

CRIMEAN TATARS

Lutfiye Zudiyeva

*Father, speak of that day,
This is vital and crucial to me.
Don't spare me, don't have pity on me,
Again go away from your home,
Lose your relatives in the train cars anew,
Again count those who are left alive.
I want to get to know everything
To be able to pass it on to your heirs.*

From a poem by Lilâ Bucurova

Today, I was in Bakhchysarai again. I skimmed through my father's historical books. He used to bring them home and always asked me to look at them closely. I was ten when I first touched them. They lay in the cabinet under the TV set where they periodically caught my eye when I cleaned the house with my mother, and needed to shift them. Then I did not really want to read them as there was too much pain in them. I also saw how my father's eyes sparkled with tears when he opened them.

At the age of fifteen, I read my father's entire library. However, I was able to genuinely comprehend everything written in his books only after 2014, when events from the past began to come to life.

I would very much like my contemporaries not to write such books. However, we live in some kind of terrible historical spiral in which my small Muslim nation has been trapped for centuries.

*

My father always dreamed of living in his parents' house. When in 1988 he returned to Crimea from Uzbekistan, where his mother had been deported in 1944, however, he found that other people were living in the family home in the village of Tav-Badrak. He did not seek their eviction, and would hardly have been able to, but he often brought us to look at the house.

Dad bought a house in another village, where we lived for many years. Later, after my marriage, he moved to Bakhchysarai, the former capital of the Crimean Khanate, and settled in its old town. He bought an old Crimean Tatar house opposite Khan Saray, the former residence of the Crimean Khans. This is the political centre of our people, redolent of four hundred years of history.

Shukri Seytumerov, a historian and a close friend of my father, lives a few blocks from my parents' house. He told me the Khan Saray, 'has been a witness to important events. For two and a half centuries until 1783 the palace served as the centre of the political, religious and cultural life of the Crimean Khanate. The historical as well as political significance of this architectural monument is undoubted. The Khan's Palace remains a significant symbol of the statehood of the Crimean Tatars. Each ruler of the Crimean Khanate lived with his family in the palace only for the period of his reign.'

Unfortunately, a significant part of this heritage has been destroyed. For a start, the original appearance of the Khan Saray has long been lost. First the palace was burned by the troops of Field Marshal Burkhard Christoph von Münnich in 1736, when priceless archives of books and state manuscripts were also destroyed. After that, the palace was rebuilt several times, but after the final conquest of the Crimean Khanate by the Russian Empire in 1783, the palace was turned into a place for the entertainment of the Russian authorities. Russian emperors and members of their families used it as a temporary residence. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was used as a museum of Crimean Tatar history and ethnography. In 1934-1941, it was turned into a centre for ideological Marxist-Leninist propaganda on the supposed achievements of the Soviet state and the Soviet way of life. During this period, the palace suffered the greatest damage of all.

Following the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, the palace was used as a propaganda tool against them. Exhibitions on 'the fight against

Turkish-Tatar aggression' were shown in its halls. 'To give an analysis of the Crimean Khanate as a parasitic state,' 'To wind down the ethnographic department,' and 'To revise the museum exhibitions within the framework of Crimea having been a Russian land for a long time' are just a few reports from a declassified archive of the Communist officials. And today, still under the guise of restoration, the remnants of the Khan Saray's authenticity are being destroyed by the contemporary Russian occupation authorities. Builder-contractors brought from Russia are changing roofs, drawing over Muslim wall paintings, and erasing the last traces of our history. No one can stop it.

Due to this vandalism, the main mosque, which once received hundreds of people for Jummah — Friday — prayer, is closed. For several years now, my father has not been able to pray there but travels to another part of the city instead.

'Khan Saray,' says Shukri Seytumerov with regret, 'has gone through all historical stages — from the once formidable centre of the Crimean Khanate, which covered vast territories at various periods of its existence, from Moldova to the Kuban and the North Caucasus, including the northern Black Sea region, and spreading its influence in Eastern Europe, to an insignificant building in the possession of Russian emperors.'

*

The first documented appearance of Islam on the territory of Crimea came with the Seljuk Turks' defeat of the Kipchaks (or Polovtsians) in 1221. The Seljuks built the first mosque in Crimea at Sudak, on the territory of the modern Genoese fortress. After that, and throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Islam became politically, culturally and socially dominant on the peninsula. Most of our predecessors became Sunnis, followers of the Hanafi school like most of the Turkic peoples from Central Asia to Anatolia.

Later the Crimean Khanate became an outpost of the Ottoman state in Eastern Europe, effectively defending its northern borders and blocking neighbouring states from seizing the Black Sea coast. The Russian Empire, meanwhile, constantly strove to reach the shores of the Black Sea. To this end, Russian diplomats repeatedly attempted to persuade the rulers of the

Crimean Khanate to declare independence from the Ottomans. When, in 1770, Russian Count Pyotr Panin, speaking on his government's behalf, suggested that the Crimean Khan secede, Qaplan Giray Khan replied, 'We are completely satisfied with the Ottoman Porte, and we enjoy prosperity ... In this intention of yours, there is nothing except for idle talk and recklessness.'

