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## **The Hidden Ethnic Cleansing of Muslims in the Soviet Union: The Exile and Repatriation of the Crimean Tatars**

The summer of 1989 was an eventful time in the Soviet Union on the nationalist level. Throughout the multi-ethnic union of Soviet nationalities the concept of *homo sovieticus*, the Russian-speaking Soviet citizen who had transcended his or her narrow sense of nationality in order to forge a greater sense of identification with the Soviet workers' state, was being shattered. In the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, national fronts were being organized to commemorate their countries' illegal annexation by the USSR during the second world war. In the Trans-Caucasus, Armenians and Azerbaijanis were beginning a spiral of ethno-communal violence that was to lead to bloody warfare between these neighbouring citizens of the 'Great Friendship of Nationalities'. In Georgia, Soviet troops brutally crushed protesters demanding a greater recognition of Georgian national identity and language. In Uzbekistan, native Uzbeks launched bloody pogroms against a small ethnic group, the Meshketian Turks, who had been deported by Stalin to their republic during the second world war.

Overlooked in this growing ethnic turmoil during the summer and autumn of 1989, was the strange migration of a small Turco-Muslim national group, the Crimean Tatars, from the depths of Soviet Central Asia to the Crimean Peninsula. From 1989 to 1994, a quarter of a million Crimean Tatars migrated from Central Asia, predominantly from Uzbekistan, to the Crimean Peninsula. In many ways this migration was a symbolic victory for the traditionally passive Crimean Tatars who had been brutally deported from their homeland by Stalin during the second world war. For almost half a century this exiled people of no more than half a million had been denied the right to express its ethnic identity, to speak its language or to return to its cherished villages and homeland on the distant shores of the Black Sea. It was only towards the end of Mikhail Gorbachev's presidency of the USSR that this liberalizing leader decided to rectify one of the greatest injustices carried out by his predecessors and allow the exiled Crimean Tatars to return to their ancient homeland.

Today, approximately half of the former USSR's Crimean Tatars have returned from their places of exile in Central Asia to a largely unwelcoming homeland that has been Slavicized in their absence. For anthropologists, political scientists and historians alike the exile and repatriation of the Crimean

Tatars offers a unique laboratory for those studying nationalism, migration, diasporic communities, ethnic cleansing, ethnic violence in the former communist world and collective identity construction. Scholars of all disciplines have, in the Crimean Tatars, been given the unique opportunity to analyse the process whereby an ancient people with a long tradition of statehood in Eastern Europe rebuilt its culture, identity and political rights from the ground up after experiencing almost half a century of state-sponsored ethnocide designed to eradicate its culture.

Strangely enough, however, the Crimean Tatars' tragic history of ethnic cleansing, exile and mass migration in the USSR and its successor states appears to have gone largely unstudied in the West. While there is a growing interest in the largely understudied Muslim ethnies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states which has come about as a response to warfare in previously overlooked places such as Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya, the case of the Crimean Tatars has not received much exposure in the West. It is with the aim of bringing this extraordinary story of human suffering, group survival and political struggle to a western audience that has only recently come to see Muslims as victimized communities that this article has been written.

It was only with the collapse of the USSR and the opening-up of secret KGB archives and new-found access to the Crimean Tatars' previously off-limits places of exile that such a study has been made possible. In 1997 I travelled to eastern Uzbekistan, the place of exile for the majority of the Crimean Tatar exiles, and interviewed survivors of this state-sponsored ethnocide with the aim of recreating the story of their Soviet-era ethnic cleansing. In addition to this field research in Central Asia, I have had second-hand access to newly-declassified KGB accounts of the hidden deportation and have lived with Crimean Tatars who, since the collapse of the USSR, have returned to establish squatter camps in their Crimean homeland.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the survivors of this ethnic cleansing interviewed had a sense of urgency when it came to telling their story, for the generation that personally experienced this hidden genocide, a living memorial to their people's tragedy in every sense, is dying off and soon there will be no more living witnesses to this crime which has gone largely unnoticed by the outside world. While it is often difficult as a privileged outsider to be accepted into the world of those who have personally experienced such horrors as the deportation of the Crimean Tatars, I found myself treated over and over again with the simple hospitality of the Tatar peasants of old by the survivors of Stalin's deportation, regardless of the level of poverty in which most interviewees found themselves. On most occasions, however, the aged Crimean Tatar men and women allowed themselves to be interviewed on one condition: time and again they implored me to 'promise to make sure the world knows of our tragedy, let

1 For a general history of the Crimean Tatars see Brian Williams, *The Crimean Tatars. The Diaspora Experience and the Forging of a Nation* (Leiden 2001). Anatolii Vyatkin, *Krymskie Tatary* (Moscow 1997) and Alan Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars* (Stanford, CA 1978).

them know what was done to our people!'. It is with the aim of both fulfilling this promise and bringing to light this long-understudied East European ethnic group's tragic experience during the Soviet period (and its descendants' continuing struggle to overcome the lingering effects of genocide in the twenty-first century) that this article has been written.

Perhaps the first thing one notices about the Crimean Tatars, who have been described as an 'ethnical mixture of the ancient Gothic and Alan (Aryan) population who adopted the language of the ruling class of the local Tatar tribe', is that their physiognomy does not resemble that of the Altaic-Mongols of Chingis (Genghis) Khan for whom they are often mistaken.<sup>2</sup> While the term Tatar (or its mispronunciation 'Tartar') is often seen as synonymous with Mongol, the Tatars of Eastern Europe actually have much older origins and are an eclectic people with origins that can be traced back to the Germanic Goths, Turkic Huns and Aryan Scythians.<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists and historians have long seen in the blue eyes, light complexions and distinctly non-Mongol features of the Crimean branch of the Tatars the direct descendants of such peoples as the Ostrogoths, who settled in the Crimean Peninsula's southern mountains and ruled from there from the fourth to the fifteenth century; the Pontic or Black Sea Greeks who settled the Crimea's shores during the time of Homer; Armenians, and various Turkic nomadic groups who roamed the Crimea's northern plains from the time of Attila right up until the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> In his nineteenth-century description of the Crimean Tatars, F.A. Feodorov wrote:

The Crimean Tatars should be divided into two groups, the mountain and steppe Tatars. The essence of the mountain people was intermixed with the ancient inhabitants of the Tauride (Greek name for the Crimea), with the Goths and the Greeks. They are in general of good height, slender and dark haired; their features are regular, their physiognomy and carriage are expressive, they are free and generous in their treatment and in their speech they are thoughtful and sensible.<sup>5</sup>

Another Russian account of the Crimean Tatars (who never intermarried with the Russians who later settled in their midst) from this period states:

There was not apparent among them the wide, high cheek bones with narrow eyes which you constantly meet among the Tatars close to the Volga. On the contrary, here there was the oblong face and straight, long nose, i.e. that which is reminiscent of the Aryan tribes.<sup>6</sup>

2 Edmond Schutz, 'The Tat People in the Crimea', *Acta Orientalia, Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. 31 (1977), 96–7.

3 Alexander Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea* (Cambridge, MA 1936), 175–6, 255.

4 Brian Glyn Williams, 'New Light on the Ethnogenesis of the Crimean Tatars', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 10, no. 4–5 (March 2001).

