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Keywords.

Crimean Tatars, Soviet Union, Russia, Stalin, World War II

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Crimean Tatars From Mass Deportation to Hardships in Occupied Crimea

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Abstract: *The article begins with a description of the deportation of Crimean Tatars. It provides a brief review of the German Occupation of Crimea, examines the negative images of Crimean Tatars published in Soviet newspapers between 1941-1943 and the explicit rationale given by the Soviet authorities for the deportation of Crimean Tatars, and reviews the mitigation of hostilities against Tatars in the years following the war. The article continues with accounts of the attempts to repatriate Crimean Tatars after 1989 and the discriminative policies against the returning people. The conclusion of the article describes current hardships experienced by Tatars in occupied Crimea.*

Keywords: *Crimean Tatars, Soviet Union, Russia, Stalin, Second World War*

The last seventy years have presented Crimean Tatars with profound challenges and enormous hardship. They suffered greatly at the hands of the Soviet government during their deportation of 1944 and their return in the late 1980s, and they are being discriminated against by the Russian Government following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. After the Soviets recaptured Ukraine from the Wehrmacht in 1944, Crimean Tatars were deported to Central Asia based on accusations of willingly supporting the enemy, killing innocent Ukrainian civilians, and conspiring to establish a Crimean Tatar republic under German rule. The presentation of this group as traitors and enemies of the Soviet people was used as a foundation for discriminative policies during their return to Crimea. Now they are facing oppressive measures implemented by the Russian government in Crimea, which are being justified based on accusations of extremism and radicalism.

In order to understand the structures and dynamics of the current identity-based conflict in Crimea that has led to the brutal oppression of Crimean Tatars after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, it is necessary to understand the political and social legacies of Stalinist repression, and the impact of that repression on the development of the systems of identity for Crimean Tatars and Russians over the last fifty years. The case study presented in this paper covers a vastly understudied area in the literature of Ukrainian studies, Russian studies, and genocide studies, which has theoretical and practical implications for our understanding of conflict and identity in post-Soviet Russia, and the on-going conflict in Ukraine.

The analysis in this article represents a clear case of categorical violence. Johan Galtung developed the concepts of direct, cultural, and structural violence.¹ While direct violence describes open cases of aggression, structural violence is understood as injustice and exploitation built into a social system of inequalities, and cultural violence is based on the prevailing attitudes and beliefs in the society. This article shows that Crimean Tatars were victims of all three forms of violence described by Galtung. They were deported by the Stalinist regime, were harassed upon their return to Crimea in 1990s and brutally beaten and killed during the current occupation regime in Crimea. The political structures of Soviet Union and current Putin's Russia supported these aggressive policies, while a culture of paternalism and submission to power justified violent actions.

This article states that the prevailing form of violence against Crimean Tatars was categorical violence. This violence is based on the social category (ethnic, religious, regional, national, gender, age, etc) that is ascribed to a particular group. It can be related to existing identities of this group, or it can be created by the authority or group in power. Because of belonging to a specific social category, a particular group can be denied some rights or access to resources and power (economic and political discrimination), to basic needs, including food (famine), territory (deportation), or right to exist (genocide). Members of a particular social group can experience exceptional hardship only because of their membership in this group that is perceived as treacherous, rebellious, or just secondary.

Both social category as a perception of a group by others, and social identity as a membership in a group, are products of a process of boarder formation, drawing distinctions between an "us" and a "them."² The constitution of social actors is often shaped through the drawing and redrawing of social boundaries, as well as the invention and borrowing of the boundaries, and encounters between previously distinct and competing networks of social actors, which can all lead to the formation of categories of social actors.³ Communities often recognize clear boundaries that represent distinctive ways of life, and may mobilize themselves by perceiving these boundaries as endangered by a threat from outside.⁴ In such a way, the mobilization of conflicting parties often accompanies an increased clarity of group boundaries amongst the individuals in conflict.⁵ These contracted and reconstructed social boundaries help justify categorical violence toward specific groups that are placed outside of the boundary of powerful groups. This article shows how Crimean Tatars were placed outside the boundary of loyal Soviet people during Soviet Union, and outside the boundary of loyal Crimean residents during the current Russian occupation of Crimea. They became victims of categorical violence that targeted this specific ethnic group for decades.

The paper begins with a description of the deportation of Crimean Tatars, and provides a brief review of the German Occupation of Crimea in order to provide the historical context necessary for examining how Soviet propaganda participated in clarifying the group identify of the Crimean Tatars as an other outside the boundaries of Soviet identity. The case study presents an account of the negative images of Crimean Tatars published in Soviet newspapers between 1941-1943, and shows how these portrayals accompanied the explicit rationale given by the Soviet authorities for the deportation of Crimean Tatars.

After outlining the relevant historical context of the Soviet repression of Crimean Tatars and the identity boundaries that were concretized after the Second World War, the paper proceeds to review the mitigation of hostilities against Tatars in the years following the war in order to show how the boundaries between Crimean Tatars' and Soviet identities were redrawn to present Crimean Tatars as being insiders, or outsiders, depending on changing political and social contexts. The argument, for example, shows that during the German occupation of Crimea, Soviet propaganda presented the Crimean Tatars as little brothers, mobilizing popular support for the Crimean Tatars by positioning Tatar identity with the family of the Soviet nation. However, when the political demands of the Soviet government shifted after the Second World War, Soviet newspapers began presenting the Crimean Tatars as traitors to the USSR, who were a different, dangerous national group and had to be removed.

