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# Hidden ethnocide in the Soviet Muslim borderlands: the ethnic cleansing of the Crimean Tatars

BRIAN GLYN WILLIAMS

It has been said that one must know a nation's tragedies and the way its people commemorate them to know its soul. To understand the Russians one has to visit its memorials to the millions of members of that nation who gave their lives fighting in the "Great Patriotic War" against Nazi Germany; to understand Serbian aggression in 1999 against the Kosovar Albanians one has to visit the sacred monasteries of Kosovo commemorating that people's defeat at Kosovo in 1389 at the hands of the Ottomans; likewise the Armenians cannot be understood today without understanding the role of the collective memory of the 1915 genocidal assault on their community by the Ottoman government; similarly, the Palestinians are defined by their trans-generational narratives of their expulsion from Israel in 1948 known as *al-naqbah* (the disaster); and the Jews of today, regardless of their level of religiosity, are shaped by the collective memory of the *Shoah* (Holocaust).

## The deportation of the Crimean Tatars

The defining event in twentieth century Crimean Tatar history is the brutal deportation and exile of this Turkic-Muslim minority from their peninsular homeland on the Black Sea (Ukraine) to the deserts of Soviet Central Asia and Siberia in the closing days of World War II. On May 18, 1944, the *entire* Crimean Tatar people, men, women, children, the elderly, unarmed civilians and those fighting for the Soviet *Rodina* (Homeland) in the ranks of the Red Army, were arbitrarily accused of "mass treason" by the Soviet leader Josef Stalin and deported from their villages located in the Crimea's southern Yaila mountains on the warm southern shore of the Crimea. The official explanation for this total ethnic cleansing was announced at a later date in the Soviet paper *Izvestiia* which declared:

During the Great Patriotic War when the people of the USSR were heroically defending the honour and independence of the Fatherland in the struggle against the German-Fascist invaders, many Chechens and Crimean Tatars, at the instigation of German agents joined volunteer units organised by the Germans and together with German troops engaged in

armed struggle against units of the Red Army ... meanwhile the main mass of the population of the Chechen Ingush and Crimean ASSRs took no counteraction against these betrayers of the Fatherland.<sup>1</sup>

The cleansing of the Crimean Tatars was actually part of a larger programme described as Operation Deportation. Stalin took advantage of the war time mobilization of Soviet troops and general distrust of non-Slavic minorities in many echelons of the Kremlin to eradicate several ethnies deemed to be untrustworthy by the Soviet regime. In addition to the Crimean Tatars, several other small, distrusted nationalities living on the Soviet Union's southern borderlands (the Chechens and related highlanders the Ingush, the Turkic pastoralists known as the Karachai and related Balkars, the Buddhist Mongol Kalmyks, the Meshketian Turks mountain farmers, and the Volga Germans) were targeted for deportation to Siberia. Not surprisingly, the sudden "disappearance" of these ancient ethnic groups, most of whom were Muslims living in the Caucasus vicinity, went largely unnoticed in the West during the general conflagration of World War II.

It was only with the collapse of the USSR that Western scholars could begin to probe once-off limits KGB documents on this tragedy and interview the survivors of the deportations. It soon became clear that in all more than 1.5 million Soviet citizens belonging to targeted ethnic groups were forcefully deported during the war years in one of the best hidden cases of mass ethnic cleansing in twentieth century history. All the targeted ethnic groups were accused of "betraying the homeland" during the German invasion and their rights as Soviet citizens were subsequently taken away.

There are some grounds for Stalin's sweeping accusation against the Crimean Tatar people. As many as 20,000 Crimean Tatars did serve in the *Wehrmacht* in varying capacities as *Hiwis* (German, literally "volunteers"). But most of these were prisoners of war captured by the German army as it surrounded and captured whole Soviet armies in 1941 and 1942. Most of those captured by the Germans were used as cannon-fodder in their costly engagements with the Red Army. Others were used in village defence brigades within the Crimea itself and their loyalty was more to their village than to the Nazis (who initially called for the eradication of the Tatars and other "Asiatic inferiors").

It should be noticed, however, that 20,000 Crimean Tatars actually fought for the Soviet homeland in the Soviet army. Others fought in the ranks of the partisans who launched guerrilla raids on the German occupying forces during the war. The eyewitness testimonies of Russian officers offer us an invaluable account of the anti-Nazi guerrilla activities of a Crimean Tatar partisan brigade:

The Commissar of the Eastern formation was named captain Refat Mustafaev (prior to the war he was secretary of the Crimean regional party). Here is one episode of the military actions of his formation. In the end of the 1943 the divisions of the second and third brigades destroyed the fascist garrison in Sary Krym (Eski Kirim) destroying on that occasion two tanks, 16 vehicles with gasoline and ammunition. The partisans occupied the building of the commander of the city police and threw grenades into the restaurant where

the Hitlerites banqueted. One of the group seized the Gestapo jail and freed 46 Soviet patriots.<sup>2</sup>

As the Crimean Tatars joined the partisans their villages suffered heavily from German reprisals. The following account is typical:

Dozens of Crimean Tatars were shot in Alushta on the banks of the Demerci, in the foothills of the Kastel in dozens in the villages of Uluala—Kizil Tash, Degirmen Koy, Tav-Bodrak, Saly and many others.

