

EGDŪNAS RAČIUS

MUSLIM TATAR COMMUNITIES  
OF THE INTER-WAR REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA



The situation of the Muslim minority in Lithuania between the two world wars, to the best of the author's knowledge, has hitherto been addressed only once – in the article by the Lithuanian historian Tamara Bairašauskaitė, published in 1993 in Lithuanian. And though arguably the Muslim community in Lithuania in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not significant in any sense so as to require a complex research, it still deserves a closer look even if only as a connecting link between the earlier more numerous and important community of the previous centuries and the current one. This paper is a modest contribution to the growing research pool in English on Lithuanian Tatars and is intended to serve as an exposé of the Muslim community's self-perception and construction of intra-communal and extra-communal relations in the independent Republic of Lithuania between 1918 and 1940.

The current text heavily relies on the same archival material (consisting of several hundred individual documents) kept in the Lithuanian State Archive and used by Bairašauskaitė twenty years ago. Although this material, chiefly comprising written communication between, on the one side, the Tatar congregations and individual Tatars and, on the other side, responsible state institutions, does not provide a comprehensive picture of the (religious) life of Lithuania's Muslim Tatars in the interwar period, it nonetheless allows a glimpse into the internal structures and dynamics of relations in the community as well as the congregations' positioning vis-à-vis the state and the wider society. In addition, several articles in the Lithuanian printed media of the time have been utilized to attain a more comprehensive picture of the situation of the Muslim community in the country and also to have a glimpse into how the Tatars were portrayed in local and national media reports.

In most of historiography, Tatars of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania are collectively referred to as 'Lithuanian Tatars' as opposed to Crimean and Kazan Tatars. In this article, the designation 'Lithuanian Tatars' means those Tatars who were living on the territory (and were apparently citizens) of the sovereign interwar Republic of Lithuania. Furthermore, since the overwhelming majority of Lithuania's Muslims in that period were ethnic Tatars (and the archival documents and media reports referred

to in the current text deal exclusively with Tatars), and virtually all Tatars were (at least nominal) Muslims, titles 'Tatars' and 'Muslims' (and consequently 'Lithuanian Tatars' and 'Lithuanian Muslims') are treated throughout the text as synonyms and used interchangeably.

## THE DEMOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

In early 1918, the national Lithuanian intellectual elite in Vilnius proclaimed creation of a sovereign state of Lithuania. After the ensuing independence war, the nascent state lost the proclaimed capital Vilnius and the region laying south and south east of it, where the overwhelming majority of Tatars had been traditionally living and which went to Poland, and regained its control only after the beginning of the Second World War, in October 1939. Therefore, the development of the Vilnius region Tatar community and its organizations between 1922 and 1939 can justly be regarded as part of the history of Islam in Poland. And only between October 1939 when the Vilnius region was given to the Lithuanian state by the Soviet Union which at that time was occupying the eastern part of the former state of Poland, and the summer of 1940 when the Soviet Union finally swallowed entire Lithuania, the three Lithuanian-speaking congregations and three Polish-speaking ones, including the one in Vilnius, were (re)united in a single state. Although in 1923 Lithuania succeeded in annexing Memelland (Klaipėda region as it is known in Lithuania), as there were virtually no Muslims in the area, this fact did not change the number, distribution or composition of the Muslim minority on its territory.

The 1923 Census revealed that 1,107<sup>1</sup> inhabitants of the Republic of Lithuania identified themselves with Islam. Of those 1,098 were Lithuanian citizens (two – Polish, seven – Soviet citizens<sup>2</sup>); 961 Muslims identified themselves as ethnic Tatars<sup>3</sup>, of 146 non-Tatars – 117 as Lithuanians (sic!)<sup>4</sup>, 12 as Polish<sup>5</sup>, one as a Turk<sup>6</sup>, with the remaining as Russians, while five<sup>7</sup> did not indicate their ethnic belonging at all.

<sup>1</sup> Lietuvos gyventojai: 1923 m. rugsėjo 17 d. surašymo duomenys. Kaunas: Centrinis statistikos biuras, 1925, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 38. It is plausible to assume that at least some, if not the majority, among these 117 'Lithuanians' were in fact ethnic Tatars who, however, for unclear reasons chose to identify themselves as Lithuanians.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The Census results show that in 1923 there were three areas of a bigger concentration of Muslims and two with smaller numbers, chiefly in the eastern and southern parts of the country, although individual Muslims were found to have been living all over the country. By far the largest number, 732 or over two thirds of the country's Muslims, were living in villages and other small settlements in the southern Alytus District<sup>8</sup>. The second largest concentration, with 122, was found in the Trakai District<sup>9</sup>. The number of Muslims in the interim capital Kaunas and nearby villages was just a little over one hundred<sup>10</sup> with one third (37 individuals) identifying as Lithuanians<sup>11</sup>. There were also smaller groups of Muslims in Vilkmergė (44 persons) and Zarasai (56 persons) Districts in the north-east of the country. Unfortunately, very little is known about Muslims of Trakai, and virtually nothing about those who were living in Vilkmergė and Zarasai Districts as the archival material is silent on them, and there are no media reports on these 'communities'.