5 F.A. Feodorov, *Krym s Sevastopolem Baliklavoiu* (St Petersburg 1855), 37.

6 O. Voropronov, 'Sredi Krymskikh Tatar', *Zabveniiu ne Podlezhit* (Kazan 1992), 170.

While the largely sedentary Gothic farmers of the south Crimean mountains were Islamized and Turkified in a cultural and linguistic sense during the period of the Mongol Golden Horde (1240–1443), they continued their ancient mountain farming traditions and continued to be sharply delineated from the Turkic nomads who roamed the plains of southern Ukraine. With the break-up of the Mongol Golden Horde in the early 1400s, the Tatarized Goths of the Crimea formed an independent state in the Crimean Peninsula and adjacent areas of the south Ukrainian steppe known as the Crimean Khanate (this state's rulers, known as khans, claimed direct descent from the founder of the trans-continental Mongol Imperium, Chingis Khan). Numbering approximately half a million, the Crimean Tatars forged a state based on nomadic herding in the northern Crimean Peninsula and agriculture and farming in the south. The Crimean Khanate maintained its independence from expansionist Russia up until 1783, hundreds of years after the brutal Russian conquest and absorption of the other Tatar states in Eurasia.

With the annexation of their state by Tsarina Catherine the Great, this largely peasant people experienced over a century of heavy-handed colonial rule by the Orthodox Russians which saw them driven close to extinction. As in the Balkans following the Ottoman retreat, the Russian state had little room for Muslim ethnic groups and the Crimean Tatars joined the Chechens, Lazes, Circassians (or Cerkes, i.e. the largest Muslim people in the northern Caucasus), Balkan Turks, Bosnian Muslims, Pomaks and Muslim Albanians in a massive migration to the safety of Ottoman Anatolia.<sup>7</sup> As many as half a million Crimean Tatars may have abandoned their homeland for the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>8</sup> This out-migration was paralleled by the in-migration of Slavic settlers and, on the eve of the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, the Crimean Tatars made up a mere quarter of the population of their historic homeland.

The Bolsheviks were initially supportive of the many ethnic groups inhabiting their multi-national state and the Soviet regime created territorial administrative homelands known as Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) and smaller territorial units for the USSR's myriad ethno-national groups. In this process, the Crimean Peninsula was organized as the Crimean ASSR and the Crimean Tatars were considered the autonomous republic's de facto state-sponsored native nationality (*korennoi narod*). This bright period in Crimean Tatar history came to an end when Soviet leader Josef Stalin replaced Vladimir Lenin's tolerant policy towards the nationalities with one designed to eradicate native communists (who were seen as too nationalistic). In the late 1920s and 1930s the Crimean Tatar intelligentsia was purged (i.e. executed *en masse*), the Crimean Tatars' property was forcefully collectivized, causing famine, and thousands of Crimean Tatars

7 Kemal Karpat, 'The Status of the Muslim Under European Rule; The Eviction and Settlement of the Cerkes', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Winter 1979), 7–28.

8 Brian Glyn Williams, 'Hijra and Forced Migration from Nineteenth Century Russia to the Ottoman Empire', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, vol. 41, no. 1 (January–March 2000), 63–92.

were deported to Siberia as *kulaks* (wealthy peasants). While the Crimean Tatars had initially supported communist rule in the Crimea, Stalin's brutal policies in the peninsula certainly disillusioned many of this nation on the eve of Hitler's invasion of the USSR in 1941.

The German blitzkrieg on the Soviet Union's western marches which aimed to exterminate communism and topple the world's first 'workers' state' caught Stalin by complete surprise. Hitler's fast-moving, well-led Panzer divisions and Luftwaffe air squadrons appear to have rolled back the poorly-led Red Army with ease in the early summer of 1941. Throughout that summer the Red Army desperately mobilized millions of Soviet citizens of all nationalities to halt the progress of the seemingly invincible nazi Wehrmacht. In this process, Soviet sources claim that approximately 20,000 able-bodied Crimean Tatars were mobilized from a total national population of approximately 218,000 (i.e. almost 10 per cent of the total Crimean Tatar population) and sent to the front to fight against the nazis.<sup>9</sup> In the initial days of the war Soviet losses were high and, as the nazi army cut through Belorussia and Ukraine towards the Crimean Peninsula, entire Soviet armies were encircled by the fast-moving German forces and captured. The defeat of the Red Army has been described as a 'great round-up' and on two occasions Soviet armies with as many as 600,000 men in them, were surrounded and captured.<sup>10</sup> During this period of retreat, Soviet sources point out that 'many of the Crimean Tatars gave their lives in the struggle against the Hitlerite invaders on both Crimean soil and on other fronts'.<sup>11</sup>

On 21 October 1941, the German 11th army broke through the superior Soviet defences at the narrow Perekop Isthmus linking the Crimea to the Ukrainian mainland and forced their way into the peninsula. The Soviet 55th army retreated in headlong flight towards the fortress city of Sevastopol in the south-west and towards Kerch in the south-east. According to German accounts, thousands of Soviet prisoners of war fell into nazi hands during the Soviet retreat across the Crimean steppe.<sup>12</sup> As the Red Army evacuated Kerch and dug in for a heroic defence at Sevastopol, the Romanian Mountain Corps (the Romanians were German allies in the war) and the German 11th army occupied most of the Crimean Peninsula.

According to Necip Adulhamitoglu, a Crimean Tatar historian, thousands of Crimean Tatars serving in the Red Army were captured by the Germans as whole Russian armies (most notably General Vlasov's army) surrendered to the seemingly invincible nazi forces.<sup>13</sup> Many of those captured Crimean Tatars

9 Nikolai Fedorovich Bugai, *Iosif Stalin-Lavrentiiu Berii: 'Ikh Nado Deportirovat'. Dokumenty, Fakty, Kommentarii* (Moscow 1992), 131.

10 B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York 1970), 168.

11 B. Broshevan and P. Tygliants, *Izganie i Vozvrashchenie* (Simferopol 1994), 34.

12 Friedrich Schulz, *The Battle for Crimea. Attack on Sevastopol* (trans. from German War Report). Historical Division, HQ, US Army, Europe, 1954, 9.

13 Necip Adulhamitoglu, *Turksuz Kirim. Yuz Binlerin Surgun* (Istanbul 1974), 57.

were taken to prisoner-of-war camps where the mortality rate was quite high. Although the nazis had initially called for the murder of all 'Asiatic inferiors' (Hitler considered 'Mongols' and Tatars to be *Untermenschen* — subhumans who were even lower on the race scale than the despised Slavs), along with the Jews and communists, Hitler's generals in the field revised this hasty policy when the Red Army began to put up a more determined resistance before Moscow, Stalingrad and Leningrad.