The terms national, nation, and nationality in English often denote a group of people united by common descent, history, or culture who form a political social body, oftentimes a state. Russian society and Soviet politics, however, has a long history of conceptualizing nations and nationalities in different terms, which has a great deal of overlap with the concept of ethnicity. Beginning around the 1930s, the boundaries of national identities in the USSR were often delineated ideologically. As the socialist regimes collapsed and central authority fragmented after the fall of the Berlin Wall, social categorization based on ideological models became irrelevant. The creation of the new independent states, the development of concepts of national identity, the rise of ethnic autonomies and enlargement of the European Community lead to changes in the system of identity. The movement from totalitarianism to political pluralism after 1989 was connected to the construction of a state and the reshaping of national identities. Most post-Soviet national identities are now political and are defined by the state. In this post-Soviet space, when a country declared itself a "national state," it led to an ethnic definition of "nationality."⁶

The paper continues with accounts of the attempts to repatriate Crimean Tatars after 1989 and the discriminative policies against the returning people. The main contention is that the categories of ethno-national social identity that are structuring the current conflict Crimea were concretized by the fall of the USSR. In the 1990s, the population of Crimea was nearly 2.5 million, with 64 percent of the population identifying themselves as ethnic Russians, 23 percent as Ukrainians, 10 percent as Crimean Tatars, and 3 percent as Byelorussians, Armenians, Greeks, Germans, Jews, and others. This meant that Crimea was the only large-scale administrative-territorial district in Ukraine where the ethnic majority consisted of ethnic Russians. At the same time, the people who identified themselves as ethnic Crimean Tatars considered Crimea as the motherland that formed their ethnic group.

Because of the history of Soviet repression against Tatars and Muslims, Crimean Tatars viewed ethnic Russians as threats to their security, despite the fact that the Russians living in Crimea in 1989 were not responsible for committing Soviet atrocities. The Crimea of the 1990s, therefore, had substantial potential for ethnopolitical violence.⁷ It is through this context that the current political discourse of Crimean Tatars as anti-Russian radical extremists, which is being employed by the Russian government in Crimea to justify repression of the Crimean Tatars, was forged. As the case study demonstrates, this dynamic of presenting Crimean Tatars as extremist nationals was firmly established through the context of Soviet policies. It was very common for proponents of the USSR, and for Soviet propaganda, to portray the USSR as a fatherland for all people residing in its territory regardless of their ethnic or national identity. This made the Crimean Tatar desire to return to a designated homeland after their deportation seem like a lack of patriotism, so that the very act of Tatars pursuing repatriation (among other rights) was viewed as the work of extremist nationals.⁸

The conclusion of the article describes current hardships experienced by Tatars in occupied Crimea. These hardships grew out of the resentment amongst ethnic Russians living in Crimea against the resettlement of Crimean Tatars, which produced conflicts over land, property, and citizenship. That Crimean Tatars received state donations to fund their resettlement increased negative attitudes towards Crimean Tatars amongst ethnic Russians, who had experienced economic deprivations following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Crimean Tatars considered it legitimate to reclaim the property, possessions, and national-territorial autonomy that they had been deprived of when they were deported from Crimea by the Soviet authorities. This dynamic legitimized Russian irredentist autonomy claims after 1989, with Russians perceiving themselves as being marginalized by Crimean Tatars even though ethnic Russians had far better access to jobs and education. Crimean Tatar protestations against discrimination in housing, employment, education, and politics provoked ethnic Russians into feeling threatened by a Crimean Tatar minority. Hence, the goals of Russians and Crimean Tatars were incompatible with the formation of a common national identity in post-Soviet Crimea in Ukraine.⁹ But, more importantly for understanding the current repression of Crimean Tatars, this discourse has become the primary discourse through which the repression of ethnic Crimean Tatars is rationalized, legitimized, and perpetrated by the Russian government in Crimea.

The Deportation of Crimean Tatars

During Second World War, Crimea was among the first Soviet territories occupied by the Wehrmacht, the German occupying army. Taking the British colonial rule over India as their model, the German occupying authorities resorted to a divide-and-rule strategy for dominating the occupied population.¹⁰ However, because they lacked sufficient manpower for complete control, the German army sought support from certain segments of the local population, recruiting them to serve in the local police force or in lower levels of government.¹¹ Historians have pointed out that the German attempt to divide and conquer occupied regions of the USSR aligned with the interest of Crimean Tatar nationalists who wanted an independent Tatar nation-state.¹² Crimean Tatar nationalist leaders worked with German authorities in Berlin, even though they frequently complained that the Germany authorities were attempting to exploit and curtail Crimean Tatar nationalist ambitions to fit German interests.¹³ Regardless, the German attempts to divide and conquer relied on tactics of ethnic division, whereby the Wehrmacht carefully exploited ethnic tensions and favored Crimean Tatars over other groups.¹⁴

Crimean Tatars are a Turkic-speaking people. They represent a mixture of the ancient Gothic and Alan populations who settled in Eastern Europe in the 7th century. The name Tatars first emerged in the 13th century, when the Mongol Golden Horde occupied the peninsula. As the non-Turkic population became assimilated with other Crimeans via shared religion, language, and culture, Tatars formed an independent state known as the Crimean Khanate—a political entity ruled by a khan, on the model of the invading Mongols. This state remained independent until the Russian Empire began to expand in the 17th century.

