Exile and the Construction of Modern Crimean Tatar Nationhood

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In 1913, during a period of exile in Vienna, future General Secretary of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin penned a profound document in the history of Marxist thought, called *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*. In it, he wrote that a “nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”[[1]](#footnote-0) This distinction of the characteristics of a nation might seem strange from a proponent of an ideology that professes a belief that nationality and ethnicity are merely artificial boundaries placed between peoples in order to obfuscate the true defining cleavage of mankind: class. However, though Communists of the early twentieth century did want to see the state wither away and the unification of the world’s peoples under a banner of proletarian unity, the foundation of nationhood was seen as a way to endear a population to socialist rule and bring it to modernity.

Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik Party during the Russian Revolution and first leader of the Soviet Union, was a great proponent of nation-building, seeing it as a way of demonstrating to especially the non-Slavic population of the USSR that his new regime would not simply be a continuation of the Russian Empire. These nation-building efforts occurred across the Soviet Union. Supported by Moscow, peoples from the icy wastes of Yakutia to the sun-baked Fergana Valley who had never previously classified themselves as nations in the European sense began to see themselves as such. Even within the borders of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), ethnic groups such as the Ingush, Chechens, Kalmyks, and Dagestanis were each granted various degrees of autonomy from Moscow as Autonomous Republics, a standardized national language and alphabet, and in many cases affirmative action for members of the titular ethnicity in government and sought-after skilled labor positions.[[2]](#footnote-1)

Though in many autonomous republics within the Soviet Union the titular ethnic group retained a demographic majority, this was not always the case. Even by the 1920s, for example, in both the Karelian and Buryat Autonomous Republics, the titular ethnic groups were outnumbered by ethnic Russians. However, the most politically charged and arguably most fascinating example of this phenomenon can be found in Crimea. The Crimean ASSR would cease to exist in the wake of the Second World War, but prior to that conflict it served as an autonomous republic, with its titular ethnicity being the Crimean Tatars. Despite the fact that by the Soviet era, the Crimean Tatars were decisively outnumbered by Slavic settlers alongside smaller communities of ethnic Germans, Armenians, and Karaite Jews, this Turkic ethnic group served as the *de facto* titular ethnicity of the Crimean ASSR, receiving all the benefits of nation-building that the Lenin regime so prioritized.[[3]](#footnote-2) However, it was their experience of exile in Soviet Central Asia and Siberia during the cruel deportations carried out during and after the Second World War that crystallized modern Crimean Tatar identity and established that people as a coherent nation.

In order to understand how the experience of exile impacted Crimean Tatar nationhood, one must first understand Crimean Tatar ethnography and the history of their interactions with both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The Crimean Tatars are a Sunni Muslim ethnicity who inhabited the Crimean Peninsula and speak a Turkic language. They have historically been divided into two distinct groups: the Nogai and the Tats. The Nogai lived on the Crimean steppe, and bore much in common with the Turkic nomads of Central Asia and to a certain extent the Scythian and Sarmatian horsemen who roamed the plains of Western Eurasia in the classical era. Brian Glyn Williams notes that “in appearance, the Nogais of the south Ukrainian plains and the steppes of the Crimea’s interior were Mongol and appeared to be the direct descendants of Genghis Khan’s horsemen.”[[4]](#footnote-3) Given their distinctive culture and lifestyle for the region, these Nogais were often regarded as highly exotic and wild by the Russians. The second main group of Crimean Tatars were the Tats or Tat-Tatars, who were concentrated in the mountains of Crimea, as well as along the southeastern coast. They were more Mediterranean in orientation, and concentrated on the cultivation of cash crops such as wine grapes and tobacco. These Tats claimed that they were the descendants of Greek and Italian settlers who had come to Crimea in the Classical era, and had endured even through the Kipchak and Mongol invasions of the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, though they had been Turkified and converted to Islam.[[5]](#footnote-4) A Russian visitor to Crimea in the eighteenth century described the Tats as “intermixed with the ancient inhabitants of the Tauride, with the Goths and the Greeks,” with other chroniclers noting their “Aryan” appearance, ample facial hair, and tall stature relative to their Nogai neighbors.[[6]](#footnote-5) Though both Muslim and of Turkic linguistic and cultural background, these two groups did not speak the same language and had radically different lifestyles, but their interactions with the Russian and Soviet states would bring them together and merge these sub-identities into a unified Crimean Tatar one.

