“Our Secret Weapon”: Minority Strategies of the Finnish Tatars 1880–1945

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Abstract
The reception of the first generation of Finnish Tatars by representatives of the majority population in Finland, including state authorities, intellectuals, political movements, and the press, shows that geopolitical circumstances and local interests outside the Tatars’ own power determined to what extent they were perceived as enemies or brothers-in-arms. Events such as the independence of Finland and the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 influenced public perceptions of Muslims in Finland. Minority spokespersons felt pressured to address mutual fears, justify their presence in Finland, and put the majority representatives at ease. These strategies did not always succeed without ruffling feathers within the Finnish Tatar communities. Behind the “success story” of the Finnish Tatars we find a century-and-a-half of struggles that were not always happily resolved.

Keywords: Tatar minority, Muslim identity, minority strategies, citizenship

Introduction
The Finnish Tatar community, as Finland’s oldest Muslim minority, is often depicted as an ideal case of successful integration. However, the first Tatar merchants appearing in Finnish marketplaces in the 1880s encountered prejudices and suspicions. In the following decades, rumors of alleged nefarious activities by the Tatars, from the sale of low-quality goods to animal cruelty and political conspiracies, made the rounds in the national press. Their religion, culture, and appearance were described as fundamentally alien to the Finns, and their presence, along with other eastern immigrants, was an uncomfortable reminder of Finland’s precarious position within the Russian Empire.

Under the onslaught of popular and persuasive stereotypes in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Finland, Tatars had to learn to defend themselves against discrimination. In Imperial Russia, they had already had to learn to navigate an obstructive system of justice. The
Grand Duchy of Finland, albeit autonomous and defensive of its separate constitution, did not fundamentally differ from Russia in this respect. Foreign subjects did not have the same rights as Finnish citizens, but they could sometimes negotiate with local authorities to find legal loopholes. Eventually, they also learned methods to pre-empt prejudice. This article explores these methods and how they may have contributed to the perception of the Finnish Tatars as a success story.

The Tatars, along with the Jews, the Roma, the Sami, and the Russians of Finland, are often called “historical” minorities. The Tatars in particular have been perceived as a successfully integrated minority, although the law in Finland does not grant them any special status except the right to maintain their language and culture on their own initiative and with their own means (Leitzinger 2006, 246–57). Even studies that dwell on the challenges and problems faced by the Tatars include positive generalizations and relativizations: “In Finland, the reception was at any rate more positive than in Russia, where Tatars and other minorities were discriminated against in many ways. The immigrants were industrious and generally blameless in their ways of living” (Halen and Martikainen 2015, 90).

Tatars in Finland have also proactively disseminated a “success story” to the general audience. One of the earliest formulations of the specifically Finnish Tatar experience as a success story was published in 1932. A representative of the community, Alimcan Idris—a controversial intellectual who shall be discussed below—visited the office of the Turku newspaper *Uusi Aura* to present an essay on the Muslim community in Finland. The newspaper’s editor translated the essay from German into Finnish, and it was published with an introduction by (presumably) the said editor. Idris expressed the deep gratitude of the community toward Finland, its government, and its people. According to Idris, the community’s success was attributed to three factors: the support of leading intellectuals in the Tatar diaspora; the publication and study of Turko-Tatar and Finnish literature and press; and the rich cultural and educational life in Finland. There was a concrete reason for the appeal to the public. In 1932, a third of the community, as former subjects of the Russian Empire, were stateless and subsisting on Nansen passports (Asikainen 2017, 28). In the *Uusi Aura* article, Idris mentioned the high cost of the citizenship application and hoped that the solution would be found in Tatar cooperation and “the kindness of the Finnish government” (Schir 1932, 8). Thus, the original success story was composed under political urgency. Ramil Belyaev, imam and historian of the community, notes that individual Tatars in Finland were threatened with deportation during the tense years after the Civil War of 1918 (Belyaev 2017, 147–48). There were also unsubstantiated rumors of collective extradition to Soviet Russia throughout the interwar

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1 All the translations of source materials into English are by Ainur Elmgren, unless indicated otherwise.
era. More research on the origins of these rumors is needed (Belyaev 2017, 219–20).

Historians of the Finnish Tatars have commented on a “double identity” among members of the community (Leitzinger 2006, 256). On the one hand, Tatars in Finland today maintain the success story by emphasizing their industriousness and financial independence. In an interview in 2015, the chairman of the Helsinki congregation stated that the Tatars have “integrated by working” (Salminen and Pietarinen 2015). On the other hand, the community’s internal memory culture records the negative effects of the pressure to assimilate and the experiences of racism. The survival strategy of keeping a low profile has made the Finnish Tatars appear to some as an “unknown” or “invisible” minority (Ståhlberg 2012; Martens 2013).

Before independence, Tatars were assumed to be well known to the public in Finland: “[…] surely those matters, familiar to everyone—Kazan – the Khanate of Kazan – Tatars – […] gateway to Asia—evoke desire, curiosity […]” (Päivälehti, August 12, 1893). The earlier familiarity with the Tatars was a product of the popularization of Finnish linguists’ and ethnologists’ travel accounts in the nineteenth century. Finnish scientists and scholars took advantage of the opportunity to explore the territory of the Russian Empire. One of the main goals of their research was an answer to a politically sensitive question: Were the Finns members of the “Mongol” or “Yellow” race? The origin of this question was the hypothesis that the Finno-Ugric languages were related to other agglutinative languages in Eurasia, such as Turkic and Mongolian. Encounters with Tatars and other Turkic-speaking peoples in Eurasia complicated the picture because Tatars were also difficult to classify racially. Finnish scholars, such as linguist Matthias Alexander Castrén (1813–1852), were initially not hostile to the potential connection, but during the late-nineteenth century, extremely hierarchical racial theories extolling the “Aryan” or “Nordic” race were popularized in the West (Isaksson 2001, 78–85, 200). As a result, Finnish scholars strove to “prove” Finnish whiteness by any means necessary. Because of the conflation of language and race, linguist and Turkologist Gustaf John Ramstedt (1873–1950) was expected to pronounce the final judgment on the racial makeup of the Finnish people. Ramstedt, who was careful to differentiate phenotypically between Volga Tatars and Mongols while classifying them under the same racial category, called the Finns not only white, but “the whitest race” (Ramstedt 1919a, 44).

Although Tatars were imagined to belong to a different race, they managed to blend rather seamlessly into Finnish society from the 1920s onwards. In 1924, a local newspaper published an essay by the vicar Wilhelm Hagfors, who opposed the right for non-Christians to apply for citizenship, in the assumption that it was still under debate (1924). Jews had been granted the right to apply for citizenship by a special act in 1918, and the constitution of 1919 and an amendment of 1920
finally guaranteed freedom of religion as well as equality between foreigners regardless of religion (Leitzinger 2006, 211–14). Hagfors cited the low number of a hundred Muslim residents to prove that their rights were irrelevant. His number was a severe underestimation but based on available statistical data. Leitzinger estimates that 123 Muslim families arrived in Finland as refugees between 1921 and 1924 alone, in addition to the already resident population (Leitzinger 2006, 116–17). Johannes Asikainen (2017) has shown how the fact that the official population statistics, produced under close cooperation with the Church of Finland, led to the distortion of statistics to the detriment of minorities. It was not deemed important to represent minority numbers accurately; instead, it was important to prove the absolute dominance of the Lutheran faith among the population (29–34).