Upon Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula in the 18th century, the Crimean Khanate lost its autonomy. The relationships between Crimean Tatars and the Russian empire periodically

intensified, culminating in the Crimean War in 1854. The mutual mistrust between the imperial Russian and Crimean Khanate governments further strained relations in the peninsula, forcing many Tatars to leave for the Ottoman Empire for fear of retaliation and possible resettlement within the Russian heartland. Though many Tatars remained in Crimea, by 1917 Tatars made up only a quarter of the population there.¹⁵

In its early years of power following the Russian Revolution, the Soviet regime followed a policy created by Lenin to support the national autonomy of minority national groups throughout the Soviet Union. The Russian empire had been a multi-national empire, and the new Soviet government had to find a way to rein in the nationalist ambitions of the various national groups—such as Ukrainians, Kazaks, Belarusians, Tatars, and many more—who spoke their own languages, held their own particular religious traditions, and demanded the right to national self-determination.¹⁶ In order to convince these groups to support the Bolshevik revolution, Lenin initially promised to support national self-determination within the USSR, and promote the autonomy of national minorities. By the early 1930s, however, the Soviet regime found this policy untenable, and turned to policies intended to coerce nationalist groups into submission to the authority of Moscow. The political ambitions of various national groups were handled on an individual basis through policies that ranged from banning national languages, to state-orchestrated famines, massacres, forced resettlements, internment in gulags, and the imprisonment or extrajudicial executions of members of the intelligentsia of the various national groups.

In 1934, in an attempt to assert Soviet control over Crimea, Crimea was divided into zoning districts, where the territories with a predominance of a certain national or ethnic group were transformed into independent administrative units. 177 regional self-regulatory bodies, the majority of them Crimean Tatars, were created, including units in the Alushta, Balaklavsky, Bakhchisaray, Karasubazarsky, Kuibyshev, Sudak, and Yalta regions. Moreover, a number of ethnic schools were established, where Crimean Tatars could teach their own language and their own curriculum. Newspapers and magazines were published in the Crimean Tatar language.

During his leadership of the Soviet government, Stalin changed many of the policies regarding the rights of national and ethnic groups. Historians have termed these policies of the late 1920s and early 1930s to be indicative of an “Affirmative Action Empire,” where Stalin believed that sanctioning nationalist autonomy for minority groups allowed Moscow to dictate the contents of their national culture and thereby circumscribe the political ambitions of these groups.¹⁷ This contradiction between promoting national autonomy while crushing the political ambitions of national groups was common throughout the USSR. Lenin and Stalin had both used the establishment of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921 as a propaganda tool to demonstrate that Soviet power was just and fair, offering political and cultural autonomy to the nations who respected Soviet authority.¹⁸ The establishment of the republic was followed by famine that some have considered to be a state-orchestrated famine, which killed over 100,000 Crimeans, most of whom were Tatar. By 1928, the nationalist leaders who Lenin and Stalin supported in 1921 were shot to death, and the USSR sought to eliminate the Crimean Tatar intelligentsia—all while proclaiming Crimean Tatar cultural autonomy.¹⁹

These policies across the USSR did not quell nationalist resistance to the Soviet program of collectivizing land and property. In Crimea, as elsewhere in the USSR, this brief period of regained autonomy was not to last. Stalin, by the mid 1930s, adopted a policy of destroying national identity across the USSR and creating a new Soviet national identity for the Soviet state. In this campaign to create a single Soviet nation, aspirations for the distinct identity of minorities were brutally suppressed. These repressions led to mass arrests and the destruction of hundreds of religious buildings (mosques, temples, synagogues, etc.) in Crimea. The independent ethnic administrative units were terminated and Crimean Tatars—among others—lost their religious freedoms and their right to send their children to ethnic schools, where they could be educated in their native language.

During the German occupation of the Ukraine in the Second World War, the situation changed yet again. The German occupying authorities enticed Crimean Tatars with special privileges, and invited Tatar nationalist leaders to Berlin.²⁰ They distributed gardens to the Tatars, which was a highly symbolic act given that the Soviet Union had abolished private property and collectivized all the land. The German occupying authorities released Crimean Tatar prisoners of war, and excused

Tatars from labor duty. In addition, Crimean Tatars were relieved of heavy tax duties, allowed to practice their religion openly, and offered education in the Tatar language. A Moslem Committee was created in Simferopol, and Crimean Tatars were appointed to administrative positions within it. Such policies garnered strong support for the occupying force from many Crimean Tatars, particularly among older residents whose suffering under Stalin's brutal collectivization policies was not forgotten. In exchange for such privileges, some Tatars did in fact collaborate with the German occupation by revealing key strategic information, such as the positions of partisan troops as well as Soviet army plans.

Yet, most Tatars refused to work for the Wehrmacht, in part because of German brutality against inhabitants of Tatar villages. Furthermore, during this time ten percent of the Crimean Tatar population was mobilized and forced to fight on the front lines for Hitler;²¹ almost every family had a close relative serving. In addition, a majority of Crimean Tatars retained their loyalty to the Soviet government, based in part on their consumption of Soviet propaganda urging them to resist the German occupiers.²²

At the beginning of the war, Soviet newspapers recounted acts of courage and heroism by Tatar soldiers. These accounts fostered patriotism in Crimean Tatars, and intensified hatred toward the Germans. Every issue of these newspapers published accounts of atrocities committed by the German troops, the progress of the Soviet army, and the courage of Crimean Tatar soldiers and guerillas fighting alongside and with the Soviet army. The leading Crimean newspaper, *Krasnyi Krym*, generally portrayed the Tatar people as coexisting peacefully for centuries with their "older brother—the great Russian nation." In these accounts, all nationalities in the Soviet Union were acting in unison against their common, and evil, adversary.²³ One such article recounts the brutality of the German army:

Brother- Tatars! You are in the occupied territory among the enemy. You see and feel the horrors of the Fascist occupation. The Germans send your sons to the frontline. They rape your daughters; they turn you into powerless slaves. They condemned you to starvation and death.²⁴

As Crimean Tatars were positioned in unity with other nationalities in the "Soviet family," the boundary divisions between Crimean Tatars (as "brothers") and Germans (as the "vicious enemy") intensified.