In a sharp reversal of Hitler's genocidal racial policies, the pragmatic German High Command 'realists' began recruiting from among the Soviet prisoners in 1942. In this way the German army created several distinct support armies, including a Crimean Tatar legion, from the groups of Soviet prisoners of war. According to the Crimean Tatar writer, Edige Kirimal, as well as Soviet and German sources, this legion eventually consisted of eight battalions with a total of 20,000 soldiers.<sup>14</sup> A historian who has analysed wartime collaboration between Soviet citizens in POW camps and the nazis claimed that 'the captors simply handed out German uniforms and only the foolhardy refused'.<sup>15</sup> Kirimal supports this claim and states: 'Officially they were volunteers, but they had almost no other choice because the majority were recruited from among prisoners of war facing starvation or death from disease in German camps in Simferopol and Nikolayev.'<sup>16</sup>

Many of the Crimean Tatar 'collaborators' were utilized in the Crimea by the German army which favoured this nationality over the Slavs in the peninsula. As in other areas occupied by the Wehrmacht, where local non-Slavic populations had suffered from the horrors of collectivization, de-kulakization, purges and other excesses of Stalinism, many Crimean Tatar peasants saw the Germans as liberators. During the first world war the Germans had been quite supportive of the political aspirations of the Crimean Tatars and other non-Russian peoples of the USSR, and many of these nations that had suffered under the communists remembered their favourable treatment at the hands of the Germans. In light of this feeling, Crimean Tatar nationalists persuaded the nazi government to allow the formation of Muslim committees in the Crimea that would allow the Crimean Tatars some form of autonomy towards the end of the German occupation. According to Alexander Nekrich:

The establishment of the Muslim committees gave a boost not so much to collaboration with the occupation forces as to Tatar nationalism. Just as the Nazis wished to use the Tatar nationalists for their purposes, the nationalists in turn hoped to utilize the situation to advance their own purely Tatar interests, as they saw them.<sup>17</sup>

14 Edige Kirimal, *Der National Kampf der Krimturken* (Emsdetten 1952), 32 and Joachim Hoffman, *Die Ostlegion 1941–1943. Turkotataren, Kaukasier und Wolgafinnen im deutschen Heer* (Freiburg 1976), 39–50. Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 34.

15 Mark Elliot, 'Soviet Military Collaborators during World War II', *Ukraine during World War II. History and its Aftermath* (Edmonton 1986), 89–104.

16 Edige Kirimal, 'The Crimean Tatars', *Studies on the Soviet Union*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1970), 93.

17 Alexander Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples. The Deportation and Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War* (New York 1978), 21.

The formation of Muslim committees in the Crimea led to rising tensions between the Russian population (who also resented the Crimean Tatars' preferential treatment in the Crimean ASSR) and the Crimean Tatars seeking autonomy. As the Crimean Tatars were formed into *Schutzmannschafts-bataillonen* (police battalions) they were used by the German army to protect Tatar villages from partisan attacks and to track down Soviet partisans in the mountainous areas in the southern Crimea, known as the Yaila. In reality these village defence forces often sided with whomever was strongest in the area and could not automatically be counted on by either the Germans or the partisans. Their prime concern appears to have been preventing partisans and German units from attacking Crimean Tatar villages.<sup>18</sup>

At this time many Russian partisans in the Crimea began raiding Crimean Tatar villages in reprisal for the collaboration of Crimean Tatars in certain districts, and a deep split developed between the local Russian and Crimean Tatar populations. Russian partisan commanders were known to shoot Crimean Tatars who attempted to join their bands, and messages were repeatedly sent to Moscow from Russian partisan leaders referring to the Crimean Tatars' 'mass treachery'.<sup>19</sup> Vera Tolz has, however, pointed out that in the Crimea and the Caucasus local Communist Party officials and partisan leaders sought to excuse their own poor record of resistance to the nazis by blaming the local non-Russian populations.<sup>20</sup>

There was not, however, complete unity in the Crimean Tatar community and it should be mentioned that, after the Russians, the largest number of local guerrillas fighting among the Soviet partisans in the Crimea were actually Crimean Tatars, not Ukrainians, who had a significantly larger population in the Crimea. In 1944, approximately one-fifth of the partisans in the Crimea were Crimean Tatars. Several Crimean Tatar partisan commanders earned fame for their activities, as the following account shows:

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 instance of military action of his formation. At the end of 1943 the divisions of the second and third brigades destroyed the fascist garrison in Sary Krym (Eski Kirim) destroying on that occasion 2 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 were dining. One of the group seized the Gestapo jail and freed 46 Soviet patriots.<sup>21</sup>

As the war progressed, more and more Crimean Tatars joined the underground to attack the German units which seized crops and supplies from the local population. The Tatar-inhabited Yaila Mountains, with their multitude of karstic caves for hiding weapons and winding roads for staging ambushes,

18 Kirimal, op. cit., 305

19 Alan Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars* (Stanford, CA 1978), 159.

20 Vera Tolz, 'New Information about the Deportation of Ethnic Groups in the USSR during World War II' in John Garrard (ed.), *World War 2 and the Soviet People* (London 1993), 165.

21 Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 36.

was a prime region for launching guerrilla attacks against the nazi occupying force. The Crimean Tatar villages subsequently 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 Ulu Sala, Kizil Tash, Degirmen Koy, Tav Bodrak, Saly and many others. In July 1988 the country learned from information from Tass (the Russian news agency) 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>22</sup>

Most importantly, the German occupation regime lost all Crimean Tatar support when it forcefully shipped thousands of Crimean Tatars to Germany to work as *Ostarbeiter* (forced labour 'Eastern Workers') in the plants and factories of the Third Reich. Like tens of thousands of other forced labourers conscripted to work in German industry, healthy Crimean Tatars were rounded up by the Crimean Gestapo and trans-shipped to Germany which was described as a 'vast slave workshop' in the last years of the second world war.<sup>23</sup>

With the retreat of the Wehrmacht from the Crimea in the spring of 1944 the Red Army entered the area and began to plunder Crimean Tatar settlements. Rumours of the Crimean Tatars' 'mass betrayal' soon eclipsed the actual fact that this people had also fought against the invaders in both the partisan brigades and in the Red Army. NKVD units (the NKVD was the progenitor of the notorious KGB) began arresting and executing any Crimean Tatar suspected of collaborating with the nazis as they moved into the Crimean Tatar hamlets. This was despite the fact that the Crimean Tatar collaborationists or '*hiwis*' had all been evacuated to Germany by the retreating nazi army. Thousands of Crimean Tatars were subsequently executed as the Red Army regained the Crimean countryside and, according to one source, 'in Simferopol (the Crimean capital) the trees lining the streets were used as gallows, so great was the number of executions'.<sup>24</sup>

With the retreat of the German army, none doubted that Stalin would seek to punish those who had previously betrayed the Soviet homeland, but few could guess at the sheer brutality and all-encompassing nature of his punitive actions. As the war drew to its close, it became obvious that many nations in the Soviet Union had collaborators in the nazi army, most notably the Russians and Ukrainians. Even the Karaims, a small indigenous Turkic-Jewish group in the Crimea, joined SS units during the war (the fact that a Jewish

22 Svetlana Alieva, *Tak Eto Bylo. Natsional'noe Repressi v SSSR*, vol. 3 (Moscow 1993), 99.

23 Gerald Reitlinger, *The House Built on Sand. The Conflicts of German Policy in Russia 1939-45* (London 1960), 185-6 and 304 for description of working conditions of *Ostarbeiter*.

