

Muslims in Ukraine. Old History - New Challenges

Workshop Report

Organizers: Olena Palko (Basel), Mykhaylo Yakubovych (Freiburg)

Sponsored by: URIS Ukrainian Research in Switzerland, BASEES Study Group for Minority History (SGMH),

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The URIS-Workshop: “Muslims in Ukraine. Old History – New Challenges” took place on the 14th of September 2023 at the University of Basel. The workshop was co-organized by Olena Palko (University of Basel) and Mykhaylo Yakubovych (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg) and was part of the BASEES Study Group for Minority History's annual program. The URIS (Ukrainian Research in Switzerland) initiative supported the workshop. The aim of this event was to highlight the undeservedly overlooked Islamic heritage of Ukraine and shed light on the long-established roots of Islam in the region, as well as the consequences Russia's war on Ukraine has had on Muslim communities.

The first panel, chaired by OLENA PALKO (Basel) focused on the history of Islam and Muslim communities on the territory of today's Ukraine. MYKHAYLO YAKUBOVYCH (Freiburg) drew an image of an intellectual history of the Crimean Khanate, demonstrating that traces of writings by scholars, who were born, studied, or lived on the peninsula, can be found in a wide geographic area, ranging from Indonesia in the east, to Tunis in the south and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the north-west. This was followed by ELMAZ ASANOVA (Kyiv/Cambridge), whose presentation focused on the impact the policies of Russification had on indigenous communities in Crimea during the 18th-19th century. With the help of reports by foreign travellers and references to poems by famous Russian poets, Aleksandr Puškin in particular, Elmaz reconstructed the disregard for and destruction of culture and religion of Crimean Tatars by tsarist officials following Russia's occupation of the peninsula in 1773. The third presentation by MARTIN-OLEKSANDER KISLY (Kyiv) focused on the 1944 deportation of the Crimean Tatars and their attempts to return to the peninsula after the war. Martin-Oleksander demonstrated how such first-hand narratives have shaped the image of Crimea for a generation of Crimean Tatars born outside of it and how this myth of homeland contributed to the drive to return, despite being deliberately hindered by Soviet officials. The destruction of this rich and vibrant Muslim history in Ukraine, and specifically in Crimea, by tsarist and later Soviet officials was a unifying thread for these three talks, which covered a timespan of more than five hundred years between the 15th and 20th centuries.

Nonetheless, this destruction of Ukraine's Islamic heritage did not stop at the end of the 20th century. The second panel, chaired by BOTAKOZ KASSYMBEKOVA (Basel) drew our attention to Muslim communities in Ukraine since 1991. OLENA SOBOLIEVA (Kyiv/Basel) opened the second panel with a presentation of the Crimean Tatars' case for repatriation and the reclaiming of the peninsula after their return. Olena outlined two strategies of land reclamation, the first being ideological and focusing on the ‘reconstruction of the lost paradise’, while the second concerned everyday activities, such as the simple act of settling and building houses on the Crimean Peninsula, whose landscape had been severely changed in the postwar era. The presentation of ELMIRA MURATOVA (Simferopol/Aarhus) turned our attention towards survival strategies among Tatar communities in Crimea, following its occupation by the Russian Federation in 2014. Elmira proposed three different strategies employed by the Crimean Tatars

who had decided to stay in the Crimea. These include ‘open resistance’, which inevitably ends in judicial persecution by the Russian state; the use of ‘culture as a new battlefield’ e.g., striking a balance between cooperation and subversion through cultural production; and ‘compelled collaboration’ whereby financial and political benefits are used to entice religious institutions into cooperation. The final presentation was given by AKIF TAHIIIEV (Kharkiv), who discussed the impact of the Russian war of aggression on Shi‘a Muslims in Ukraine and especially their perceptions of the *marja’ al-taqlid* system. Although none of the seven Shi‘a mosques in Ukraine have been directly hit by Russian missiles, Iran’s support for Russia has had a defining impact on how many Shi‘ites relate to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as their legal and religious authority.

Workshop overview:

Welcome/ Introduction: F. Benjamin Schenk (Basel), Olena Palko (Basel)

Panel 1: Islam and Muslims in Ukraine’s History

Chair: Olena Palko (Basel)

Mykhaylo Yakubovych (Freiburg): Towards an Intellectual History of the Crimean Khanate

Elmaz Asanova (Kyiv/Cambridge): Russification of Crimea and its impact on Indigenous Communities at the Turn of 18-19th centuries

Martin Kisly (Kyiv): Claiming the Homeland. Crimean Tatars’ Deportation and Return

Panel 2: Muslims Communities in Ukraine since 1991

Chair: Botakoz Kassymbekova (Basel)

Olena Sobolieva (Kyiv/Basel): Violence, Belonging and Mobility. Crimean Tatar case of repatriation.

Elmira Muratova (Simferopol/Aarhus): Survival Strategies of Crimean Tatars in Occupied Crimea. Memory, Culture, and Religion

Akif Tahiiiev (Kharkiv): Impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on perception of *marja’ al-taqlid* system in Ukrainian Shia communities