The newspapers repeatedly cast the Germans as colonizers seeking to destroy the cultural heritage of the people: "The Germans try to sow discord among people of the Crimea. They set Russians against Jews, Tatars against Russians. This is an old trick of colonizers."²⁵ The proclamation made by German occupying forces that they would bring freedom to Tatars was unmasked in these narratives as part of a devious campaign of colonization, linked to their true mission to destroy the nation's honor and pride, and to plunder the rich Crimean soil.²⁶ But the Soviet army—it was promised—would soon reenter the peninsula and dispel the Wehrmacht, according to the newspaper accounts.

Some of the articles at this time do mention the collaboration of Crimean Tatars with the German army, but the reports state that such collaboration occurred only after German deception, provocation, and coercion. Even so, the collaborators were viewed as traitors to the nation. According to one article,

[The Germans] created the so-called Tatar Committee, but it is clear to everyone that this committee is the slave of the German-colonizers, it works for Fascists and helps rob and deceive the Tatar people.²⁷

The articles referred to an old Russian proverb that there is no village without a dog, implying that every community has its own degenerates (*urody obshestva*) and there are some traitors within any community—but such cases were presented as rare. In general, the Crimean Tatar population remained loyal to Soviet rule and was viewed as such.

The Soviet authorities drew upon cultural images of tight-knit Crimean Tatar communities, which emphasized family security and respect for elders, to show that the willingness of some

Crimean Tatars to join the German army was like an act of youthful rebellion against the wider family. By casting enemy collaboration in familial terms, forgiveness for such transgressions and re-unification of the greater Soviet family could result, presumably, from acts of repentance on the part of the rebellious child.

As the war progressed, Soviet propaganda sought to intensify national pride by promoting images of the heroism of the multicultural Soviet army. Acts of enemy collaboration by a few individuals were presented as cases of character flaws, likened to the betrayal of selling one's ancestral land. Newspaper stories stressed that the Soviet army included soldiers of all racial and ethnic groups, in stark contrast to the racist policies of the Wehrmacht, which followed the National Socialist racial policies, and considered all non-Arians as *Untermenschen* and prohibited people of inferior races from fighting in its ranks.²⁸ Many articles offered personalized accounts of the hardships of Crimean Tatar troops and featured the life stories of those who demonstrated outstanding courage.²⁹

As the Soviet army recovered its territory from the Wehrmacht in the later stages of the war, the number of articles glorifying the heroic deeds of Tatars rapidly decreased. The Soviet propaganda machine shifted from publishing inspiring stories in pursuit of national unity to narrative tactics that served the need to return a sense of normalcy to the reoccupied territory. Following a new government campaign, the newspapers abandoned their earlier characterization of Crimean Tatars as rebellious younger brothers and portrayed them, among other ethnic groups, as enemy accomplices. These portrayals castigated these groups as traitors who deserved severe punishment. Moreover, based on this characterization future generations of Crimean Tatars should be condemned for the actions committed by their ancestors during the war. Dehumanizing images of Tatars were spread throughout the general population, representing a stark contrast to the glorification of those who had served in the Red Army.

The official decision to deport all Tatars from Crimea between 1942 and 1943 required careful planning and forethought at the highest levels of government. In his secret correspondence to Stalin months prior to the decision to deport Tatars, Levrentii Beria, the head of NKVD (the organization preceding the KGB), characterized all Crimean Tatars as traitors. In one transmission Beria writes:

The devastating situation in the occupied territories of Crimea can be explained by the diversion group. 1178 people who helped the German army were arrested. The Tatar national committee, which had branches in various regions in Crimea, mobilized volunteers into the Nazi Tatar division and sent the non-Tatar population to the labor camps in Germany.³⁰

In another letter, Beria states that during the Second World War, Crimean Tatars acted as accomplices to German occupiers:

Many Crimean Tatars betrayed their Motherland, deserted from the army and joined the army of the enemy, participated in the voluntary Nazi divisions, [and] participated in the barbaric and cruel killings of the Soviet people.³¹

As such correspondence was taking place, the People Commissar on Internal Affairs and the People Commissar on State Security imposed a law (*Ukase*) in April 1944 designed to punish all anti-Soviet elements operating in areas previously occupied by the Wehrmacht. According to this law, the Crimean peninsula was to be cleared of "agents of German and Romanian intelligence, traitors, collaborators, members of crime organizations." The law's intent is conveyed as follows:

To clear the territory of the Crimean region from the agents of foreign intelligence agencies and contra-intelligence groups, of those who betrayed their country and traitors, who actively helped Nazi-German occupation forces and their agents, of participants of anti-Soviet organizations, bandit groups and other anti-Soviet elements that helped occupations forces (13 April, 1944).

Interestingly, the law lacked particular reference to any specific ethnic affiliation of the enemy elements.

