This paper discusses the Muslim-Tatar Youth Union that was active during the Second World War in the west Belarusian region. It seeks to underscore the existence of the organization within the context of the earlier twentieth-century history of the Tatar community in Eastern Europe. To highlight the organization’s role within the longer Tatar history as well as during the war, it uses Philippe Burrin’s notion of l’accommodation as an analytical tool to untangle the circumstances, motivations, and opportunities that faced both the youth members and group’s leaders. In doing so, this paper seeks to bring nuance into the collaboration versus resistance terminological dichotomy that exists in scholarly debate.

Key words: Tatar-Muslim Youth Union; Belarusian Youth Union; collaboration; accommodation; Second World War; occupation; Tatars; West Belarus.

In March 1942, under German occupation forces, the Muslim-Tatar Youth Union (MTYU), also known as “Birlik” or unity, was officially established. The official goal of the organization was to continue and develop the cultural life of the Tatar community in the Belarusian, Lithuanian, and eastern Polish territories, all the while preparing for a new Europe after the war. In the initial phases, the Germans hoped to train these young men and women to create an anti-Soviet fighting force, as had been done with the Belarusian Youth Union (BYU). However, such goals failed to materialize within its Muslim-Tatar counterpart [3, c. 2,
In spite of the lack of militarization, the MTYU continued to exist until the Red Army’s recapture of the territory in the summer of 1944.

The case of the MTYU raises questions that problematize our understanding of “collaboration” and “resistance”. Historiographically, this has been studied through an analysis of police units, political leaders, and puppet governments established on Belarusian territory during the Second World War. However, where do youth organizations, and youth members, fall within our categorization? This article seeks to present the Birlik case in order to address this question, within the context of the history of the Muslim-Tatar community during the Second War in the west Belarusian territories. It argues that rather than ascribing the “collaborationist” or “resistance” label, Philippe Burrin’s notion of accommodation can be used as a terminological lens, in order to better understand the position of the organization within the occupational period.

This article attempts to first of all describe the nature of the organization against a brief historical background of the Muslim-Tatar experience during the interwar period and into the Second World War. Secondly, it will explore what significance the case of the MTYU presents within the larger history, followed by a posited analysis based on both secondary and primary source material.

During the interwar period, there were approximately 3777 Tatars living in the Belarusian SSR [9, с. 1133]. Many of these were educated individuals and leaders of academic, cultural, and religious communities. The majority resided in cities – approximately 3129 – while the minority lived in the countryside. As with many ethnic and national minorities, the Tatar community fell victim to the purges of the 1930s. They suffered cultural and religious repression, were forced into mass deportations, and executed. The first wave of arrests came in March 1933 with the OGPU’s arrest of a group of prominent Tatar and Belarusian intelligentsia under articles 72 and 76, charging victims with “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda as well as participation in counterrevolutionary organizations” [9, с. 1133]. The next heightened wave of arrests came in 1937 and 1938.

In the western Belarusian territory, which was part of the Second Polish Republic from 1918 to 1939, resided approximately 5 to 6 thousand Tatars [12, с. 545]. There were vibrant Tatar communities in Slonim, Kletsk, Lakhavichakh, and Lida. There were also approximately two thousand Crimean Tatars in the territory in question at that time [12, с. 546]. The interwar period proved to be a culturally, religiously, and politically enriching time for the Muslim community in Poland. Vilna and Warsaw became major Muslim centers from 1924 to 1939, witnessing the establishment of higher institutes of learning, an All-Polish Muslim Congress, and the organization of administrative centers in various cities throughout Poland and especially the borderland, or kresy, region [16, с. 138, 139]. Dr. Jakub Szynkiewicz¹ was elected as mufti of Poland in 1925 and support-

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¹ Szynkiewicz completed his doctoral work at the University of Berlin (1919–1925). In January 1926 at the First All-Polish Conference of Muslims, he was nominated as Mufti of the Polish Second Republic. It was not until the end of 1941 and beginning of 1942 that Szynkiewicz
ed the expansion of Muslim press and academic writing [12, c. 180]. There was even a Muslim-Youth Drill Riflemen’s Unit created in 1938 in Vilna [16, c. 141].

