland, unable to manage in a new reality that required paying for wage labor. Additionally, because of the tax burden, their properties were sold or auctioned to cover debts. One should bear in mind that while most Tatars still served in the army, the pay was insufficient, which frequently led to the incurrence of debts that led to the collapse of Tatar land ownership.¹⁹

Another noticeable phenomenon was the significant migration to cities which, in many cases, broke the multi-generational chain which passed down tradition, religion, and culture.²⁰ In the nineteenth century, due to the incorporation of most of the lands of the former Commonwealth into the Russian Empire, the paths of social advancement through a career in the military became available to the Muslim community. However, with time, more and more often it became civil service.²¹

However, the nineteenth century did not only consist of breaking relations and impoverishing the Tatar community; it was also the period when Tatars fully became nobility. Having proven their noble descent before the heraldic office, they were able to enjoy public rights.²² In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, such

¹⁹ See J. Szumski, *Ziemiaństwo tatarskie w powiecie kalwaryjskim w pierwszej połowie XIX w.*, "Białostoczczyzna" 1993, 3, pp. 32–38. See also Leszczany estate, belonging to Marianna née Baranowska-Buczacka, and then to her son Mustafa Murza Buczacki, State Archives in Białystok, *War and Domain Chamber [Kamera Wojny i Domen]*, ref. no. 1865, c. 4, 5. I ref. no. 1227, c. 111, when the property had already been auctioned off.

²⁰ An example is the increasing number of Tatars in cities, see *Pamiętna książka grodenskiej guberni na 1887 god*, Grodno 1886, pp. 12–16, et seq for the following years: 1887, 1890, 1889.

²¹ See S. Dumin, *Tatarzy Rudziewiczowie w Rzeczypospolitej, na Krymie i w Cesarstwie Rosyjskim*, [in:] *Tatarskie biografie. Indywidualne losy – ich wpływ na budowanie i podtrzymywanie tożsamości grupy*, A. Konopacki (ed.), Białystok 2019, pp. 149–180.

²² For noble descent, see A.B. Zakrzewski, *Położenie prawne Tatarów w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim (XVI–XVIII w.)*, [in:] *Kipčiakų tiurkų Orientas Lietuvoje: istorija ir tyrimų perspektyva*, Tamara Bairašaukaitė, Halina Kobeckaitė (eds.), Vilnius 1994, pp. 118–129; S. Dumin, *Szlachta tatarska w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim i zmiany w jej sytuacji prawnej w XVI–XVIII w.*, "Roczniki Historyczne" 1991, 57, pp. 147–163; I. Rychlikowa, *Tatarzy litewscy 1764–1831 częścią szlacheckiego stanu?*, "Kwartalnik

rights were granted only by the Constitution of May 3, 1791. Although the local Christian nobility did not always agree with the Tatars' access to nobility in full, the offices of assessors and border courts still became available to them. Tatars observed the reluctance of the nobility when, for example, "in 1817, the parliamentary assembly did not allow Tatars to vote, then Jan Murza Tuhan Baranowski, the assessor of the Grodno lower land court, complained to the war governor, referring to the former noble rights and privileges [which Tatars had as nobility]." The response to the complaint was positive, especially since Tatars were already voting in the Minsk, Vilnius, and Białystok governorates, and the nobility did not want to allow them to vote in the Grodno Governorate. In the same year, Tatars from the Novogrudok *powiat* were entered into the register of citizens with the right to vote at the *sejmiks* of that *powiat*.²³

In the second half of the nineteenth century, more and more Tatars participated in civil service in tax, financial, and customs institutions. However, the army was the most popular choice. Tatars also appeared at all levels of education, from noble or craft schools to the universities of Moscow, Warsaw, and St. Petersburg.²⁴ A large group of Tatars remained working in the craft, specializing, as before, in leather processing. Some of them cultivated small plots, working mainly in horticulture.²⁵

Apart from radically changing the socio-economic situation of Tatars, the nineteenth century also influenced religious issues. As mentioned above, living in a Christian milieu, the Tatars underwent natural cultural assimilation. Thus, they were also subject to the religious influences of the Christian environment, which sometimes meant abandoning the religion of their ancestors. However, it was never a mass movement.