In a secret wire to Stalin, Molotov, and Malenkov two weeks later, Beria reported on the number of members of each nationality living in Crimea who were killed, taken to labor camps by the German army, or evacuated by the Soviets:

On Crimea. The population of the Crimea before the war—1,126,000 people, including 218,000 Tatars. Killed 67 thousands of Jews, Karaimov, Krymchakov, taken to Germany—50,000 people, evacuated 5,000 people.³²

Beria explained that the high number of casualties in Crimea resulted from the work of saboteurs and anti-Soviet elements among the Crimean Tatars. The Tatar National Committee was cited as working closely with voluntary German divisions, supplying intelligence on Soviet operations, and sending non-Tatar natives to the German labor camps. The document stated:

The Tatar National Committee, having its own branches in every Tatar district in Crimea, recruited intelligence agents to work in the occupied territories, enlisted volunteers to the created German Tatar division, [and] sent the local non-Tatar population for work in Germany.

Crimean Tatar families, women, and elders were identified as traitors aiding those hiding from the Soviet army. These accusations had the effect of intensifying prevailing divisions between those who were considered loyal Soviet peoples and the supposedly treasonous Crimean Tatars.

In a later telegram to Stalin, Beria established for the first time an ethnic designation to anti-Soviet elements operating during the war.³³ He wrote that more than twenty thousand Crimean Tatar soldiers deserted the Soviet army and joined German forces.

Considering treacherous action of the Crimean Tatars against the Soviet people and considering unfeasibility of the further residency of Crimean Tatars on the border of the Soviet Union, NKVD asks for your consideration of deportation of all Crimean Tatars from the territory of Crimea.³⁴

In this communiqué, Beria recommended to Stalin that the entire Crimean Tatar population be deported to the Uzbek Soviet Republic. Before writing this memo, Beria had already informed the head of the Central Committee of Uzbekistan about this impending deportation, anticipating no obstacles to his proposal of this state-sponsored brutality. He stated that the operation would start on May 21 and last for about ten days. In the letter to Stalin, Beria wrote, “the issue of settling the Tatars in Uzbek SSR is arranged with the Secretary of the Central Committee of Uzbekistan, comrade Usupov.”³⁵

The day after receiving this correspondence, Stalin signed the deportation decree. A top-secret document dated May 11, 1944 recounts that the Soviet State Defense Committee set the decree in motion, ordering the deportation of the entire Crimean Tatar nationality from the Crimean peninsula. Many Crimean Tatars were accused of treason, deserting their military units, embracing the enemy’s goal of conquest, and serving in *Schutzmannschaftsbataillonen* (police battalions). The document additionally asserted that Crimean Tatars acted inhumanely against the Soviet guerrillas, actively engaged in transporting Soviet people to German labor camps, gathered intelligence for the enemy, and sabotaged Soviet military operations. Instead of being cheered as war heroes or scolded as younger brothers, the Crimean Tatars were now repositioned as a monolithic unit, a dangerous enemy bloc whose recent campaign of mass treachery necessitated the deportation of the entire population to Uzbek Soviet Republic by June 1, 1944. These drastic measures were allegedly required to prevent any additional collaboration of Crimean Tatars with potential sympathizers to the retreating German army.

Moreover, although the Germans were in retreat and certainly losing the war by this time, the idea that they could have used Crimean Tatars to establish alliances with Turkey and with segments of the Muslim population prompted concern among the Soviet officials that the Tatars could take up the banner and threaten the cohesion of the Soviet Union by fostering Muslim solidarity across the

region. Despite such frenzied accusations, the few documented cases of collaboration by Crimean Tatars were wildly exaggerated by propagandists.³⁶

The Soviet fear of losing Crimea to the Wehrmacht army even after their departure prompted the authority to deport so-called unreliable elements of the population into Central Asia. But even in possession of totalitarian controls, the Soviet leaders still required a public justification for such widespread actions launched against this ethnic group. With vitriolic hatred of Germans still deeply ingrained in the collective psyche, the positioning practices began to shift, and a new enemy group emerged.³⁷ But unlike Germans, who, as invaders, were never in close proximity to the majority of the Soviet population, Tatars inhabited the land for centuries and lived freely among the Soviet people. Their perceived betrayal felt personal, close to home, and fratricidal. Many segments of the general population found in the Tatars convenient scapegoats.³⁸ to explain the source of their current misery. Tatars were blamed for the miserable conditions of service in the Soviet army, and the lack of basic necessities for survival for many members of the general population. The positioning tactics of the propaganda campaign established a normative order that exiled the outgroup not only physically but socially, forever tainting them with the stain of treason.

The Soviet political elite skillfully exploited the emotional trauma among the population. In May 1944, with little forewarning, Tatar women, children, and the elderly were loaded into freight trains and transported to Central Asia, primarily to Uzbekistan. Lacking food, water or adequate sanitation, many Tatars died in transit. Those who survived the journey were confined to special zones for their residency. The vigilance of lower Party officials to meet pre-established quotas resulted in many Tatars abandoning their property and personal possessions. The settlements of Crimean Tatars in Uzbekistan turned into permanent residences. Tremendous economic, political, and social hardships ensued. Beria's plea to Stalin to implement a "cleaning [cleansing] process of Crimean population from the anti-Soviet elements" resulted in thinking clinically about the whole operation. Almost every day for four months preceding the final arrests and deportations, Stalin received progress reports which reduced the tragic events for thousands of families to numerical measurements—the number of people deported, the number of arrests, and the number of appropriated houses, cattle, and other domestic animals.