The discrepancy between the Census figures and the available information on the Lithuanian Muslims of the period in the archival (including interwar Lithuanian printed media) material calls for a separate investigation which is beyond the capacity of the present research. Consequently, this chapter concentrates primarily on the congregations in Alytus District and Kaunas City as well as on a tiny yet vocal (judging from the surviving archival material) congregation in a small western village Vinkšnupiai in Vilkaviškis District, which is not even indicated in the Census results as having any significant number of Muslims – just one person in the entire Vilkaviškis District identified himself as Muslim in 1923<sup>12</sup>. This is, however, explainable by the fact that the community in Vinkšnupiai (re)emerged somewhat later when the Tatars came back to the area after the commotion of the World War One (during which, by the way, the Vinkšnupiai mosque was damaged) and subsequent military operations and when it succeeded in reclaiming its immovable property from the new claimants. The property disputes are several times referred to in the surviving archival documents.

Arguably, the most visible sign of Muslim presence (and belonging?) in an area are mosques, especially purpose-built, and cemeteries. Since the majority of the Tatars on the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania traditionally lived in the countryside, most of their mosques, around which religious life revolved, were situated in villages rather than cities. Although there had been several dozen mosques all

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

around the Grand Duchy, only two of the historic Tatar mosque buildings remained on the territory of inter-war Lithuania – one built in 1889 in Raižiai (Alytus District, some 70 km south of the interim capital Kaunas) and the other built in the 1820s in Vinkšnupiai (some 80 km south-west of Kaunas). The latter had been damaged during the preceding war and reportedly remained in a bad shape throughout the interwar period as there were no funds (and apparently will) to repair it. The tiny community of worshippers is reported to have prayed in the imam's home. The Vinkšnupiai mosque did not survive the Second World War, while the apparently frequently attended and well kept Raižiai mosque was destined to become the sole operational mosque during the subsequent Soviet period. There were historic mosques in Vilnius and nearby lying villages (like Niemiež/Nemėžis, Sorok Tatory/ Keturiasdešimt Totorių), but these were technically in Poland until late 1939.

In the interim capital Kaunas, a new brick mosque (the only of its sort to this day in Lithuania) was built on the spot of a former makeshift mosque and opened its doors to worshippers in 1932. Although initiated by Kaunas Tatars in 1930<sup>13</sup>, the financial burden of bringing the mosque to completion from the inception was seen by the Tatars to be the state's responsibility. Local Tatars (in the letter their numbers are given as 200 in the Kaunas region, with just 70 in the Kaunas city itself<sup>14</sup>) could have never expected to collect the needed amount (originally estimated at staggering 85 thousand Litas); thus, they immediately proceeded with lobbying the Minister to make the funds available. The Kaunas mayor and other relevant authorities without much due approved of the construction<sup>15</sup>. In the end of the same year, they repeatedly requested 25 thousand Litas from the state for the completion of the mosque, citing their failure to raise supposedly expected additional funds from within the community<sup>16</sup>.

Although there had been many more Tatar (Muslim) cemeteries on the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, in interwar Lithuania only several of them appear to have been still used for burial. The biggest burial grounds were in Raižiai, but other villages in the surrounding more densely Tatar-populated Alytus District also had their cemeteries. Vinkšnupiai had a cemetery next to the mosque, although it appears not to have been used for burial any more. The new Kaunas mosque was built in the section of the city cemetery used by Tatars.

<sup>13</sup> Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (Lithuanian Central State Archive, further – LCVA), f. 1622, ap. 4, b. 75, l. 5; f. 391, ap. 4, b. 148, l. 2, 2 ap.

<sup>14</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 148, l. 2, 2 ap.

<sup>15</sup> LCVA, f. 1622, ap. 4, b. 75, l. 1, 6.

<sup>16</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 148, l. 16.

## ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Prior to the emergence of sovereign nation-states, the overwhelming majority of the 'Tatars of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania' throughout their history would live in one state – be it the Grand Duchy itself (between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries), the Commonwealth of Two Nations (the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries), or the Russian Empire (the 19<sup>th</sup> through the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) – and thus would perceive themselves and each other as belonging to the same single ethno-confessional community speaking the same language (a mixture of Polish and Byelorussian), albeit dispersed over a relatively big territory. Founding of nationalistically orientated and even mutually antagonistic independent states of Lithuania and Poland (and also of Soviet Byelorussia) in the aftermath of the World War One had almost by default obliged the Tatars to redefine their identity and belonging. Those Tatars who found themselves on the territory of the Republic of Lithuania had to come to grips with the new reality – not only having become a tiny ethno-confessional minority in the Lithuanian nation-state, but also having been cut from the related congregations and the centuries-long demographic and spiritual center Vilnius. This newly emerged factual situation demanded from the Lithuanian Tatars to define their identity and relations with the out-groups (the majority of society but also Tatars in the neighboring countries, foremost Poland) anew. This was made even more urgent by the seemingly permanent state of war between Lithuania and Poland over the Vilnius region, which lasted until 1938 when the two states finally established diplomatic relations. Therefore, both Tatar communal relations and relations with the Lithuanian state authorities for much of the interwar period should also be viewed through the prism of the Lithuanian–Polish relations. The bulk of the surviving archival documents (in the form of letters from Tatars to the Lithuanian state institutions) vividly attest to this.

In any case, it was in interwar Lithuania that a distinct 'Lithuanian' Tatar (as different from and even opposed to the 'Polish' and 'Byelorussian') identity was born. Apparently, some of the Tatars, not the least those whose ancestors had converted to Christianity, started identifying themselves as Lithuanians. One may speculate that some, if not most, of 117 Muslims in the 1923 Census, who identified as Lithuanians were in fact of Tatar origin, although ethnic Lithuanians (presumably converts and their progeny) might have also been among them.

With becoming inhabitants and ultimately citizens of independent Lithuania, Tatars had to adapt to the new reality in many ways, not least of which was to learn the official language of the country (Lithuanian). As most of the Tatars had been living in territories dominated by Slavic speakers for centuries, their adopted tongues (Tatars ceased using their Turkic vernaculars by the 17<sup>th</sup> century) were variations of Polish, Byelorussian and

Russian, and there virtually was no need for the use of Lithuanian. Now, however, they had to learn it if they wanted to fully integrate into the new society and state's life. The task of learning the Lithuanian language was made even more urgent by the same fact that Lithuania and Poland did not get along and any alleged sympathies for Poland (or the USSR), in the form of the used language or otherwise, could have drawn suspicion of disloyalty to the (new) homeland.

In fact, in their correspondence to the state authorities and in media reports, the leadership of the Tatar congregations would never fail to profess their loyalty to the Lithuanian state and nation: "in general, in the mass of the Lithuanian Mohammedans, there are no sympathies for Poland, and quite on the contrary, the Lithuanian spirit prevails, Mohammedans do well joint Lithuanian work by taking part in patriotic organizations and the union for the liberation of Vilnius, serving in the armed forces"<sup>17</sup>. Likewise, the Kaunas mosque imam is quoted as having claimed that the Tatars felt very well (*puikiausiai*) in Lithuania, "because Lithuania is our dear motherland. Here our ancestors shed their blood, here we were born and grew up, here everything is dear (*sava*) to us. And, speaking frankly, we have lost our ethnic identity (*esame nutautėję*): we do not know our language or script, we read only Lithuanian newspapers and write letters in the Lithuanian language"<sup>18</sup>.

A significant aspect of this national (as partially opposed to ethnic) identity construction is the Tatar adhering to the cult of Vytautas the Great, the duke who has always been regarded by Lithuanians themselves as one of the most important and praiseworthy rulers of the Duchy. For instance, in a letter to the Minister of Education, dated April 6, 1930<sup>19</sup>, in which the Tatars solicit financial assistance from the state in building a new mosque in Kaunas, arguably in commemoration of the 500-year anniversary of Vytautas' death, the authors of the letter started it with paying tribute to Vytautas whom they called "the hero whose name is dear to us, Tatars". The authors of the letter went as far as to promise to name the new mosque after Vytautas who, by the way, had never been a Muslim. Similarly, in a lengthy hand-written letter to the Minister of Education from December 29, 1939, the Raižiai Tatars express their sincere admiration for Vytautas; in it, the authors went to great lengths in reminding the Minister of the long and glorious Tatar history in Lithuania, closely linking it with the person of the Grand Duke Vytautas: they claim to be "descendants of those courageous and honorable soldiers who took part in the army of Vytautas the Great" and also that "the Lithuanian Tatars, soldiers of Vytautas the Great, out of their own free will pledged

<sup>17</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1845, l. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Totoriai nuo seniai gerai sugyvena su lietuviais // Darbininkas. 4 January 1940. Nr. 1 (1044), p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 148, l. 2, 2 ap.

loyalty to Lithuania with their swords, and to this day we stand by that pledge and honorably fulfil it. We, the Lithuanian Tatars, Lithuania's sons, are ardently attached to it"<sup>20</sup>. The authors further claim that Lithuanian Tatars, "out of respect for Vytautas the Great, mention his name in their prayers"<sup>21</sup>.