But the Ottoman empire was weakening, while Russian power was steadily rising. The Russian-Turkish war of 1768 to 1774 ended in disaster for the Crimean Tatars. In 1772, with Russian troops present in the Crimea, a gathering of *beys*, *murzas* and Nogai *seraskers* in Karasubazar was forced to sign a treatise proclaiming the independence of the Crimean Khanate from the Ottomans and 'alliance, friendship and trust between Crimea and Russia.' In 1774, the Ottoman Porte in turn was coerced into concluding the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, which recognised both the 'independence' of the Crimean Khanate and Russia's right to station troops at Kerch, Yeni-Kale, Kinburn fortress on the mouth of the Dnipro, and Azov on the mouth of the Don.

The pretence of independence was finally abandoned in 1783 when Russian Empress Catherine II signed the 'Manifesto on the accession of the Crimean peninsula, Taman Island and the Kuban region to the Russian Empire.' Russian troops were then stationed throughout Crimea and a new imperial governing system was forcibly established.

Because the Crimean Tatars did not support the new regime, the machinery of Tsarist imperialist repression was launched against them. Protests and any other manifestations of dissent were severely suppressed. Religious figures were persecuted, Qurans were burned, and *haj* and *umra* pilgrimages were banned. After a law of 1836, only religious figures loyal to the Russian regime could be appointed to spiritual positions. Russian police checked all mullahs, imams and muezzins for political reliability. Those who did not obey were subject to removal from office. Any Crimean who had been educated abroad, even in a secular institution, could not become a mullah. And Russian governors would veto the muftis elected by the Crimean Tatar community, while promoting their own candidates, sometimes including criminals.

Soon a campaign was launched to seize the written heritage of the Crimean Tatars, or according to government documents collected in

Arslan Krichinsky's 'Essays on Russian Politics in the Outskirts', 'books and manuscripts that are harmful to them and the general peace of mind ... those that do not conform to the laws and rules of prudence.' These were texts which, in the opinion of the Russian governor of the time, would 'only damage the honour of the Russian Tatars who are loyal subjects of our father, the sovereign.' The Russians confiscated Arabic-language manuscripts from the clergy as well as from family homes. Later they burnt the books, by order of the Minister of the Interior. And so a resource of enormous historical and cultural significance was destroyed.

In the following years, as a result of the colonial presence and various Russification policies, a significant proportion of the Crimean Tatars emigrated to adjacent Muslim lands. In the words of orientalist Mikhail Yakubovich, 'Unlike the case of other Muslim peoples from the imperial hinterland (the banks of the Volga or the north of Kazakhstan), Crimea was located on the border with Turkey and the Balkans, and the Crimean Tatars themselves preferred to leave rather than integrate into the community of prisoners of the 'prison of peoples'.'

The Russian government facilitated the emigration of Crimean Muslims in every possible way. Shukri Seytumerov quotes a document from the government archives (from the Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire, Edition One, Volume 21), which states, 'It is not appropriate to object to the open or secret exodus of the Crimean Tatars. On the contrary, this voluntary emigration should be regarded as a beneficial action, calculated on the liberation of the territory of the peninsula.'

The emigration occurred in three main waves, the peaks of which were in 1874, 1883, and 1901-1902, and led to the formation of Crimean Tatar diasporas in Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania. According to the 1792-1793 census, the Crimean Tatar population decreased from 500,000 to 75,000 in just twenty years of Russian rule. Tens of thousands of Muslims were killed by Russian imperial soldiers, and the remaining hundreds of thousands, not wanting to submit to tyranny, left their lands en masse for Muslim Turkey and the Balkans. Those who remained in Crimea at the end of the eighteenth century sought to survive, to raise children, and to restore their numbers.'

*

The next phase in the oppression of our people followed the Russian Empire's reinvention as the Soviet Union. After cracking down on religious figures, the new dictatorship set to work on the secular intelligentsia. On 17 April 1938, dozens of people were shot dead. The goal of the purge was to eradicate the active, passionate, thinking stratum of the Crimean Tatar people so as to eliminate any potential alternative non-Communist leadership. Scientists, politicians, writers and teachers considered objectionable by the authorities were among the victims.

Muslims were persecuted under the Soviet regime. The Crimean Tatars were forbidden from studying the Arabic alphabet, and thus were prevented from understanding the texts of the Qur'an. At the same time, mosques, mektebs, and madrasahs were closed and destroyed.