24 Kirimal, 'The Crimean Tatars', op. cit., 89.



group served in the SS would obviously indicate that duress was used in recruiting Soviet citizens into the German war machine).<sup>25</sup>

As the Soviets rolled back the German forces in a vast front extending from the Caucasus Mountains to the Crimean Peninsula, rumours began to reach the Crimea that Stalin was taking advantage of the wartime chaos to eradicate small ethno-nations deemed to be historical enemies of Russia or the Soviet state. Beginning in 1943, Stalin launched a series of surprise operations with the aim of eradicating several *entire* national groups, including the elderly, women and children, who were arbitrarily deemed to have been guilty of 'mass collaboration' with the enemy. While the targeted nationalities have argued endlessly since about the injustice of punishing whole nations, including innocent, unarmed civilians, for treason (especially when several of these ethnic groups had more soldiers fighting in the Red Army than with the invaders), the charges of mass national treason were in all probability simply a pretext for ethnically cleansing the Soviet Union's borderlands of non-Slavic, predominantly Islamic, nationalities (Stalin actually used the term *ochistit'*, 'to cleanse' in his orders).

Stalin was preparing for the eventuality of war with Turkey at this time in order to gain two provinces lost to Russia during the first world war (the Turkish provinces of Kars and Ardahan). As a Georgian, Stalin distrusted Muslim groups inhabiting the USSR's main military highways through the Caucasus to the Turkish frontier and the USSR's main naval bastion for projecting its power into the Black Sea, the Crimean Peninsula. Regardless of the motives, the results were a terrifying example of a totalitarian regime's capacity to use its tremendous resources to engage in total cleansing with a speed and all-encompassing nature seen only in the Third Reich.

Stalin had first experimented with communal deportation of whole communities during the 1930s when he exiled almost 200,000 Koreans of the Soviet Far East to Central Asia.<sup>26</sup> It was not until the early days of the second world war, however, that the great *Vozhd'* (leader) contemplated the destruction of multiple national groups. In the first move of what has been called 'Operation Deportation', Josef Stalin deported the Volga German population from its autonomous republic on the central Volga to the steppes of Kazakhstan in 1941. This move was explained as a pre-emptive measure designed to prevent collaboration between Soviet Germans (who had actually been fairly quiescent up to this time) and the invading nazis. Following the German retreat, the NKVD then began 'cleaning up' the Soviet southern borders, starting in November 1943 with the deportation of the Karachays, a small Muslim people from the northern Caucasus mountains. This was followed by the punitive deportation of the Buddhist Mongol Kalmyks from the plains of the north-eastern Caucasus in December 1943, the Chechens and related Muslim

25 Shmuel Spector, *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, vol. 2 (New York 1996), 786.

26 Henry Huttenbach, 'The Soviet Koreans', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1993), 59-71, 66.

mountaineers, the Ingush, in February 1944, the Muslim Balkars later in 1944, and in May 1944 it was the Crimean Tatars' turn to discover the horrors of *deportatsiia*, an antiseptic term which, like its modern equivalent, 'ethnic cleansing', was a euphemism for mass killing, the destruction of lives and dreams, the splitting-up of families, and brutal expulsions.<sup>27</sup>

The night of 18 May 1944 saw the beginning of the *Kara Gun* (Black Day), commemorated by Crimean Tatars to this day. NKVD mechanized infantry units surrounded all the Crimean Tatar villages and suburbs in the Crimea and herded the startled inhabitants to several designated trans-shipment points. The shocked Tatars were given less than an hour to gather a few belongings and then were transported at gunpoint to major railway stations in the Crimea. Tatar survivors of the deportation claim that many people assumed that they were to be executed en masse in much the same way as the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) had murdered the Crimea's Jewish population during the German occupation of 1941–44. Crimean Tatar dissident, Reshat Dzhemilev writes: 'The cruel treatment by armed soldiers convinced the Crimean Tatars that they were being taken out to be shot at the anti-tank ditches just as the fascists had shot all the Jews. Some of the Tatars even began bidding each other farewell.'<sup>28</sup> And according to Crimean Tatar leader, Mustafa Dzhemilev:

The total deportation and the beginning of genocide against the Crimean Tatars a month after Soviet troops returned to the Crimea surpassed their worst expectations. This was, in addition, the greatest treachery by the Soviet authorities, since during the same period the majority of Crimean Tatar men who had been conscripted into the army at the beginning of the war continued to spill their blood on the fronts for this same Soviet authority.<sup>29</sup>

Tens of thousands of NKVD troops surrounded the Crimean Tatar hamlets in the Crimean ASSR and began to expel their startled inhabitants on the eve of 18 May 1944. Thousands arbitrarily deemed guilty of collaboration with the Germans were shot on the spot, and those who resisted were beaten or shot. Traditionally tight-knit Crimean Tatar families and patriarchal villages were divided as the well-armed troops gathered the Tatar villagers and drove them to local railway stations for deportation in various directions. In many cases the men were separated from their families and shipped to labour camps in Siberia. The high death rate due to the harsh conditions in these camps meant that many Crimean Tatar men never saw their families again.

In his account of the war, the Crimean Tatar writer Cengiz Dagci describes the return of a young Crimean Tatar partisan fighter to his home village in the

27 Brian Glyn Williams, 'Commemorating "The Deportation" in Post-Soviet Chechnya. The Role of Memorialization and Collective Memory in the 1994–96 and 1999–2000 Russo-Chechen Wars', *History and Memory*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2000).

28 Reshat Dzhemilev, *Musa Mahmut*, *Human Torch* (New York 1986), 20.

29 Mustafa Dzhemilev (Cemiloglu), 'A History of the Crimean Tatar National Liberation Movement: A Socio-political Perspective' in Maria Drohobycky (ed.), *Crimea. Dynamics, Challenges and Prospects* (Lanham, MD 1995), 93.

south Crimean mountains. He arrived to find that all the inhabitants of his village had just been deported, leaving behind only his friend Alim.

'Tell me Alim, what's happened in Chukurdja?'

Alim stared at him in silence like a dumb man.

'Who is here in Chukurdja Alim?'

Alim shrugged, 'Nobody.'

'What about Bilal Agha?'

Alim turned his eyes on the ground and began to speak in an anguished voice. 'Two days ago the Russians came to the village. They hanged Grandpa Djavit and Kaytaz on the tree by the mosque. They shot fifteen people including Hassan Agha, lining them up against the mosque wall. They killed some others too, but this I didn't see. Then they gathered the people in the village square. I stood near Bilal Agha. He whispered in my ear 'You run away Alim. Run away to the mountains, look for Selim, find him and tell him what you've seen. Tell him to stay in the hills. You too stay there, don't come back to the village. Because the village isn't ours now.'<sup>30</sup>

Even today the deportees remember with particular horror the subsequent weeks spent on the trains in cattle trucks whose only modification for human habitation was a pipe fitted in the corner for defecating. Mark Taplin writes of these trucks: 'The cattle cars set aside for Beria's [the head of the NKVD] ugly errand had already been used for his earlier deportations; they were caked in old feces, and smeared in dried blood and urine. With practice the NKVD had perfected these sinister operations to a ruthless science.'<sup>31</sup> This 'removal' was carried out with a cold efficiency that resembled the deportation of Jews to camps in nazi Germany. For efficiency's sake the deportees had been crammed into the locked wagons. Those soldiers involved in the deportation were delighted to find that the high percentage of children meant that they could squeeze more Tatars into each wagon and thus fulfil their task ahead of schedule and meet their quotas. The packed, unhealthy conditions in the sealed cattle trucks led to outbreaks of diseases such as typhus, which swept away many, especially the young and the old. A survivor of the deportation recalls the journey to Central Asia in these wagons, which have been described as crematoria on wheels:

