

## Religious Language of a Belarusian Tatar Kitab

A Cultural Monument of Islam in Europe / With a Latin-Script Transliteration of the British Library Tatar  
Belarusian Kitab (OR 13010) on CD-ROM

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Shirin Akiner

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## Editorial Comment

The Belarusian Tatars are the descendants of a Turkic community that arrived in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania during the fourteenth century. Their settlement was probably contemporaneous with that of another Turkic people, the Karaites (Karaim), who moved to the Grand Duchy from the Crimea. Today, both groups remain as tiny minorities in their adopted Northern European homeland. Although the Tatars assimilated to Slavic languages (Belarusian and Polish) as early as the 1600s, unlike the Karaites who have only recently become almost uniquely Slavic-speaking, they retained their Islamic religion, and a rich Arabo-Turkic terminology.

The Mediterranean Language and Culture Monograph Series is a fitting vehicle for this study, which should appeal to a double audience. Students of Mediterranean linguistics should find interest in the discussion of Islamic terminology and in the ways in which a Mediterranean community, in the broadest sense of the word, became acculturated to a Northern European milieu, while Slavists will appreciate this publication of an early nineteenth-century colloquial Belarusian document. This monograph sheds new light on the linguistic creativity of the Belarusian Tatars - a creativity which spans more than three hundred years.

Paul Wexler

## Author's Preface

молю же всѣхъ почитающихъ. не можете  
клати нѣ исправльше. почитайте.  
Тако бо и сѣи апѣль пауль глѣтъ.  
(Colophon to Ostromir Gospel, 1056-1057)

I first embarked on this study over thirty years ago. It became my doctoral dissertation, submitted and approved by the University of London in 1980. Thereafter, commitments and distractions of many kinds, as well as constantly changing (and improving) technical facilities, delayed preparation of the text for publication for decades. Inevitably, I now long to rewrite the work completely, and am only restrained from attempting this task by the thought that history would probably repeat itself and that ten years hence I would still be wanting to rethink it. In a subject of this complexity there will always be the need for new and more specialised research.

The work is essentially the same as originally presented as a thesis. However, some parts have been expanded (notably the section on the historical background). There has also been some new research on sources and texts, and these too have been consulted and the findings incorporated here. Yet in other areas, such as dialectology, there has been relatively little advance, hence minimal updating was required.

Needless to say, this work has many shortcomings, but if it stimulates the interest of others and provokes further investigation, then something useful will already have been achieved. The Colophon to the Ostromir Gospel, cited above, which I first read as a student of Comparative Slavonic Philology many years ago, gives admirable advice: 'I pray all who read this work, do not curse [its faults] but as the Holy Apostle Paul said, correct [them] and read on'.

I am indebted to Professor A. B. McMillin (School of Slavonic and East European Studies) for first introducing me to things Belarusian and for encouraging me to engage in research in this field; also to Professor V. L. Ménage (School of Oriental and African Studies) for much valuable advice and unflagging patience in answering my many queries. Special thanks are due to the Very Reverend Monsignor Dr Alexander Nadson, Librarian of the Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library, without whose

active encouragement and support this work could never have been undertaken. No reference book, however rare, eluded him for long and (almost as important to an impecunious student) no visit to the library was ever allowed to pass without a gargantuan, mouth-watering (and memorably garlic-laden) meal. Father Nadson's energy, enthusiasm and meticulous scholarship were, and remain, an inspiration and spur to further endeavour.

I also remember with deep affection and gratitude my many other Belarusian friends, among them the late Bishop Česław Sipovič, who showed me unfailing kindness and hospitality. The Belarusian Charitable Trust generously provided funds for the publication of this book. I am also grateful to Professor Paul Wexler of Tel Aviv University. Professor Wexler's own research on Jewish interlinguistics has done much to establish a general framework within which to examine the phenomenon of language shift without loss of cultural and ethnic identity. His work on Jewish languages in the Slav context points to similarities with the language of the Belarusian Tatars and opens up intriguing possibilities for further comparisons between the two groups.