As with conversion to other religions, there were various reasons behind the change of religion. Undoubtedly, an essential determinant of abandoning one's religion was living in a very scattered environment – as the examples of the settlements of Kruszyn and Tatary, located near Tykocin, show. A small community, living in isolation from large groups of fellow followers, subjected to the natural process of assimilation, disappeared entirely in the eighteenth century. There are testimonials that some Tatars from these two settlements adopted Christianity in the church in Tykocin or Knyszyn, while others left these lands, probably moving to Kruszyniany, where more of their fellow believers lived at that time.²⁶

Based on the available source material, the author will reconstruct the typology of reasons behind a life change as significant as the abandonment of one's ancestors'

Historyczny" 1990, 97(3–4), p. 80; A.B. Zakrzewski, *Struktura społeczno-prawna Tatarów litewskich w XV–XVIII wieku. Próba nowego ujęcia*, [in:] *Inter Orientem et Occidentem. Studia z dziejów Europy Środkowowschodniej ofiarowane Profesorowi Janowi Tyszkiewiczowi w czterdziestolecie pracy naukowej*. T. Wasilewski (ed.), Warszawa 2002, pp. 127–128; J. Sobczak, *Czy tatarska ludność Litwy należała do stanu szlacheckiego?*, "Przegląd Historyczny" 1986, 77 (3), pp. 467–480.

²³ National Historical Archives of Belarus in Grodno (hereinafter NHAB) F.1 series 1, subseries 1057, p. 78 and 81.

²⁴ See T. Bairašauskaitė, *Lietuvos totoriai XIX amžiuje*, Vilnius 1996, p. 294.

²⁵ On the number of Tatars and their activities in particular governorates in 1832, see NHAB F. 1 series 27, subseries 202.

²⁶ See J. Maroszek, *Osadnictwo Tatarów na Podlasiu w XV–XVIII w.*, [in:] *Sokólskie spotkania z tatarszczyzną*, prepress: J. Konopacki, Białystok 2008, pp. 12–18.

religion. The examples presented below certainly do not exhaust all cases but constitute a mere exemplification of human behavior in the face of life dilemmas.²⁷

5.1. Illness

Illness is an integral part of existence, with the potential to significantly affect the life of every human being, whether temporarily or permanently.²⁸ When faced with an illness, a person initiates various coping behaviors or strategies,²⁹ such as seeking help, not only medical but also supernatural. A life-threatening situation generates questions as to whether one's religion or faith is good or whether another god might be more helpful. While the available preserved sources and police or church reports do not shed light on such quandaries, one may state with certainty that life-threatening disease was one of the reasons for conversion among Tatars.

One such case was Samuel Abrahamow (the son of Abraham) Bajraszewski.³⁰ He was an official of the Grodno tax office, and therefore a reasonably well-educated person; one may therefore assume that he was also quite aware of his religion. He was also living in an environment where the Tatar population was relatively large. Bajraszewski, "having been seriously ill for two Sundays so that his life was in danger, [wanted] to fulfill his resolution [which he supposedly had for a long time] to adopt the Catholic faith as soon as possible"; he was baptized by the then dean Majewski himself in the Grodno church parish on May 31, 1855.³¹

This is not the only example of such a conversion; in 1860, the Vilnius consistory received a report that: "There [was] a tax official of the governorate, secretary Iwan Osipowicz Sulkiwicz [and thus an educated person also from the Grodno region] in the Grodno hospital, who [wanted] to be baptized due to a dangerous disease." The report recorded the baptism of thirty-year-old Ivan (Jan), terminally ill, the son of Josif and Zuzanna Sulkiwicz née Talkowska, on December 30, 1859.³²

Women also converted due to illness. According to the medical certificate, Marianna Krynicka from the Lida *uezd* (the equivalent of a *powiat*) suffered from *bronchitis capillaris* (bronchial disease, possibly lung disease, but not tuberculosis). Since

²⁷ A. Konopacki, *Raz jeszcze o konwersjach Tatarów – postulaty badawcze*, [in:] *Dialog chrześcijańsko-muzułmański. Klucz do wspólnej przyszłości*, M. Lewicka, C. Łapicz (eds.), Toruń 2012. See J. Maroszek, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–18.