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>32</sup>

30 Osman Tukay, 'The Tragedy of the Crimean Tatars', *Index on Censorship*, 3, no. 1 (1974), 71-2.

31 Mark Taplin, *Open Lands. Travels Through Russia's Once Forbidden Places* (South Royalton, VT 1992), 175.

32 Alieva, op. cit., 79.

The most horrific stories of the deportation involve several accounts of sealed wagons full of Crimean Tatars that could not be opened on their way to Central Asia. When these wagons were finally forced open at their destination their occupants were found to have perished from dehydration and starvation and were dumped in ditches to the sound of wailing from family members in neighbouring wagons. Families that were divided at the time of deportation and forced onto different trains often lost family members for ever as the trains were routed to various parts of the USSR, with some arriving in Siberia and others in Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan. It was over a decade before divided families were able to search out members who were forced into special settlement camps following the deportation and it was not until the post-Soviet repatriation of the dispersed Crimean Tatars to their Crimean homeland that many extended families or members of traditionally tight-knit Tatar villages were reunited.

The trains carrying the bulk of the Crimean Tatar population (most of whom were civilians and the wounded, since the young men were still fighting in the Red Army or had retreated with the nazis) 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 in May 1944. Another account based on conflicting NKVD sources from 1944 claims that only 187,859 Crimean Tatars were deported from the Crimea.<sup>33</sup> Of these, Bugai claims 151,604 were sent to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic and 8597 to the Udmurt and Mari Autonomous Provinces (Ural mountain region, part of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic).<sup>34</sup>

B. Broshevan and P. Tygliants support this claim and refer to a telegram sent from NKVD chief Lavrentii 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>35</sup> Although Soviet records do not record the 'resettlement' of Crimean Tatars in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, several thousand were eventually transferred or migrated to these regions, especially to the Khojent (Leninbad) region in Tajikistan and the Osh region in Kyrgyzstan, according to the overwhelming testimony of those I interviewed in Uzbekistan in the spring of 1997. Approximately 7900 Crimean Tatars died during the actual deportation process according to Michael Rywkin.<sup>36</sup>

Tashkent served as the main dispersion centre for the majority of the Crimean Tatars who were sent to Uzbekistan (other deported groups, such as

33 Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 45.

34 N.F. Bugai, 'K Voprosy o Deportatsii Narodov SSR v 30-40-x godax', *Istoriia SSSR*, no. 6 (November-December 1989), 135-44.

35 Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 45.

36 Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Lost Empire* (Armonk, NY 1994), 67.

the Chechens and Ingush, were sent to Alma Ata, the capital of the Kazakh SSR<sup>37</sup>) and then scattered throughout eastern Uzbekistan, from the Fergana Valley in the north to the deserts of the barren Kashga Darya *oblast* in the south. According to records sent to Beria in June 1944, the Crimean Tatars were settled in Uzbekistan in the following *oblasts*: Tashkent — 56,632, Samarkand — 31,540, Andijan — 19,630, Fergana — 16,039, Namangan — 13,804, Kashga Darya — 10,171, Bukhara — 3983.<sup>38</sup> Little or no preparations had been made in advance for the deportees and most were forced to live in barracks outside factories, in dug-outs, or in self-constructed huts.

More than any other event, the brutal deportation and exile of the USSR's entire Crimean Tatar population has shaped this people's contemporary collective identity. 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. The Crimean Tatars of the diaspora often use the term *jenosit* (genocide) to describe the deportation and exile of their people to Central Asia, and the high mortality rate resulting from the deportation and resettlement lends credence to these claims.<sup>39</sup> In discussing the high death rate in the special settler camps organized for the deportees, 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>40</sup> All Crimean Tatar families have stories of lost family members that recall the horrible conditions this 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

37 Nikolai Fedrovich Bugai, 'Pravda o Deportatsii Chechenskogo i Ingushkogo Narodov', *Voprosy Istorii*, no. 7, 32-44.

38 Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 46.

39 E. Seydamet, 'Eski Schir Milletvekili . . .', *Emel*, no. 203 (May-June 1994), 10.

40 Reshat Dzhemilev, op. cit., 22-3.

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>41</sup>

In addition to physically eradicating a significant portion of the Crimean Tatar nation, the Soviet system engaged in a policy of ethnocide towards the survivors. Ethnocide can be defined as the eradication of an ethno-national group's communal identity, spirit, collective memory, language, customs and history (an objective that, in its most extreme cases, is achieved by genocide). Scattered across thousands of miles, throughout five Soviet republics, the Crimean Tatars had no homeland to help them sustain their national identity, no newspapers or schooling in their language, no positive discrimination in local management positions as other ethnic groups in the USSR had, etc. Few westerners expected the Crimean Tatars to maintain their unique national identity in the postwar years. Fewer still expected this scattered, suppressed group to sustain any sense of cohesion or links to the lost Crimean homeland for more than a generation or two.

Several older Crimean Tatar interviewees also claimed that the local Uzbeks, who initially stoned the Crimean Tatars when they arrived, 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, together with many wounded Red Army officers. Many Uzbek villagers were, according to my informants, ashamed to discover that initially they had been so 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 Soviet sources.<sup>42</sup> A full 82 per cent of the Crimean Tatar 'collaborators' brutally deported to Uzbekistan in 1944 were actually women and children, and the majority of the men included in this number were, in all probability, war invalids from the Red Army or the elderly.

In paintings depicting 'The Deportation' that now hang in art exhibitions presented by the Crimean Tatars in the post-Soviet Crimea and Uzbekistan, there is a common theme. Invariably the Crimean Tatar artists portrayed the horror-stricken victims of the '*echelons*' (cattle trucks) as weeping women, children and the elderly. Young men never appear in these works. To this day the Crimean Tatars retain a particular revulsion for the Soviet regime for its

41 *The Crimean Review*, vol. 1, no. I (18 May 1986), 10.

42 Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 45.

treatment of this non-combatant segment of their population who were left defenceless while thousands of their husbands, brothers and fathers were fighting on the front in the ranks of the Red Army against the German invaders.

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 the special settlement camps in distant Central Asia were automatically declared *spetspereselenets* ('special resettlers') along with their relatives and confined to the special settlement regime. Soviet sources recorded the arrival of approximately 9000 demobilized Crimean Tatar soldiers at the *spetsposelenie* (special settlement camps) after the war.

With the arrival of many of their fathers, sons and brothers in 1946, these largely defenceless people had thousands of hardened war veterans to protect them from the abuse of MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) '*kommandants*' 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 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>43</sup>

The establishment of a rapport with the indigenous Uzbek population certainly eased the resettlement process for the deported Crimean Tatars. According to first-hand accounts, some Crimean Tatar widows initially married Uzbek men who were Hanafi 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 one. 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.

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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*. These informal camps, surrounded by barbed wire, which were run by the *otdel spetsposelenii* (special settlement department) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, are remembered with particular repugnance by the Tatars who lived in them. The heads of Crimean Tatar households were required to report to the *spetskommandants* every three days for a *spetsial'nyi uchët* (special accounting report on their family deaths, births, work progress, etc.) and those who left their assigned region were arrested and sentenced to five years hard labour.