Russian rule first came to the Crimean peninsula in 1783, when the region was annexed into the Russian Empire by Catherine the Great. This annexation caused a mass exodus of over 100,000 Crimean Tatars to the Ottoman Empire, with the outmigration concentrated particularly among the steppe Nogai.[[7]](#footnote-6) At the time, Western notions of nationhood could not be said to apply to the Muslim Crimean Tatars, who formed the overwhelming majority of the peninsula’s population, and ethnic tensions between Slavs and Crimean Tatars were not the driving force behind the exodus. Instead, the migration was largely caused by religious differences between the Crimean Tatars and Orthodox Christian Russians. The mass migration was motivated by the Islamic concept of *hijra*, that Muslims should voluntarily relocate from a country ruled by unbelievers such as the Russian Empire to one ruled by Muslims, like the Ottoman Empire.[[8]](#footnote-7)

The evident Crimean Tatar affinity for the Ottoman Empire, a Turkic kingdom and the world’s last remaining Muslim great power, caused a great degree of suspicion among Tsarist officials in Crimea and Moscow that the Crimean Tatars were not fully loyal subjects and would prefer to be ruled by the Ottomans. These suspicions were heightened to frenzied levels during the Crimean War of 1853-56. The war, which saw a coalition of the United Kingdom, France, the Kingdom of Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire attempt to check Russian influence in the Black Sea region, was primarily fought in southwestern Crimea. This conflict would be the first, but not the last, instance of fabricated or at least exaggerated Russian gossip of the traitorous activities of the Crimean Tatar population leading to immense human suffering and rapid demographic turnover. Though Crimean Tatars did not collaborate *en masse* with the invading armies, and many actively supported the tsar through volunteering for service in the army, Russian soldiers treated them as a potential fifth column due to their religious and cultural affinity for the hated Ottomans.[[9]](#footnote-8) In the course of the war, the Crimean Tatars were harassed by Cossacks in the employ of the Russian Army, and many villages were burned.[[10]](#footnote-9) Rumors circulated among the Crimean Tatars that the Tsar either intended to wipe out or deport them to the Ottoman Empire or the Orenburg district of Central Russia.[[11]](#footnote-10) No plans are known to exist of these deportations, but fear of them prompted hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars to flee the peninsula for the Ottoman Empire in the latter half of the 1850s. Initially, Tsarist authorities welcomed the demographic dilution of the Muslim population of Crimea, but as the scale of the migration became known, with roughly two-thirds of the pre-war Crimean Tatar population having left, the Russians moved to halt further emigration, fearful of the depletion of manpower and the loss of tax revenue. Ultimately, the Nogai regions of northern and western Crimea were the most devastated, being nearly depopulated, and the southeastern Tat majority area was least affected.[[12]](#footnote-11) This episode, which is a regretfully under-discussed aspect of the Crimean War, foreshadows the future tribulations of the Crimean Tatars and highlights the degree to which their experience of Russian rule has been defined by forced emigration.

The remaining time the Crimean Tatars would spend in the Russian Empire did not see any further mass emigration, though a mass migration of Slavic settlers in the latter half of the nineteenth century resulted in the Turkic people’s status shift to that of an ethnic minority in Crimea. However, it was during this period that the first stirrings of true Crimean Tatar nationalism can be seen. The genesis of this nationalism can be traced essentially to a single man: Ismail Gasprinski. Gasprinski was born in 1851, in Bakhchysarai, the old capital of Crimea. He was brought up in a cosmopolitan setting, educated in a Russian-language school, and spent extensive time abroad in France and the Ottoman Empire. Though Gasprinski identified his “people” as all the Muslim Turkic peoples of the Russian Empire, his work was most concentrated in Crimea and among the Crimean Tatars. He was a crusader against the “backwardness” he identified with the Crimean Tatar and broader Muslim communities in the Russian Empire.[[13]](#footnote-12) An opponent of the traditional *ulama*, as part of an effort to counter this backwardness, Gasprinski fostered the creation of modern schools which taught in native Turkic languages and taught modern subjects like mathematics and literature instead of focusing exclusively on the memorization of the Arabic Quran, as the old Crimean *medrase* had. Through Gasprinski’s expansion of literacy in Crimea, more people became aware of international affairs and intellectual movements, such as nationalism. However, his most enduring achievement in the context of Crimean Tatar nationalism was his foundation of the newspaper *Tercuman*. This was the first newspaper printed in Crimea intended for Crimean Tatar audiences, and was for many their first experience of any literature at all outside the Quran. The paper was written in a constructed Turkic language, called in Crimea *Orta Turk Tili,* intended to be readable to all Turkic peoples of the Russian Empire, but was the first time that the Nogai and Tat populations were united in a single standard language, and improved literacy fostered the creation of an imagined Crimean Tatar community.[[14]](#footnote-13) For the first time, these two Turkic peoples of Crimea were brought together under the banner of one nation, though for now they were to be subsumed in the minds of Gasprinski and his followers into the greater Turkic one rather than one specific to Crimea. The reforms and ideas of Gasprinski were also highly meaningful to the idea of Crimean Tatar nationhood because the identity of the Nogais and Tatars was beginning to shift from firstly being defined by Islamic to one of being a part of a Turkic linguistic and cultural community.