At the onset of the German invasion into Poland on September 1, 1939, many Muslim-Tatars who worked in metropolitan centers fled eastwards, taking refuge in the borderland areas. Nevertheless, upon the arrival of the Red Army on September 17th, they were imprisoned or deported to the East, as well as Central Asia [6, c. 63]. The combined German and Soviet occupational forces repressed the intellectual elite, affecting the cultural, educational, and political development of the community2. During the Soviet occupational period of the borderlands, from 1939 to 1941, Jakub Szynkiewicz agreed to cooperate, at the official level, with the Red Army. However, no real established networks or ties ever manifested throughout this two-year period. Upon the changeover in occupational force, Szynkiewicz once again swore his allegiance to the German regime [16, c. 146]. This relationship was different, in that Szynkiewicz was close to Josef Goebbels, minister of propaganda in the Third Reich, with whom he had studied in Berlin. By the beginning of 1942, Szynkiewicz officially became the mufti of Ostland, encompassing the regions of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, and the eastern regions of Poland.

There were, of course, Muslim-Tatars that operated outside of Szynkiewicz’s community. Some were active in the underground, such as Hassein Aleksandrovich who later also joined an anti-German partisan group in the Ivianetskaya forest [14, c. 32]. There were also individuals that even participated in the Warsaw Uprising [6, c. 65]. It must be stressed that the MTYU was but one part of the total Muslim-Tatar experience during the Second World War, yet deserves attention as a point of study.

On the official level, the MTYU strove to continue and maintain the group’s national, cultural existence and to strengthen its community numbers [4, c. 13]. Germany was the source of leadership and educational inspiration that would serve as an example from which the Muslim-Tatar group was to learn. Officially, all young people of Muslim faith between the ages of six and twenty were welcome to volunteer for membership into the organization and would pay an application fee. Jews were explicitly excluded. The leader of the organization would preside over admission decisions and he could also refuse any applications [5, c. 2]. Within this age group, there were three subdivisions for those between the ages of six and ten; eleven and fourteen; and fifteen to twenty.

Administratively, there were two centers: one for Belarus and one for Lithuania, under the leadership of a Chief of Staff. The former’s headquarters were in Baranovichi, while the latter’s in Vilnius [5, c. 3] Each center housed a series of departments that covered press, propaganda, culture, social work, healthcare, and

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2 Some of these individuals included: historian Stanisław Kryczyński, Warsaw imam Ali Ismail Woronowicz, and Judge Leon Kryczyński.
so forth, and each leadership position of the latter was given at the recommendation of the Mufti. The organization was financed by membership fees incurred, revenue from youth events, as well as donations and financial aid from the German civil administration [5, c. 3]. As such, all activities of the Birlik group in Belarus were subject to the supervision of the General commissar in Minsk, while in Lithuania the General Commissar in Kaunas. The management of funds was also to be regulated by both the leadership of the MTYU and German authorities [5, c. 4]. Collectively, there were four main Birlik centers on Belarusian territory in Minsk, Kletsk, Lakhovishakh, and Baranovichi. On 1 March 1944, the Mufti requested that the headquarters be moved to Baranovichi. He often sent special requests and signed off on things on behalf of the organization.

Aside from the German authorities, the association leader retained the highest level of power within the organization. The position’s tasks entailed convening the association assembly, meeting with subordinate managers, awarding honorary recognition to members, approving entrance and exit declarations, etc. In cases where the association leader was unavailable or unable to tend to his duties, the Chief of Staff would take over. Its everyday tasks included supervision over all units and members, organization of events, issuance of member cards, proposing appointments and dismissals, etc. There was a separate department for women, with its own female representative that was subordinate to the association leader [5, c. 8]. In the spring of 1944, according to German registration records, there were nine thousand members of the organization in the regions of Minsk, Baranovichi, Slonim, and Navahrudak. This number includes youth members, as well as educators, leaders, and administrators [4, c. 65]. While, the association leader was at the highest position within the organization, yet the mufti played an instrumental role in the proliferation of the organization, as well as in its justification and validation. His official title was Supreme Leader of the Muslim-Tatar Youth Organization [5, c. 3].