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 leaving their restricted areas to visit family members in other camps and of the cruelty of the hated camp *kommandants*.<sup>44</sup> Living conditions in the settlements were abysmal. Most deportees lived in barracks constructed next to factories, dug-outs, or simple huts hastily built of unbaked dried mud bricks.

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>45</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 Fergana Valley) differed markedly from that of the coastal Black Sea home of the Crimean Tatars. The majority of the Crimean Tatars had, of course, previously lived in the valleys and foothills of the peninsula's Yaila Mountains or on the Crimean coast and were unaccustomed to the conditions they found in the arid lands of Uzbekistan. Uzbek medical facilities during this period were filled 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.

In addition, the majority of the deportees were from the Crimean countryside and, according to NKVD sources, a mere 18,983 of the exiles were actually deported from cities in the Crimea.<sup>46</sup> Few Crimean Tatar farmers

44 Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 103.

45 Adam Smith Albion, 'Crimean Diary', *Institute of Current World Affairs*. 20 July 1995, 3.

46 Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 44, 49.



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.

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 become menial workers in the many factories that had been evacuated to this region from the western Soviet Union during the German invasion. In an order of May 1944, Stalin clearly ordered Uzbek officials to place the 'special settlers' from the Crimea in state farms, collective farms and factory settlements for 'utilization' in village agriculture and industry.<sup>47</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>48</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 by factories; the Crimean Tatars, regardless of their previous occupation, were transferred to heavy labour in various spheres of industry. The roots of national distinction were cut off at the base, permanently.<sup>49</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 the repatriated Crimean Tatars suffer from this sundering of their agrarian ties to the Crimea.

In the southern 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.

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47 Bugai, op. cit., 136.

48 B.L. Finogeev et al., *Krymskotatarskie Zhenshchiny: Tryd, Byt, Traditsii* (Simferopol 1994), 15.

49 M. Guboglo and S. Chervonnaia, *Krymskotatarskoe Natsional'noe Dvizhenie*, vol. 1 (Moscow 1992), 76.

The Crimean Tatars suffered in this alien land for 12 long years under the *kommandant* regime before they were released from the special settlements. With the death of Stalin in 1953 the Soviet Union experienced a political thaw which had a direct impact on the punished peoples who had been deported to Central Asia. In an effort to rectify some of Stalin's greater injustices, the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, lifted the special settlement regime in 1956 and allowed the Crimean Tatar survivors to begin the process of reintegrating themselves into Soviet society. In addition to exculpating the Crimean Tatars and other deported nations of the spurious charges of 'mass treason' levelled against them by Stalin, Khrushchev went so far as to allow several of the exonerated nations to return to their reconstituted home republics the following year. These included the Kalmyks, Karachay, Balkars and the bellicose Chechen and Ingush highlanders who had begun an uncontrollable surge back to their Caucasian homelands after the death of the feared Stalin.

It was then that the Crimean Tatars began the task of rebuilding their shattered society and assessing the damage to their devastated nation. Among their first tasks was the uniting of splintered families and discovering which neighbours, friends and family members had been lost in this communal disaster. Crimean Tatar activists and the remnants of the pre-deportation Crimean ASSR communist leadership (which had been deported despite its loyalty during the war) travelled throughout the settlements in Central Asia and conducted a census to ascertain the magnitude of the damage to the nation in demographic terms.

As the results were correlated by daring activists, the enormity of the tragedy became strikingly apparent. The ad hoc Crimean Tatar census committees came to the conclusion that 46 per cent of their nation had been killed in the deportation and resettlement process. In fact, to this very day Crimean Tatars in the Crimea, Uzbekistan, Turkey, the Romanian and Bulgarian coastal province known as the Dobruca (settled by Crimean Tatars during the Ottoman period) and the USA recite this statistic in much the same way that Jews have committed the number six million to their communal memory of the Holocaust.

This statistic is, however, treated with caution by most outside observers, and is disputed by Ann Sheehy and Bohdan Nahylo.<sup>50</sup> Kremlin sources based upon the bi-weekly reports made by Crimean Tatars in the special settlements state that the Crimean Tatar population in Uzbekistan had dwindled from 151,604 to 119,460 by the year 1946 (i.e. a loss of 30,000, 'only' 20 per cent of the total exile population).<sup>51</sup> By 1948 between 40,000 and 44,000 Crimean Tatars had died in Uzbekistan and their number was certainly not replaced by 6,564 births in this period.<sup>52</sup> Most Crimean Tatars claim that the death rate in Siberia, where the winters were extremely cold, was actually higher than that

50 Ann Sheehy and Bohdan Nahylo, *The Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans and Meshketians. Soviet Treatment of Some National Minorities* (London 1980), 8.

51 Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 106.

52 Ibid.

in Central Asia, but there are no accurate statistics from this region. The total percentage of those killed in the deportation and resettlement in the first five years was probably closer to 30 per cent of the deported population.

By the 1950s the Crimean Tatar death rate had fallen dramatically and this community once again appeared stable, but the losses it incurred in the war, deportation and resettlement had left a considerable mark. Out of a pre-war population of 218,000, approximately 80,000 were lost as a result of evacuation by the nazis, forced labour in Germany, wartime losses in combat and raids by partisans and nazi forces, and deaths due to the deportation and resettlement. In sociological and demographic terms the communal trauma resulting from the loss of such a high proportion (more than one in three) of the Crimean Tatar community cannot be underestimated.

This tremendous injustice was covered up both at home and abroad by propaganda which stressed the 'voluntary' nature of the Crimean Tatars' transfer to Central Asia.<sup>53</sup> M.A. Vyltsan, for example, claims that during the operations, the NKVD used the term *pereselenie* (resettlement) for internal consumption rather than *izganie* (expulsion, deportation) which came into usage at a later date.<sup>54</sup>

The Crimean Tatars were not unique in experiencing heavy losses during this 'voluntary resettlement'. In his work on genocide in the Soviet Union, R.J. Rummel estimates that of the 1,600,000 members of the Soviet nations deported during the war, almost one in three (approximately 530,000) died, vividly demonstrating that the wartime deportation of Soviet nationalities was one of the best-kept examples of genocide in the twentieth century.<sup>55</sup>

For the surviving Crimean Tatars, Guboglo and Chervonnaia claim: 'It is apparent that the authorities planned on the Crimean Tatars being assimilated by the population of the Central Asian republics.'<sup>56</sup> Most scholars familiar with the Crimean Tatars' plight predicted that this scattered people, who had been deprived of their identity and official homeland would, in a generation, be assimilated in the Central Asian ethnic cauldron like many ethnic groups before them. The process of assimilation would, in theory, be facilitated by the fact that the customs, Islamic cultural identity and shared Turkic language (excluding the Tajiks) of the surrounding indigenous Turco-Muslim population of Central Asia such as the Uzbeks, Kazkaks and Kyrgyz were closely related to those of the Crimean Tatars.

In socio-political terms the Crimean Tatar nation had been all but destroyed

53 M.A. Vyltsan, 'Deportatsiia Narodov v Gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny', *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie*, no. 3 (May-June 1995), 28.