By the turn of the twentieth century, this incipient nationalism was beginning to take more overt forms. In Istanbul, Crimean Tatar students also formed the *Vatan Cemiyeti* or Fatherland Society, which advocated for the liberation of Crimea from the Russian Empire and the establishment of a Crimean Tatar nation state. Members of this society began to establish nationalist cells in Crimean Tatar villages across Crimea in an effort to increase national consciousness among the population. They were aided in large part by Turkish and Tatar volunteers who served as teachers and propagandists, and evoked the memory of the Crimean War and the subsequent mass emigration in order to galvanize Crimean Tatar sentiment against the Russian Empire.[[15]](#footnote-14) However, despite these nationalist elements, Crimean Tatar society was still strongly divided between Nogais and Tats. These two peoples were certainly different from Slavs, but aside from being Muslim, they did not have much else in common. Their differences were analogous in many ways to those between Turkmen and Uzbeks. Both groups were Turkic Muslims who inhabited the same place, but they differed strongly in culture and especially dialect.[[16]](#footnote-15) Local *mullahs* still retained a strong grip on power through their control of the villages, impeding an identity independent from Islam from fully taking shape among the Crimean Tatar population. A more sophisticated sense of Crimean Tatar distinctiveness was beginning to take shape in the late Russian Empire, but collective nationhood of the Crimean Tatar people had yet to materialize.

Though nationalism had emerged as a potent political force in Crimea during the Russian Empire, the ideology exploded there after the Russian Revolution of 1917. In the chaos of mid-1917, which saw the German Empire advance rapidly against the crumbling Imperial Russian Army, Crimean Tatars took advantage of the situation and established a secular *Kurultay*, or ruling council, to govern their peninsula. Notably, this *Kurultay* was not formed by and for the conservative Islamic clergy. Instead, it was secular, along the lines of the modern nationalist Young Turks in Turkey, with whom the *Kurultay* quickly established independent and warm diplomatic relations.[[17]](#footnote-16) This brief period of independence was crushed by the mostly ethnic Russian Sevastopol Bolsheviks in January 1918, establishing the Taurida Soviet Socialist Republic, which showed preference for ethnic Russians over the Crimean Tatars.[[18]](#footnote-17) The Taurida SSR did not last long, and was quickly defeated by advancing German forces in April 1918. The Germans established the Crimean Regional Government, which was notably led initially by the Lipka Tatar Maciej Sulkiewicz.[[19]](#footnote-18) Under the Germans, the Crimean Tatars were re-empowered, and the *Kurultay* pushed for the mass return of the Crimean Tatar diaspora in Turkey and the Balkans in order to re-establish demographic supremacy in the peninsula. The Germans were receptive to this, as it would both bolster Crimean Tatar nationalism and weaken the status and power of the Russians in this strategically vital area. Had the Germans been able to bring enough Crimean Tatars back, Crimea would have gone from an ethnically mixed area with an indigenous minority to a ready-made nation-state, in line with other republics with large Russian minorities like Kazakhstan or Ukraine. However, the defeat of the German Army by the Entente ruined this plan, and the peninsula was reconquered in April 1919 by Bolsheviks under the command of Pavel Dybenko, who established the Crimean Socialist Soviet Republic, a polity led by none other than Lenin's brother, Dmitry Ulyanov. This Crimean SSR was far more accommodating of Crimean Tatars than the Tauride SSR had been, and though it would be conquered by White Forces under Anton Denikin later in July, permanent Bolshevik control of Crimea would finally be asserted in October 1920.[[20]](#footnote-19) However, the Crimean Tatars’ collaboration with the armies of the Kaiser led to a lingering ethnic Russian suspicion of Crimean Tatar disloyalty that would manifest itself during the Second World War and subsequent deportations.

The Crimean Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic was established in 1921 as an ethnically mixed autonomous region within the RSFSR, and though the Crimean Tatars did not have titular nationality status as the Volga Tatars did in Tatarstan, they were *de facto* treated as such, in large part to dilute Russian nationalism, which Lenin viewed as the greatest threat to the integrity of the Soviet state.[[21]](#footnote-20) Though just a quarter of the population was Crimean Tatar in 1926, they represented a majority of government officials in Crimea.[[22]](#footnote-21) As in other Turkic and Muslim regions of the Soviet Union, the Soviets embarked on a modernization and nation-building campaign in Crimea in the 1920s. Efforts were made to “indigenize” the party and skilled workforce of the peninsula by promoting Crimean Tatars, who often had agricultural backgrounds and low levels of formal education, to key roles in Communist Party infrastructure at the expense of Russians, Ukrainians, and Germans. Similarly, desirable proletarian jobs in cities like Kerch or Sevastopol which had previously been exclusively held by Slavs or Germans, like those in shipbuilding or heavy industry, were granted to Crimean Tatars on an affirmative action basis. The Crimean Tatar language was also standardized, merging the two main dialects of Nogai and Tat, and given a Cyrillic and Latin alphabet, replacing the old Arabic script.[[23]](#footnote-22) The Soviet state introduced universal education, dramatically increasing both the literacy rate and the number of girls in school. Critical for the development of Crimean Tatar nationhood is the promotion of Crimean history in schools. The peninsula’s mosaic ethnic and political history was portrayed as that of the entire population, but it resonated especially strongly with the Crimean Tatars, who took it strongly as their own. As Brian Glyn Williams notes, after a decade of Soviet rule, “[e]ven the most uneducated Crimean Tatar *kolkhoznik* . . . living in the most isolated farm in the Yaila hinterland would have been aware of the fact that the Crimean ASSR was his homeland and that the Crimean Tatars were an ethnically-defined people with special prerogatives on this territory.”[[24]](#footnote-23) This sentiment is without question the most lasting contribution that the Soviet state made to the idea of Crimean Tatar nationhood. A people that previously had little consciousness outside loyalty to Islam and affinity for their fellow Turks became one that began to identify very strongly with Crimea as an ethnic homeland, whether they were Nogai or Tat.