The secrecy of Soviet institutions kept the general population ignorant of the numerous atrocities committed by the Soviet government against its people. Those who expressed disapproval of inhumane treatment of minority groups were denounced as enemies of the people. Nevertheless, stories about mass deportation and arrests began to circulate unofficially throughout the country. Many segments of the general population learned about the deportation of Crimean Tatars to Uzbekistan, as well as the dispersion of Chechens, Koreans, and Volga Germans to Kazakhstan. Other small ethnic minorities, such as the Karachay, Ingush, Balkar, and Kalmyk, were also scattered across vast Soviet territories. But few realized the scale of the tragedy, or the full extent of demonization campaign against the Tatars and other minorities.

During post-war reconstruction in the Soviet Union, a large number of deportees sought to return to their homeland. Yet the need to control the interactions of multiple nationalities could not warrant such mobility. The Supreme Committee of the Soviet Union passed an Ukas (decree) imposing severe punishment to anyone attempting to repatriate, citing that returning Crimean Tatars would serve as agents for foreign governments. The law demanded that each ethnic group be assigned a particular place of residence. Like so many of the edicts of the Soviet government, this law was established in secret.³⁹

Repatriation—Exoneration of the Crimean Tatars

Over time, the cause for Crimean Tatar repatriation became widely recognized. Beginning in 1989, the liberal policies associated with Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika allowed more than a quarter of a million of Crimean Tatars to return to their historic homeland, predominantly from Uzbekistan.⁴⁰ These policies were driven by the need to redress gross injustices of the past and the brutal mistreatment of this Turko-Muslim ethnic group. As might be expected, many Crimean residents objected to Tatar repatriation. Their allegedly treasonous deeds during the war were not forgotten or forgiven. The Tatars were stigmatized as a danger to the Soviet people, citing alleged Tatar degeneracy. In the half-century absence of Crimean Tatars from their homeland,

Tatar history and culture heritage were largely expunged from the population of Crimea as they were castigated as invaders whose presence represents a threat to the legitimate residents of the peninsula.

As an extended arm of the reigning political institutions, the mass media actively embraced government policies for the repatriation of exiled ethnic groups; however, their simultaneous coverage of public demonstrations and conflicts among the local population in Crimea perpetuated strong negative images of returning Crimean Tatars. Letters to the Editor of the large newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* (*Arguments and Facts*) denounced attempts by Crimean Tatars to return to Crimea. Their claims to return to their historic homeland were dismissed as groundless. Most returnees were accused of never having lived in Crimea. Tatars were accused of marrying outside of their ethnic group and thus relinquishing their right to return. Because the USSR was viewed as a fatherland for all people residing in its territory regardless of their ethnic identity (or nationality in Soviet policy), the desire to return to a designated homeland represented a lack of patriotism. Once again, the practices of identity positioning returned to the idea of the greater Soviet family to suit the needs of the dominant group. The very act of Tatars pursuing repatriation (among other rights) was viewed as the work of extremist nationalists.⁴¹

As the number of Crimean Tatars returning to the peninsula increased, ethnic hostilities intensified in Crimea. After extended political debate in the late 1980s over the rights of Crimean Tatars, representatives of the Central Committee of Communist Party of Ukraine held dialogues between Crimean Tatars and other ethnic groups, seeking to decrease social tensions and prevent extremist tendencies toward repatriation in the population. Some Committee officials were sent to Uzbekistan, the major source of repatriates, to discourage the migration of large numbers of people. Moreover, the Committee recommended that the Soviet Ministers of Ukraine revisit the history of the peninsula, particularly the period of Second World War, to install a monument in commemoration of the Crimean Tatars soldiers who died during the war.⁴² These positioning tactics embraced a policy of “keep them where they are.” The Department of Information and Popularization of the Central Committee of the Communist party of Ukraine advised the Ukrainian media to promote peaceful coexistence among the diverse ethnic group of the Crimean peninsula.⁴³ The Ukrainian newspapers called for harmonious ethnic relations and stressed long traditions of respectful and peaceful coexistence between Tatars and the Ukrainian population. They condemned attempts to sow seeds of discord among the citizens of the Ukraine.⁴⁴ According to some articles, Crimea had sufficient resources to meet the needs of all returning ex-patriots.⁴⁵

And yet, economic challenges contributed to escalating tensions between current residents and the newcomers to Crimea. To aggravate tensions, the government could not provide all returnees with affordable housing, equal educational opportunities, or adequate medical services. The newspapers repeatedly raised the following rhetorical question: “Where does one get various resources?”⁴⁶ The dissolution of the Soviet Union increased economic burdens on the local government. Lacking governmental support, many returning Crimean Tatars settled in locations that were prohibited by government authorities. The formation of unauthorized self-seized settlements, known as *samozahvat*, enraged the local population. Newspapers reported that *samozahvat* destroyed 238 hectares of fertile land.⁴⁷ Hundreds of houses built by the newly arrived Crimean Tatars were bulldozed; hundreds were denied registration, jobs, and education. The rights for housing and settlement became a point of contention between the government of Ukraine and the Tatar *mejlice*, a local elected governing office.