This line of reasoning is also prominent in media reports on Lithuanian Tatars. For instance, in a comparatively lengthy article in one of the major Lithuanian dailies, the imam of the Kaunas mosque is quoted as claiming that "Tatars in Lithuania were settled (*įkurdino*) by the Great Duke of Lithuania Vytautas the Great who came to like (*patėgo*) Tatars for their militant nature (*karingą būdą*), courageousness and skilfulness in the battlefield. Indeed, Tatar units assisted (*talkino*) Vytautas the Great in the Žalgiris (Grünwald) battle. Vytautas, like all Lithuanians, was grateful for their services and therefore awarded the Tatars with tracts of land and provided other privileges"<sup>22</sup>.

From the available archival material it appears that no one in interwar Lithuania would object to these Tatar claims, and the overall environment was conducive to the Tatar identity transformation to a national yet well integrated and accepted ethno-confessional minority. Islam as a religion also appears not to have caused any uneasiness among Lithuanians, be it state officials or media reporters.

## RELIGIOUS LIFE

Both the archival material and media reports allow one to have some insight into the religious life of the Tatars in interwar Lithuania. Although, as indicated earlier, there were three mosques in Lithuania, only the one in Raižiai appears to have served as a proper center of religious life; the one in Vinkšnupiai, as mentioned above, was not operational, and the small community would pray in the private premises or even in the cemetery, while the newly built Kaunas mosque for much of the period lacked a resident imam and was occasionally served by an imam from Raižiai. However, with the small number of potential worshippers – the imam would estimate his flock in Kaunas to be in the range of 60, and that including children<sup>23</sup>, what roughly corresponds to the Census figures – there appears to have been little need for a permanent imam as the level of religiosity of Tatars is reported to have been low.

Given that the numbers of potential worshippers in Kaunas were very low, one may be prone to ask why the Tatars wanted to build a mosque in Kaunas in the first place? And

<sup>20</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1846, l. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., l. 29 ap. 30, 30 ap.

<sup>22</sup> Pasikalbėjimas Vytauto Didžiojo garbei skirtoje šventykloje // XX amžius. 2 January 1940. Nr. 1 (1052), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

even more interesting is the question why the state authorities agreed to provide the bulk of funds needed for the construction of the mosque. Given that both the government and the community leaders hoped that one day the Vilnius Region will be reunited with Lithuania and knowing well that the real cultural (and, foremost, religious) Tatar center was in Vilnius, it is hard to explain why there was so much will and readiness to build a mosque in a city with so few potential worshippers. Unfortunately, neither the available archival material nor the media report help in answering these questions.

Even if the mosques were hardly functioning, Muslim congregations felt that their imams do perform well enough and are entitled to salaries to be paid by the state. So, for instance, in June 1929, the Kaunas Mohammedan Parish approached the Prime Minister with the request to “assign permanent salary” for the congregation’s imam (*dvasiškis*, Lith. for “clergyman”)<sup>24</sup>. The petitioners grounded their request on the fact that although the former clergyman would be content with the 100 Litas allowance provided by the Department of Faiths and would serve as the imam “out of dedication, without requiring a separate salary”, with his passing away, the congregation, on its own, “without state’s support (...) in no way can sustain a clergyman”. The request was received favourably and dealt with promptly (on the same day as it came in to the Prime Minister’s Chancery) by the Prime Minister Augustinas Voldemaras personally who in his hand-written resolution on the very same letter sympathized with the local Muslims<sup>25</sup>. Ultimately, the state resolved to pay modest semiannual allowance to the imams of all three parishes<sup>26</sup>. This practice appears to have continued until the occupation of Lithuania by the USSR.

Part of the Lithuanian Tatar community, which concentrated in the Alytus District, must have been the most religiously and culturally active, as next to regular prayers, the local imam would hold religious and Arabic language classes for Tatar pupils. Although, once again, there is only anecdotal evidence, like the words of the Kaunas mosque imam that “around Butrimonys there are other Tatar-inhabited villages and thus the congregation (*parapija*) there is stronger. The imam (*dvasininkas*) there gives classes in Mohammedan faith to children in primary schools. In addition, in the Raižiai village we have also a school where the youth are taught how to read the Quran”<sup>27</sup>. Judging from this and other information, it may be tentatively argued that Tatars of Raižiai and the surrounding villages were de facto the core of the Lithuanian Tatar communal

<sup>24</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1821, l. 41.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., l. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., l. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Pasikalbėjimas Vytauto Didžiojo garbei skirtoje šventykloje // XX amžius. 2 January 1940. Nr. 1 (1052), p. 7.

life. In view of this, it becomes easier to understand why the Raižiai congregation was so adamantly negative about the Kaunas congregation's pretensions to unite, lead, and represent the entire Lithuanian Tatar community.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

As indicated above, Lithuanian Muslim community until 1939 was comprised of three physically relatively distant religious congregations (locally called by Tatars themselves 'parishes'), the most numerous being the Raižiai Mohammedan<sup>28</sup> Parish, followed by the Kaunas Mohammedan Parish (in 1936 registered as the Kaunas Muslim Society) and then the smallest of them, the Vinkšnupiai Mohammedan Parish. As there had hardly been any unified organizational structure, the parishes historically functioned as independent in all matters, religious and lay, and met the dawn of independent Lithuania as such. Both Raižiai and Vinkšnupiai parishes were happy to keep their independence and did not see any need for organizational unification. The surviving archival material vividly attests to the provincial parishes clinging at all costs to their independence of each other or a unified organization. However, the leadership of the newly formed Kaunas parish since its founding envisioned a leadership position for itself in a prospective unified structure of the Lithuanian Muslim community.