Because of the tightening of border controls between Finland and the Soviet Union, and the political tensions and persecutions of minorities in their former homeland, Tatars in Finland were more than motivated to prove their allegiance to the Republic of Finland, while also striving to develop and maintain the separate identity of their community as a part of a transnational Turko-Tatar network. A key role in the formation of this “double identity” is played by privileged individuals striving to shape the public image of their group. In the early twentieth century, the interactions between these minority representatives and their desired allies among the majority population’s elite were far from equal. The latter, with a stronger position in Finnish society, tended to appropriate newcomer minorities for their own causes. Aspiring Tatar leaders and intellectuals felt the need to navigate both local and global political turmoil and to handle the demands of their would-be benefactors as well as the demands of their own communities. Some brought upon themselves the ire of their peers, their allies, and even the Finnish authorities. The negative experiences were relegated to the shadow side of the success story. Even historians who have promoted the Finnish Tatar success story have explored the notion of keeping a “low profile”. According to Leitzinger, the community learned to be careful in disputes to avoid solving internal disagreements in public at Finnish courts. The descendants of the disputing parties have mostly partaken of attitudes and hints of unsure origin, because the older generation stopped speaking openly about matters (Leitzinger 2006, 193). Belyaev (2017) identifies this “low profile” strategy as particularly present during the wars with the Soviet Union, when the Finnish Tatar community had many vulnerable relatives in the USSR (150). The survival strategies of the Finnish Tatars could have effects far beyond the borders of Finland.

The title of this article is taken from my Tatar grandfather’s wartime anecdote. When an officer found out that my grandfather had been drafted despite not being a citizen of Finland, the officer called him “our secret weapon.” The quip shows how Finnish Tatars, as not-quite insiders, and not-quite outsiders, could be an asset to the majority’s needs, but their
existence could also be conveniently forgotten—to be re-discovered when needed again. At the same time, the fluidity of their identity (as Muslims, Volga Turks, Finnish Tatars) and their indefinable appearance (some Finns depicted them as Asian in cartoons and stage costumes [Elmgren 2020]; others saw them as “Southerners,” and still others marveled at how “normal” they were) meant that individual Tatars could hide, if necessary, or instrumentalize their public identities to appeal to the majority, or recreate themselves to empower their own community.

Minority Survival Strategies
The study of what can be termed immigrant and minority survival strategies is vast. Studies on the maintenance of group identities range from cultural explanations to structural; the relation to the majority population, as well as to other groups, can also be studied through interaction theory, or ideas of “mixed embeddedness” (Karan 2017). I focus on individual practices, successes, and failures in a historical perspective from the 1880s to 1945.

The history of the Finnish Tatars is also the history of Islam in Finland until the arrival of greater numbers of other Muslim groups as refugees in the early 1990s. The Finnish Tatars have constituted a relatively homogeneous group, ethnically, religiously, and professionally. The first known Tatars to arrive in Finland came as conscripts of the Imperial Russian Army. Muslim worship had taken place in the fortress of Sveaborg outside Helsinki by the early nineteenth century. Few soldiers settled permanently in the country, but there was some continuity, as the military mullahs of Sveaborg also served the early civilian community of Muslims in Helsinki (Belyaev 2017, 73–74). Most of the current community traces back its lineage to traveling merchants from a handful of Mishär (a sub-group of Volga Tatars) villages in the Sergach district in the Nizhny Novgorod government in the Russian Empire. The migration of Mishär Tatar merchants and peddlers began in the late 1800s (Halén and Martikainen 2015). Belyaev (2017) notes that the railroad connection between St. Petersburg and Riihimäki, north of Helsinki, was completed in 1870, connecting the capitals of the Empire and the Grand Duchy (73). The development of rail connections within Finland in the 1870s and 1880s aided the settlement of Tatar merchants in important cities and market towns (99).

Both poor peddlers and wealthier merchants belonging to ethnic and religious minorities occupied a particular position in the agrarian-dominated society of the previous turn of the century. Edna Bonacich’s concept of “middleman minorities” may be used to describe the risky but potentially rewarding roles, both socially and economically, such mobile ethnic groups could fulfill between different social classes (Bonacich 1973). In the case of the Finnish Tatars, similarly to the Finnish Jews, this middleman position was historically contingent and, as its specific preconditions—a stratified, hierarchical society with rigid social roles—gradually changed, the “middleman minority” also disappeared from public view.
The eventual diversification of occupations among the Tatar minority resembles the equivalent process within the Jewish community in Finland (Ekholm 2014).

Peddlers offered desirable products and services, but they were also condemned by journalists and authorities for skinning poor peasants, spreading diseases and rumors, and committing crimes. Wealthier merchants looking to regularize their stay in the country were often caught in the middle of legal disputes between the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland and the Russian Empire. The reception of the Tatars in the Finnish press revealed a conceptual confusion around the Tatar population in Finland. They were difficult to classify in statistics. They came from Russia but were not Russians. The legality of their presence was disputed. Their religion, language, and details of their costume distinguished the Tatar peddler from the “rucksack Russians,” itinerant traders from the Archangelsk and Olonets regions in Russia, who were considered to be familiar marketplace visitors by the 1880s (Wassholm and Sundelin 2018, 133; Wassholm 2020).

The independence of Finland was a tumultuous process. The revolutionary year of 1917 and the bloody civil war in the spring of 1918 also meant that some Tatars lost their lives in the conflict, although the local Tatar communities remained passive bystanders. After the Bolshevik revolution, the next wave of Tatars arrived in Finland. In addition to political refugees, Finnish Tatars sought to bring relatives over the initially porous borders. Following independence, many Tatars lived under threat of expulsion, some for illegal trading and some for suspicions of intrigues against Finland. Nevertheless, settling down and acquiring citizenship became possible (Baibulat 2004, 22). The first official religious congregation for the Muslim Tatars was founded in 1925. The population of Tatars in Finland has always fluctuated around a thousand individuals, but there are no exact figures. Membership of religious congregations has not included all self-identified Tatars.

In the turbulent times of the February Revolution and the October Revolution in 1917 as well as the Civil War in Finland 1918, Tatars became a “pet minority” for some Finnish intellectuals and political activists who wanted to utilize them in the struggle against Soviet Russia. However, positive attention could also sow the seed of discord within the community itself. A closer look at these conflicts reveals that the “success story” of the Finnish Tatars was not yet formed in the decades before the Second World War, and that many different strategies were tested by members of the community to gain status and relevance in Finland.

How Does One Become a “Model Minority”? Throughout the twentieth century, Finnish Tatars actively discussed their identity and role as a community in numerous self-published books and magazines (Halén 1979). The Tatar minority did not create its own identity and history in a national vacuum. Some of the community’s leading
members were inspired by Turkish nationalism, while others maintained contacts to Tatars in other countries. Finnish Tatars saw themselves as members of a worldwide community of Muslims and welcomed individual Muslims from other ethnic groups into their places of worship (Halén 1991, 76–77).

Finnish Tatars could also use their imagination and knowledge of history and myth to build an idiosyncratic identity. As long-term historical minorities in many countries, Tatars have been struggling with—and appropriating—historical and ethnic stereotypes. Internal disagreements about the meaning of a “Tatar” identity have affected Tatar communities throughout the world. Before modern nationalism, Tatar was perceived to be an exonym, possibly an insult (Bukharaev 2000, 12–14). However, the influential Islamic scholar and historian Shigabutdin Marjani (1818–89) stated that, regardless of which ethnonym the Turkic-speaking Muslims of the Middle Volga region used for themselves, the Russians would find a way to twist it to a slur, and therefore they might as well go by “Tatar” (Leitzinger 2006, 78). In the modern era, activists have championed political or cultural identities as Turks, Mishärs, or Volga-Bolgars, while scholars note the potentially lasting appeal of the Golden Horde to the Volga Tatar diaspora (Shnirelman 1996, 59).

Despite the efforts of scholars and writers studying the Tatar communities in Finland, the appeal of a success story must also be understood in the context of widespread ignorance. In 2012, the Finnish Tatar politician Jasmin Hamid, having been elected to the Helsinki city council for the Green Party, was presented as “one of the first council members of immigrant background” on public service television (YLE Aamu-TV, October 31, 2012). Meanwhile, the Tatar “success story” has been used polemically against other Muslim groups. In xenophobic rhetoric, the Finnish Tatars become the exception that proves the rule that Muslims cannot integrate successfully into Finnish culture. Jussi Halla-aho, the leader of the right-wing Finns Party since 2017, claimed in 2005 that discrimination experienced by Roma and Somali people was not based on racism, because “people don’t have a negative attitude toward Tatars or Japanese, although they are as different in appearance and culture” (Halla-aho, April 20, 2005). He revised his prejudices after meeting a Tatar couple at a neighborhood playground. Halla-aho described the husband as “normal and pleasant, a cultivated man, speaking about normal things, wearing normal clothing,” and the wife, “also a Tatar, is a normal and pleasant woman in normal clothes” (Halla-aho, September 11, 2007). He added that the Islam that he criticized was not “their” Islam. In the first example, Tatars were tolerable to Halla-aho—despite their Otherness—because they were well adjusted. In the second example, they were tolerable because they were not the Other, after all.