In July 1988 the country learned from information in Tass that in the partisan regions in the mountainous part of the Crimea all villages were burnt and a “dead zone” was created. Yes it actually happened. More than 70 villages were destroyed. In them dwelt more than 25% of the Tatar population of the Crimea. In these villages, in remote woodlands, in the mountains lived only Tatars.<sup>3</sup>

Seen in this light, the official charges levelled against the Crimean Tatars of “mass treason” are obviously spurious. The real reason for the deportation may in fact lie in Stalin’s plans to invade Turkey at this time. In particular, as the Red Army moved into a collapsing Germany, Stalin contemplated the annexation of the Turkish *vilayets* (provinces) of Kars and Ardahan on Turkey’s north-eastern border with the USSR (these were lost to Russia during World War I). The Soviets commenced a broad propaganda campaign at this time designed to lead to an Armenian uprising in this region and Turkey in return planned a full mobilization.<sup>4</sup> As Stalin prepared for this operation he, as a Georgian, must have been keenly aware of the existence of several Muslim, traditionally pro-Turkish ethnic groups located on the invasion route through the Caucasus. The “Crimean Turks,” as the Tatars of the Crimea were often known, occupied the USSR’s main naval base facing Turkey across the Black Sea and other small, distrusted ethnic groups, such as the Karachai, Balkars, Chechens, Ingush and the Meshketian Turks, occupied the frontier with Turkey or the two main highways running to Turkey—the Georgian military highway and the coastal highway.

All these suspect Muslim groups were deported after having been accused of blanket treason against the *Rodina* during the German invasion, except for the Meshketian Turks who were never officially accused of mass betrayal. The homeland of this small conglomerate ethnic group, made up of Turkic Karapapakhs, Muslim Armenians (Hemshils), Turkicized Kurds and the Meshketian Turks proper, was located far to the south of Georgia on the Turkish border and had never been close to the scene of combat. The fact that this patently innocent ethnic group was chosen for group deportation lends the strongest credence to the claim that the deportation of the Crimean and Caucasian Muslims had more to do with Soviet foreign policy priorities than any real crimes of “universal treason” committed by these groups. As Mehmet Tutuncu surmised, “The only thing all of these peoples have in common is religion and that they inhabit areas that would be sensitive in an invasion of Turkey. And this seems the only reason for the collective punishment of all these people.”<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the justification, the results of the deportations were terrifying for the targeted nationalities. Just as the sanitized term “ethnic cleansing” fails

to capture the true horror of rape camps, mass slaughter, brutal expulsion, and destruction of homes, welfare and culture, the term “deportation” fails to capture the true horror of this fate which befell the Crimean Tatars and several other small nations during the final days of World War II. Tens of thousands of NKVD (the progenitor of the KGB) troops surrounded the Crimean Tatar hamlets in the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Crimean ASSR) and began to expel their startled inhabitants on the eve of May 18, 1944. Thousands deemed guilty of collaboration with the Germans, who had occupied the Crimea during the war, were summarily shot on the spot; those who resisted were beaten or shot. Traditionally tight-knit Crimean Tatar families and villages were divided as the well-armed troops gathered them and drove them to local rail-heads for deportation in various directions. Families who did not get on the same train often never again saw family members who were scattered throughout Central Asia and Siberia. In many cases the men were divided from their families and shipped to lumber and natural gas camps in Siberia where they were forced to do hard physical labour. The death rate in the harsh conditions in these camps deprived the Crimean Tatar community of scores of able-bodied men who might have helped their families re-adjust to harsh life in exile.

The deportees remember the weeks spent on the eastward moving trains in cattle cars, whose only modification for human inhabitation was a pipe fitted in the corner for defecating. This was remembered with particular horror. For efficiency’s sake the deportees had been crammed on to the locked train cars and the packed, unhealthy conditions led to outbreaks of disease such as typhus, which swept away many, especially the very young and the old. A survivor of the deportation recalls:

The doors of the wagons were usually opened in stations where the train stopped for a few minutes. The panting people gulped fresh air, and they gave way to the sick who were unable to crawl to the exit to breath it. But along the length of the wagon one officer in a blue hat hastily strolled with soldiers and, glancing into the wagon, asked the same question. “Any bodies? Any bodies?” If this was the case, they pulled them out of the wagon; they were mainly children and the old. There and then, three meters from the rail embankment (the bodies) were thrown into hollows with dirt and refuse.<sup>6</sup>

The trains carrying the bulk of the Crimean Tatar population (civilians and the wounded) trundled across the hot plains of the northern Caucasus and Kazakhstan and, after two weeks, most made their way to Tashkent, the capital of the dry Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan. According to N. F. Bugai, a specialist on the deportations, a maximum of 191,088 Crimean Tatars were deported from the Crimean autonomous republic on that May of 1944. Another account also based on conflicting NKVD sources from 1944 claims that only 187, 859 Crimean Tatars were deported from the Crimea.<sup>7</sup> Of these, Bugai claims, 151,604 were sent to the Uzbek SSR and 8,597 to the Udmurt and Mari Autonomous *Oblasts* (Ural Mountain region, part of the Russian Federated Socialist Republic).<sup>8</sup> B. Broshevan and P. Tygliants support this claim and reference

a telegram sent from Beria to Stalin which proudly proclaims that “all the Tatars have arrived in the places of resettlement and 151,604 people have been resettled in the *oblasts* (districts) of the Uzbek SSR and 31,551 in the *oblasts* of the RSFSR (Russia).”<sup>9</sup> Although Soviet records do not record the “resettlement” of Crimean Tatars in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, several thousand were eventually transferred or migrated to these regions. The Khojent (Leninbad) region in Tajikistan, in particular, saw considerable settlement according to the overwhelming testimony of those I interviewed in Uzbekistan in the spring of 1996. Approximately 7,900 Crimean Tatars (ca. 4%) died during the actual deportation process.