Despite the fact that there had never been any significant Muslim presence in Kaunas (apart from Muslim soldiers in the Russian czarist army stationed in the Kaunas garrison before the First World War), after its becoming the (interim) capital of Lithuania, local Muslims registered a religious community there in the fall of 1923 and by the second half of 1925 came up with a plan to establish a Faith Organization of Lithuanian Mohammedans which would supervise and coordinate religious activities of all Muslim congregations in the Republic of Lithuania. The temporary rules for the supervision of the relations between the envisioned Faith Organization and the Lithuanian government foresaw the seat of its governing body, the Mohammedan Central Council, to be in Kaunas. This Council would consist of three members elected by congregation representatives, two per each 150 congregation members<sup>29</sup>. However, back then, the idea of a central spiritual governing body in Lithuania did not materialize mainly due to lack of commitment and widespread mistrust of the Kaunas congregation's intentions among Muslims of the provinces who made up the numerical majority of Lithuania's Muslims.

<sup>28</sup> In the interwar period, Lithuanian Muslims frequently referred to themselves as "magometonai" – "Mohammedans".

<sup>29</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1821, l. 75.

The most active members of the Kaunas congregation, after the local organization's reorganization in 1930 into a purely religious (rather than a confessional Tatar) – the Kaunas Muslim Society (officially registered in 1936), being headquartered in the interim capital, close to the seat of power, apparently hoped that the relevant state authorities would recognize their new / old organization as the *de facto* leader among the nation's Muslim congregations and as the center around which provincial congregations should unite. The state appears to have for a moment subscribed to this idea and entrusted the Kaunas Muslim Society with supervision of the state allowance distribution among the three acting imams. Members of the Society, perceiving themselves as acting on behalf and in the name of the state, in June 1937 paid a (unannounced) visit to Vinkšnupiai to inspect the mosque and the cemetery which they later claimed, in their report to the Ministry of Education, to have found in an appalling state – the mosque being in a bad shape and therefore permanently closed, and the cemetery neglected<sup>30</sup>. Due to this, the Society proposed to the Ministry to temporarily hold paying allowance to the mulla of the Vinkšnupiai congregation.

Possibly emboldened by the state's sympathetic attitude toward it (especially during the construction of a new brick mosque in Kaunas in 1930–1932), the Kaunas Muslim Society in 1937 made a second attempt at the unification of the Lithuanian Muslim congregations under its leadership, when it submitted a request to relevant state authorities for establishing a unified Muslim confessional center. In the request, the Society's leadership argued that in the absence of administrative oversight, individual mullas sometime mis-performed their duties, could not come to terms to coordinate their activities and also disregarded advise by congregation members, however, supposedly themselves realizing a need for such a unifying body<sup>31</sup>. Thus, the authors “humbly ask” that the addressed official in charge of religious affairs “takes the initiative into his hands to unite the actions of the mullas by appointing for this purpose one of them as the Imam (dean) and entrusting the rest to his leadership”<sup>32</sup>.

Internal communication in the Ministry of Education suggests the initial positive reaction, and the Ministry encouraged the Kaunas Muslim Society to prepare a document to serve as the basis for centralization of the Muslim organizational structure in the country, which the Society soon did<sup>33</sup>. In its letter accompanying the draft of “The Rules of the Centralization of Muslim Confessional Institutions”, the Kaunas Muslim Society leadership urged the relevant state authorities (identified as Ministries

<sup>30</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1845, l. 37.

<sup>31</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1846, l. 40.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., l. 40.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., l. 36, 36 ap.

of Education and Interior) to act promptly as the “founding of a highest Muslim clergy body (Muftiate) is an urgent and necessary matter”<sup>34</sup>.

The Society’s submitted draft of “The Rules of the Centralization of Muslim Confessional Institutions” stated in the outset that the supervision of Lithuanian Muslim confessional institutions “belongs” (direct translation from the original Lithuanian) to the mufti of Lithuanian Muslims, and the muftiate’s headquarters are in the capital of Lithuania, although, without indicating whether that is Kaunas (even officially perceived to be only a temporary capital) or Vilnius (officially seen as the “occupied”, yet the only true, capital). However, in the very end, the Rules clear the situation – “the capital of Lithuania” is meant to be Vilnius. And as long as Vilnius remained in the Polish hands, the duties of the mufti were to be conferred temporarily to someone residing in “the interim capital” (e.g., Kaunas).