²⁸ When writing this in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is most apparent how the disease changed the lives of all people in the world, not only in particular regions or countries.

²⁹ See G. Dolińska-Zygmunt, *Podmiotowe uwarunkowania zachowania się pacjenta wobec własnej choroby*, [in:] *Podstawy psychologii zdrowia*, G. Dolińska-Zygmunt (ed.), Wrocław 2001, pp. 243–259.

³⁰ The Bajraszewski family, originally from the Vilnius Governorate, was listed in the Białystok district. Samuel was the grandson of Dawid Bajraszewski, the standard-bearer (*chorąży*) of the 1st Lithuanian Vanguard Regiment under Michał Kirkor, S. Dumin, *Herbarz rodzin tatarskich Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego*, Białystok 2019, pp. 89–90.

³¹ Central State Historical Archive of Saint Petersburg (hereinafter CSHA), F. 822 series 3, subseries 13545, c. 1, 1v.

³² CSHA, F. 822, series 3, subseries 15019, c. 1, 1v. Jan was born on June 24, 1829, and was entered into the records of the mosque in Bohoniki. The author would like to thank Dr. Stanisław Dumin for this information.

the disease was terminal, Marianna came to Father Antoni Kułakowski with a request to be baptized. However, the disease might not have been the only reason behind such a decision. As can be seen from the Ministry of Internal Affairs documents addressed to the Catholic Spiritual Consistory, Marianna wanted to change not only her religion but also that of her daughter, Sofija, who was still under the age of six. Perhaps Marianna decided to convert for the sake of her daughter because she had given birth out of wedlock. Thus, in the probable event of her succumbing to the disease, Marianna's daughter would become an orphan with the odium of a mother who had renounced the faith of her ancestors. One may safely assume that earlier, due to pregnancy, she was forced to leave the family home as a disgraced woman; in this case, her daughter could not rely on help from her relatives. The baptism of Marianna, who changed her name to Elżbieta, and her daughter took place in the church in Eišiškės [in Polish, *Ejszyszki*] on August 25, 1863; the witnesses were "Antoni Kiwaczynekin [?] and a noblewoman from the Monkiewicz family".³³

As the cases discussed above show, individuals who changed religion were seeking supernatural help. They could not find it in their religion, so they hoped that converting to another would change their fate.

5.2. Marriage

Thanks to another type of preserved documents, correspondence, one may indirectly learn a different reason behind changing religion, i.e., marriage. It primarily affected women because a Muslim woman can only become a Muslim man's wife. While marrying outside the Muslim Tatar community could have happened to secure a woman's future or for financial reasons, one cannot exclude the possibility of mutual love. It is worth noting that all the presented women married relatively wealthy men. Only one woman decided to stay in the monastery, where she was also provided with material support. These are, of course, mere hypotheses, as the scarcity of sources precludes us from discovering the actual reasons. Tatars did not keep diary records in which such decisions could be recorded.

The discussed source materials show another marriage-related reason for changing religion, namely when one of the parties remained in a marriage or was already divorced but had previously married a Muslim Tatar. Unfortunately, one cannot say much about the reasons for these choices. Perhaps an unhappy relationship spurred individuals on to escape from another arranged marriage within their community. As one document reads: "Emilia (Elmira aka Almira) Melech, 27 years old, living in the vicinity of Afendziewicze [Afendziejewicze, now a suburb of Vilnius], a divorced wife of Szczucki, a nobleman who remains in the Mohammedan faith, was baptized with the name of Antonina in the Vilnius Bernardine Church on May 23, 1882".³⁴

³³ CSHA, F. 822, series 4, subseries 15981, c. 1-8.