However, this period of Crimean Tatar national empowerment was relatively brief, coming to a screeching half in 1928 with the arrest and execution of Veli Ibrahimov, the ruler of the Crimean ASSR, for bourgeois nationalism. From this date, suppression of Islam, which had precedent during the days of the Crimean SSR in 1919 but had abated since then, returned with a vengeance. Thousands of Muslim clergy were shot or deported to Siberia between 1928 and 1937, and mosques were closed around the peninsula. The Crimean Tatar language, only recently reformed and standardized by Soviet officials, would be suppressed in the 1930s in favor of a policy of Russification. Only the Cyrillic script, not the Latin or Arabic one, would be permitted to be published, and the number of Crimean Tatar-language newspapers and journals was reduced from twenty-three to nine.[[25]](#footnote-24) The Crimean Tatars had a right to be suspicious of Soviet agricultural policy, as war communism had been a driving factor in devastating famines during and immediately after the conclusion of the Russian Civil War, and collectivization also proved highly unpopular among the Crimean Tatars, and many actively worked to undermine the process by destroying Soviet farm equipment and not doing their work on the *kolkhozy*.[[26]](#footnote-25) Between 1928 and the beginning of the Second World War, tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars were deported from their homes to Central Asia, food shortages were endemic, and a revolt even broke out against Soviet authorities in Alakat. Angered at their treatment by the Soviets and resentful of the ever-increasing number of Slavic settlers who poured into Crimea in the interwar period, the Crimean Tatars proved a receptive audience to any power opposed to the Soviet Union.[[27]](#footnote-26)

The arrival of the Second World War was never a positive development to the civilians affected by its presence, and the peoples of Crimea were no exception. The Nazi advance into Crimea was completed by July 1942, following a brutal siege of Sevastopol by German and Romanian forces. The conduct of the German occupation in Crimea, especially with regard to the Crimean Tatar population, has been a highly controversial subject ever since its conclusion in 1944. On the one hand, Nazi leadership considered the Crimean Tatars as Asiastic *Untermenschen* who were unfit to live in the Reich’s planned eastern territories. In keeping with this racist worldview, the Germans were not kind occupiers. Numerous Crimean Tatar villages were torched in anti-partisan operations, many working-age Crimean Tatars were shipped off for forced labor in war industry in the *Reich*, and the *Wehrmacht* requisitioned supplies without asking for consent from Tatar civilians of both Nogai and Tat heritage. Massacres of the Jewish population took place at a large scale, and Crimean Tatars served in large numbers in both the Red Army and local partisan forces within Crimea.[[28]](#footnote-27) One Crimean Tatar, Amet-Khan Sultan, was even awarded the prestigious “Hero of the Soviet Union” award for his exploits as a flying ace in the Red Air Force.[[29]](#footnote-28)

Though Crimean Tatars served with distinction in the Red Army and many took up arms as partisans, collaborationist activities by some segments of the population led to accusations by the Soviet state of collective collaboration with the Germans of the entire Crimean Tatar people. During the German occupation, Crimean Tatar nationalists established “Muslim Committees” which ruled Crimea in the name of the Nazi regime. These Muslim committees were designed to divide the population and ferment ethnic strife, as the Crimean Tatars were given preference over Slavs, despite the former’s ostensible “racial inferiority” according to the Nazi worldview. They also established German-sanctioned *Selbstschutz* (self defense) brigades which sought to counter partisan activities, especially in the Yaila Mountains. In addition, a small cadre of Crimean Tatar nationalists living abroad in Turkey approached the Nazi government through Turkish intermediaries about the possibility of forming an independent Crimean Tatar fighting force aligned with the Germans. The German government agreed, and began to recruit soldiers from prisoner-of-war camps in Germany and the occupied Soviet Union.[[30]](#footnote-29) Usually, such soldiers had little choice of whether to join or not. If they remained in the prisoner of war camps, starvation or death from disease were a near certainty, and few Crimean Tatars refused the opportunity of rations and an escape from captivity. This ostensibly voluntarily-formed detachment ultimately came to include roughly 20,000 soldiers, alongside many *Hilfswinger* (*Hiwi*) volunteers who aided the regular *Wehrmacht* in their campaigns.[[31]](#footnote-30)