Unfortunately to the Lithuania’s Muslims, this second attempt failed also. The provincial congregations (centered around the Raižiai and Vinkšnupiai mosques) rejected the initiative outright and even openly suggested that the despised Vilnius-based Polish Muslim organizations, who were even accused of having sent the very draft of the Rules, must have stood behind this latest attempt by the Kaunas congregation<sup>35</sup>. For the sake of fairness, one has to admit that the submitted draft of “The Rules of the Centralization of Muslim Confessional Institutions” was conspicuously reminiscent of the statute of the Muslim Religious Union of Poland, adopted in Poland in the summer of 1936<sup>36</sup>. In reaction to the insinuations by the provincial congregations and in view of communal squabbles (see below), the Department of Culture at the Ministry of Education in December 1937 informed the representative of the Vinkšnupiai congregation in Kaunas that “the question of the centralization of the Muslim faith is for the time being put off”<sup>37</sup>.

Towards the end of the independence, after the Lithuanian Muslim community had been enlarged significantly by attaching the Vilnius Region to Lithuania in the fall of 1939, the Kaunas mosque imam admitted that there had been little organizational cooperation among the Lithuanian Muslim congregations: “If he (the former Mufti of Poland Jakub Szynekiewicz (*Lith.* Jokūbas Šinkevičius – *author’s insertion*) were to be recognized by the Lithuanian government as the spiritual (*tikybinė*) head of the Lithuanian Mohammedans, our internal structure (*santvarka*) would improve, for

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., l. 36.

<sup>35</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1845, l. 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Bairišauskaitė T.* Musulmonų konfesinė bendruomenė nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje // Lietuvos istorijos metraštis 1991. Vilnius, 1993, p. 107.

<sup>37</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1845, l. 27.

we would have one single head (*viršininkas*) who would certainly be able to manage community affairs more smoothly (*nuosekliau*) than they have been run until today having no single head and with everyone acting the way he likes”<sup>38</sup>.

## RELATIONS AMONG CONGREGATIONS

The feeling of independence among the members of the two provincial congregations must have been so entrenched that, though minuscule in numbers and surrounded by the majority of a different faith, the Lithuanian Muslim community throughout the period of the independence of the interwar Lithuanian Republic was cursed with permanent self-inflicted disunity. This disunity in the form of open animosity appears to have escalated and reached its peak at the renewed Kaunas Muslim Society’s attempts at both legally and factually take the reins of the Muslim affairs into their hands starting with 1937. This was the time when the provincial congregations started barraging the relevant state authorities with complaints full of insinuations and conspiracy theories.

The Vinkšnupiai congregation was especially unfavorable toward the Kaunas Muslim Society. In their August 1937 reaction / reply to the report submitted by the Society to the Ministry of Education on the state of affairs in the Vinkšnupiai congregation, the congregation leadership in a five-page letter accused the Kaunas Muslim Society of exceeding its powers and meddling in the internal affairs of the Vinkšnupiai congregation<sup>39</sup>. The authors accused (and indeed rightfully) the Kaunas Muslim Society of seeking to subjugate and even include the Vinkšnupiai congregation into the Kaunas congregation<sup>40</sup>. They further charged the Society of sowing discord both inside the Kaunas congregation and among Muslims of Lithuania and argued that the Society should not be seen by the state as representing Lithuania’s Muslims<sup>41</sup>. Finally, the Vinkšnupiai congregation requested (although it reads more like demand) that the Ministry ceased transferring allowance money to the Society and rather resumed the earlier practice of disbursing it directly to imams<sup>42</sup>.

Pretty much the same accusations levelled at the Kaunas Muslim Society were repeated in a later shorter letter (written in September 1937), this time signed by representatives of both provincial congregations<sup>43</sup>. This suggests that the two congregations would join efforts in their fight against the perceived hegemony of the Kaunas Muslim Society. In

<sup>38</sup> Totoriai nuo seniai gerai sugyvena su lietuviais // Darbininkas. 4 January 1940. Nr. 1 (1044), p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1845, l. 33.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., l. 33 ap.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., l. 34.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., l. 34 ap., 35.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., l. 31, 31 ap., 33.

this particular letter, the authors argued that the two provincial congregations were centuries-old and had always been independent in their spiritual affairs, with imams being locally elected, something that the Kaunas congregation, being a new formation, lacked<sup>44</sup>. In the letter, like in the previous one, the Society was called a small private organization with the membership consisting of relatives and therefore unrepresentative of the wider Muslim population in the country. Although the Kaunas Muslim Society's rank and file can indeed be seen as comprised of members related to each other through blood or marriage (this was, after all, a very small congregation), the same can be said of the Vinkšnupiai congregation which also consisted of several families.