Many other friends and scholars have given me help and encouragement over the years, including Gökçe Abdurazzak (School of Oriental and African Studies), Uilleam Blacker (School of Slavonic and East European Studies), Andrzej Drozd (University of Poznań) and Moshe Gammer (University of Tel Aviv). I thank them warmly. I also appreciated the kindness of the Dominican Order at Santa Sabina, Rome, particularly Fra Bernadino Prella's patience in helping me untangle sixteenth-century Latin syntax. I must, too, acknowledge the fortitude of my publishers, Harrassowitz Verlag, for patiently waiting for this manuscript despite innumerable broken promises on delivery dates.

Above all, I am indebted to my husband David. Without his unstinting support I would not have persisted in taking this study thus far.

Shirin Akiner (London, January 2009)

## Summary

The Belarusian Tatars (also known as Lithuanian or Polish Tatars) are descendants of Turkic-Mongol tribes from the Golden Horde who settled in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th and 15th centuries. Like the rest of the Golden Horde, they were converted to Islam, probably during the 14th century. They were quickly assimilated by the local population and by the mid-16th century had almost completely forgotten their original linguistic heritage (Turkic, with possibly some residue of Mongol). They remained Muslim, however, and the need soon arose for the Quran and other essential religious texts to be translated. Compilations of such translations, called *chamail* or *kitab*, were made of prayers, pious narratives and ritual instructions. The British Library Kitab, the main focus of the present study, is a typical example of its genre. Like all the religious works of the Tatars of this region, it is written in the Arabic script, although the language is Belarusian/ Polish.

The Tatars were confronted with the task of conveying Islamic ideas in a Slav/Christian language. Their religious vocabulary falls into two main semantic groups: terms relating to ethics, and terms relating to ritual practice. For the former, acceptable Slav equivalents were generally available, since it is an area in which Christian and Islamic teachings frequently coincide, but for the latter, Ottoman Turkish (predominantly of Arabic origin) terms had perforce to be used, as the concepts are virtually untranslatable. The conclusion reached in this study is that the Tatars' religious vocabulary is basically Slav, with an admixture of a relatively small number of Turkish/Arabic terms to convey uniquely Islamic ideas. These loanwords were grammatically and syntactically fully incorporated into the Slav linguistic structure.

## Abbreviations

### Dictionaries and other Reference Works

- AVAK *Akty, izdavajemyje Vilenskoj komissijeju dlja razbora drevnich aktov*
- (BC)\* *Chronika vsego Sveta Martina Bel'skogo* (Bielski's Chronicle)
- Bial Bialkievič, I. K. *Krajovy sloŭnik uschodniaj Mahiloŭščyny*, Minsk, 1970
- (BK)\* *Biblejskije knigi* (Biblical books of the early 17th century)
- BM Aničenka, V. V. *et al.* 'Materyaly dla dyalektnaha sloŭnika Homieľščyny', *Belaruskaja mova i movaznaŭstva*, 3-6, Minsk, 1975-78.
- BN Bajkoŭ, M. and Niekraševič, S. *Belaruskaja-rasijski sloŭnik*, Minsk, 1926.
- BR-R Krapiva, K. (main ed.). *Belorussko-russkij slovar'*, Moscow, 1962.
- Bud Budagov, L. Z. *Sravnitel'nyj slovar' turecko-tatarskich narečij*, 2 vols, St Petersburg, 1869-71.
- Bul Bułyka, A. M. *Daŭnija zapazyčanni biełaruskaj movy*, Minsk, 1972.
- (CAN)\* Card index for the dictionary of modern Belarusian at the AN BSSR/Belarus.
- (CB)\* *Knihi rožaju* (Christmas Books).
- Da Dal', V. *Tolkovyj slovar' živogo velikoruskogo jazyka*, 4 vols, Moscow, 1863-66.
- DABM Avanesaŭ, R. I. *et al.* (eds). *Dyjalektalaŭny atlas biełaruskaj movy*, AN BSSR, Minsk, 1963.
- DI Hughes, T. P. *A Dictionary of Islam*, London, 1896.
- Dob Dobrovol'skij, V. N. *Smolenskij oblastnoj slovar'*, Smolensk, 1914.
- EI *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new, second, edition), Bearman, P. J. *et al.* (eds). Leiden and London, 1960 – 2004.