Neither of these phenomena were totally unique to the Crimean Tatars. Millions of Soviet citizens of many ethnicities aided the Germans largely out of necessity, as the economics of the war had made non-war related employment much harder to find, including for those of Slavic background. In addition, many other Soviet peoples served in the *Wehrmacht* or *Waffen-SS*, including Ukrainians, Central Asian Turkic ethnicities, and those from the Baltic states. This group also includes Russians, who formed the Russian Liberation Army under General Andrei Vlasov, which came to number in the tens of thousands. In an event of superlative irony, even members of the small Turkic-Jewish community of Karaites in the Crimean Peninsula served in the *Waffen-SS*.[[32]](#footnote-31)

Despite being far from the only ethnic group with collaborationist elements, the Crimean Tatars were among those singled out for deportation to Central Asia in May 1944, a process known in Crimean Tatar as the *Sürgün*, initiating a half-century long separation between the Crimean Tatar people and their ancestral homeland. The reasoning for this mass deportation has long been questioned, as other groups who had collaborated with the Germans to a much higher degree, such as Latvians or Estonians, did not face the complete removal of the Crimean Tatars. It is suspected today that the true reason the Crimean Tatars were deported was to ease the Soviet military’s access to the Black Sea and prepare for a potential war with Turkey, as Stalin had long coveted the eastern Turkish provinces that had once been a part of the Russian Empire, as well as control of the Dardanelles and Bosporus Straits.[[33]](#footnote-32)

The deportation of the Crimean Tatars was rapid and brutal. Those taken in 1944 were overwhelmingly women and children, as the men were either serving in the Red Army or had retreated west with the Germans, either as part of the *Wehrmacht* or to work as forced labor within the *Reich*. Those Tatars who remained in Crimea were sent east, mostly to the Uzbek SSR, in crowded boxcars, which reeked of excrement and were poorly ventilated. There were no sanitary facilities and no opportunities to resupply. Roundups were also not always clean-cut affairs. Though most in peninsular Crimea were not harmed in the initial phases of the deportation, this was not a universal experience. For example, in the Arabat Spit, when NKVD officials forgot to deport the local Crimean Tatar population, instead of organizing trains for them, the NKVD simply loaded every Crimean Tatar they found onto an old boat and sank it in the Sea of Azov, gunning down any survivors of the resulting shipwreck in cold blood.[[34]](#footnote-33) Death rates on these trains were immensely high, with NKVD officers simply dragging out the dead during refueling stops in Russia and Kazakhstan and leaving their bodies in the open.[[35]](#footnote-34) Those who actually made it to Central Asia found no preparations had been made for their settlement there. Usually, nothing more awaited them than open country, with no shelter or food available. Local Uzbeks, who had been fed propaganda by the NKVD that the Crimean Tatars had all collaborated with the despised German invader, were initially quite hostile to the deportees, declining to give them food or assistance.[[36]](#footnote-35) Despite all these hardships, the situation began to improve by 1947 and 1948 as the deportation of male Crimean Tatar Red Army veterans and Prisoners of War offered the population a much-needed source of manpower.[[37]](#footnote-36) In addition, connections began to be made between Crimean Tatars and the local Uzbek population largely due to a shared Islamic faith. Though by 1950 the gravest hardships had passed, between 1944 and that year somewhere between one quarter and one half of the deported Crimean Tatar population perished.[[38]](#footnote-37)

As they adjusted to their new homes, Crimean Tatars had to establish new forms of being and a new sense of identity. The trauma that they had collectively suffered had strengthened the sense of distinctiveness and independent identity that local nationalists during the Tsarist period and state actors in the Soviet period had worked so hard to establish. Modern notions of Crimean Tatar nationhood were to be born in exile, as the image of “home” and all it meant to the Crimean Tatar people became mythologized, and barriers between the Tats and Nogais began to dissipate. The key elements of this new nationalism were the transmission of memories of Crimea and collective Crimean Tatar political activism.

Very early in the *Sürgün*, Crimean Tatar activists, armed with an identification of Crimea as a home for their people, founded the Crimean Tatar National Movement. Though the Movement began a letter-writing campaign advocating for return in 1956 during the beginnings of the Khrushchev thaw, working in tandem with the Communist Party, this accommodating position was not held for long. In 1957, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev declared that he would allow some deported ethnicities, such as the Chechens, to return to their homeland. The Crimean Tatars were not included, which galvanized resistance efforts.[[39]](#footnote-38) The Crimean Tatar National Movement used memory as a weapon against Soviet power by asserting the illegitimacy of the Russian annexation of Crimea in the eighteenth century as well as the destruction of the Crimean ASSR in 1946, and its subsequent transfer to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954. The National Movement also adopted Tat claims of descent from Genoese and Venetian settlers by also claiming more relations to the Scythians, Goths, Greeks, and others. They even rejected the name "Crimean Tatar," calling themselves instead Kirim, or Crimean, declaring themselves the "true" indigenous people of the peninsula, rather than an outpost of earlier Turkic or Mongol expansion.[[40]](#footnote-39) This intellectual dimension of Crimean Tatar nationalism was propagated by and designed for by the Crimean Tatar intellectual elite in order to argue for a return using the nationalist language the Soviet state had so ingrained in the interwar period.[[41]](#footnote-40)