These contradictory notions of exoticism and ordinariness may be shared by many Finnish Tatars themselves. Some believe sincerely in the success story and promote it as inspirational. Others may prefer to avoid
public debate and keep a low profile. Finnish Tatars may cherish “just getting along” and being able to take a joke (Kervinen 2004). Some have had the experience that outside of Finland, a Tatar or part-Tatar identity is an asset and that they are not merely a curiosity or the butt of a joke (Ståhlberg 2012). In such contexts, “Tatarness” might become the individual’s own “secret weapon.”

But success stories must not be taken at face value. More than a century ago, the Hungarian Turkologist Ármin Vámbéry (1832–1913) wrote about the perception of meek contentment among Tatars in the Russian Empire:

Yet despite these emigrations [. . .] the general opinion has held that the Tatars have never had any complaints about Russia; contrariwise, that they, in their firm conviction in the impossibility of avoiding fate, have never desired to speak one word of discontent or displeasure, even less to show any sign of revolt or to express more biting criticism [. . .]. (Vámbéry 1908, 55)

Today, it is uncontroversial to discuss the situation of Tatars in the Russian Empire as fraught with real repression (Bekkin and Ståhlberg 2015). Vámbéry himself wanted to inform Western readers that Tatars did indeed actively criticize their living conditions and fight against the suppression of their religion and language (Landau 2004, 174). Tatars might have shared the experience of oppression that made a virtue out of the necessity to keep a low profile, but many of them did raise their voice for various causes, got involved in activism, and ended up being perceived as troublemakers.

Stereotyping and Self-Defense in the Grand Duchy
To deconstruct the success story, we must take a closer look at the local reception of the first Tatar migrants in Finland. Until 1917, the descriptions and depictions of these Tatar peddlers and merchants were colored with general xenophobia and religious prejudice toward non-Christians but also with “infectious” prejudices aimed at other disadvantaged groups, such as anti-semitic and anti-ziganist stereotypes. Tatars have a complicated presence in the historical consciousness of many European nations. Translated sayings, works of fiction, and news reports from distant countries are numerous among the hits of a general search of the term “Tatar” in early twentieth-century newspapers in Finland (Kaisko 2012, 96–97). Tatars were accused of being “as disgusting as Jews and [. . .] behaving more insolently” (Hämäläinen, May 22, 1889; see also Wassholm 2020). Newspapers gave colorful descriptions of this “new scourge”:

Already the appearance betrays that the merchant is not a citizen of this country. It is a stumpy man, walks slightly bowed, his face jaundiced, usually pock-marked, an old fur hat on his head,
wearing a belted caftan, dirty, feet in high boots (Mikkeli-lehti, March 16, 1898).

The peddler’s small trade took place in a legal gray zone. Itinerant trade was illegal for non-citizens in Finland. However, local authorities often lacked means or motivation to enforce the law (Wassholm and Sundelin 2018, 133; Wassholm 2020). Attitudes were dependent on changes in the greater political climate.

A specific case illustrates the political tensions within Finnish society that also affected minorities during that time. In 1899, the February Manifesto of Emperor Nicholas II threatened to erase the constitutional autonomy of Finland as a Grand Duchy directly subject to the monarch. Leading Finnish activists collected signatures for a protest petition to be delivered to the emperor. In the press, rumors began to circulate that peddlers had been collecting signatures for obscure purposes around the country. Many newspaper articles put the blame on Tatars, claimed that these counter-petitions professed loyalty to the Tsar, and accused Tatars and other foreign peddlers of spreading rumors that land was going to be distributed to the poor.2

The “petition panic” spread so rapidly that a few newspapers recommended that their readers keep calm, at least so as not to scare the children with unsubstantiated horror stories (Rauman Lehti, April 15, 1899; Hämeen Sanomat, August 13, 1899). Decades later, the event was considered to be significant enough to be researched and debunked by a Tatar scholar (Räsänen 1941).

At the time, Tatars almost never appeared on their own terms and in their own words in the Finnish- or Swedish-language press. However, a Tatar businessman in Tampere, Mustafa Ismailoff, wrote to the local newspaper to declare himself and his employees innocent of the petition scandal (Hämäläinen, April 22, 1899). Ismailoff’s case is a micro-historical study of the challenges that a first-generation Tatar trader faced in nineteenth-century Finland. He established himself as a trader in the industrial city of Tampere in 1895 (Baibulat 2004, 23). After receiving a commercial license, he seems to have settled in quickly. In 1897, Ismailoff started to advertise his haberdashery in the Tampere newspaper Aamulehti (June 3, 1897). The local newspapers included him in their lists of noteworthy taxpayers (Tammerfors Nyheter, May 14, 1898; Aamulehti, February 26, 1899). In 1898, he could afford to move to a central location at Hämeenkatu 25, the main street (Aamulehti, June 16, 1898).

Even though Ismailoff showed evidence of success, it seems that his business annoyed some locals. In September 1898, an anonymous letter in

2 A selection of headlines from newspapers associating the term tattari with the rumors: “Tattarit adressiinsa nimiä houkuttelemassa” [Tartars luring signatures to their petition] (Aamulehti, April 8, 1899, 2); ”Onnettomuus tuli tattarien adressille” [Tartar petition out of luck] (Tamperen Sanomat, April 11, 1899, 3); ”Tattarit puuhassa Kotkassakin” [Tartars busy also in Kotka] (Päivälehti, April 19, 1899, 3).
**Tammerfors Nyheter** was remarkable enough to get distribution in other newspapers in the country. The letter called Tampere “the promised land of the Tatars” and described their appearance, religion, and businesses mockingly, feigning surprise at the fact that the traders were using bicycles. Ismailoff’s address was mentioned as “their headquarters.” The letter writer implied that illegal business was afoot: “I don’t think I can judge if such peddler trade is legal or not, but surely a poor ‘rucksack Russian’ will get caught if he offers his goods in the countryside” (*Wiborgsbladet*, September 17, 1898, 3). It was possible to interpret this as an encouragement to denounce the traders, or at least to undermine general confidence in them.

Sometimes professional disagreements took more brutal forms. In February 1899, Ismailoff was involved in a market brawl (*Aamulehti*, February 15, 1899). In March, someone threw a brick through Ismailoff’s shop window (*Tammerfors Nyheter*, March 17, 1889). Multiple incidents must have raised tensions and prepared Ismailoff to defend himself, no matter against whom. Soon after the February Manifesto in 1899, the “petition panic” reached Tampere. *Tampereen Sanomat* reported in April that a Tatar in Pori had tried to trick a small boy to sign a strange paper, but the boy managed to snatch the paper and delivered it to the police (April 11, 1899). A few weeks later, the newspaper published a similar story about schoolboys in Tampere stealing a “petition” from a Tatar. Ismailoff undoubtedly felt threatened by the gossip. Together with Josepoff, a fellow merchant, he tried to raise a libel suit against *Tampereen Sanomat* (*Tammerfors Nyheter*, May 10, 1899). The newspaper facetiously claimed not to know what nationality the accusers might belong to (*Tampereen Sanomat*, May 10, 1899). Because the offending article had not mentioned anyone by name, the libel charges were dropped. *Tampereen Sanomat* was triumphant: “Don’t go to the sauna if you don’t itch”; that is, if you can’t take the heat, stay out of the kitchen (May 11, 1899). Ismailoff and Josepoff had to pay twenty marks to cover the legal expenses of the newspaper’s editor-in-chief. The unsuccessful libel suit was even seen as a minor victory for freedom of the press at a time when the Governor-General held the press under strict control (*Kansalainen*, May 15, 1899).