As mentioned previously, unlike its Belarusian counterpart, the MTYU did not ultimately serve as a military training organization for youth. Besides militarization, there were differences in ideological training between both groups. Generally, lectures carried out toward the BYU were ridden with anti-Semitism and mini-biographies of various prominent figures in the German Reich [1, c. 2, 3]. Furthermore, lectures catered to the BYU also contained lessons on various aspects of Belarusian culture and symbolism, something not seen in the Muslim-Tatar case [2, c. 7]. Parallels between both “lesson plans” included lecturing on community and solidarity, as well as putting the group and nation’s needs over individual desires [2, c. 4].

1 The position of Mufti is ascribed to a valuable expert in Islamic law. The individual is equipped with the education and knowledge to provide legal advice. This juxtaposition between religious and political duty was not a new phenomenon within the Muslim-Tatar community, and in fact, existed already in the 14th and 15th centuries in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. See: Tyszkieicz, Z historii Tatarów polskich 1794–1944, 135.
Generally, western studies dealing with collaboration in Belarus have looked at police units, government officials, and diplomats. These include the works of Martin Dean and Timothy Snyder\(^2\). Leonid Rein’s work on collaboration during German-occupied Belarus delineates four categories that can be ascribed to different cases\(^3\). Despite this, there is a lot of grey area between these polarized terms. In his thorough analysis of Vichy France, Philippe Burrin synthesized the notion of *l’accommodation*, or accommodation, in order to provide a more nuanced and appropriate classification of behavior and decision-making during the occupational period. Moreover, it views this daily activity as a vacillating negotiation process between ideology, personal-material preoccupations, and circumstances [8, c. 8, 9]. Other scholars have utilized Burrin’s approach to view certain cases of accommodation, within the French context [7, c. 84–100]. As such, his terminology offers a more nuanced interpretative tool that can also be applied to the case of the MTYU.

There are two levels from which accommodation can be viewed in regards to the MTYU. The first is, of course, from the perspective of the young men and women themselves. Survival during the war and occupation certainly contribute to a desire to be part of the group. There is also protection from actually fighting or being drafted to fight. At the personal and material level, members of the organizations could participate in study trips to Germany. These trips were considered part of their overall education, and included language study, participation in Hitler-Jugend events, and cultural courses. More importantly, these visits were funded by the Reichministerium für die Ostgebiete through the allocation of scholarships [4, c. 104]. The mufti, in other words Szynkiewicz, would send a request to German authorities for travel permission and the educational benefits of the opportunity. These requests were received in both Minsk and Vilnius. Requests were usually for groups of around twenty Muslim-Tatar youth members [4, c. 54]. Such trips continued to be organized as late as June of 1944 [4, c. 104]. The opportunity to travel to Germany, while fully funded, may have appealed to some of the members, as well as to their parents who wanted to secure a future for their children.

The costs of such a relationship were reasonably low. Members were not required to join any of armed struggle against the opposing armies. Furthermore, the lectures and activities organized by the organization stressed values of family unity, solidarity, and, most importantly, love for Allah that would guarantee the path to an enlightened life [4, c. 14]. To propagate the feeling of unity and community, the organization invited people of all ages to become supporters in spirit.

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\(^3\) Rein utilizes Werner Rings’s collaboration classification. The four categories are: neutral, unconditional, conditional, and tactical.
and faith [4, c. 15]. For direct and extended members of Birlik, the organization may have offered a sense of security and stability in a time of war, occupation, and uncertainty, as well as an opportunity for travel and education. It also offered a chance to continue the development of their community that had been disrupted through repression and mass deportations.

There is another perspective from which to examine Birlik’s accommodation that views the relationship from the position of the leaders of the organization. This refers mainly to the Chiefs of Staff and mufti. As mentioned previously, the mufti of Ostland was Dr. Jakub Szynkiewicz, a position he maintained before and, official, well after the war. The Chief of Staff of Belarus was Hussein-Konstantin Jakubowski [4, c. 55]. He was initially headquartered in Minsk and but later moved to Baranovichi in March of 1944 [4, c. 53]. There were officially sixteen individuals on the German payroll that were financed throughout the organization’s existence. This included six group secretaries and even a cleaning lady. The best-paid position went to the Chief of Staff, with a salary of 200 marks a month [4, c. 17]. Aside from financial benefits, higher up officials could also put in requests for better travel arrangements or benefits. Throughout his travel, for example, Jakubowski was given permission to ride in the “train car for Germans” [4, c. 7].