Public officials and the media eventually recognized the scarcity of resources to meet the basic needs of the general population. The voices that encouraged resettlement were met with disdain from most members of the population. Some of these critics saw the fount of troubles as coming “from the top” by government authorities.⁴⁸ Old labels, stories, and prejudices reflecting well-worn patterns of ethnic hostility resurfaced. Many articles cast Crimean Tatars as traitors for serving in the German army.⁴⁹ The economic prosperity of some Crimean Tatar families was attributed to their inherent criminal character, as evident in practices such as money laundering and government corruption, rather than to their hard work.⁵⁰ Many members of the general public even positioned Tatars as barbarians.⁵¹ Tatars were denigrated as culturally backwards, lacking adequate language skills, and unsuited for modern life.⁵²

In general, economic hardships often force people to blame an ethnic or minority group that differs from the predominant population. The citizens of Crimea during the 1980s argued that the peninsula was being invaded by traitors who sought to transform Crimea to Tatarland (*otatarivshiy*).⁵³ Despite certain official proclamations regarding the need to exonerate Tatars from past allegations, returning Tatars accused by some officials of engaging in a sinister campaign of conquest over the rightful residents of Crimea. These officials went as far as to argue that Crimean Tatars lost all their rights as a result of their deportation to the Central Asia.⁵⁴

As they began to repatriate, some Crimean Tatars responded to their continued provocation with aggressive statements, political challenges, and in some cases violence. Attempts to reclaim lost property led to numerous attacks against the local population. Crimean Tatar officials threatened that, once in power, they would deny residency for all non-Tatar populations in Crimea.⁵⁵ Such rhetoric further incited animosity and escalated the struggle to a state that approached civil war.

Crimean Tatars in Occupied Crimea

In February 2014 Russia took control of Crimea and occupied the peninsula. On March 16, 2014 the Crimean Government held a referendum on the status of Crimea. The aim of the referendum was for the Crimean people to decide whether Crimean would join Russia as a federal subject, or if they wanted to restore the 1992 Crimean constitution and Crimea's status as a part of Ukraine. According to Crimean authorities, 96.77 per cent of voters in Crimea supported joining Russia. Many Crimeans loyal to Kiev, including Crimean Tatars, boycotted the referendum, and the EU and US condemned it as illegal. The Joint Statement on Crimea issued by the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy and President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso stated: "The referendum is illegal and illegitimate and its outcome will not be recognized ... We reiterate the strong condemnation of the unprovoked violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and call on Russia to withdraw its armed forces to their pre-crisis numbers and the areas of their permanent stationing, in accordance with relevant agreements."⁵⁶

Crimean Tatars together with other residents of the peninsula were forced to give up their Ukrainian citizenship for Russian citizenship. All Ukrainian citizens became foreigners in their own land and had to acquire a "residence permit."⁵⁷ Facing an illegal Russian Government, many Crimean Tatars decided to leave Crimea. According to Amnesty International, "up to 7,000 Tatars have fled Crimea already. Those who have stayed face the unenviable choice of having to give up their Ukrainian citizenship and accept a Russian one or become 'foreigners' in their homeland."⁵⁸

The highest executive body of Crimean Tatars, the Mejlis, has openly criticized Russia's occupation of Crimea. Members of Mejlis recommended that all Crimean Tatars boycott both the March referendum on Crimea's status and the September local elections. Most Crimean Tatars boycotted the March 16 illegal referendum on the status of Crimea, fully supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity. They also boycotted Russian local elections held on September 14.

Mejlis also appealed to the Crimean authorities to disarm and make illegal the self-defense units in Crimea. These self-defense units were formed as armed paramilitary groups in late February with the aim of precluding any opposition to the referendum on Crimea's status. Since then they have been involved in "unlawful detention, abduction, ill-treatment including torture, and harassment of pro-Ukraine activists and other residents with complete impunity."⁵⁹ The self-defense units have also been a part of illegitimate searches of persons, properties, and vehicles, violent dispersals of meetings and public gatherings, and numerous attacks on representatives of the mass media. Crimean authorities did not launch any investigations regarding unlawful actions of self-defense units. Instead, in June 2014, the parliament of Crimea passed the law On People's Uprising that makes the self-defense units legal on the peninsula. The law authorized self-defense units to check identity documents and assist police in temporarily detaining people.⁶⁰ Many units are operating without the presence of police. They regularly harass, interrogate, and sometimes beat people because they choose to do.

Mejlis became the target of coercive actions by the Crimean Government. The prosecutor issued several statements describing the Mejlis actions as extremist activities, including a boycott of the September 14 local elections.⁶¹ In September, the de facto prime minister of Crimea stated publicly that the Mejlis was not a "legal organization" and that it had "very little authority" among the Crimean Tatar population.⁶²

The leaders of Mejlis were forced to live outside Crimea. On April 22, 2014 an informal leader of the Crimean Tatars, Mustafa Jemiliev, was informed by the Russian Federal Migration Service that he was a *persona non grata* in Crimea, and on May 2, 2014 he was refused entry to Moscow to board his flight to Crimea. The following day, he was stopped at the checkpoint between Crimea and mainland Ukraine. Several thousands Crimean Tatars created a human corridor welcoming Jemiliev into Crimea but he was refused entry. On May 4, 2014, the Chair of Mejlis, Refat Chubarov, received a written warning from the Prosecutor of Crimea stating that his activities and the activities of the Mejlis were in violation of Russian law on extremism.⁶³ On July 5, 2014, on his return from the neighboring Ukrainian region of Kherson, Chubarov was stopped at a checkpoint by the Russian military and received notice of his five-year ban on entering the territory of Russia.⁶⁴

The houses of other Mejlis members were routinely searched by Crimean authorities. For example, on the night of May 14, a day before planned public gatherings to commemorate the anniversary of the mass deportation of Crimean Tatars, the authorities searched dozens of homes, including the home of Mustafa Dzhemilev and the Mejlis' press secretary, Ali Khamzin. The authorities searched for weapons and explosives at the home of Mejlis member Edem Mustafaev.⁶⁵ The authorities also searched dozens of private residences of Crimean Tatars and conducted invasive, and some times illegal, searches of mosques and Islamic schools to look for drugs, weapons, and prohibited literature.