Tashkent served as the main dispersion centre for the majority of the Crimean Tatars who were sent to Uzbekistan (other deported groups, such as the Chechens and Ingush, were sent to Alma Ata, the capital of the Kazakh SSR, who were then scattered throughout Eastern Uzbekistan, from the Ferghana Valley in the north to the deserts of the barren Kashga Darya *Oblast* district in the south.)<sup>10</sup> According to records sent to NKVD head Lavrenty Beria in June of 1944, the Crimean Tatars were settled in Uzbekistan in the following *oblasts*: Tashkent—56,632, Samarkand—31,540, Andijan—19,630, Ferghana—16,039, Namangan—13,804, Kashga Darya—10,171, Bukhara—3,983.<sup>11</sup> Little or no preparations had been made in advance for the arrivees and most were forced to live in barracks outside factories, in dugouts, or in primitive earthen huts. The death rate continued to rise at this time and as many as a third of the Crimean Tatars may have died during the resettlement period in special camps in Central Asia.

The Crimean Tatar men who were still fighting for the Soviet homeland on the front (and had thus avoided deportation) were demobilized after the fall of Berlin and joined by the Tatar males deported from the Crimea in labour brigades in Siberia and the Urals region. Many Soviet military commanders, however, hid the identity of the Crimean Tatar soldiers with whom they had served during the war to protect their trusted comrades from the NKVD.

### Adjusting to life in exile

From my own interviews with survivors of the deportation it appears that most deportees who were deposited in Kazakhstan were well treated by the indigenous populations. Those who were exiled in the Mari Republic (Siberia) found that many of the local inhabitants were themselves deported *kulaks* (a persecuted category of so-called wealthy peasants) and political prisoners from the 1920s and 1930s; these were quick to offer assistance. Most accounts, however, stressed the hostility of the Uzbeks towards the deportees in the first year or two in Uzbekistan. The NKVD had been active in the region prior to the deportations, spreading anti-Tatar propaganda against this “nation of traitors” and it seems to have been particularly effective among the simple Uzbek *kolkhozniki* who had a xenophobic distrust of outsiders. According to the testimony of one deportee, in some instances the Uzbeks stoned the already stricken Tatars when

they arrived in the comparatively backward countryside. The Crimean Tatar physicist and dissident Rollan Kadiyev claimed, "I personally recall how we were met by the local inhabitants, who had been poisoned by Stalin's propaganda. One of the rocks hit me. I was then only a boy."<sup>12</sup>

The Crimean Tatar dissident Reshat Dzhemilev wrote, "People were dying in droves every day, from hunger, exhaustion, and the unaccustomed climate, but no one would help them bury their dead." According to Dzhemilev, "People died from the sharp changes in the climate and the unbearable work, from dystrophy and other illnesses, from cold and malnutrition in the absence of medical care, from nostalgia and from grief over the lost members of their family."<sup>13</sup> All Crimean Tatar families have stories of lost family members that recall the horrible conditions their people encountered in their first two years in Central Asia. The following account given by one deportee is sadly typical:

My niece, Menube Seyhislamova, with ten children, was deported with us. Her husband, who had been in the Soviet Army from the first day of the war had been killed. And the family of this fallen soldier perished of hunger in exile in Uzbekistan. Only one little girl, Pera, remained alive, but she became a cripple as a result of the horror she had experienced and of hunger.

Our men-folk were at the front and there was no one to bury the dead. Corpses would lie for several days among the living. Adshigulsim Adzhimambetova's husband had been captured by the Fascists. Three children, a little girl and two boys, remained with her. This family was also starving just as we were. No one gave either material or moral help. As a result, first of all, the little girl died of hunger, then in one day, both the boys. Their mother could not move from starvation. Then the owner of the house threw the two children's bodies onto the street, onto the side of the irrigation canal. Then some children, the Crimean Tatars, dug little graves and buried the poor little boys.

Can one really tell it all? I have such a weight on my heart that it is difficult to remember all. Tell me why did they allow such horrors to happen?<sup>14</sup>

Crimean Tatar survivors of the deportation claim that the local Uzbeks did eventually come to aid of the outsiders who had been dumped in their midst after the first year or two. In interviews I conducted in Tashkent with elderly deportees, they stressed the fact that the Uzbeks accepted the Crimean Tatars when the latter made a point of stressing their shared Islamic beliefs and traditions. The exiled Crimean Tatars in fact made a point of emphasizing the Muslim aspects of their culture and identity to open a dialogue with the local Uzbeks who had maintained much of the traditional, conservative religious traditions lost by the less religious, Europeanized Crimean Tatar population. Islam, in effect, provided a common language of idioms, symbols and shared cultural norms that bridged the differences between these two different peoples.