There were, however, more honorable advantages aside from material concessions. One of the most significant ones came from the Szynkiewicz himself, who, along with other Tatar scholars, was able to inhibit the annihilation of the Karaite community in the region. As a result of his relationship with Goebbels, Szynkiewicz, with his careful research and credentials, was able to dissuade German academic scholars and politicians of a Semitic association between the Karaite and Jewish community. This succeeded and hindered the Karaites’ deportation from the region to concentration and labor camps. However, as Mikhail Kizilov notes in his work on Polish-Lithuanian Karaites, this change of heart on behalf of the Germans probably had more to do with their fear of losing Tatar support, both in Crimea and Poland-Lithuania [12, c. 310]. Nevertheless, the Tatar intellectual community was able to use its position of association as a strategic tool.

Whether looking at this case from the occupier or occupied perspective, it is clear that control and oversight of the youth was crucial to both parties. The youth group became a tool in cultural, ideological, and military policy. The German occupiers sought to utilize Birlik, initially, as a group that could become an anti-Soviet fighting force. They were willing to finance study trips to Germany in order to “educate” these individuals. Furthermore, they made other concessions to the mufti. When efforts to create a fighting unit failed however, support for Birlik was driven by a desire to keep the population firmly within the anti-Soviet sphere of influence.

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1 There issue of the Karaite community’s ethnic and racial ties to Jews was long disputed and became a reoccurring point of discussion during the interwar period and the Second World War.
The utilization of Burrin’s approach is not an intention to diminish the implications of some collaboration efforts, but merely serves as a fulcrum through which to see a case that does not fall within the police or government categories. Looking at the juxtaposition of all the motivations that lead to accommodation in the case of the MTYU, we must consider the self-awareness of the group’s individuals as well as its leaders. As such, understanding of the Muslim-Tatar community’s tragic preceding history, its delicate survival, and uncertain future are important when looking at the motivations for accommodation with the occupying regime.

Recent scholarship pertaining to the Second World War in Eastern Europe has looked beyond the higher political and military echelons involved, and has instead attempted to deepen our understanding of every day people during war. Some works have looked at occupational zones through a focus on collaboration between various national and ethnic groups. This historiographical focus has also been divided according to ethnicity or nationality. Nevertheless, within the rich, multinational, and multiethnic context of Eastern Europe, the Muslim-Tatar community has been neglected in the discussion of “everyday life during the war”.

While this article has not exhaustively discussed the Muslim-Tatar experience, it has attempted to shed light onto one small part of the occupational experience through its focus on the Union of Muslim-Tatar Youth. Examining the Birlik case highlights the intricate shades of culpability or collaboration amongst youth. We see that there were various generational categories of individuals involved in the youth group - some of who remembered previous Soviet and Polish occupations, while others were looking for opportunities in education and travel. Furthermore, the organization, at both the leadership and youth membership level, was not required to take up physical arms and in fact, as is seen, was able to garner significant benefits for itself and for another community. Contextualized within the early part of the 20th century history in the region, the case of the youth organizations underscores the everyday reality and precariousness of the Muslim-Tatar population.

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ИЗМЕНЕНИЯ В ГОРОДСКОМ ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВЕ НА ТЕРРИТОРИИ БЕЛАРУСИ ПОСЛЕ ЕЕ ВХОЖДЕНИЯ В СОСТАВ РОССИЙСКОЙ ИМПЕРИИ В КОНЦЕ XVIII ВЕКА

CHANGES IN CITY LEGISLATION ON THE TERRITORY OF BELARUS AFTER IT JOINED TO THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE AT THE END OF THE XVIII CENTURY.

Статья посвящена изучению изменений в городском законодательстве на территории белорусских земель после их включения в состав Российской империи в конце XVIII в. Рассматриваются особенности функционирования системы городского права на территории Беларуси в данный период. Характеризуются основные нормативные правовые акты, действовавшие в белорусских городах в конце XVIII в.

Ключевые слова: белорусские земли; город; законодательство; право; городская дума; суд; управа благочиния; Российская империя.