Finally, in the end of the same year, the representative of the Vinkšnupiai congregation in Kaunas, Aleksandras Chaleckas, wrote yet another similar five-page letter to the Minister of Education, reiterating most of the earlier accusations leveled at the Kaunas Muslim Society and at the same time dealing, from the perspective of the Vinkšnupiai congregation, with the issues raised in the report of the Society's fact-finding mission<sup>45</sup>.

Further intra-congregation hostility is displayed openly in numerous subsequent provincial congregations' letters to the state authorities. In one of them, an anonymous letter dated as late as October 28, 1938, the Kaunas congregation was bluntly called "a real and unbearable misunderstanding among Mohammedans"<sup>46</sup>.

The animosity between the capital-based and provincial congregations crossed the limits of a simple internal power struggle and was intentionally extended by provincial congregations to include the question of position on and relations with the citizens of the arch enemy – Poland. The provincial congregations would go as far as to accuse the Kaunas-based Muslim activists of treason because of their alleged cooperation with the Vilnius-based Muslims. For instance, in their aforementioned lengthy letter to the Minister of Education written on October 28, 1938 and marked "Secret", its authors claimed that the Kaunas Muslim Society was maintaining close relations with Muslim organizations ("Związek kulturalno oświatowy" and "Muftiat"), based in occupied Vilnius. At the purported instigation of these Polish organizations, with which they supposedly "had secret relations" and from which they "used to receive instructions", activists of the Kaunas Muslim Society "would engage in various intrigues and misunderstandings among Mohammedans, fighting this way with the Lithuanian spirit of Mohammedans and with this very much obstructed execution of useful work"<sup>47</sup>. The

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., l. 31.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., l. 28, 28 ap., 29, 29 ap., 30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., l. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., l. 10.

Kaunas Muslim Society was deemed to have received advice from the Polish side to “try and take under its tutelage Mohammadan parishes and create a central Mohammadan organization made purely of Polephiles (*lenkomanai*)”<sup>48</sup>.

The provincial (in this case Vinkšnupiai) congregations must have been convinced that Muslims based in Vilnius wished no good for those living in Lithuania. They alleged that as a Polish organization, the Vilnius Muftiate was more of a political organization and a tool in the hands of the Polish state than a faith-based institution: the Muftiate and its affiliated organizations are charged with having “secret political goals and work” which they (the Polish Muslim organizations) and “their agents cover and dress in supposedly Mohammadan faith matters”<sup>49</sup>, while in reality “the special purpose” of these organizations was “to polonize Mohammedans in Vilnius and elsewhere and to look for means to bind the Lithuanian Mohammedans with Polish organizations”<sup>50</sup>.

#### THE LAST YEAR OF INDEPENDENCE

Occupation by the Soviet Union of the eastern part of the Polish Republic in the first month of the Second World War (which began on September 1, 1939) led, on October 10, 1939, to the Vilnius Region (with its significant Muslim community (estimated at some 670<sup>51</sup>) and the Muftiate) being given by the Soviets to Lithuania. After regaining the Vilnius Region, the number of Muslim congregations in Lithuania doubled to six. After installing its control over the lands formerly held by Poland, the Lithuanian authorities outlawed all Polish-registered organizations, among them the Muftiate, and its premises were locked and sealed<sup>52</sup>.

The Kaunas Muslim Society then made a last-ditch attempt at the unification of these congregations under one umbrella organization. In their “Memorandum” of November 29, 1939 to the Minister of Education, they called on the Minister to either promulgate the 1937 “Rules of the Centralization of Muslim Confessional Institutions” or solve the problem in some other way<sup>53</sup>. This last attempt appears to have been welcomed by the Raižiai congregation which had apparently switched sides and which in its letter of December 29, 1939 not only urged the Minister of Education to move quickly in solving the lasting impasse but also were full of praises for the Mufti who was claimed to be “full of love to Mohammedan-Muslim faith and Lithuania, his motherland”<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., l. 9, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., l. 9.

<sup>51</sup> *Bairašauskaitė T.* Musulmonų konfesinė bendruomenė nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje // Lietuvos istorijos metraštis 1991. Vilnius, 1993, p. 110.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>53</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1846, l. 41.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., l. 30.