Ismailoff had some reason to worry, not only because of his personal experiences. In the spring of 1899, the rural police were instructed to round up for interrogations Russian subjects practicing illegal peddling (Tommla 1999, 247–48; Polvinen 1985, 213–15). Albeit dubious, the petition stories were so numerous that scholars have speculated that actual petitions may have been distributed concerning the rights of foreigners to trade in Finland (Asikainen 2017, 41). The Russification measures in 1900 included a decree that legalized itinerant trade in Finland for Russian subjects. Tatars were rumored of appealing to pro-Russian governors and receiving the necessary permits, despite popular resistance (*Helsingin Sanomat*, June 14, 1914). In 1912, the Russian Duma unilaterally imposed
an “Equality Act” on Finland to allow Russian subjects, including Tatars, the right to trade freely in the country, but the Finnish authorities refused to ratify it (McRae 1997, 45).

Migrating peddlers were often lumped together when accused of various crimes and misdemeanors. Tatars were accused of skinning their easily duped rustic customers and taking their profits to Russia. Their wares were either too cheap or their prices were too high. Their wares were suspected to spread contagion, such as cholera (Wassholm 2020, 19–20).3 Often Tatars were depicted along with other despised groups in cartoons (Elmgren 2020). If Russian nationalists complained about Finnish obstruction or separatism, Finnish newspapers could reply that only misbehaving Russian peddlers and Tatars were treated badly in Finland—and did not Russians themselves have a proverb, “an uninvited guest is worse than a Tatar” (Länsi-Suomi, April 16, 1910)? However, it is important to note that the perceptions in the newspapers, often sponsored and consumed by the middle classes, differed from the experiences of the peddlers’ rural and working-class customers (Wassholm and Sundelin 2018).

The class-related matter of horse meat consumption became a concern for the early animal welfare societies in Finland and is a prime example of the high visibility of Tatars in the Finnish public sphere before independence. Russian literature and Finnish explorers spread stories about the custom of eating horse meat, “which seems to be the best delicacy of the Tatars” (Pohjan Poika, December 30, 1907, 2; on horse meat consumption, see Svanberg, Ståhlberg, and Bekkin 2020). The Tatars’ reputed taste for horse meat interfered with a change in Finnish law and culture regarding the treatment and slaughter of horses. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Finland, founded in 1901, promoted the consumption of horse meat along with animal welfare. The society’s journal, Eläinsuojelus (Animal protection), published articles about the benefits of horse meat penned by intellectuals and officials belonging to the upper middle classes, who were following the example of their peers in Sweden and Germany. Transforming the horse into an economic asset was a way of persuading commoners to submit to new regulations and stricter hygienic control. The introduction of a new taste in Finnish meat consumption became a civilizing act. Eläinsuojelus promoted the use of horse meat as an economic alternative and organized horse steak dinners to dispel prejudices about its flavor (Suomen Eläinsuojeluyhdistys 1905, 156).

Eläinsuojelus also published stories about Tatars buying old horses and butchering them on the outskirts of towns. Some stories were based on reports received by the society, others were fictional. Tatars and Roma were sometimes mixed up, because the slur tattari could be used of both

3 Playing with the idea of contamination, a satirical magazine joked that hugging a Tatar was madness because kissing a Mohammedan would transmit polygamy (Kompia, 20 April 1899, 8).
groups (Suomen Eläinsuojeluyhdistys 1912b, 179). However, mentions of Islamic customs and culprits’ names reveal that the journal chiefly targeted the Turkophone, hippophage Tatars, not the Roma. These stories served as calls for increased public surveillance and improved education of the lower classes (Suomen Eläinsuojeluyhdistys 1907a, 76; 1907b, 91; 1908a, 10; 1912a, 46). In 1908, the editors promised the public a reward of 50 markka for any information that would lead to the conviction of Tatars guilty of illicit horse slaughter (Suomen Eläinsuojeluyhdistys 1908b, 170). The journal celebrated successful convictions and published the offenders’ names (Suomen Eläinsuojeluyhdistys 1909, 142).

Animal welfare activist Torsten Forstén promoted new methods of stunning animals before slaughter and produced a number of informative pamphlets on the topic. He accused Tatar butchers of cruelty in his pamphlet The Most Common Methods of Slaughter in Our Country (Forstén 1905, 12–13). Their methods were an uncomfortable reminder of the traditional methods of the Finnish peasantry that had only recently been outlawed (Forstén 1902). The prime objective of the activists was to reform the customs of their countrymen, and Tatars everywhere served as examples of barbarism. Animal welfare activist Constance Ullner (1903) reported about the customs of Tatars and Turks at the Black Sea coast. She claimed that Tatars mistreated their horses in the belief that they were their reborn enemies and warned that “Tatars were vindictive” (178). The popular press picked up these stereotypes and developed their political implications. A Finnish animal abuser could be accused of being “worse than a Tatar” (Tornion Uutiset, January 26, 1909). A complaint addressed by Muslims to the Governor General on behalf of dabh slaughter (permitted according to Islamic law) was described as “sabre rattling” and a hostile act against Finnish autonomy. Muslim demands were equated with Russian imperialist policies (Helsingin Sanomat, June 16, 1909; Sosialisti, March 26, 1910).

Tatars, as barbaric Others, served as useful scarecrows on the path to progress. As late as the 1920s, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Finland appealed to the authorities concerning dabh and shechita slaughter (conforming to Jewish diet regulations) in its annual report. The society claimed that nothing had been done about an alleged Tatar practice:

[. . .] to make the meat tender, they whip and trample the horse to death. This practice, often a topic during our meetings, and often reported by us to the authorities, must be common knowledge by

4 The society’s journals sometimes published “Tatar tales” promoting kindness to animals. In the tales, Tatar characters were often punished for their lack of compassion (Suomen Eläinsuojeluyhdistys 1906, 123–26; Eläinten Ystävät, December 1, 1908).

5 Roughly equivalent to 212 Euros, or 254 US dollars, in 2020 (Suomen virallinen tilasto 2020).
now. However, the authorities just do not fulfill their obligations [. . .]. (Suomen Eläinsuojeluyhdistys 1923, 55)

There was ideological power in the imagined distinction between dabh slaughter (itself not very different from the practices of the Finnish peasantry before the legal reforms) and new and improved “Finnish” practices, imported from Sweden and Germany by elite reformists. As Jonathan Burt (2006) observes in his article on “Conflicts around Slaughter in Modernity,” which deals with British debates on Jewish slaughter and the introduction of new industrial methods of slaughter in the modern meat industry, “the cultural conflict around slaughter reveals that the manner in which we adhere to this or that mode of animal slaughter”—and, I might add, are persuaded to change those modes—“is one of the constituting elements of our particular social identity” (126).

The Public Sphere of Independent Finland: Access and Allies

After the October Revolution in 1917, unprecedented numbers of refugees arrived in Finland, including relatives of previously settled minorities. Not only newly arrived Tatars felt the suspicions of Finnish authorities, as private correspondence was intercepted and, in some cases, ended up under public scrutiny. Finnish authorities suspected minority communities of Bolshevik infiltration, a direct concern for the Tatar community (Leitzinger 2006, 116–17, 146, 206). A study of the archives of the Turku police reveals that Tatars appearing in the police’s register of foreign residents from 1914 to 1918 were often placed “under threat of deportation,” being Russian subjects (Asikainen 2017, 27). The list of foreign residents from the period 1919 to 1923 differentiated Tatars from Russians by nationality (using the obsolete and derogatory term tattari), and they were no longer predominantly designated for deportation. Asikainen interprets this as a result of the improvement of the legal standing of the Tatars after the passing of the freedom of religion act of 1923—and, paradoxically, of their increased visibility (Asikainen 2017, 27–28).

However, visibility came in many forms, not necessarily positive ones. In Western Europe, Tatars had been used as an explanation of the backwardness of Russia, either in the historical sense of the “Tatar yoke” (Bilz-Leonhardt 2008, 33) or in the racist sense of inherited inferiority. Derogatory notions of Tatars had also been imported to Finland through the Russian press. In both anti-Russian and Russian propaganda, Tatars were used as metaphors of cultural savagery and racial inferiority (Uusi Suomi, August 20, 1927). In 1924, German economist and sociologist Werner Sombart held a speech at the Finnish-German Society in Helsinki.