Several older Crimean Tatar interviewees also claimed that the local Uzbeks were taken aback when they discovered that the vast majority of the "traitors to the homeland" dumped in their midst were actually the elderly, women and children with many wounded Red Army officers in their midst. Many Uzbek villagers were, according to my informants, ashamed to discover that they had



been so initially harsh to women and children who hardly looked like hardened Nazi collaborators.

Soviet statistics back up the Crimean Tatars' claims that the majority of those transported on the terrible journey from the Crimean peninsula to Uzbekistan were indeed women and children. Of the 151,529 Crimean Tatars deposited in Uzbekistan an astounding 68,287 were children, 55,684 women and a mere 27,558 men, according to a letter sent to Beria.<sup>15</sup> A full 82% of the Crimean Tatar "collaborators" brutally deported in 1944 to Uzbekistan then were actually women and children and the majority of the men included in this number were, in all probability, war invalids or the elderly. The abundance of children was a pleasant surprise for those involved in the deportation for they could squeeze more deportees in a wagon due to their smaller size.

In paintings depicting "The Deportation" that now hang in art exhibits presented by the Crimean Tatars in the post-Soviet Crimea and Uzbekistan the author noticed a common theme. Invariably the Crimean Tatar artists portrayed the horror stricken victims of the "*echelons*" (cattle transport carts) as weeping women, children and the elderly. Young men never appear in these works. To this day the Crimean Tatars reserve particular revulsion towards the Soviet regime for its treatment of this non-combatant segment of their population who were left defenceless while thousands of their husbands and fathers were fighting on the front against the German invaders in the ranks of the Red Army.

The desperate situation of the Crimean Tatar elderly, women and children in Central Asia improved significantly when the war ended and many (although not all) Tatar soldiers were allowed to search out their families in the various places of exile between 1945 and 1948. The Crimean Tatars have a distinct genre of stories which speak of the anguish of Crimean Tatar soldiers who were discharged from the Red Army only to return to a Crimea that had been emptied of their families, villages and entire people. Those who did make their way with great difficulty across the war torn Soviet Union to their families in their special settlement camps in distant Central Asia were automatically declared *spetspereselenetsy* ("special resettlers") along with their relatives and confined to the special settlement regime. Soviet sources recorded the arrival of approximately 9,000 demobilized Crimean Tatar soldiers to the *spetsposelenets* (special settlement) camps after the war. Most interestingly, Soviet sources mention that 524 of these veterans who automatically became "traitors to the homeland" were Soviet officers and 1,392 sergeants in the Red Army.<sup>16</sup>

With the arrival of many of their fathers, sons, and brothers in 1946, this largely defenceless population had thousands of hardened war veterans to protect them from the abuse of MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) "*kommandanty*" and help them rebuild their lives in their places of exile. Several older Crimean Tatar interviewees recalled the rare feelings of joy their community felt when the Crimean Tatar men came back in waves from the front to be reunited with their families. One Crimean Tatar recalled:

In the first months in Uzbekistan after arrival, more than 40,000 Crimean Tatars perished. A primary role in this was played by the circumstance that the local population received

the exiles as their personal enemies. Anti-Tatar propaganda was spread among the peoples of Central Asia and the Crimean Tatars were pictured as traitors who had betrayed Central Asian men who were fighting for the Soviet *Rodina* on the front.

A short time passed then the local population began to understand. Dozens of disabled soldiers without arms or legs, with medals clinking on their chests returned from the front and searched for their mothers, wives, and children but they were no longer in this world ... And then the Uzbeks understood that a monstrous injustice had taken place and they began to share their last scrap of *lepishka* (scone), their last handful of *kishmish* (raisins) or nuts.<sup>17</sup>

The establishment of a rapport with the indigenous Uzbek population certainly eased the resettlement process for the deported Crimean Tatars. According to firsthand accounts, some Crimean Tatars widows initially married Uzbek men who were Turkic Sunni Muslims like themselves (the war and labour camps had decimated the Tatar male population) and Crimean Tatar orphans were adopted by the local Uzbeks. If one believes Soviet mythology, this tradition of adopting war orphans was in fact an Uzbek national characteristic. One Uzbek of the period, Sham Akhmudov, was reputed to have adopted 15 war orphans and a massive statue to this socialist hero still dominates the square in front of Tashkent's Palace of the Friendship of Peoples.

### The special settlement regime

Establishing good relations with the indigenous Central Asian populations was not, however, the deportees' only concern. Upon arrival in Central Asia, the Crimean Tatars, who were considered to be traitors to the homeland by the state and its officials, were forced to live under a punitive regime, in the so-called *spetsposelenie* settlements (special settlement camps). These informal camps surrounded by barbed wire, which were run by the *otdel spetsposelenii* (special settlement department) of the MVD, are remembered with particular repugnance by the Tatars who lived in them. The heads of Crimean Tatar households were required to report to the *spetskommandanty* every three days for a *spetsial'nyi uchet* (special accounting report on their family deaths, births, work progress, etc.). Those who left their assigned region were arrested and sentenced to five years hard labour. In these camps Crimean Tatars report that the "The commandants were god and Tsar."<sup>18</sup>

In interviews I held in Uzbekistan, Crimean Tatars told of being woken before dawn for 12-hour workdays in the fields and factories, of Crimean Tatars who were sentenced to the labour camps for five years for leaving their restricted areas to visit family members in other camps, and of the cruelty of the hated camp *kommandanty*.<sup>19</sup> Living conditions in the settlements were abysmal. Most deportees lived in barracks constructed next to factories, dugouts or simple huts hastily built of unbaked dried mud bricks during the *spetsposelenie* years.