Despite the intellectual nature of the early Crimean Tatar National Movement’s use of memory, most Crimean Tatars in exile used much more mundane and yet personal anecdotes. Parents told children of their homeland in intense detail, and though in most cases these children were sheltered from the true reasons for their exile until they were older, Crimean Tatar children in Central Asia displayed a stunning awareness of the physical topography of Crimea. Like Palestinians brought up in refugee camps, Crimean Tatars always identified Crimea, not their location in exile, as their true home. Maps of Crimea were placed in primary schools, and many spoke longingly of their lives prior to the deportations. Music also served to keep the memory of Crimea alive, with the nationalist song “I Pledge” being a particular favorite. In the *Sürgün*, home would always mean Crimea, not Central Asia, regardless of how materially comfortable the Crimean Tatars would become there.[[42]](#footnote-41) Unable to fully shake the accusations of collaborationism from their Uzbek neighbors, Crimean Tatars were unable to fully integrate and always considered themselves a distinct people removed from their rightful home.

Inspired by this strong identification of Crimea as a homeland, some Crimean Tatars illegally began to repatriate, though they faced deportation should they be caught. This movement began in the late 1960s and 1970s, following a long period of campaigning in Moscow which saw the state dismiss charges of mass treason by the Crimean Tatars in 1967.[[43]](#footnote-42) This decree, while important, was unsatisfactory because it did not actually allow the Crimean Tatars to return to Crimea, and instead labeled them as a subgroup of Volga Tatar, a blatant display of ethnic erasure. Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, an increasing number of dissidents, including future chairman of the Mejlis Mustafa Dzhemilev, began to protest Soviet policy towards the Crimean Tatars, leading to public disturbances in the Uzbek SSR in 1968 and 1969. The Crimean Tatars also became objects of sympathy for many Soviet dissidents, particularly those of Ukrainian extraction, including former Red Army General Petro Grigorenko and poet Boris Chichibabin, who condemned the 1944 deportations during public poetry readings in the city of Kharkiv.[[44]](#footnote-43) To these dissidents, the Crimean Tatars served as a symbol for the needless brutality of the Soviet regime, and for Grigorenko especially, how far the state had deviated from the Leninism on which it was allegedly founded. Many Crimean Tatars actually illegally returned to Crimea, only to find themselves soon deported, as roughly 6000 did in 1968 alone. One of these dissidents was Musa Mahmut, who moved to Crimea from Uzbekistan in 1975 and was condemned to deportation in 1978. Instead of returning to Tashkent, he set himself on fire in protest of the Soviet state’s discrimination against his people, determined to die on what he called his native soil.[[45]](#footnote-44) His death signals the commitment the Crimean Tatars showed to the idea of Crimea as the *only* homeland that they could ever accept.

While in exile, Crimean Tatars became what Brian Glyn Williams calls “a classic diasporic group in their refusal to assimilate in their surrounding environment and their conscious effort to actively link themselves to another place that continued to be constructed as a ‘homeland.’”[[46]](#footnote-45) They remained largely endogamous, maintained their language, and retained their distinctive culture. Crimean Tatar women continued rejecting the veil, a stark visual contrast to their more conservative neighbors across Soviet Central Asia. Crucially, though identification as a Nogai or Tat was still a critical part of most Crimean Tatars identity, it began to become secondary to the identification as Crimean Tatar itself. This occurred through a mix of intermarriage between Tats and Nogais in exile, as well as the decline in the distinctiveness of Tat and Nogai speech as their dialects converged to become closer to Standard Crimean Tatar in exile. Crimean Nogai deportees, while retaining an affinity for the Nogai of the Kuban, who had not been deported, began to affiliate much more strongly with their fellow Crimean Tats, and Crimean Tatarness became increasingly identified exclusively with an origin in Crimea, rather than Islam, ethnic subdivision, or speaking a Turkic language.

The return of the Crimean Tatars to Crimea, enabled by the enactment of *perestroika* and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and hastened by the outbreak of ethnic violence in late-Soviet Uzbekistan, saw them return to a highly different place than their memories had envisioned. The Crimean Tatars themselves were different too. Ethnic sub-identities have drastically decreased in importance alongside the rise of a uniquely Crimean Tatar identity. Today, perhaps the greatest cleavage in Crimean Tatar society is that between those who were in exile in different parts of the USSR. Those who lived in cities like Tashkent tend to associate primarily with other former urban-dwellers, and those who lived in Siberia or in other rural areas in Central Asia retain an affinity for those with the same experience.[[47]](#footnote-46) In a sense, however, this “cleavage” shows how united the Crimean Tatars truly became during the *Sürgün*. These divides are clearly analogous to urban-rural divides within a nation-state like Poland, rather than an ethnic bifurcation, as can be seen in a place like Bosnia. This breakdown in the division between Tats and Nogais is why the *Sürgün* is so essential to the creation of modern Crimean Tatar nationalism and national identity, as the last major division among the population was reduced to a triviality through the collective struggles of exile. Though the Crimean Tatars were forced to spend nearly half a century in exile, they returned a more cohesive group than they had left, and the *Sürgün* removed the ethnic subdivisions which represented the last barrier to true nationhood for the Crimean Tatar people.