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6 The word tattari was disliked by Tatars in Finland, not only because of its frequent use in negative reporting, but also because it was used as a slur against Roma people (Leitzinger 2006, 67–68; 2011, 36). Tatarophiles like G. J. Ramstedt and Yrjö Jahnsson used the terms tataritataari or tatarilainen/tataarilainen. Eventually, many Finnish Tatars began to refer to themselves as turkkilainen (Turk), which remained in use until the 1970s (Leitzinger 2006, 224–46).
where he claimed that “the Jews had conceived the Russian Revolution, the Tatars carried it out bloodily—Lenin was a Tatar—and the Slavs patiently suffer its disastrous consequences” (Uusi Suomi, October 23, 1924). This speech was reproduced in the major newspapers (Asikainen 2017, 52). The notion of a racial stigma was also reproduced in the early twentieth-century context of the rivalry between Finnish- and Swedish-speakers in Finland. Finnish-speaking Finns reported with disgust that Swedish-speakers sometimes called them tattari (Tartar). Finnish-speakers bristled at the insult because of the implication of Asian origins, and, therefore, racial inferiority (Elmgren 2020, 28).

Finnish nationalists mocked the Western racism that placed the Finns in the same inferior category as Asian nations, but otherwise accepted the notion of racial hierarchies, as long as Finns had a chance to stay on top. Pekka Isaksson has shown how Finnish scholars adapted hierarchical racial theories in anthropological research on the indigenous Sami (Isaksson 2001, 20). Linguist G. J. Ramstedt was cited to prove that Finns were “the whitest race in Europe,” at least in comparison with the Tatars (Uusi Suomi, May 23, 1925; Ramstedt 1919a). Nevertheless, Ramstedt was one of the Tatars’ faithful supporters (Ramstedt 1919b). Already by 1910, he had helped the Tatar author and religious scholar Musa Jarullah Bigi compile information for a Tatar-language book about Finland (Suupohjan Kaiku, April 4, 1912; on Bigi and Finland, see Belyaev 2017, 117; Zaripov and Belyaev 2020). Together with another respected scholar, economist Yrjö Jahnsson, Ramstedt became involved in efforts to aid political refugees from Russia, as well as to organize a potential resistance movement consisting of Tatars and other minority nations. Businessman Hasan Kanykoff (1880–1954) was one of Ramstedt’s and Jahnsson’s Tatar contacts. Jahnsson helped Kanykoff to apply successfully for Finnish citizenship in July 1921 and to bring his children to Finland from Soviet Russia (Leitzinger 2006, 117–20).

In a study on the nations of Russia published in the spring of 1919, Yrjö Jahnsson paid considerable attention to the national movement of the Turko-Tatar peoples in the former Russian Empire (Zetterberg 1982, 306). Jahnsson emphasized in his lectures that their representatives should be taken to Finland to receive a Finnish education, which they would spread among their nations. Jahnsson organized asylum for many refugees and helped them to find work and attend schools (Halén 1999, 290; Leitzinger 2006, 231–33). “Imagine the difficult position of the Tatars,” Jahnsson wrote to his wife. “If I should just quit for a moment, other forces will get moving to stop them from arriving.” Jahnsson meant the Finnish authorities, whom he intended to fight “out of principle.” He found the liberal Minister of the Interior, Heikki Ritavuori, “strangely narrow-minded in this case, probably chiefly because of the agitation of the Central [Investigative] Police” (Zetterberg 1982, 307; Leitzinger 2006, 119). The Central Investigative Police (Etsivä Keskuspoliisi) had just been founded as a political police force in 1919 (Wiberg and Piispanen 1997,
Despite Jahnsson’s suspicions, Leitzinger (2011) notes that the chief of the Central Investigative Police, fierce anti-Communist Esko Riekki, showed understanding toward the clandestinely immigrating Tatars (39). It is highly likely that the activities of Ramstedt, Jahnsson, Kanykoff, and their supporters were seen as problematic by the authorities, because they endangered border security at a time when irregular Finnish forces were crossing the border to aid uprisings in Soviet Karelia. Jahnsson had the ear of Rudolf Holsti, Minister of Foreign Affairs, which proved occasionally helpful (Leitzinger 2006, 186–87).

The professor saw himself as indispensable for the cause of the Tatars, but what about the Tatar activists? Hasan Kanykoff had come to Finland at the young age of fifteen from the village of Aktuk in the Sergach district. During the following decades, Kanykoff traded in textiles and built up a successful business network. He was also one of the founding members of the Finnish Oriental Society (Hufvudstadbladet, October 16, 1919). In the autumn of 1919, Kanykoff and another Tatar activist, Sarif Daher, joined Ramstedt and Jahnsson in the Club of Vanguard Nations (Etuvartiokansojen klubi) to unite the resistance activities of the minority peoples of Russia (Leitzinger 2006, 180–88; 2011, 39). There are few public traces of their practical activities, except for a late biographical note that Kanykoff had served as “bursar of the Tatar Military Committee” in 1917, predating the Club of Vanguard Nations (Helsingin Sanomat, February 28, 1950). This was probably related to fundraising efforts for the Idel-Ural Republic, a short-lived state uniting Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvash, and other ethnicities in the Volga region in 1918. If Jahnsson served as the face of the organization to the Finnish public, Kanykoff may have been the actual organizer of refugee rescue operations, utilizing his language skills and his extensive contacts with people on the Soviet Russian side of the border, as well as his experiences as an organizer of military training during the revolutionary years. Russian researcher Yuliya Guseva has found references to Kanykoff in GPU files from this era, which represented him as “enjoying the protection of Finnish officials” and a “great authority” to the Finnish police, a key figure in the transmission of aid to persecuted Muslim intellectuals in Soviet Russia (Guseva 2018, 81–82).

One of the less glorious legacies of the club was a rift between some leading members of the Tatar community in Finland. Hasan Kanykoff and Zinetullah Ahsen Böre had opposing views of the project, and never reconciled after their conflict. Ahsen Böre was also a native of Aktuk and owed his safety in Finland to Jahnsson, who had averted the expulsion of Ahsen Böre and the entire Tatar community from Terijoki, by the local governor (Suikkanen 2012, 50). In December 1919, the irascible

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7 Leitzinger gives the impression that the Tatars founded the club. Zetterberg names only the Finnish and Estonian members and one Komi immigrant, Igon Mosšeg (Zetterberg 1982, 308–9). Halén claims that the Club of Vanguard Nations may have been a Soviet set-up (Halén 1999, 290).
Jahnsson denounced Ahsen Böre as a Bolshevik agitator to the governor of Uusimaa and claimed that the Tatar had agitated for the murder of General Mannerheim. Ahsen Böre replied that “snot-nosed” Kanykoff with his allies had planned to “sell the Tatars to the English” (Leitzinger 2006, 189). After harsh words on both sides, the governor ordered the expulsion of Ahsen Böre from Uusimaa. Ahsen Böre settled in Tampere in 1920, where he kept a textile and haberdasher’s shop, and continued to play a leading role in the small Tatar community. The Helsinki congregation took his side and approached the governor with an open letter declaring Jahnsson to be an unknown individual who did not represent the Tatars in any way. Ahsen Böre would, in later writings, refer to Jahnsson as “the mad professor” (Suikkanen 2012, 60). The conflict was concurrent with the Greco-Turkish War of 1919–22, which had been instigated by the Western Allies. Britain had promised Greece territorial gains in former Ottoman territory. The Turcophile Ahsen had reasons to be suspicious of activities that would cause repercussions in Turko-Soviet relations, too (Leitzinger 2006, 191).