As "enemies of the people," the Crimean Tatars had no rights as Soviet citizens during this period, and their group aspirations were reduced to one basic

objective, communal survival. One Crimean Tatar, whose mother died in the settlement camps, remembers her last words “continue the race” (*prodolzhit rod*), and this appears to have been a national mission for the Crimean Tatars who fought to keep their nation alive.<sup>20</sup>

This simple task was made all the more difficult by the Crimean Tatars’ difficulties in adjusting to their new environment. The natural environment of Uzbekistan, with its blistering dry summers, droughts and desert oasis conditions (except in the high Ferghana Valley) differed markedly from that of the coastal Black Sea home of the Crimean Tatars. Uzbek medical facilities were filled during this period with Crimean Tatars who began to die off in large numbers due to their lack of immunity to local diseases, such as malaria, dysentery, dystrophy, yellow fever and other intestinal illnesses, which were not found in the Crimean peninsula where the water was purer. Women and children died in the greatest numbers. The majority of the Crimean Tatars had previously of course lived in the valleys and foothills of the peninsula’s Yaila mountains or the Yaliboyu coast and were unaccustomed to the conditions they found in the arid lands of Uzbekistan.

In addition, the majority of the deportees were from the Crimean countryside and NKVD sources a mere 18,983 of the exiles were actually deported from cities in the Crimea.<sup>21</sup> Few Crimean Tatar farmers could acquire fields in the land-starved Uzbek oases and overpopulated Fergana valley and most of these village peasants were forced to find work in mines or factories (the only jobs available due to the Uzbeks’ loathing of such work) located for the most part in large cities such as Tashkent. One source records that during the first few years in Uzbekistan “It was characteristic that the *spetspereselenety* from the Crimean Tatars were frequently assigned to the most trying and heaviest construction enterprises.”<sup>22</sup>

Crimean Tatars who were settled in the Tashkent vicinity in such towns as Chircik, Angren, Gulistan and Yangi Yul or in the Fergana valley towns of Marghilan, Andijan, Namangan, and Fergana were forced to labour as menial workers in the many factories that had been evacuated to this region from the Nazi occupied west. In an order of May 1944, Stalin clearly ordered Uzbek officials to settle the “special settlers” from the Crimea in *sovkhozes* (state farms), *kolkhozes* (collective farms) and factory settlements for “utilization” in village agriculture and industry.<sup>23</sup> According to one source, “The Crimean Tatars, to a considerable degree, satisfied the need for the speedy development of industry in the republics of Central Asia.”<sup>24</sup> In their work on the Crimean Tatars, M. Guboglo and S. Chervonnaia write:

In the places of “special settlement” the Crimean Tatars were subjected to a special regime, the aim of which was the destruction of the traditional modes of production, which had been forged over the centuries by systems of life security among the Crimean Tatars. Prior to the war, in the Crimea, they were primarily involved in village production and were especially famous for their skill in gardening, in wine producing, and tobacco growing. In their new regions of inhabitation they were settled in barracks, communal housing,

hurriedly constructed temporary shelters, and annexes located near factories, the Crimean Tatars, regardless of their previous means of occupation, were transferred to heavy labour in various spheres of industry. The roots of national distinction were cut to the root, permanently.<sup>25</sup>

The cutting of the Crimean Tatars' "roots" in the soil of the Crimea was to be permanent and few of the Crimean Tatars' traditional agricultural skills were to survive this disruption. In the post-Soviet Crimea of today the repatriated Crimean Tatars suffer from this sundering of their agrarian ties to the Crimea.

In the southern Uzbekistan region of Kashga Darya and Bukhara another form of forced labour prevailed among the Crimean Tatars. Crimean Tatar farmers who had worked for centuries maintaining the specialized mountain irrigation canals of their forefathers were now forced to work 12-hour days under the hot sun in Uzbekistan's "cotton *Gulag*." Moscow had turned much of the deserts of Central Asia into a vast, artificially irrigated cotton field and, with the arrival of the Crimean Tatar deportees, a class of *helots* had been provided to develop this region. Many Crimean Tatars suffered subsequent health problems from working in the pesticide-coated cotton fields or as menial labourers in the unhealthy conditions of Uzbekistan's factories.

### Commemorating "the deportation" in Central Asia

More than any other event in their history, the removal of this small nation from a land it had come to define as its *natsional'naia rodina* (national homeland) under the first two decades of Soviet rule and its *atavatan* (fatherland) on the eve of the Russian revolution has shaped this people's contemporary national identity. For several generations the Crimean Tatar people worked in the factories, mines and industrial centres of a Central Asian landscape that was in every way different from their peninsular homeland on the Black Sea, and this has shaped this victimized community's collective memory.

