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## **Resilience in Crimea: The History of the Crimean Tatars**

*Abstract.* This essay explores the history of the Crimean Tatars, from their origins as a Turkic-speaking people in medieval Crimea to their significant political and cultural role under the Crimean Khanate. The impact of Russian imperialism, Soviet repression, forced deportation in 1944, and struggles faced upon their return to Crimea after the collapse of the Soviet Union are examined. The ongoing persecution of the Crimean Tatar community following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 is also discussed, highlighting their resistance to occupation amidst efforts to suppress their language, culture, and political representation. This examination of the ongoing oppression and challenges faced by the Crimean Tatars sheds light on their resilience and the enduring spirit of their proud heritage.

*Origins.* The Crimean Tatars are a Turkic-speaking ethnic group from Crimea, a peninsula on the northern coast of the Black Sea connected to Ukraine by an isthmus. According to “Turkish sources”, the dynasty of “Seljuk Turks settled in Crimea” (Fisher, 1979: 2).

These sources trace Crimean Tatars back to the early medieval period, specifically around the thirteenth century. The Crimean Tatars are believed to have descended from the Kipchak Turkic people, who had settled in the region after the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century. However, the “ethnogenesis of the Crimean Tatars” can predate the thirteenth century, and the ethnic group is considered the “indigenous people of the (Crimean) Peninsula... and ancient tribes lived in the region such, as Tavriis and Kimmerites” (Uraz, 2015: 100).

The Mongols, under the leadership of Genghis Khan, dominated much of Central Asia, and their descendants formed the Golden Horde, which controlled large parts of Russia and Eastern Europe.

The Crimean Tatars developed as a distinct group during multiple ruling periods, adopting elements of the “Goths, Huns... Kypchaks, Italians, Mongolic, and Turkic tribes”, specifically their cultures and heredities (About Crimean Tatars, 2017).

Despite converging with other ethnic groups, Crimean Tatars have maintained their unique roots and heritage. Their homeland, Crimea, was initially a part of the Mongol Empire, and later, following the collapse of the Golden Horde, the Crimean Khanate was founded in 1441. The original ruler of the Khanate, Hacı I Geray, was a descendant of previous rulers within the Golden Horde, and his legacy continued through what is known as the Giray Dynasty. The Crimean Khanate was a small territory controlled by “powerful and influential families of the Crimean nobility” and gained international support, primarily through the Ottoman Empire (Gendler, 2023).

The Khanate also controlled much of the Black Sea coast, which increased wealth due to ports, allowing the Khanate to access trade routes with other regions to improve economic ties and benefits. Although the Crimean Tatars retained their multiracial heritage, they gradually developed their political structures, social systems, and a distinct Crimean Tatar identity. For Crimean Tatars,

Islam is the dominant religion, and their language, also known as Crimean Tatar, "contains elements" of both Oghuz Turkic and Kipçak Turkic, but is primarily a Kipchak branch of Turkic languages (Williams, 2001: 330).

The Impact of Russian Imperialism. The decline of the Crimean Khanate began in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, due to the expansionist policies of the Russian Empire. The Russo-Turkish Wars weakened the Khanate's ally, and the Khanate became "unprotected... In 783, Catherine II annexed the entire peninsula as the Taurida Oblast." (Gendler, 2023)"

Under Catherine II, also known as Catherine the Great, Crimean Tatars experienced a decline in political autonomy, economic power, and cultural identity. The annexation of Crimea also began a long period of imperial expansion and efforts to silence political elites, resulting in the dissolution of the Crimean Khanate, which negatively influenced the Crimean Tatar community.

Under Russian rule, the Crimean Tatars were subjected to significant cultural and political repression. Russian authorities suppressed their language, religion, and social structures, and imposed Russian customs and governance on the peninsula. However, Russian authorities later understood that they would have to "[depend] on controlling, removing, or eliminating the Crimean Tatar people... were believed to be potentially disloyal subjects" (State Defense Committee, "Decree No. 5859SS: Revelations from the Russian Archives, 1996).

The Russian Empire also engaged in "[interfering in the activities of Muslim communities by strictly regulating the implementation of their religious rules and norms" (Abdulaieva & Kulinich, 2025).

As a result, Crimean Tatars migrated from Crimea to other regions to escape persecution from the Russians, but this led to a disruption in the demographic balance of the area and further marginalization of the Crimean Tatars. Despite these pressures, the Crimean Tatars retained a strong sense of identity and resisted Russian cultural assimilation.