54 M.I. Isayev, *National Languages in the USSR. Problems and Solutions* (Moscow 1977), 105. In his 1977 work which was translated into English for consumption abroad, Soviet linguist M.I. Isayev wrote: 'The Crimean Tatar language is the mother tongue of the Turkic population that inhabited the Crimean peninsula and most of whom have currently resettled in the Uzbek SSR.'

55 R.J. Rummel, *Lethal Politics. Soviet Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1917* (New Brunswick 1990), 158.

56 Guboglo and Chervonnaia, *op. cit.*, 80.

by the deportation and was in danger of complete social disintegration as a distinct ethnîe. By stripping the Crimean Tatars of their territorial basis for recognition, the Crimean ASSR, the Kremlin had erased this non-nation of 'traitors' from the USSR's ethnic map. Schooling for the Crimean Tatars was now to be in Russian, their national literature had been destroyed, they had no prerogatives based on nationality and they were no longer recognized as a distinct people.

It soon became apparent that the unique Crimean Tatar national identity forged over the centuries had been slated for annihilation. Scattered across thousands of miles, throughout five Soviet republics, with none of the institutions granted to other Soviet ethnic groups to help them sustain their national identity, the Crimean Tatars were not expected to maintain their separate national identity in the postwar years, nor to sustain any sense of cohesion or links to the lost Crimean homeland for more than a generation. The all-powerful bureaucracy of the Soviet government was now devoted to 'de-rooting' this people from its home-republic and the Crimean Tatars' prospects for returning to the homeland were virtually non-existent. Lemerrier Quelquejay's gloomy pronouncement that 'the Crimean Tatars are doomed to be assimilated by the peoples among whom they are now living. Thus a people with a long, glorious and tragic past will disappear from history', was a typical western prognosis for this small, seemingly doomed nation.<sup>57</sup>

If the forced dispersion of this group throughout the USSR was not sufficient to achieve the 'de-nationalization' of the Crimean Tatars and eradication of this ancient ethnîs, the Soviet government enacted a policy of 'de-Tatarization' in the Crimean Tatars' former homeland, designed to obliterate all traces of the Crimean Tatars' centuries-long inhabitation of the peninsula. In many ways this destruction of the Crimean Tatars' heritage in the Crimea paralleled the destruction of hundreds of years of Muslim culture in Bosnia by Serbian and Croatian forces in areas cleansed of their Muslim populations in the 1990s.

Following the demotion of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945 to the status of a normal province in the Russian Federated Republic, the Soviet government used its vast resources to eradicate any memory of the Crimean ASSR. Crimean Tatar-language textbooks published in the 1920s were burned, all manifestations of Crimean Tatar identity in the Crimea were removed and many aspects of the Crimean Tatars' long history in the Crimea destroyed. The local Crimean authorities actively severed many of the Crimean Tatars' historical and cultural 'roots' in this imagined homeland. In the Crimean Tatars' villages, for example, many traces of Tatar culture (simple village mosques, Muslim cemeteries, marble fountains, turban-capped tombstones, etc.) were destroyed.

<sup>57</sup> Lemerrier Quelquejay, 'The Tatars of the Crimea, A Retrospective Summary', *Central Asian Review*, 16 (1968), no. 1, 25.

Ancient Crimean Tatar village or topographic names (often with pre-Mongol roots) were changed overnight by administrative caveat. This cultural and administrative Russification of the Crimean Tatars' homeland was paralleled by government-sponsored settlement of Russians and Ukrainians in the abandoned state and collective farms of the region.

According to V. Broshevan and P. Tygliants, 'After the deportation from the Crimea of the "punished" peoples a catastrophic situation arose on the peninsula. In addition to the damage wreaked on the economy by the war, the republic now lost many work hands, specialists.'<sup>58</sup> Eyewitnesses to the desolation left behind in the empty Crimea countryside following the deportation of the Crimea's valued peasant population report that:

In the region of Ulu Uzen in the Alushta region in the mountains there were tens of thousands of herds of small cattle remaining after the expulsion of the Tatars. The cattle were not guarded by anyone and there were instances when certain soldiers drove off huge herds of 100-200 head explaining that this herd had no owner. In the village of Ulu Uzen on the premises of a mosque all the possessions left by the Tatars were gathered. As a result of the lack of guards this state property was constantly plundered.<sup>59</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of simple Slavic collective farmers from southern Russia were resettled in the farms, houses and villages of the deported Tatars. According to most estimates, a full 90 per cent of the Slavic population of the Crimea actually arrived in the peninsula after the war.<sup>60</sup> In many instances the Slavic arrivals sub-divided the long, stone houses of the Crimean Tatars built to house several generations and turned them into a number of smaller units which can still be found in divided sections throughout the Crimea. Many of the new settlers found household items, such as chairs, beds, farming tools and utensils left behind by the Crimean Tatars, awaiting them.

On 30 June 1945, Stalin had the Crimean ASSR downgraded to the status of a regular *oblast* within the Russian Republic and, for all intents and purposes, the Crimea, cleansed of its previous inhabitants, was now in every sense an integral part of the Slavic world. In 1954, Khrushchev transferred the Crimean *oblast* from Russia to Ukraine in a (at the time!) purely symbolic gesture, celebrating the 300th anniversary of Cossack Ukraine's unification with Russia in 1654.

By the late 1950s, the sun-baked, semi-tropical shore of the southern Crimea had been developed into the USSR's premier vacation resort. Once-lazy Tatar coastal hamlets were replaced by bustling sanatoria, *khirorts* (resorts), Young Pioneer camps, and hotels which catered to millions of Soviet citizens who vacationed in a proletarian playground few could guess had been inhabited by Tatar farmers for close to eight centuries. Soviet guidebooks

58 Broshevan and Tygliants, op. cit., 74.

59 Ibid., 80.

60 Mikhail Guboglo and Svetlana Chervonnaia, 'The Crimean Tatar Question and the Present Ethnopolitical Situation in the Crimea', *Russian Politics and Law*, vol. 33, no. 6, 39.

for the Crimea mentioned the 'Tatar Mongol' inhabitants of the Crimea in passing, as if this people were barbaric Scythians or Huns of a bygone era, not a living Soviet people languishing in exile in the depths of the USSR. For most historians and anthropologists an ancient people with a rich history had simply disappeared from the Soviet Union's ethnic map. For most Soviet citizens, however, a traitorous people had simply ceased to exist in the great Soviet 'Friendship of Nations'.

In 1957 Krushchev allowed the Crimean Tatars and other deported peoples to leave their hated *spetskommandantskii* (special commandant) camps in their places of exile and exonerated the deported nations of the false charges of mass treason. While the deported Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, Karachays and Balkars were allowed to return to their reconstituted homeland-republics, the Crimean Tatars, Meshketian Turks and Volga Germans were not allowed to go back to their natal territories for reasons that probably had to do with the value of their former homelands. The Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans and Meshketian Turks were to be arrested if they attempted to resettle in their former homelands and these groups were in essence forced to languish in exile for the remainder of the Soviet period (the Meshketian Turks have still not been allowed to return to their homeland in the post-Soviet republic of Georgia as a result of the anti-Muslim prejudices of the Georgian ruling élite).