Crimean authorities also denied Crimean Tatars' right to freedom of expression, assembly and potentially association. For example, the ban imposed on all mass meetings in Crimea until June 6 impeded the events planned for the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the mass deportation on May 18. Crimean Tatars were allowed only to hold a common prayer on the outskirts of the Crimean capital, Simferopol.

Unlawful detention, abductions, and the beating of Crimean Tatars also became a common feature in Crimea. In October, authorities arrested and charged three Crimean Tatars with violating the law during the protests of May 3. Human Rights Watch previously documented at least 15 cases in which Crimean Tatars or pro-Ukraine activists were forcibly disappeared, abducted, or went missing in Crimea since March 2014. Six of them were later released but two of them were subsequently found dead.⁶⁶ For example, on March 3, 39-year old Reshat Ametov had held a one-man protest in front of the Crimean Council of Ministers building in Simferopol. Three men from the self-defense forces led him away and put him into their car. Two weeks later his body was found showing signs of torture. A criminal case that has been opened but has, as of yet, not result in any arrests.⁶⁷ Edem Asanov, a Crimean Tatar who was not politically active but had posted information about the treatment of Crimean Tatars on his social network VKontakte, disappeared on September 29 in Evpatoria. Six days later, police found Asanov's body hanged in an abandoned building.

Crimean Tatars' media also became a target of Crimean authorities and self-defense units. Russia's Federal Security Service and the Crimea prosecutor's office have issued warnings to leading Crimean Tatar media outlets not to publish extremist materials and threatened editors that the outlets would not be allowed to re-register unless they changed their anti-Russian editorial line. The self-defense units publicly referred to ATR, the main Crimean Tatar channel that broadcasts in three languages: Crimean Tatar, Ukrainian, and Russian, as the enemy channel and since March attacked and beat several ATR journalists.⁶⁸ On May 16, the Crimea prosecutor's office issued an official warning to ATR's leadership about its coverage of the mass gathering on May 3, stating that the channel had reported on the gathering's participants making calls "of an extremist nature."⁶⁹ According to Amnesty international, "ATR has received informal instructions from the authorities not to broadcast reports which included members of the Mejlis or leaders of the Crimean Tatar community, unless they were loyal to the Crimean authorities and Russia."⁷⁰ Several journalists and media workers have been detained and in some cases harassed and beaten. For example, on May 18, self-defense units detained Crimean Tatar journalist Osman Pashayev and his crew while they were filming a meeting in Simferopol. The self-defense units forced him and his colleagues to stand facing a wall and interrogated them, beating and harassing them for several hour. The journalists' equipment was confiscated and never returned to them.⁷¹

All Ukrainian media was gradually removed from translating in Crimea. According to the OSCE, "Broadcasts from the six main Ukrainian television channels in Crimea have been blocked

and replaced with broadcasts from Russian channels. Since the end of June, cable television providers also stopped airing most leading Ukrainian-language channels in Crimea, including Inter, Channel 5, 1+1, and several others, significantly reducing the amount of televised Ukrainian-language content.⁷² Police seized the equipment and computers that belonged to Chernomorska (Black Sea) Television Company and the Center for Journalistic Investigation, a nonprofit group specializing in investigative journalism that had an office in the same building.⁷³

Conclusion

Categorical violence against Crimean Tatars is rooted in the redefinition of social boundary and ascription of treacherous and rebellious attitudes to the entire ethnic group. During the Second World War, the Soviet authorities orchestrated a campaign to collectively reclassify certain ethnic minorities as a prelude to their deportation from their homelands. Such negative categorization soon became an instrument of terror. The demonization of Germans as Nazis by the Soviet propaganda machine intensified hatred toward their (perceived and actual) collaborators. Working in secrecy, Soviet propagandists exploited information about a few cases of Crimean Tatar collaboration with the German occupation to generate nationalistic hatreds that lasted for half a century.

Significant reduction of the level of hostility toward the Crimean Tatar population began with perestroika and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The repatriation of Crimean Tatars in the beginning of the 1990s aimed to redress previous injustices and to compensate them for the hardships they experienced at the hands of the Soviet government. However, Crimean Tatars were ill-treated by local Crimean authorities and experienced discrimination from the Crimean population. They were denied access to land, work, and affordable housing. After Ukrainian independence they gradually acquired many rights but some issues remained unresolved.

The illegal occupation of Crimea by Russia has again reignited hardship suffered by Crimean Tatars. They refused to acknowledge the new authority by boycotting the referendum on the status of Crimea and the local elections. In response, local government and militant self-defense forces targeted Mejlis leadership, activists and mass media representatives. Harassment, arrests, abductions, and beatings once again became a part of the everyday life for Crimean Tatars. Two Mejlis leaders were prohibited to live in Crimea and Mejlis actions were portrayed as extremist.

The demonization of Crimean Tatars that started during the Second World War by the communist regime continues to play a definitive role in their positioning in society today. It provided the justification needed by the Crimean Government in the late 1980s to create impediments to the return of Crimean Tatars to their Motherland. Similar definitions of treason and extremism were employed by the authorities of illegally occupied Crimea in 2014. In all three situations, categorical violence based on the negative portrayal of Crimean Tatars has led to a denial of their rights, and the prosecution and harassment of leadership and ordinary citizens.

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