³⁴ CSHA, F. 822, series 4, subseries 18163 B, c. 137. The Melekh family, a remarkably distinguished Tatar family, lived in the vicinity of Afendziewicze since the seventeenth century, see S. Dumin, *Herbarz rodzin tatarskich...*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

The following is a similar case: “In 1855, on May 2, in the Carmelite church in Vilnius, Sofi Radkiewicz, age 20, took the name of Józefa while being married to the Mohammedan Aleksandrowicz Radkiewicz who remains in his incredulity”. Sofia’s/ Józefa’s godparent was Aleksander Jasiński, a lieutenant colonel.³⁵ Interestingly, the godfather’s surname is undoubtedly associated with Tatars, meaning that he may have already converted, and introduced another neophyte from the same religious circle from which he came.

5.3. Loneliness–ostracism

Another reason why women abandoned Islam was unquestionably for fear of loneliness, especially when previous experience or life choices had not always been fortunate. Sometimes the Tatar community protested the conversion in front of a county court (or, as in the case below, a local court of Zaslav). Such was the case of Feliksa [Felicja] Józefowa. Felicja’s family came from the village of Juwkowce, which belonged to the Tatars from Ostroh. Her mother, Rozalia Aleksandrowicz, married Zahari [Zachariasz], a Muslim Tatar serving in the Tatar regiment as a non-commissioned officer. There were three children from this marriage: two daughters who died shortly after birth, and a son, Mustafa, who also died prematurely. When Zahari died at 30, the young widow promptly left the village and lived in Ostroh with Josif Hohenbin, aka Cholenbinom. From this informal relationship, she gave birth to Feliksa [Felicja], a daughter. As one learns from the court report, Josif was not doing very well as he “dealt with drunkenness.” One may only speculate as to why, on April 22, 1854, the nineteen-year-old Felicja came to the Zaslav office wishing to accept the Catholic faith. The Tatar nobility, however, protested her admission to the Catholic Church. According to the preserved sources, Rozalia Aleksandrowicz died and was buried in the Orthodox cemetery in Gricow³⁶ – perhaps she had already converted to Orthodoxy.³⁷ Unfortunately, it is impossible to find out how Felicja’s fate unfolded. Did she manage to convert despite the protest of the local Tatars? She probably did. Nevertheless, Felicja’s example is fascinating because while there were protests or even raids on the homes of newly converted Tatars in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, the Ostroh example was unique for the nineteenth century.³⁸ At that time, the Tatar community in the Ostroh neighborhood was not large. In this context, it shows

³⁵ CSHA, F. 822, series 3, subseries 12807, c. 1-5. See S. Dumin, *Herbarz rodzin tatarskich...*, *op. cit.*, p. 142. The source does not specify Radkiewicz’s name, and Aleksandrowicz is certainly a patronym of his father’s name. Similarly, the name Jasinski may be the name Jasiński known today.

³⁶ For more on the Tatars in Volhynia, see M. Jakubovich, *Dvi viyny, try derzahvy: lodi polsko-litovskikh Tatar na Volini*, [in:] *Tatarzy w Niepodległej. Tatarskie drogi do niepodległości*, A. Kopopacki (ed.), Białystok 2018, pp. 61–73; S. Kardaszewicz, *Dzieje dawniejsze miasta Ostroga. Materiały do historii Wołynia*, Warszawa–Kraków 1913; W. Wielhorski, *Ziemia ukraińska Rzeczypospolitej. Zarys dziejów*, London 1959.

³⁷ CPHAR, F. 822, series 3, subseries 13100, c. 1-2.