However, the Vinkšnupiai congregation remained unwavering and renewed the bombardment of the state institutions with its letters full of complaints about the perceived intentions and activities of the Vilnius-based Muslim leadership, chiefly in the person of Jokūbas Šinkevičius / Jakub Szyrkiewicz. In his letter of November 17, 1939, the representative of the Vinkšnupiai congregation in Kaunas pleaded the Ministry of Education not to allow the reopening of the Muftiate<sup>55</sup>. In their later letter, coincidentally (?) dated the same day (December 29, 1939) as the supportive Raižiai letter, several members of the Vinkšnupiai congregation argued that “for many years we did joint Lithuanian work not for the sake that now, after regaining the Vilnius Region, we would import here Polish leaders for ourselves and even foreigners (Jakub Šinkevič) [...] and all sorts of troublemakers” and suggest that these “mind their own business”<sup>56</sup>. Just a day later (December 30, 1939), in another and more elaborated letter, several representatives (some of them the same as in the letter a day earlier) of the same Vinkšnupiai Mohammadan Parish argued that “Lithuanian Mohammedans do not want any Polish leaders, their go-between (Janušauskai, Vilčinskai from “Kaunas Muslim Society”), and we protest against the work of them all.” The authors were adamant: “We did not do patriotic Lithuanian work for 20 years to put on ourselves the noose of Polish leaders now, after having regained Vilnius (???)”. In the end, they even issued a judgment on Šinkevičius’/ Szyrkiewicz’s prospects of receiving Lithuanian citizenship: “The above mentioned Jakub Šinkevič [Jakub Szyrkiewicz] cannot be a citizen of Lithuania, because he was born in the town of Liachovičiai [Lachowicze], close to Baranovičiai [Baranowicze], and his friends want to import him to us”<sup>57</sup>. Finally, the authors pleaded with the Minister to “definitively close the aforementioned Polish organizations (“Muftiat”), not to give any money to Polish leaders, and to prevent their interference in our affairs”<sup>58</sup>.

Despite these protests by the Vinkšnupiai congregation and after heavy lobbying by the Kaunas Muslim Society (now supported by the Raižiai congregation) and Mufti Šinkevičius (who, by the way, had been after all denied Lithuanian citizenship<sup>59</sup>) personally, in January 1940 the authorities allowed Šinkevičius to resume his functions, though without the pay or office, until it “obtains the permit to operate legally”<sup>60</sup>. In the end of January, Šinkevičius approached the Minister of Education with a

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., l. 42.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., l. 50.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., l. 48 ap.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., l. 49.

<sup>59</sup> *Bairišauskaitė T.* Musulmonų konfesinė bendruomenė nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje // Lietuvos istorijos metraštis 1991. Vilnius, 1993, p. 112.

<sup>60</sup> LCVA, f. 401, ap. 2, b. 160, l. 17, 18.

letter requesting to reopen the Muftiate and to allocate funding for the salaries of its employees<sup>61</sup>. The imminent annexation of Lithuania in the summer of 1940 by the USSR and the subsequent occupation by Germany made all this impossible. However, Šinkevičius / Szykiewicz remained in Vilnius throughout the Nazi occupation until 1944 in his capacity as the spiritual head of Muslims in the area, when, in the wake of the Soviet return to Lithuania, he emigrated first to Egypt and later (in 1957) to the USA, where he died in 1966<sup>62</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The interwar period was in practice the time in which the local Tatar Muslim community, which consciously identified itself with the Lithuanian nation-state (in contrast to the earlier identification with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that had covered parts of Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine), was born. This identity was closely tied to the settlement stories where the perceived bravery and loyalty of Tatars in the army of Vytautas the Great and his gratefulness to Tatars were central.

However, despite this unitary narrative of belonging to and in the land, Muslims (especially those based in provinces) of the Republic of Lithuania in the interwar period failed to realize a need for and see benefit in a higher institutionalization of Islam on its territory and rather continued with the tradition of independent congregations (parishes) inherited from the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and resisted centralization and institutionalization very much like they did in the Russian times. In Bairašauskaitė's opinion<sup>63</sup>, the part of the original community of the 'Muslims of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania' which found itself within the borders of the Republic of Lithuania was intellectually not advanced.

This appears certainly to be true in the case of the provincial congregations; however, the core comprising the Kaunas Muslim Society seems to have been 'progressive' – they not only sought to unite Lithuania's Muslims under a single umbrella organization and in this way raise standards of Islamic practices, but also had an even broader vision and were also open to cooperation with the Vilnius-based Muftiate. In this regard, Muslims of the interim capital, or at least those most active among them, and provincial Tatars had rather divergent perspectives on the development of the Lithuanian Muslim

<sup>61</sup> LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1846, l. 22, 22 ap.

<sup>62</sup> *Jakubauskas A., Sitykovas G., Duminas S.* Lietuvos totoriai istorijoje ir kultūroje. Kaunas. 2012, p. 148.

<sup>63</sup> *Bairašauskaitė T.* Musulmonų konfesinė bendruomenė nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje // Lietuvos istorijos metraštis 1991. Vilnius, 1993, p. 105.

community. As Bairašauskaitė<sup>64</sup> correctly points out, “contradictory positions of Muslim parishes were caused by inner competition and different political attitudes, which were obstacles for making decisions on creating the confessional center.” At the same time, with no pressure (or support) from above (e.g., state authorities), there was no interested player strong enough to organize Lithuania’s Muslims into a coherent faith community that would have mirrored the one in interwar Poland.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 111.