*Soviet Repression, 1944, and the Return to Crimea.* During the Soviet era, particularly under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, the persecution of Crimean Tatars increased. In 1944, during the end of the Nazis' brief occupation of Crimea during World War II, Stalin's regime falsely accused the Crimean Tatars of "[betraying] the Motherland, deserting Red Army units that defended the Crimea and siding with the enemy" (State Defense Committee, "Decree No. 5859SS: Revelations from the Russian Archives, 1996).

The accusation resulted in the Soviet Union deporting Crimean Tatars to Central Asia, primarily to Uzbekistan. Additionally, any "property, buildings, outbuildings, furniture, and farmstead lands left behind... will be taken over by the local authorities," ultimately eradicating the Crimean Tatar culture and presence from the peninsula (State Defense Committee, "Decree No. 5859SS: Revelations from the Russian Archives, 1996).

On May 18, 1944, the Soviet authorities forcibly removed roughly 200,000 Crimean Tatars from their homes, subjecting them to harsh conditions during transport and in their new, remote locations. Many died from starvation, disease, and the brutal conditions of the journey. The Soviet government's desire to erase the Crimean Tatars from their homeland also included imprisoning "Crimean Tatar intelligentsia, [changing] alphabet... from Arabic to Latin... [shutting] Tatar schools, newspapers, and other institutes" (Uraz, 2016: 103).

While the deportation represented a significant injustice, the trauma endured by the Crimean Tatars strengthened the community, shaping their resilience and resolve.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Crimean Tatars began returning to their ancestral homeland. Political and social challenges made the return a slow and difficult process. Many returned to find their homes and lands occupied by others, and they faced significant discrimination and resistance from the Russian and Ukrainian authorities, as well as from the ethnic Russian population after Ukraine's independence. Despite these challenges, the Crimean Tatars began reasserting their presence in Crimea, reviving their language, culture, and political institutions. Crimean Tatars formed political organizations to represent their interests, most notably the Mejlis, the Crimean Tatar representative assembly "officially recognized by the Ukrainian government... in 1999" (Gendler, 2023).

Difficulties remained, however, as their efforts to secure land rights, cultural recognition, and political autonomy were met with resistance from both local authorities and the broader population. The Crimean Tatars' struggle for justice and recognition was further complicated by the geopolitical tensions between Ukraine and Russia, which intensified in the 2000s.

Ongoing Persecution. In 2014, when Russia illegally annexed Crimea following a controversial referendum, Crimean Tatars were once again threatened with persecution due to their heritage and being seen as a minority. The international community widely condemned the annexation, but it was supported by the Russian government, which sought to consolidate control over the strategically important peninsula. In response, many Crimean Tatars have "boycotted the referendum, organized rallies... abstained from voting in Russian elections" (Shynkarenko, 2022: 76-77).

After the annexation, Russian authorities and many Crimean Tatar activists and politicians banned the Mejlis, and intellectuals have been arrested, harassed, or forced into exile. Russian authorities have systematically continued to suppress the Crimean Tatar language, culture, and political expression. The government has used laws against what it deems as extremism and terrorism to target Crimean Tatar organizations and individuals who resist the occupation. The situation for the Crimean Tatar community has become increasingly dire, with ongoing "human rights violations... including torture, disappearances, and psychiatric abuse" (Green, 2022).

As with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Russia invaded more Ukrainian regions and increased Russian presence in the annexed regions in 2022, the Crimean Tatars faced intensified persecution. Some Crimean Tatars fled Ukraine to escape, but "around 90% of Crimean Tatars within Crimea have received mobilization notices," as well as other minorities within Russia and other annexed regions (Raymond, 2022).

Despite this, the Crimean Tatars have not been silenced. They continue to resist the occupation through peaceful protests, international advocacy, and preserving their cultural heritage. Many Crimean Tatars have also moved west into mainland Ukraine, where they have continued to raise awareness about the tribulations of their people in Crimea and the ongoing violations of their rights. Activists, including Eskender Bariiev, have rallied Crimean Tatars and supporters and have also led groups to observe "the victims of the Crimean Tatar Genocide and [celebrate] the Day of the Crimean Tatar Flag, World Indigenous Peoples Day, and Human Rights Day" (Bariiev, 2023).

By maintaining a sense of community despite hardships, staying true to their traditions, and peacefully resisting the Russian occupation of Crimea, Crimean Tatars will continue to preserve their unique identity and oppose oppression.

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