³⁸ For the raids on the voluntarily newly baptized Tatars, see *Akty izdawajemyje Wilenskoj Archieograficzieskoju Komissijej dla razbora drevnich aktow*, no. XXXI: 1906 Wilna, 1669, no. 252, pp. 407–409.

signs of an attempt to preserve the group's unity. Perhaps by refusing to allow the conversion, the local Tatar nobility gave a warning signal that the group was about to "disappear," that they would soon cease to exist, that they had to defend their faith, which remained the only determinant of the group's identity.³⁹

The preserved historical sources rarely document protests by the Tatar community against attempts to abandon Islam. The second such example is Novogrudok, a town with a strong Tatar settlement dating back to the end of the fifteenth century. The local community tried to thwart the abandonment of Islam, and one of the methods was rejecting the families of converts, i.e., ostracism. It was ineffective and counterproductive, prompting the convert's relatives to convert, as they were fearful of remaining alone. This was the case of Felicja Jakubowska, who asked the police for permission to be converted in September 1863. She was nineteen when she wrote the request, her parents were dead, and her two sisters, Ursula and Zofia, had already converted to Christianity in the Roman Catholic rite. Felicja may have felt lonely. However, to give such consent, the police asked for the opinion of Abraham Jakubowski, a Muslim under whose care Felicja had been staying from the age of 13.⁴⁰ He probably disagreed because no further conversion process is visible in any available documents. Of course, there is a chance that she managed to fulfill her wish in the end.

As a large urban center, Novogrudok attracted the rural population or settlers from smaller towns. It was also where the Dominicans were active, carrying out numerous missions in the territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Defending their religious tradition and group unity, Tatars reported cases of informal conversion to the police as a crime. In 1852 in Novogrudok, Dawid Dębowski reported to the county police that: "In 1851, the Dominicans from Novogrudok baptized several Tatars without the consent of the town authorities. Namely, Anifu Lebidź and her daughter Kustyńska Anifa from the town of Bielica, Fatmu and her underage daughter, and two from the town of Lebidziewo."⁴¹ This was then investigated by the police. In Novogrudok, in 1844, 1846, 1847, 1851, and 1852, six Tatars in the Roman Catholic rite were baptized in a Dominican monastery. One of them was Anifa Kustyńska, baptized as Marja Józefa, the wife of Dikov, a regimental writer who served under the Hussar banner (*rota*) of Prince Fidirich Gesen-Kostelski. Another Tatar woman, Fatma, baptized as Petrunela, was the wife of Gładyszewski, a burgher from Novogrudok. After baptism, her daughter Halima resided with her, as one reads in the letter addressed to the Novogrudok police. Galka Lebidź, baptized as Józefa, stayed with the Dominican nuns. At the request of the police authorities, Dean Ejsmont showed permits from the Ministry of Internal Affairs that had authorized the change of the religion of the women mentioned above. The clergyman testified that the Tatar women staying in the monastery did it „voluntarily and so that their relatives would not distress them.”⁴²

³⁹ More on Tatars in Juwkwocce and Ostróg, see A. Drozd, *Zabytki kultury Tatarów z Ostroga i Juwkwoców na Wołyniu*, "Archaeologica Hereditas" 2019, 16, pp. 231–253.

⁴⁰ Vilnius University Library (hereinafter VUL) F. 57-554-137, c. 5-8v.

⁴¹ LPAH, F. 378 series 1852, subseries 2200, c. 1.

⁴² LPAH, F. 378 series 1852, subseries 2200, c. 5v-7v.

Thus, one may conclude that Dąbrowski's complaint proved unfounded. Moreover, this document exposes a fascinating phenomenon: there was a concern that local Tatars or the relatives angered by abandoning Islam could hurt the baptized women.

5.4. The young people

When considering the types of conversion to Christianity among Tatars, it is impossible to ignore the issue of the age of people changing their religion. The available source material shows a representative group of people at a very young age who abandoned Islam, the faith of their ancestors, in favor of Roman Catholicism. One such example was the baptism of the twenty-year-old Franciszka Lebień on February 12, 1856. The godparents were Piotr Wołkowycki, who acted as a *chinownik* of the noble deputation of Grodno, and Brygida Janowska, an assessor's wife.⁴³ Another example of a young girl changing her religion was Felicjana Jakubowska, a nineteen-year-old noble whose conversion took place in the Vilnius All Saints Church on December 29, 1863.⁴⁴ Rozalia Gembicka obtained the approval of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to change her religion in 1856, at the age of 19, and she changed her name to Dobrowłana.⁴⁵