From 1944 to 1957, the Crimean Tatars worked in Central Asia's cotton *gulag* or served as a helot class working in the many factories transported to Central Asia from European Russia to put them beyond the reach of the invading Germans. In 1957 the new Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev allowed the Crimean Tatars and other deported peoples to leave their hated *Spetskommandantskii* (Special Commandant) camps and he exculpated the deported nations on the false charges of mass treason. In addition, Khrushchev allowed several of the deported peoples from the Caucasus to return to their reconstituted homeland-republics, but three groups were omitted from Krushchev's decree. The stunned Volga Germans, Meskhetian Turks and Crimean Tatars learned that their exile was to be permanent. While the deported Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, Karachays and Balkars were thus allowed to return, the Crimean Tatars, Meshketian Turks, and Volga Germans were not allowed to return to their natal territories for reasons that probably had to do with the value of their former homelands.

The devastated Crimean Tatars were forbidden from returning to their republic and those who did were to be arrested. In response to this decree the scattered Crimean Tatars began to unite and mobilize their communities for a struggle to earn the right of repatriation. For the next 30 years the Crimean Tatars launched the Soviet Union's first ethnically-based frontal challenge to Moscow's authority demanding the right to return to their homeland. During the long exile years the Crimean Tatars began to commemorate the *Deportatsiia* on May 18 and, symbolically, they commemorated Lenin's birth date (Lenin was the founder of the Crimean ASSR and was considered much more tolerant of displays of ethno-national identity than his successor, Stalin). The exiled Crimean Tatars used these commemorative events as an opportunity to demand the right to return to their homeland. Wreaths were laid at the foot of statues of Lenin, banners were carried demanding the right to return to the Crimean peninsula (which had been demoted to a regular province in the Russian Federation and Slavized during the Crimean Tatars' absence). The MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs), militia and KGB often broke up these commemorative rallies, with the most spectacular attack on Crimean Tatars happening in the year 1967 in the city of Chirchik. On that occasion hundreds of Crimean Tatars were arrested, attacked by club-wielding troops, or sprayed with acidic substances. This widely reported clash was in fact one of the first instances of ethnic unrest in modern Soviet history.

In addition to these outward commemorative acts, Crimean Tatar parents and grandparents kept the memory of the deportation alive in the minds of new generations who grew up on stories of this tragedy. As a whole generation grew up in Central Asia with no first hand memories of the Crimean homeland or the deportation, the Crimean Tatar mantra became "Nothing is forgotten, nothing will be forgotten." Rather than peacefully assimilate in their places of exile, the Crimean Tatars (even those who had never been to the Crimea) actively fought to keep their identity alive and to make sure that new generations remembered their people's tragedy.

These trans-generational transfers of grievance are in many ways similar to the narratives of the Palestinians who, like the Crimean Tatars, were expelled from their homeland in the 1940s (more than three quarters of a million Palestinians were expelled from Israel to Jordan, Egypt, the Gaza, Lebanon and the West Bank in 1948). Whole generations of Palestinians growing up in squalid refugee camps in the Middle East considered their real home to be Palestine. Unlike the Palestinians who gave up the real dream of regaining their lost lands by the 1980s, the Crimean Tatars continued to think of their people's total repatriation in a real sense. The stories of the deportation served as one of the primary vehicles for keeping this dream alive amongst all members of the community during the tragic exile years.

Lilia Bujorova, perhaps the most famous Crimean Tatar writer and poetess to emerge from the exile, has had her poems of the Crimean homeland published throughout the former Soviet Union and provides the following poem entitled

*Speak (Govori)*, which captures her experience growing up in Central Asia with stories of the deportation and her lost homeland:

Speak father speak,  
 Speak until the dusk!  
 Speak of the cruel war,  
 Speak of the terrible day,  
 In my veins let the tragedy flow,  
 How salty is the sea water,  
 Don't spare me, don't spare anything,  
 Go again out of your native home,  
 Again lose your relatives on the wagons  
 Again count who remains among the living!  
 I want to know about everything,  
 So that I can tell it to your grandchildren,  
 Your pain cries to me,  
 I will bring every moment to life in them!  
 It will also become a homeland for them  
 The word "Homeland" and the word "Crimea"!  
 Speak father speak,  
 Speak father until the dusk!<sup>26</sup>

### Return to the homeland

It was only in 1989 that a decree was published in the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiia* allowing the Crimean Tatars to return to their homeland. Since that date roughly 250,000 of the former Soviet Union's 500,000 Crimean Tatars have returned to a homeland that most, who grew up in Central Asia, have never seen. The return migration of convoys of Crimean Tatar families from the deserts of Central Asia to the dreamed of homeland on the distant Black Sea had all the drama of the Jews' return to Israel.

While the jubilant Crimean Tatar repatriates grew up on stories of the romanticized *Yeshil Ada* (Green Island) of the Crimea during the exile years, these idealized notions of the homeland were, however, crushed by the bitter realities of life in the post-Soviet Crimea. The Crimean Tatars' return to the Crimea in the early 1990s was strongly resisted by the local Communist *nomenklatura* (entrenched Soviet-era bureaucratic elite) which destroyed Crimean Tatar *samožakvat* (self seized) settlements, refused to allow the Crimean Tatars to settle on their cherished southern coast (known as the *Yaliboyu*) and culturally, economically and politically marginalized the destitute returnees.