A key element of any nation is the culture it produces. Due to the highly politicized nature of Crimean Tatar nationhood, it should perhaps come as no surprise that much of the cultural output of the post-repatriation Crimean Tatar community has had to do with themes of loyalty, dispossession, and the trials of history, though different artists focus on different elements of past and present experience. One such artist is Rustem Eminov, a Crimean Tatar painter who was born in Uzbekistan in 1950. Eminov’s stated goal as an artist was to bring to life the stories he had heard from his parents and grandparents about the trauma of deportation and ensure such stories could never be forgotten. Notably, rather than painting pictures of a Crimea he never saw until he was in his forties, Eminov concentrates on the human element of the tragic history of the Crimean Tatar people in the twentieth century: the desperation of a woman in exile in a strange place without her beloved husband, the worn face of a male elder, the quiet resolve of Musa Mahmut as he self-immolated.[[48]](#footnote-47) Another painter active in the post-Soviet Crimean Tatar artistic scene is Nuri Yakubov, who came to Crimea at just twenty-four years old, in 1989. Raised to believe Crimea was an Edenic land of milk and honey, as his parents had remembered it, Yakubov returned to a Crimea devastated by environmental degradation and fraught with ethnic tensions and social inequality. Instead of turning these images into dour or resentful art, Yakubov has taken a much lighter tone. He paints scenes of a Crimea he feels ought to be, rather than the one it currently is. His pieces show the Crimeans in traditional Tatar dress, living in the pristine land of abundance that was promised to those lucky enough to return to the promised land of Crimea. Yabukov’s art shows a Crimea fit for the sufferings endured to return to it, and as a symbol of moving forward from the sorrows of the *Sürgün*.[[49]](#footnote-48) Notably, neither artist portrays uniquely Tat or Nogai figures, subsuming their collective experiences into a unified Crimean Tatar historical narrative, highlighting the homogenizing effects of the *Sürgün*. Crimean Tatar art indicates the role that exile played in collective identity, as many works either deal with the memory of deportation or guardian against another, but also that the Crimean Tatar nation is a modern and dynamic one, continually producing works of high and low culture, not strictly focusing on the events of the past.

In keeping with a more unified sense of national identity, the Crimean Tatars became highly assertive of their political rights in post-Soviet Ukrainian Crimea. Leading dissident Mustafa Dzhimilev assisted in the creation of the Qurultai and Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People. These institutions were legislative bodies established alongside the Ukrainian central authorities, and only held power over Crimean Tatars and their affairs. Constantine Pleshakov likens the arrangement to a “benign apartheid,” in which Crimean Tatars were granted their own institutions independent of those pertaining to the majority Slavic population.[[50]](#footnote-49) However, this body was always viewed with intense suspicion by the Russian population, who were highly cognizant of the anti-Russian sentiment among many Crimean Tatars dating from the deportations. Due to these ethnic Russian anxieties, in 2010 the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovitch placed the Mejlis under the direct control of his regime in Kyiv by reducing its size by half and directly appointing its members.[[51]](#footnote-50)

Though the establishment of political institutions granted a degree of autonomy for the Crimean Tatar population in Ukrainian Crimea, the repatriation of the Crimean Tatars, a key element of Crimean Tatar nationalism, was not a smooth process. Though the return was viewed as potentially destabilizing by the Ukrainian government, the Ukrainians were far more receptive to it than the Russian Federation or ethnic Russians in Crimea. However, Crimean Tatar life under Ukrainian rule was far from perfect. Crimea was already an impoverished place relative to the region, with salaries being less than half of those in Russia in 2010.[[52]](#footnote-51) Crimean Tatars were also forced back into rural areas during the repatriation, unlike those of other ethnicities, who could often choose where they wanted to live. Though most Crimean Tatars had settled into an urban way of life in Central Asia, many were quickly returned to rural destitution upon repatriation. Many were not even able to secure land in rural areas, and, unable to acquire land on which they can legally live, squatted in rudimentary dwellings wherever they could find open space.[[53]](#footnote-52) Even in 2000, roughly half of Crimean Tatars still lived in such structures. Unemployment has been rampant among the Crimean Tatar returnees, and many Crimean Tatars are victims of police brutality. Divorce, alcoholism, and reduced life expectancy have been a persistent problem for Crimean Tatars post-repatriation, and many men especially have been forced to return to Central Asia due to a lack of prospects.