The place of residence and a populous Tatar community were not always obstacles to changing religion, which is an undeniable signal that social processes typical of the nineteenth century also affected Tatars – loosening social relations and a decreasing group pressure hastened the departure from the ancestors' faith. Also, the status or past of the parents (especially the fathers, distinguished military men) did not constitute an obstacle. Sometimes a conversion was simultaneous for siblings; in this case, it is unknown whether the reason was the death of both parents, although one may advance such a thesis. It is especially possible when considering the age of one of the Szefejew sisters, Amelia Szefejew, a resident of the Butrymowszczyzna village, a famous Tatar *zaścianek* in the Trakai Voivodeship, whose parents were Szymon and Rozalia Milkamanowicz Szefejew. Amelia decided to change her faith to Catholicism at the age of 18. On November 2, 1858, in the Vilnius Visitationist Church, she took the name of Petronela–Maria.⁴⁶ On the same day in the same church, at the age of 16, her sister Elżbieta “was baptized from the Muhammad faith after one year and three months of learning” and took the name of Teresa Stanisława. Amelia's godparents were Benedykt Turski, an assessor, and Tekla Selmanowicz, a widowed noblewoman, while Elżbieta's godparents were Adam Wiszniewski, an assessor, and Maria Kasprowicka, a widowed burgher. Both sisters kept their surnames.⁴⁷

The conversion process also affected men, such as Abram Aleksandrowicz, from the noble family of Szymon Aleksandrowicz and Alona née Bogdanowicz, from the Minsk Governorate, residents of Novogrudok. Abram asked the Vilnius consistory

⁴³ CSHA, F. 822, series 3, subseries 13570, c. 6.

⁴⁴ CPHAR, F. 822, series 4 subseries 16070 “Ż,” c. 109.

⁴⁵ CPHAR, F. 822, series 3, subseries 13829, c. 1-3.

⁴⁶ CSHA, F. 822, series 3, subseries 1347 “a,” c. 1-6.

⁴⁷ CSHA, F. 822, series 3, subseries 14052, c. 6.

to allow him to accept the Catholic faith. Abram was 22 years old when on May 12, 1838, in the Trinitarian Church in Vilnius, priest Władysław Andrykiewicz gave him a new name, Albin.⁴⁸ However, it is interesting that he decided to change his religion in distant Vilnius and not in Novogrudok, where he lived. It may indicate that he could have faced strong disapproval from fellow followers in a town where the Tatar community was quite numerous.

The same theme of fearing fellow believers echoes quite strongly in the request to change the religion written by Anifka Krynicka *née* Kustyńska. According to Anifka: “She has long had the sincere desire and true vocation to accept the holy Roman Catholic Christian faith. As she confessed, her intention is kept in the greatest secret from her relatives and fellow believers. Had it been revealed, she would inevitably be exposed to the cruelest persecution and oppression. Thus, she is begging for help and effective protection”.⁴⁹ At that time, Anifka was the wife of Amurat Kryczyński, and they both lived in Novogrudok. Unfortunately, it is unknown how her conversion influenced her relationship with Amurat or whether it led to their separation, as there are no records from the mosque in Novogrudok in which it might have been noted. However, one may assume that Amurat could have left his wife due to the pressure of the Tatar community in Novogrudok. One should perhaps ask what caused the young, 22-year-old wife, who lived among a relatively large group of fellow believers, to change her religion.