Although the club was unsuccessful in its political aims, many Tatars believed that Kanykoff’s personal connections had helped them through this transitional period. The benevolence of the professors toward the “poor Tatars” strengthened their self-confidence and “accelerated their Finnishization,” according to Leitzinger (2011, 39–40). In Leitzinger’s opinion, the conflicts that involved the Finnish authorities encouraged the adoption of the Freedom of Religion Act of 1922 (Leitzinger 2006, 192). Even though Jahnsson may have exaggerated his own importance at the expense of the minority activists, the cooperation produced some positive results. The club assisted political refugees such as the Volga Tatar politician Sadri Maqsudi, who had served as president of the Idel-Ural republic in 1918. As a deputy in the Duma, Maqsudi had been known as a defender of Finnish autonomy. He did not stay for long in Finland but continued to maintain contacts with Finland even after settling in Turkey, where he continued his career as a scholar and statesman (Belyaev 2017, 118–19). When Ramstedt was appointed chargé d’affaires for Finland in Tokyo and Beijing, he met Maqsudi in Paris and received a recommendation letter in Turkish for the long journey across the Levant (Halén 1999, 212).

As Soviet power consolidated, the activities of the Club of Vanguard Nations petered out toward the mid-1920s. Other enthusiasts spoke in favor of political co-operation between Finno-Ugric and Turanian nations against Soviet Russia, forming an “iron chain” around the common enemy, but remained doubtful about its immediate feasibility (Suunta, July 12, 1919; Uusi Suomi, February 14, 1924; Uusi Suomi, June 27, 1924). The club was discontinued and disparaged by nationalists as an ideological dead end (Fennobalticus 1927, 73; Leitzinger 2006, 186). Others were fascinated by its legacy. In one of the most famous nationalist science-fiction novels of the interwar era, author and illustrator Aarno Karimo pictured a future total war between Finland and Russia.
(see Stadius in this volume). The novel, *Kohtalon kolmas hetki* (The third moment of destiny), was first serialized in the magazine *Hakkapeliitta* in 1925–26, and published as a novel in 1926, with a second edition in 1935.

Finnish technological ingenuity plays an important role in the narrative, but the ultimate *deus ex machina* is a Tatar officer, a direct descendant of Genghis Khan and leader of a secret union of minority nations, who heads a million-headed Mongol horde in the final onslaught against Russia. The author’s imagination had evidently been captured by the idea, presented in the novel as an arithmetical fact, that all minorities of the Russian Empire together could outnumber the ethnic Russians. This power fantasy was contaminated with an antisemitic trope: the novel’s Russia was led by a crypto-Jew. The racist stereotype that Russians were pathetically incapable of action without “alien” leaders was used to justify the novel’s genocidal ending. Karimo was possibly inspired by the adventures of his acquaintance Yrjö Elfvengren, a Finnish-born officer in the Russian Army, who allegedly had fought on the side of the Crimean Tatars in 1918 and later joined the White side in the Finnish Civil War (Karimo 1928, 155–60; Aro 1931, 7).

The “conspiracy of the ten nations” in Karimo’s novel was a fanciful invention, but it would appear in a serious guise as an expression of what I call arithmetical pragmatism: the belief that Russia could be defeated by adding up the populations of its opponents until they collectively outnumbered the ethnic Russians (Elmgren, forthcoming). In 1933, the nationalist journal *Suomen Heimo* published Tatar author and businessman Ibrahim Arifulla’s (1901–55) essay “Idel-Ural” about the struggle for liberty by the “Volga Turks.” An unsigned introduction to the article claimed that only 75 million of the 160 million inhabitants of the Soviet Union were “Great Russians” and that Finnish prejudices against its oppressed minorities were unwarranted: “in the last decades, with increased contacts to Europe and Bolshevik terror, [the hope for independence] has led all minority peoples to organize on behalf of their national interests” (I. Arifulla 1933, 10). This was a way to frame the article as relevant to the Greater Finland project. Arifulla’s essay addressed the matter of uniting all minorities against Russia, but he was primarily interested in the Turkic nationalities. The essay was also published as the first of a publication series by the Prometheus association in Helsinki, founded as a branch of the international Promethean League to promote the cause of the national minorities in the Soviet Union (I. Arifulla 2011, 135; Leitzinger 2006, 196–204). Former supporters of the Club of Vanguard Nations, such as Ramstedt, were among its founding members (Halén 1979, 14; 1999, 290–93). Tatars, or rather, Turks, formed a significant proportion of its members. Of the association’s 72 members in 1933–34, 42 were native-born Finns, and 20 were “Idel-Uralians” (Leitzinger 2006, 200).

The Tatar community was open to other Turkic immigrants, who were often hired as teachers and contributed to publications. Osman Soukkan,
a native of the Ottoman Empire, became a valued member of the Helsinki community. He left Finland for Sweden after the Second World War and participated in the founding of the first Islamic congregation in Sweden (Sorgenfrei 2020). The Azeri Mehmet Sadik was hired as a teacher by Ahsen Böre and published in Helsinki a magazine for the independence of Azerbaijan, called *Yeni Turan*, later *Turan*, with contributions from Ibrahim Arifulla, among others. Sadik was fired by Ahsen Böre under unclear circumstances, possibly because the Central Investigative Police investigated him, although he was not accused of any crime. A later visa application was denied; the Central Investigative Police stated that Sadik had been spreading discord among the Muslims in Finland (Leitzinger 2006, 194–95).

In the early 1930s, another scandal rocked the Helsinki Muslim community. The Bukharan teacher Alimcan Idris (1887–1959), mentioned above, had gained the community’s trust. He was a proactive community representative who had advertised the success of the Tatar community in a Turku newspaper (*Schir* 1932). After a sojourn in Estonia in 1930 and 1931, Idris lived in Finland as a Turkish citizen. In 1932, the Central Investigative Police received tips from their colleagues in Estonia and Poland that Idris was in fact a GPU agent. His colorful life included serving Muslim prisoners of war in Germany as a mullah during the First World War. After the Bolshevik Revolution, he began to agitate for their return to Russia. According to Polish intelligence, he was caught at the border and sentenced to ten years in the Lubyanka prison for smuggling medicine. However, he was soon sent on various missions to Bukhara, to Kazan in 1920, and to Berlin in 1922. The Gestapo also informed the Finnish Central Investigative Police in 1934 of Idris’s suspicious activities. The Finnish authorities doubted the rumors but recommended the refusal of his visa in the future. Only Hasan Kanykoff supported Idris publicly (Leitzinger 2006, 195; Halén 2007, 40).

A complicating factor was that Idris belonged among those Turkic intellectuals who supported the term “Tatar,” which Kanykoff continued to use. As the relationship between the Soviet Union and Turkey cooled in the early 1930s, the Finnish Tatars increasingly made a symbolic and political choice between Turkish and Tatar identities (Leitzinger 2011, 44). Zinetullah Ahsen Böre, who had had his own share of trouble with Finnish authorities and intellectuals, had his citizenship application refused in 1922. Instead, he applied for Turkish citizenship, which was granted in 1923. He began to promote to the Finnish Tatars a Turkish alignment and the modernizing efforts of Mustafa Kemal, who had a generally positive reputation in Finland at the time. Ahsen Böre was one of the first Finnish Tatars to embrace Turkish nationalism, but he was far from the only one. As chairman of the Turkish Society of Finland, a cultural association founded in 1935, Ibrahim Arifulla resisted the use of the ethnonym Tatar and promoted the use of “Turk” about all nations.

8 See, for example, author Mika Waltari (1929) and statesman Urho Kekkonen (1930).
considered Turkic (I. Arifulla 1941). In an earlier interview, his brother Sadri Arifulla had dismissed the ethnonym Tatar as a Russian invention (S. Arifulla 1936). The enthusiasm formed the education of their children. Leitzinger calls the second generation of the Finnish Tatars (1935–65) “those who grew up as Turks” (2011, 43). Similar trends can be observed among Tatar minorities in other countries outside of the Soviet Union. For example, Japanese Tatars acquired Turkish citizenships in the 1950s, and are still referred to as “Turks” in Japanese literature, although the community mainly consisted of Volga Tatars, Bashkirs, and Central Asians until the post-war era (Dündar 2014).