Crimean Tatars who managed a furtive visit to their old homes and villages in the 1960s have left many stories of the sorrow that confronted them upon arriving in the off-limits Crimea to find strangers living in their ancestral cottages. The following poem by one such secret returnee entitled 'Ballad of the Ancestral Home' (*Ballada ob Otchem Dome*) captures some of this anguish:

I am a Crimean Tatar. I am the son of these sunny mountains,  
To which I have stolen today like a thief.  
A squeamish functionary, having lowered his fish-like eyes,  
Issued me a residence permit . . . for 24 hours.

I greet Ayu Dag [Bear Mountain] and the dove grey misty Yaila Mountains!  
I have not been to my sad homeland for so long!  
Here is the mud-walled house in which I was born and lived.  
The fig tree my grandfather planted has grown so much!

Our vineyard and tiny stone garden,  
Are, as before, filled with the festive ringing of cicadas.  
The bumpy muscles of vine, like my grandfather's hands,  
Are hard, resilient, and darkened by rain and dew.

The muscat is ripening! But I will not harvest it.  
I am stealing along the back yard of my father's house like a thief.  
Here is the white well and the frail, singing source . . .  
Some jaunty retired officer is busying himself in the garden.

He is digging a cellar (or maybe a latrine?)  
 Oh, what has he done, he has overturned the stone in the corner!  
 The age-old gravestone under the quince tree full of chinks,  
 Where all my ancestors are lying . . . their heads pointing eastwards!

He thinks the sacred bones are those of a goat and breaks them with a spade . . . Allah  
 forgive the unbeliever!

We look each other in the eyes for such a long time and with such difficulty.  
 He calls for somebody, letting his dog with its long mane loose.

Do not do it colonel! I will not take your fruit.  
 You can run my mud-walled house for now.  
 Tomorrow I will go back to faraway Chimkent [S. Kazakhstan]  
 I am only an observer, a keeper of ancestral legends.

I am an unwanted ghost, a fleeting shade on the wall,  
 Although bitter ashes churn and smoulder in me.  
 I am conscience and a riot, and someone's deep shame.  
 I am a Crimean Tatar, I am a son of these sunny mountains.<sup>61</sup>

With tales of the Crimean homeland such as this in their collective memory, the Crimean Tatars launched the first ethnically-based frontal challenge to Moscow's authority, demanding the right to return to their homeland. Crimean Tatar parents and grandparents kept the memory of The Deportation alive in the minds of new generations which grew up on stories of this tragedy. These trans-generational transfers of grievance served as a primary marker of Crimean Tatar identity during the exile years and kept the dream of returning to the lost homeland alive among those born in Uzbekistan and other places of exile.<sup>62</sup>

It was only in 1989, during the era of *glasnost*, that a decree was published in the Soviet paper *Izvestiia*, allowing the Crimean Tatars to return to their homeland, and the unimaginable took place for tens of thousands of exiled Crimean Tatars. 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. While the jubilant Crimean Tatar repatriates had grown up on stories of the romanticized *Yeshil Ada* (Green Island) of the Crimea, these idealized notions of the homeland were crushed by the bitter realities of life in the post-Soviet Crimea. The Crimean Tatars' return was resisted by the local communist *nomenklatura* (the entrenched Soviet-era bureaucratic élite which had ordered the redeportation of Crimean Tatars attempting to return illegally to their homeland in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s), which ordered the destruction of Crimean Tatar *samozakvat* (self-seized) settlements, refused to allow the Crimean Tatars to settle on their cherished southern coast (this area is valued by the local mafia and communist-era leadership for its

61 Viktora Nekipelova, 'Spuchitsiia i Tleet vo Mne', *Kirim* (23 August 1997), 3.

62 For an analysis of the Crimean Tatars' struggle to keep alive their ethnic identity, language, traditions, etc. and pass a sense of 'Crimean Tatariness' on to future generations growing up in exile, see Brian Glyn Williams, 'The Crimean Tatar Exile in Central Asia. A Case Study in Group Destruction and Survival', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1998).

hotels and resorts) and culturally, economically and politically marginalized the destitute returnees.

Most Crimean Tatars have 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 brick houses, covered with corrugated tin roofs, often lacking running water and electricity, located on dirt roads linking them to highways (these roads prove impassable in the winter months).

The Crimean Tatars have erected in Simferopol two monuments to the deportation which have great symbolic significance for this people who lost so many of their relatives in this communal tragedy. The monuments, which consist of two small stone markers approximately six feet in height with barbed wire stretched around them, have plaques on them that read in Russian and Tatar 'On this spot will be erected a monument to the genocide (*cinayetke*) against the Crimean Tatar people.' When I visited these monuments accompanied by an 83-year-old survivor of the deportation (who served in the Red Army during the war), vandals had spray-painted swastikas and anti-Tatar graffiti on these simple memorials to his people's suffering. This sort of anti-Tatar vandalism of Crimean Tatar cemeteries, mosques and monuments is not uncommon in the Crimea, where many Russians still believe that Stalin's spurious charges of treason against the Crimean Tatars were valid. More than half a century after the end of the second world war, the Crimean Tatars continue to be discriminated against on the basis of false accusations levelled against them by Stalin.

While the West has traditionally been apathetic to the victimization of East Europe's Muslim ethnies (an ethno-religious relic from the era of Ottoman expansion in East Europe), the mass slaughter and ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims, who were in every sense cultural Europeans, and Kosovar Muslims has gradually begun to change this attitude. While the West has been notoriously unconcerned about human rights abuses against the Chechens by Russian security forces in the secessionist republic of Chechnya (in both the 1994–96 invasion and the more recent 1999–2001 invasion), Europe appears to have acknowledged the Crimean Tatars' plight and to have offered them some official recognition. United Nations representatives have visited the Tatars' squatter camps in the Crimea, their leaders have been invited to OSCE conventions on national minorities, EU and PACE leaders have been on fact-finding missions to the Crimean camps, and western donor countries (the Netherlands in particular) have given the Crimean Tatar repatriates, who live in extreme poverty, considerable financial assistance. A wider recognition of the genocidal nature of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars that deprived this small nation of one in three of its people in a three-year period during the Soviet era will also serve to change perceptions of the Tatars as Europe's Muslim and 'Mongol' other.

It should, however, be noted that half of the Crimean Tatar people are still living in what they call the *pitmegun surgun* (continuing exile) and are unable



to return to their cherished homeland on the shores of the Black Sea. Most Crimean Tatars had their life savings wiped out by hyper-inflation in the early post-Soviet years and many cannot afford the enormous expenses involved in moving from one former Soviet republic to another and building a house in the resource-scarce, largely unwelcoming Crimean Autonomous Republic. Many elderly pensioners I interviewed in their places of exile in Central Asia dreamed of returning to spend their final days and be buried in the cherished home villages in the Crimean homeland of their youth but are unable to do so.<sup>63</sup> One hopes that the Russian Federation (which claims to be the legal heir to the USSR) and the international community will assist that portion of the Crimean Tatar community still forced to remain in its places of exile in overcoming the deportation crimes of the Soviet era and at long last acquire that most basic of human rights — the right to live in one's homeland.

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63 Although Alfred de Zayas points out that the right to live in one's homeland is not recognized by any international convention or addendum to the universal human rights covenants, the deportation of native populations was prosecuted as a crime against humanity at the Nuremberg trials. Alfred de Zayas, 'The Right to One's Homeland, Ethnic Cleansing, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia', *Criminal Law Forum*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1995), 258.