5.5. Recanting the conversion

The preserved documents show yet another behavior of people intending to convert, namely that of recanting the conversion. There is no source material available that would shed light on the reason for such behavior. Could it be group pressure? The fear of ostracism? Or maybe the decision to change the religion was too hasty? A report shows that, in 1863, Marianna Dembicka filed a request for permission to change her religion and to become part of the Catholic Church. She was to bring it to the Benedictine sisters’ monastery in Vilnius. According to the report, however, she did not reside there. She lived in the town of Kaltanėnai [in Polish, *Koltyniany*], so it was necessary to “find out if she wants to accept the Roman Catholic faith or stay in Mohammedanism.” The report from January 1856 urged that the matter should be clarified as soon as possible. Most likely, the woman did not convert because, in May of the same year, a copy of the previous summons was sent, and there was no further correspondence or record of the baptism.⁵⁰ As the consistory was quite meticulous about the correspondence, it seems that the woman abandoned her intention.

⁴⁸ CSHA, F. 822, series 3, subseries 14266, c. 6.

⁴⁹ VUL, F. 57-554-139, c. 29.

⁵⁰ CSHA, F. 822, series 3, subseries 12810, c. 1-7.

Conclusions

It was the nineteenth century that had a massive impact on the life of Polish-Lithuanian Tatars, not the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The nineteenth century, with all its transformations, the period of partitions and major socio-economic transformations engendered the declassing of Tatar settlers. The centuries-old bond between the Tatar settlers who lived together in settlements and practiced the same soldier profession was broken. New social roles, including clerical careers, only deepened this process. The nineteenth century was probably the first moment when Tatars no longer worked in the same profession, namely as soldiers. The inability to find their place in the new economic system after the abolition of serfdom in Poland was why the Tatar owners fell into debt and sold or often auctioned their properties. As a result, larger Tatar-owned estates almost ceased to exist at the end of the nineteenth century.⁵¹ Extensive migration from settlements to cities furthered the disintegration of the community. In the cities, some people who devoted themselves to civil service were subjected to Russification, and some, with time, abandoned the religion of their ancestors, i.e., Islam.⁵²

Thus, religion was the only common element that survived; however, its operation also weakened over the years. The lack of educated imams or writers who knew the Arabic alphabet resulted in the mechanical copying of religious literature, often with errors.⁵³ Migration to cities, departure from ancestral homes, and the consequent loosening of existing relationships within the families could also be the reason for the weakening of the religious message among Tatars. As a result, one may observe the conversion process taking place in this small community, i.e., abandoning Islam in favor of Christianity. The examples presented above do not manifest a massive religious change movement among the Muslim Tatars. However, they do illustrate that a group that remained under the influence of the Christian environment for several centuries was indeed influenced by this environment, which includes religious influences. These examples also show that the Muslim Tatar community's reaction to a member's abandonment of centuries-old traditions, i.e., the faith of their ancestors, was often heated. However, when examining these cases, one can firmly declare that they fit into almost all conversion models appearing in social sciences. This proves that Tatars underwent the same processes as the rest of society.

It is also worth noting that the nineteenth century was when Muslim religious life fared relatively well in some places, as evidenced by the fact that, despite the difficulties caused by the Russian authorities in obtaining permits for the construction

⁵¹ Cf. NHAB, F. 24 series 7, subseries 22, c. 114.

⁵² An example might be the increasing number of Tatars in cities, see *Pamiętna książka grodenskiej guberni... op. cit.*, Grodno 1886, pp. 12–16, et seq for the following years: 1887, 1890, 1889.

⁵³ See A. Konopacki, *Autorzy, kompilatorzy, kopiści – rzecz o rękopisach Tatarów Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego*, [in:] *Tefsir Tatarów Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego. Teoria i praktyka badawcza*, J. Kulwicka-Kamińska, C. Łapicz (eds.), Toruń 2015, pp. 271–286.

of mosques, old mosques were renovated, and new ones were erected.⁵⁴ A small number of conversions to Christianity did not affect the attitude to Islam among the majority of the Tatar community, nor its determination and care to preserve the religion of ancestors in places where the community lived in large, close-knit groups and in places where, thanks to this, it has survived to this day in the territories of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine.

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⁵⁴ Cf. A. Drozd, M.M. Dziekan, T. Majda, *Meczety i cmentarze Tatarów polsko-litewskich. Katalog zabytków tatarskich*, Warszawa 1999.

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