Unlike many Tatar writers at the time, Ahsen Böre advocated the Latin alphabet. The spelling reforms initiated by him finally found a breakthrough in the Islamic Congregation of Finland in the 1950s and 1960s, after Böre’s death. He also proposed the founding of a school for “Finnish-Turkish” children, which became reality twenty years after his death. Two of his sons were sent to study in Istanbul, and the elder brother settled in Turkey permanently. The father may have wanted to put his ideals into practice but also to avoid the danger of assimilation. This included the temptation to become assimilated into a high-status minority. Some of Ahsen Böre’s children went to Swedish-language schools and participated in Swedish-speaking sports associations in Tampere, and eventually moved to Sweden (Suikkanen 2012, 91). The relative multiculturalism of the urban Swedish-speakers in Finland, already successfully assimilating Germans, Russians, and other immigrants, may have contributed to the appeal of Swedish schools and associations to minorities. Many Finnish Jews were also Swedish-speaking until the 1930s (Ekholm and Muir 2016).

Even though the efforts of individual Tatars and Turks were received benevolently, Pan-Turanism—the ideology of the unity of political interests between Turkic and Fenno-Ugric nations—never became a mainstream ideology in Finland. Although an inclusive Hungarian Pan-Turanist like Károly Tornay could take arithmetical pragmatism to new heights with a sum of “600 million [. . .] the largest number among the races of Man,” the nationalist journal Suomen Heimo rejected this vast imagined community in its comments to his article: The “doctrine that Turks and Mongols are our relatives is not accepted here” (Tornay 1933, 110–13). Tornay called for brotherly love to forge the Turanians into one people, but the Finnish-language nationalist movements of the 1920s and 1930s emphasized the danger of the small Finnish nation being “submerged” into greater national collectives. To many commentators, the fate of the minorities in Soviet Russia seemed irreversible, and the best course for Finland would be to strengthen its real and symbolic borders and eradicate all internal difference (Kallia 1937; Posti 1937).

The Tatars in Finland, fewer than 1,000 individuals during the interwar era, felt the threat of becoming “submerged in a sea of nations” even more acutely. After the discord caused by the Club of the Vanguard
Nations and the cases of Mehmet Sadik and Alimcan Idris, the Tatar communities may have feared that further internal conflicts would lead to negative perceptions by the majority, and so they adapted a low profile. Already in 1932, a Central Investigative Police agent reported that “[they] associate only with each other and live a completely isolated life that a stranger’s eye cannot penetrate” (Leitzinger 2011, 43). However, the Tatars maintained international contacts within the Volga Tatar diaspora that escaped the eye of the Finnish public. They commemorated the Idel-Ural Republic in a great congress of the diaspora in Poland in 1938, welcomed by representatives of the Polish state (Baibulat 2004).

The Redemptive War?
The participation of the Tatars and Jews in the Finnish armed forces as well as the women’s auxiliary corps (Lotta Svärd) between 1939 and 1945 has recently been formulated as the defining moment of their integration into the nation. Dan Kantor writes about the participation of the Finnish Jews in the Second World War: “It has often been said that then, at the latest, the Jews of Finland redeemed their place [lunastivat paikkansa] in and the acceptance of the Finnish society” (Kantor 2012). But a closer study of the rhetoric around the war as a redemptive event reveals that the integration process was one-sided. The participation of the minorities in the wars is not as important to the majority narratives as to the minorities’ own narratives (see Roman, this issue).

Although the Constitution of 1919 had given Tatars and other foreign citizens the right to apply for naturalization, a sizable portion of the Tatar population in Finland did not have Finnish citizenship when the Winter War broke out in 1939. According to oral history recorded by community members, stateless Finnish Tatars volunteered for service (Belyaev 2017, 156). However, according to the 1932 Conscription Act, foreign citizens or stateless refugees could be conscripted to military service by the order of the governor (Merikoski 1933, 7, 68). 9 Many may have felt that they volunteered out of patriotic duty, but they were legally obliged to obey the governor’s decision.

Although Tatars were numerically few, their presence at the front and at home evoked cognitive dissonance in Finnish journalists: The Tatars appeared to be both exotic and overwhelmingly normal. In a description of the gathered mourners at the funeral of a “Turkish” soldier, a columnist wrote that “especially the women were so Finnish-looking, and the men, too, dressed so familiarly, [. . .] that on first appearance you would have thought them to be Finnish through and through, but on a closer look the color and twinkle of their eyes proved them Southerners” (Suomen Islamseurakunta 2006, 103). The columnist confessed daydreaming about “Turanian tribal ties of blood,” for “our Turks, commonly called Tatars,

9 My grandfather Abbas Bavaudtin was among these stateless conscripts. He preserved the conscription order signed by the governor of Turku and Pori Province. This type of document ought to be studied further.
are great patriots and feel warm tribal affinity to the Finns.” Despite the affection, he felt confused observing a group of men in Finnish uniform speaking “such a strange language [. . .] that one could not understand a single word” (Suomen Islam-seurakunta 2006, 103).

The reaction was not always benign. In September of 1942, a uniformed soldier on leave was shot by a stranger while walking and conversing in Tatar with a friend in nocturnal Helsinki. The “shooter was suspected of believing [the victim] to be a spy or a desant [Soviet agent],” although he was never found (Suomen Islam-seurakunta 2006, 115).

Many Tatar women volunteered to serve in civil defense. In one case, this opened the way for Finnish Jews to participate in the “redemptive” process and overcome potentially lethal stereotypes. The Lotta Svärd organization, the prestigious women’s auxiliary corps, had previously excluded Jewish women, officially because they were not Christian. In the yearly meeting of the Lotta Svärd organization in 1923, it was stated that “Jews will probably be at pains to commit to the defense of the first clause of the Lotta pledge: our faith” (Vasara 1997, 150). This discrimination seemed to be amplified by political and racial prejudice. In 1925, the central board of directors received the guideline that “when considering membership applications by Jews and Russians, refuse them as a rule” (151). Later, when Jewish women applied for membership after the Winter War in the spring of 1940, the association also initially rejected them. But then, only a few weeks later, the applications of two Muslim women were immediately accepted by the board of directors. At the same time, the board accepted two applications by Jewish women. Although the board did not comment on the ideological change, it seemed as if the Muslim women had opened the way for their Jewish sisters (151).

During the Continuation War (1941–44), Finnish newspapers started to pay attention to the country’s minorities again, especially the Tatars. Ibrahim Arifulla was interviewed in the popular journal Seura, where he consistently referred to his people as “Turks” and their language as “Turkish” (Arti 1944). Some articles were devoted to their warlike past and successes against the Russians as well as their patriotic service in Finland, even debunking the petition panic of 1899 that apparently was still remembered (I. Arifulla 1941, 110). The Arifulla brothers served in various intelligence-related tasks during the Winter War 1939–40 and the Continuation War 1941–44 (Suomen Islam-seurakunta 2006, 26–27). Tatars seem to have been over-represented in military intelligence and propaganda duties in 1939–44, considering the small size of their naturalized population. Several Finnish Tatars participated in Operation Stella Polaris, a secret transfer of intelligence material and personnel to Sweden in case of Soviet occupation in 1944. Some of them remained in Sweden after the war to avoid repercussions (Leitzinger 2006, 184). Halén mentions a specific “Turkish section” of military intelligence under colonel Reino Hallamaa, who participated in the planning and execution of Operation Stella Polaris (2005, 24). The same individuals, who were
involved in the Tatar community’s public relations, evidently provided a “secret weapon” for the Finnish war effort.

The policy of territorial expansion awakened interest in ethnic minorities as potential allies. Ahsen Böre contributed to this tendency by painting a spectacular picture of a “peaceful” Europe ruled by Greater Germany, Greater Finland, and Greater Turkey (*Helsingin Sanomat*, August 28, 1941). However, at the same time, Finnish authors reproduced the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy theory, augmented with racist descriptions of the Bolsheviks and the Russian people as “Tatarized,” that is, Asian, hence autocratic and despotic (Ruuskanen 1944). Turkophiles and Tatarists alike had to continue defending their community against the unfortunate implications of such anti-Russian propaganda.

