

The Genocide of the Crimean Tatars from 1944 to the Present

The Crimean Tatars were subjected to an intentional campaign of genocide and ethnic cleansing in 1944, when Stalin and the Soviet leadership ordered the forcible deportation of the Crimean Tatars from Crimea. Soviet propaganda sought to justify this mass deportation as a form of collective punishment for collaborating with the Nazi occupation regime in during 1942–1943. Most scholars and commentators, however, agree that the true aim of the Soviet government was the ethnic cleansing of the Crimean Tatars. This constituted the continuation of a policy practiced earlier in the Caucasus, whereby ethnic groups were selected to be deported and then charges of “treason” were fabricated.

Soviet motivations for the elimination of the Crimean Tatars included the strategic location of Crimea next to the Black Sea and close to Turkey. Another motivation was their close historical and cultural ties with Turkey. Since the Soviet Union had a long-term plan to annex of the Ardahan and Kars provinces of Turkey, and to demand naval bases at the Turkish Straits, the deportation of the Crimean Tatars took place in preparation for a possible future Soviet-Turkish conflict.

At least 238,500 people were deported, mostly to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. This included the entire ethnic Crimean Tatar population. A large number of deportees (more than 100,000 according to a 1960s survey by Crimean Tatar activists) died from starvation or disease as a direct result of deportation. This was a clear-cut case of genocide and “ethnic cleansing.”

Prior to the Stalinist repression, the Crimean Tatars had long been recognized as the indigenous people of the Crimean Peninsula, and the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist

Republic (Crimean ASSR) was established as an integral part of the Soviet Union. Under this administration, Crimean Tatars enjoyed cultural autonomy and the promotion of their culture, and the Crimean Tatar language had co-official language status along with Russian. Crimean Tatar cultural activities flourished, including establishment of cultural institutions, museums, libraries and theaters.

This “golden age” of Crimean Tatar culture and political autonomy ended when Stalin and the other Soviet leaders embarked on a brutal and intentional campaign to wipe out the Tatar people from the Crimean Peninsula. The Soviet leadership ordered the banishment of the Crimean Tatars to the Uzbek SSR. The operation was to be completed before June 1, 1944, and all property left behind would be confiscated by state authorities.

The deportation began on May 18, 1944 in all Crimean-inhabited localities. The forced deportees were given only 30 minutes to gather personal belongings, after which they were loaded onto cattle trains and moved out of Crimea. The deportees were brought to central gathering stations in Simferopol and Bakhchysarai, and after a short waiting period, loaded on trains. At the same time, most of the Crimean Tatar men who were fighting in the ranks of the Red Army were demobilized and sent into forced labor camps in Siberia and in the Ural mountain region.

According to eyewitness accounts, the Russian NKVD officials forgot to deport the Crimean Tatars in the fishing villages of the Arabat Spit. On July 19, 1944, when Soviet authorities learned about these villages, orders were issued that no Crimean Tatar should be left alive within 24 hours. Following this, all inhabitants of these villages were locked up in an old and big boat, which sailed to the deepest part of the Azov Sea and was then sunk. Soviet soldiers waited in a nearby ship with machine guns.

The train journey of the deportees to the destinations was carried out under harsh conditions and resulted in a large number of deaths. According to official Soviet data, 7,889 people, amounting to approximately 5% of the Crimean Tatar population was presumed dead during the deportation, but in all probability, these estimates were grossly understated. The deportation was carried out in sealed box cars, and thousands of deportees died because of thirst. The cars were called "crematoria on wheels" by Crimean Tatars. The doors and windows were tightly bolted to prevent the entry of fresh air, there was no medical care and little food. This led to the deaths of especially elderly people and children, who could not withstand the suffocating conditions and the lack of food. Grigorii Burlitskii, a NKVD officer overseeing the deportation who later defected, reported that "they were packed into wagons like sardines, the wagons were locked and sealed and put under the guard of military detachments". According to testimonies, the doors of the cars were only opened upon arrival to the Kazakh steppe, where the dead were dumped along the railway track, with the deportees not given the time to bury them.

The deportation was poorly planned and executed. Local authorities in the destination areas were not properly informed about the scale of the matter and did not receive enough resources to accommodate the deportees. The lack of accommodation and food, the failure to provide proper clothing to help the deportees to adapt to new climatic conditions and the rapid spread of diseases further decimated the Crimean Tatar people during the first years of exile.

Upon their arrival in Central Asia, Crimean Tatars were forced to live in special settlement camps, surrounded by barbed wire. Leaving the camps was punished by five years of hard forced labor. Many Crimean Tatars were also made to work in the large-scale projects conducted by the GULAG system. In these forced labor camps, deportees were assigned the heaviest tasks available and awoken before dawn for 12-hour workdays.

In Uzbekistan, Stalin ordered the settlement of Crimean Tatars in kolkhozes (collective farms), sovkhoses (state-owned farms) and settlements around factories for industrial and agricultural production. The deportees partially provided the required workforce for the industrial development of the area. Regardless of their former profession and skills, Crimean Tatars were forced to do heavy labor. Their places of residence consisted of barracks, makeshift shelters, parts of factories and communal housing.