Most Crimean Tatar repatriates have thus been forced to live in what can best be described as squatter camps outside the cities of the Crimea. All Crimean cities are surrounded by distinctive Crimean Tatar settlements made up of simple rough hewn houses, with corrugated tin roofs usually lacking running water, often with no electricity, with dirt roads linking them to the highway (these roads prove impassable in the winter months). The Crimean Tatar returnees, many of

whom overcame the obstacles against them in Central Asia and became white collar professionals during the Soviet era, cannot find jobs in the Crimea (which now belongs to independent Ukraine). Over 80,000 Crimean Tatars were refused Ukrainian citizenship until 1999 due to bureaucratic hurdles placed in their way (one needs citizenship in order to receive a housing permit, job permit, to use hospitals and to send one's children to school). Most importantly, when land was privatized in the Crimea in 1999, the Crimean Tatars who did not belong to collective farms from the Soviet era were left out when the land was distributed so that most are now landless.

Not surprisingly, the Crimean Tatar repatriates have once again begun to use commemorations of "the deportation" as a forum for not only keeping the memory of their nation's national tragedy alive in the minds of new generations, but for stating their current socio-political grievances. Every May 18th, a day known as the *Kara Gun* (Black Day), thousands of Crimean Tatars from the settlements throughout the Crimea converge on two simple monuments erected in the early 1990s in the Crimean capital, Simferopol. Those from the southern Crimea gather at a monument erected on the banks of the Crimea's main river, the Salgir (which flows through Simferopol), while those from the north gather at a monument erected opposite Simferopol's main train station.

I lived with a Crimean Tatar family in 1997 in a *samostroi* (self built house) in the settlement of Marino just outside Simferopol. The father of this household, Nuri Shevkiev, gave the following answer as to why he takes his family to this commemorative event every year:

Every May 18th when I was a child growing up in Uzbekistan far from the Crimea, my parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles used to tell stories of the our family losses suffered during the deportation. I know everything about those who were lost at this time, I know the names of all my father's friends killed in the deportation. Now that we have returned to the Crimea and have begun to rebuild our lives there is a danger my boy and girl will not remember our national tragedy. That they will forget those who died on the trains or in the special settlements in Uzbekistan. By taking my children to the monument on May 18th I am reminding them of the deportation and reminding them of who they are.<sup>27</sup>

This source described the commemorative gatherings of May 18th as the most important annual event in the year for Crimean Tatars. Prayers are said for the *shehitler* (victims) of the deportation, commemorative speeches are given by top Crimean Tatar political and religious leaders, such as Mustafa Dzhemilev Kirimoglu (the Crimean Tatar "Mandela" who spent 17 years in the *gulag* for his anti-Soviet struggle to return his people their homeland) and the *Mufti* (Chief Islamic cleric) of the Crimea. At noon the two groups march from the monuments to the central square in Simferopol carrying banners, singing traditional Crimean Tatar songs and showing their unity in the face of the militia which guards the march path. In the Central square thousands of Crimean Tatars listen to prayers and speeches demanding more rights for their people. The 50th anniversary of the deportation on May 18, 1994, saw a particularly large turnout

as tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars converged on Simferopol celebrating their new-found political assertiveness.

I visited these two memorials to the Crimean Tatars' suffering and found these stone edifices to be powerful in their simplicity. Both are about 6 feet in height with plaques mounted on them, which read in Tatar and Russian "On this spot a monument will be erected to the victims of the genocide against the Crimean Tatar people." While visiting one of the memorials, a Crimean Tatar Red Army veteran pointed out to me that vandals had spray painted swastikas and anti-Tatar graffiti on this modest memorial. The saddened veteran informed me that he had lost a brother to the Nazis, had fought for the Soviet Union and was now called a "Nazi" by xenophobic Russians in the Crimea. Crimean Tatar cemeteries in the Crimea, often ancient sites which play an important role in Tatar Islamic celebrations and holidays, are also routinely defaced with Nazi graffiti. Long after the Soviet Union had ended and World War II has been largely forgotten by most of Europe, the Crimean Tatars of the twenty-first century will continue to be saddled with the stigma of *izmeniky rodiny* (traitors to the homeland) by their detractors and those who wish to see them disenfranchised in their own homeland.

Not surprisingly, tension runs high in the largely Slavic Crimea (the Crimean Tatars now make up between 10 and 11% of the Crimea's 2.6 million population) and the landless, workless and politically voiceless Crimean Tatars who are excluded from the Crimean parliament have responded with mass protests. The commemoration of the deportation in 1998 turned violent as frustrated Crimean Tatars clashed with militia troops and demanded citizenship and governmental assistance to assist in the repatriation of the roughly 180,000 Crimean Tatars still languishing in exile in Central Asia (most families are divided between the Crimea and Central Asia). In 1999 the commemoration of the deportation began on April 8th with a commemoration of the April 8, 1783 Russian annexation of the Crimean Khanate (the independent Crimean Tatar state which existed from 1440 to 1783) by the expansionist Russian Empire. Commemorative events continued right through to May 18th. A march, which began in the eastern Crimean city of Kerch, wound its way through the Crimea and called for greater rights for the Crimean Tatars. On May 18, 2000, Crimean Tatar protesters set up a tent city in the central square of the Crimean capital, Simferopol, and demanded the redistribution of land that has been given to the Russian and Ukrainian population. As their camp was surrounded by the Crimean militia the protesters chanted "nothing is forgotten, nothing will be forgotten."

The anniversary of the deportation carries considerable emotional symbolism, for the generation who remember the actual event are dying off. These living memorials to this tragedy will soon disappear, and it will be left to those who grew up on the stories of the deportation to make sure that the memory of this collective tragedy is not forgotten by the next generation generations.