To improve the community’s public standing, Zinetullah Ahsen Böre had already by the 1930s started to promote information about Islam. He had a religious education and had functioned as an imam in Viborg before moving to Terijoki, where he was elected imam in 1916. His interest in spreading information about Islam to the Finnish majority was kindled around the same time as his pro-Turkish activities. In 1931, he translated a book by a famous convert, Lord Headley, also known as Shaikh Rahmatullah al-Farooq, into Finnish. He also translated the Quran into Finnish in collaboration with the Russian emigrant Georg Pimenoff. The project was finished in 1942. In the foreword, Ahsen Böre flattered the Finnish reader: “I have lived in Finland for more than a quarter of a century, and I have noticed that the Finns are enlightened and want to get the right understanding about all things” (Suikkanen 2012, 111). He sent a copy to the Commander in Chief, Gustaf Mannerheim, and received a telegram of thanks on December 18, 1942, for “your gift of the Holy Quran in the memory of the young Muslims who faithfully fulfilled their soldier’s vow until their heroic deaths” (Belyaev 2017, 150). Ahsen Böre, who had been denied citizenship based on the accusation that he had insulted Mannerheim, must have received some satisfaction from this reply.

There is some potential to explore to what extent Russians, Jews, and Tatars collaborated in their charity efforts for the ethnic and religious minorities among the Red Army POWs in Finland. By 1942, the prisoners of war under Finnish control had been sorted into separate categories, one of which was “soldiers and NCOs belonging to minority nationalities sympathetic to Finland” (Danielsbacka 2013, 82–84). Tatars and other Turkic nationalities were placed in this category. This helped the organization of private initiatives to their aid. It is possible that the Jewish businessman and humanitarian Abraham Stiller (1885–1972) helped the Tatar community to distribute aid and Qurans to Muslim prisoners of war.10 It was not an unproblematic task. Zinetullah Ahsen Böre supplied Muslim prisoners of war with Qurans and textiles, but was forced to give

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up his charity after reprimands by the State Police. His colleague, Georg Pimenoff, was imprisoned for two years for informing the International Red Karelia (Suikkanen 2012, 120).

Tatars served in military intelligence and in the interrogation of prisoners. After the Moscow armistice in 1944, some of them moved to Sweden in fear of trials or deportations according to the peace agreements (Suomen Islam-seurakunta 2006, 132–34). These literal secret weapons, Tatar refugees from Finland and the Baltic states, founded the first Muslim congregation in Sweden in 1949. The first Swedish imam was Osman Soukkan, who had arrived in Finland in the 1920s and become integrated into the Tatar community in Helsinki. At the time, there were around fifty Tatars living in Sweden (Al-Nadaf 2002, 88; on Tatars in Sweden, see Sorgenfrei 2020).

The ensuing Cold War and uneasy neutrality of Finland forced the Tatars to return to the “low profile.” Already in 1945, when the State Police produced a report on suspected anti-Soviet activities of the Finnish Muslims in compliance with the armistice agreement, the report repeated almost verbatim the results of the 1930s reports: “They associate only with each other and live a completely isolated life that a stranger’s eye cannot penetrate” (Leitzinger 2006, 204). It is possible that the Tatars continued to have friends in high places; alternatively, the majority’s wide-spread ignorance provided a protective veil.

No Shortcut to Success: Conclusion and Prospects for Further Research

The Tatars were compelled to serve various purposes in the interests of the majority population—or rather, its intellectual representatives—during the first decades of Finnish independence. We may imagine four parallel audiences to the success story, as articulated by Finnish Tatars: the Tatar community; the public sphere dominated by the majority population (often assumed to know nothing about Tatars); the global Tatar diaspora and the Turkic world; and the Dar al-Islam—the abode of Islam, the Muslim world. The resolution remains the same: after initial hardships, a compromise is reached, and the Tatar identity has been maintained, while an external assimilation process has been fulfilled, so that Tatars “pass” as Finns. Although individual stories of discrimination or prejudices are by no means ignored, they are not included in the public balancing of the accounts.

We have seen how Tatars in Finland on occasion provoked the ire of powerful allies and felt persecuted unfairly by authorities. Yrjö Jahnsson’s denunciation of Zinetullah Ahsen Böre to the authorities as a “Bolshevik” may have been groundless, but it had concrete effects: Ahsen Böre’s citizenship application was denied because of rumors substantiated by a respected Finn. Although the congregation supported him, its members must have drawn their own conclusions about the usefulness of provoking powerful people. Researching these everyday survival strategies must
be done through autobiographical accounts and extensive interviews. The topic can only be explored through its negation here: the initial failure of Zinetullah Ahsen Böre to maintain such networks and the lessons he may have drawn from it.

Immigrant groups relied heavily on informal networks of trust and support. Leitzinger has noted that agents of the Central Investigative Police, looking for evidence of business irregularities among Tatars in Terijoki in 1920, evaluated suspects favorably if they knew them personally (Leitzinger 2011, 40–41). When the Central Investigative Police gathered intelligence locally, the methods could be quite informal. Many negative decisions on citizenship applications were based on local authorities making sweeping statements of the “usefulness” of the applicant, the large size of their families, and the “harmful” competition that their businesses would constitute to Finnish entrepreneurs. Senior Detective Arvid Ojasti gave the following advice during a training session for detectives in 1935:

When investigating citizenship petitions, one should talk to janitors and house managers, but then I think that one can quite directly address the person without concern for their particular political color, especially concerning the foreigner’s financial circumstances. (Valtiollinen Poliisi 1935, 1)

Ignorant people could be persuaded to believe that foreigners would just end up living on taxpayers’ money, “and when you present it like this, people will gossip freely about the person in question” (Valtiollinen Poliisi 1935, 1). In Ahsen Böre’s case, the accumulated rumors from Terijoki and Helsinki, including the reputed insult to Mannerheim, became the undoing of his citizenship application in 1922 (Suikkanen 2012, 62). The Central Investigative Police could recommend the refusal of an application even if accusations had been proven to be false, or based on suspicious, albeit legal, behavior (Leitzinger 2006, 194). In one case, the municipality supported the citizenship application, but two members of the municipal council insisted on adding cautions about “Oriental customs” and Islamic permission of polygamy to the protocol. Some applications were refused merely because municipal authorities did not want to encourage more applications (Leitzinger 2011, 41–43).

For members of a minority community that had to rely so much on informal networks because the authorities applied the laws and regulations arbitrarily, it made sense to tell a success story once the opportunity arose to reach an influential audience. It is not surprising that Tatars have insisted on such a narrative, emphasizing values that are extolled by the majority culture, such as industriousness, self-control, and respectability (see Stark in this volume). However, this did not exclude carnivallistic takes on the community’s history. According to an oft-repeated anecdote, the first Tatar traders came to Finland “by accident,” after getting too
drunk on a ferry (I. Arifulla 1941). This anecdote is repeated in many historiographies of the community as a humorous contrast to the emphasis on respectability. Such anecdotes provided a way to bond with Finns and make light of prejudice. They also served the most important strategy, informal networking in everyday life. Getting along with one’s neighbors, who could testify to one’s trustworthiness to the authorities, became a core value. To explore this strategy, more research is needed.

In a strange echo of the geopolitical strategy that I have named arithmetical pragmatism, Leitzinger (2006) has envisioned the defeat of the notion of an “average Finn” within the population of Finland: if all minorities unite, the average Finn becomes a statistical rarity (257). However, the aging Tatar community is disappearing among the mass of new minority groups forming within the Finnish population since the 1990s. New Islamic congregations with larger memberships have pushed them out of the limelight. On behalf of the Tatars, Leitzinger laments the fact that the media seeks out other, more radical spokespersons in matters related to Islam (254–55). I agree with Leitzinger that the strategy of the low profile is no longer enough. There is a danger that outsiders, such as xenophobes, will fill the knowledge vacuum with their own interpretations of Tatar identity and utilize the Tatar “success story” for their own purposes. To be accepted, they have emphasized their similarity with the Finns, but to survive as a community, they have maintained and cultivated difference. Perhaps it is time to emphasize the differences, even if it means to uncover painful conflicts in the past. How else can new minorities learn from these experiences? The legacy of these survival strategies continues to this day.

References


11 Such humor can be found in an interview with Osman Abdrahim, an elder of the Helsinki Tatar community (Lönnqvist 2015).
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