The modern era has seen strain on the Crimean Tatar nation like no other since the end of the Soviet era. One threat to the cohesiveness of Crimean Tatar nationhood is the rise of Islamic extremism. Some Crimean Tatars have volunteered to join ISIS, fighting in Syria and Iraq alongside the terrorist organization, and in May 2014 Crimean Tatar ISIS commander Andul Krymsky advocated for an armed Islamist revolt against the Russian occupation.[[54]](#footnote-53) While Islamic extremism remains far outside the political mainstream among Crimean Tatars, it poses an existential threat to the largely secular nationalism of most modern Crimean Tatars. It is unclear whether such extremism would undermine the cohesiveness of Crimean Tatar identity, as Crimean Tatars of all backgrounds are overwhelmingly Muslim, but should radical Islam become more prominent among Crimean Tatars, the face of Crimean Tatar nationalism would doubtlessly be profoundly altered. Such an Islamicized Crimean Tatar identity would represent the largest shift in Crimean Tatar nationalism since the *Sürgün*, though for now such questions remain mostly in the realm of hypotheticals. Undercurrents of Islamic extremism are also the cause of much suspicion of Crimean Tatars from Crimea’s Slavic inhabitants and the governments of Ukraine and especially Russia.

Another challenge facing the Crimean Tatar nation is that posed by the modern Russian Federation. In 2014, Russia invaded and annexed the Crimean peninsula, which is home to a majority ethnic Russian population. Immediately following the annexation, the Russian government took actions against Crimean Tatar institutions, with the Russian-appointed Supreme Court banning the Mejlis as an instrument of “regional instability,” and many of its members, alongside thousands of everyday Crimean Tatars, fled to Ukraine.[[55]](#footnote-54) Mustafa Dzhemilev, the de facto leader of the Crimean Tatar nation, has been barred from entering Crimea, though was in 2019 awarded the Lech Walesa prize for his activism against the Russian occupation.[[56]](#footnote-55) Discrimination towards Crimean Tatars, especially by state authorities, has significantly worsened under Russian occupation. There are hundreds of accounts of arbitrary detention and torture of innocent Crimean Tatars by the Russian military and local police forces, and little is being done to rectify the long-standing issues of rural poverty and lack of opportunity in Crimea.[[57]](#footnote-56) There has also been a notable rise in the cost of living, raising the peninsula’s average costs significantly above those of Ukraine, despite the difficult economic conditions following Russia’s annexation.[[58]](#footnote-57) However, despite the severity of these troubles and the contemporary suffering of the Crimean Tatars, they have weathered all this and worse before. Though the Russians are today savagely oppressing the Crimean Tatars, they have been unable to destroy the cohesive national identity this people has built through the trials of the past. The Crimean Tatar language remains spoken, the Crimean Tatar cause retains its fierce advocates in Kyiv and before the United Nations, and the Crimean Tatars remain distinct from their Russian occupiers, standing in the way of that nation’s unilateral domination of the peninsula.

Prior to the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine, Crimean Tatars mostly rebelled against their Russian occupiers by actively defying stereotypes of their political unreliability and religious fanaticism by stringently complying with the demands of their Russians occupiers. However, an overwhelming majority of Crimean Tatars have remained in Russian-occupied Crimea, often citing the immense sacrifices of their ancestors in securing a homeland there as a motivating factor. In fact, the concept of “homeland” lies second only to “family” in the priorities of the Crimean Tatar populace as of 2015. They remained adamant in keeping their unique culture alive, despite Russian harassment of Crimean Tatar comedy, theater, and other avenues of Crimean Tatar cultural expression.[[59]](#footnote-58) However, with the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine, some Crimean Tatars have begun active resistance, and the Crimean Tatar resistance group Atesh was founded in September 2022 to disrupt Russian military activities in Crimea. The group is both highly clandestine, with not a single member yet apprehended by Russian authorities, and very active, destroying millions of dollars worth of Russian military equipment, gathering intelligence, and even assassinating wounded Russian soldiers in the city of Simferopol.[[60]](#footnote-59) Identifying Crimea as their national homeland and defiant in the preservation of national culture, Crimean Tatars continue to resist Russification and Russian domination to assert their national culture and interests.

Returning to Stalin’s definition of a nation as given in *Marxism and the National Question*, it is difficult to say that the Crimean Tatars truly qualified as a nation during the Tsarist period, and even during the interwar period. To be sure, the Nogais and Tats shared a common religion and cultural heritage, but they were really not yet united by language or economic activity. A Nogai from northwestern Crimea would have far more in common with another Nogai of the Kuban than he or she would with a Tat from Yalta, and this fact impeded the creation of true nationhood among the Crimean Tatars up until the *Sürgün*. This traumatic experience gave all Crimean Tatars a shared history, and forced them to homogenize. Dialects disappeared as the two groups increasingly intermingled and intermarried, and the historic economic differences between Tats and Nogais faded as they took similar jobs in their exile. The exile also underscored the role of a Crimean homeland in the Crimean Tatar psychology. The Soviet state’s denial of return created a common goal for all Crimean Tatars: reversal of the exile. These unifying experiences and homogenization were obviously unintentionally created by the post-war Soviet state, but were if anything more effective in building a resilient Crimean Tatar nation than the conscious nation building of the early Soviet period. Though the seeds of Crimean Tatar nationhood had been planted long before the *Sürgün*, it was this event that created the modern Crimean Tatar nation.

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