Interestingly enough, the commemorations of the deportation are not limited to the Crimean Republic. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries close to



half a million Crimean Tatars fled from their Russian-dominated homeland to the Ottoman Empire, and today Crimean Tatar activists claim there are five million descendants of these emigrants living in the former Ottoman provinces of Romania, Bulgaria and, most importantly, Turkey. On past commemorations of the “Black Day” prayers have been said in Istanbul’s Fetih Mehmed Cami (Mohammed the Conqueror Mosque) for those killed in the deportation, Mustafa Dzhemilev Kirimoglu, the head of the Crimean Tatars’ parallel parliament known as the *Mejlis*, has met with Turkish president Suleiman Demirel for commemorative events, and commemorative ceremonies have been held in Ankara, Eski Shehir and smaller towns with Crimean Tatar–Turk populations.

The small Crimean Tatar enclaves found in the Dobruca region of Bulgaria and Romania (the coastal strip on the Black Sea of these countries extending from the Danube to Varna) also commemorate the *Kara Gun*—Black Day. As these small diaspora enclaves become increasingly aware of their Crimean Tatar identities in the post-Communist setting, this commemoration serves as a catalyst for rediscovering and transmitting a sense of Crimean Tatariness to new generations experiencing assimilative trends (there are about 40,000 Crimean Tatars in Romania; there are only 5,000 left in Bulgaria). The small Crimean Tatar community of the USA, located mainly in the New York area, which consists of approximately 5,000 post-World War II forced émigrés from displacement camps, also commemorate the deportation. In these commemorative events, leaders of the American Crimean Tatar community give speeches, traditional Crimean Tatar cooking (such as that delightful representative of Crimean Tatar cuisine, *chiborek* pastries) are served, prayers are said for relatives killed in the deportation and an effort is made to keep the importance of this day alive for a new generation of American Crimean Tatars who are feeling the lure of assimilatory Americanism.

Interestingly, the most important monument to the deportation was actually built in Long Island, New York by Crimean Tatar architect, Fikret Yurter. This large marble edifice is located in the centre of Crimean Tatar Muslim cemetery in the town of Comack and consists of a 9-foot tall marker in the shape of the *tarak tamgha*. The *tarak tamgha*, originally the dynastic seal of the Crimean Khans of the Giray lineage descended from Chingis Khan, was adopted by early Crimean Tatar nationalists as the symbol of this people’s new-found national identity during the early twentieth century. It is singularly sad that the largest monument to the event that saw the Crimean Tatars scattered from their homeland by Stalin lies not in the Crimea itself but a world away on one of the many shores this diasporic people have found themselves. While visiting this monument in 1999, the author was told that most of those who were born in the Crimea have begun to die out and that generation with direct memories of the “Green Isle” of the Crimea in America must pass on memories of this homeland to those who have never seen it.

As the victimized Crimean Tatars commemorate their people’s national tragedy and use it as an opportunity to gain the world’s attention, it is hoped that the world will not only remember this people’s long history of expulsion,

ethnocide and oppression during the Soviet period, but that they will also be aware of the fact that the “Crimean Tatar problem” has still not been resolved. Half the Crimean Tatar nation are still living in the *pitmegin surgun* (the unfinished exile). Those who have returned find themselves in truly stark economic conditions in their “Zion,” and both the Ukrainian authorities and local Crimean Republican authorities continue to display a shocking lack of concern (one might even call it antagonism) to the Crimean Tatars’ plight in the Crimea.

The world has witnessed the spectacle of the return of a long suffering exiled people to their traditional homeland, but the struggle for the Crimean Tatars is far from finished. As Mustafa Dzhemilev Kirimoglu, the political head of the Crimean Tatar community, told the author during a 1997 interview in the *Mejlis* (Parliament) building in Simferopol, “Our people were forced from their homes once before and for 50 years we have been discriminated against. While we are a pacifist people, even we have a breaking point. If we continue to be arrested, attacked by the Crimean mafia, and discriminated against by the local authorities in our own homeland we are not going to take it lying down anymore. The fight for true rehabilitation from Stalin’s lie still goes on.”<sup>28</sup>

As a postscript it should be mentioned that the office where this interview was held was bombed by unknown assailants in January 1999. In addition, on several occasions, the headquarters of the Crimean Tatar *Mejlis* has been raided by Crimean authorities. There have been several mosque burnings and several Crimean Tatars have been killed in clashes with the Crimean mafia which is known to be linked to the Crimean police. While inter-ethnic violence has not appeared on any large scale in the Crimea, one has but to look at the toppled minarets of Bosnia, the war blackened villages of Kosovo and the bombed ruins of Grozny-Djohar to see examples of the danger to Muslim communities situated on the always uncertain fault line between the Islamic and Orthodox Christian worlds. Having suffered so much in the twentieth century, it is to be hoped that inter-ethnic violence of the sort found in neighbouring lands divided between Christians and Muslims (such as the secessionist Georgian territory of Abkhazia, the Armenian-dominated Nagorno-Karabagh enclave in Azerbaijan, Chechnya, Dagestan, Bosnia, and Kosovo) will not appear in the Crimea so that the Crimean Tatars can rebuild their culture, hopefully in a democraticizing Ukraine.

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