Crimean Tatar activists carried out a census in all the scattered Tatar communities in the middle of the 1960s. The results of this inquiry show that 109,956 (46.2%) Crimean Tatars of the 238,500 deportees died between July 1, 1944 and January 1, 1947 due to starvation and disease.

The Soviet government also efficiently destroyed all remaining traces of Tatar culture. This included the destruction of Tatar monuments and burning of Tatar manuscripts and books. Tatar mosques were converted into movie theaters and warehouses; gravestones of Tatars were used as building material. Exiled Crimean Tatars were banned from speaking of Crimea, and official Soviet texts, including the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, erased all references to them. When applying for internal passports, "Crimean Tatar" was not accepted as an existing ethnic group and those that designated themselves as "Crimean Tatars" were automatically denied passports.

Soviet authorities also ordered the renaming of all Tatar place names (including mountains and rivers), and a decree of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet Presidium on December 14, 1944 required the renaming of all districts and district centers to Russian-language names. In total, more than 1389 Crimean Tatar towns and villages were renamed.

The Soviet propaganda machine worked hard to hide the true nature of the deportation from the domestic and international media by falsely claiming that it was “voluntary”. The

deportations were referred to as "resettlement." Crimean Tatars were depicted as “bandits” and “thieves,” and were accused of being Nazi agents.

On April 28, 1956, by the decree of the Supreme Soviet Presidium of the USSR, the Crimean Tatars were released from special settlement, accompanied by a restoration of their civil rights. In the same year, the Crimean Tatars started a petition to allow their repatriation to Crimea. They held mass protests in October 1966, but these were violently suppressed by the Soviet military. On June 21, 1967, after a meeting between representatives of the Soviet government and a Crimean Tatar delegation, prompt rehabilitation of Crimean Tatars was promised, but never fulfilled. In August and September 1967, thousands of Crimean Tatars took to the streets to protest in Tashkent.

A decree of the Supreme Soviet Presidium was issued on September 5, 1967 exonerating the Crimean Tatars, but the Soviet government did nothing to facilitate their resettlement back to Crimea, or to make reparations for the loss of lives and confiscated property. In 1968, a token 300 families were allowed to return, but this was only for propaganda purposes. Crimean Tatars, led by the Crimean Tatar National Movement Organization, were not allowed to return to Crimea from exile until the beginning of the Perestroika in the mid-1980s.

The Crimean Tatars began repatriating on a massive scale beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the early 1990s. The population of Crimean Tatars in Crimea rapidly reached 250,000 and leveled off at about 270,000. There are believed to be between 30,000 and 100,000 remaining in exile in Central Asia.

Finally, in November 1989, after the end of the Cold War, the Soviet government acknowledged responsibility for this clear violation of international law. In November 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR recognized the deportation as a crime against humanity of the highest degree. On April 21, 2014, following the annexation of Crimea by Russia, President Vladimir Putin of Russia signed a decree that “rehabilitated” Crimean Tatars and other ethnicities who suffered from Stalinist repressions in Crimea. However, this decree proved to be hollow, not only because there was no compensation, reparations or restitution offered, but also because Russia instituted a crack-down on Crimean Tatar dissidents who opposed the annexation and favored a continuing relationship with Ukraine. Leaders of the Crimean Tatar opposition have been subjected to prolonged arbitrary detention, which itself is a recognized violation of customary international law, and the general Crimean Tatar community has been subjected to a continuing reign of terror and Crimes Against Humanity, including arbitrary killings, arbitrary confiscation of property, state-sponsored and widespread theft of personal and real property, extortion and harassment of every possible variety.

It can reasonably be argued, therefore, that the genocide of the Crimean Tatars, which started in 1944, continues up until the present.

The mistreatment and persecution by Russia of the Crimean Tatars meets the generally accepted definition of genocide, since it specifically targeted a particular ethnic group for destruction, and implemented calculated policies to achieve that goal. The Genocide Convention of 1948 specifically recognizes genocide to include: “Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its destruction in whole or in part.” This is precisely the policy that the Soviet Union formulated and carried out in 1944, and continues today.

The Crimean Tatar Genocide is actionable under the Alien Tort Statute (28 U.S.C. § 1350), which states: "The district courts shall have original jurisdiction of any civil action by an alien for a tort only, committed in violation of the law of nations or a treaty of the United States." The courts of the United States, therefore, are available to non-U.S. citizens (i.e. aliens) who have been subjected to violations of international law, such as genocide in this case.

U.S. citizens of Crimean Tatar descent may also, on behalf of themselves or their family members, avail themselves of the U.S. courts for wrongs committed by Russia in violation of international law (i.e. genocide), since federal common law in the U.S. incorporates international law, which recognizes genocide and "ethnic cleansing" as a violation of customary international law. There are Crimean Tatar communities in Brooklyn, New Jersey and other metropolitan areas of the U.S. that have had a longstanding commitment to the search for justice for the Crimean Tatars, who suffered so greatly as a result of the genocidal effort by the Soviet Authorities in 1944, and who continue to be persecuted by Russia in Crimea and elsewhere.