During these years, my great-grandfather Ismail Osman was dispossessed and exiled from Crimea to the Urals. He was born in the village of Tav Badraq in the Bakhchysarai region where he raised horses and sheep. According to the 1897 census, there had been 575 people in the village, of which 532 were Crimean Tatars. The vast majority of the inhabitants of the village professed Islam.

In the Urals, he and his wife were forced to cut wood. Their daughter, my grandmother Lilya Osmanova (born in 1930), who at the time of her exile to the Urals was about three years old, fell from the second floor in a special settlement while her parents were doing compulsory logging work. She remained disabled for the rest of her life as a result of medical neglect.

In 1938, the family managed to return home to Crimea and began to restore their household. With the outbreak of war with Nazi Germany in 1941, Ismail Osman used his property to provide for the partisans of the Soviet army, even though he had previously been dispossessed by the regime.

The war catalysed the bloodiest episode in the long history of the persecution of the Crimean Tatars. On 10 May 1944, the Secret Police chief Lavrentiy Beria sent Joseph Stalin a draft decision on the deportation of the entire population of Crimean Tatars. A day later, Stalin signed Decree No. 5859 'On the Crimean Tatars.' The Crimean Tatars were accused of treason and collaboration with the Germans.

According to official data, 183,155 Crimean Tatars were deported from Crimea on 18 May 1944. Most were transported in cattle cars. In the first year and a half after this date, 46% of those deported died. This incomprehensibly high number, and the totality of the crime committed against the whole population, surely justifies the charge of genocide.

My father's grandparents, Osman and Fera, along with their six children, were deported to special settlements in the Tashkent region of Uzbekistan. The family were given only 15 minutes to gather their belongings – just enough time to pack a Quran, a little food and a few clothes for the children. They travelled in a train carriage full of corpses. When they arrived in Uzbekistan, Osman and Feru were very sick and could not work. Lilya, my father's mother, used to tell us how in the early days of their exile they were constantly hungry.

Many other Muslim peoples in the Soviet Union – Karachais, Chechens, Meskhetian Turks, Balkars, Ingushes and others – were forcibly deported. Muslim religious and cultural values interfered with the Soviet regime's demand for faith in the leader and the party rather than in God. Muslims' collective spirit and mutual devotion irritated and frightened the authorities, so Stalin pursued a tough anti-religious policy.

My father remembers the incomprehension felt by the deportees: 'They didn't understand why they were treated like this. They couldn't come to terms with it, and they raised their children with the hope of returning to Crimea. They continued to secretly read prayers and to fast in the month of Ramadan.'

The older children in the family started working early to support their younger siblings. But the young ones still died — two from dysentery and two more for reasons unknown to us. The eldest daughter, Emine, worked sorting apples, and after work hours she went to the railway line and collected grain, beets, and carrots that had fallen from the train carriages. At home, everyone was waiting for her return, because she brought food for the whole family.

A few years later, grandmother Lilya was moved again, this time to a special settlement in which barracks surrounded bast-fibre factories. Here flax was immersed in special containers with water and soaked. It was then beaten, and threads for tarpaulins and ropes were made. It was very hard work in inhuman conditions. The Soviet regime took all the 'undesirables'

to such special settlements. My father's parents were actually born in these settlement colonies. Until 1957, they did not even have passports of citizens of the USSR, but only the status of special settlers.

Other Crimean Tatars were forced to work in mines.

When I interview historian Elvira Kemal, he told me about the cold-blooded and calculated nature of these genocidal crimes. 'If we look at the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, and then the decades of forcible retention of the entire people away from their homeland ... as well as the creation of ideological, legal, administrative, organizational, material, and simply gangster obstacles to their return and restoration to their inalienable natural rights, not as a stand-alone episode but rather in the entire historical context of the centuries-old systematic policy of genocide pursued by different states, regimes, and political forces, then there is no mystery in this. The goal was the total appropriation of Crimea at the cost of destroying its autochthonous population, both physically and morally.'

*

In March 1953, Joseph Stalin died. A year later, Moscow decided to transfer Crimea to Ukraine as a result of – according to the draft decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR – 'the territorial attraction of the Crimean region to the Ukrainian SSR, the common economy and close economic and cultural ties between the Crimean region and the Ukrainian SSR.'

From that moment, the deportees began to return to Crimea, first individually and then collectively. My father joined the struggle for the right to live in his own home, attending mass rallies, organizing pickets, and printing leaflets. My grandmother Lilya was able to return in 1988. Of the family of eight, only she returned. All the others died in exile. Then in the uncertainty following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, entire villages and large families returned to Crimea. The return of the Crimean Tatars has rightly become a central event in our recent history. It became possible thanks to our joint efforts. This rebirth after many years of wandering has resulted in a stormy search for national and religious self-identity.

Crimean Tatars found it difficult to re-establish themselves but they worked hard to restore what had been lost. Schools teaching the Crimean

Tatar language began to appear. New mosques were built where religious literature was freely available. Muslim organizations carried out their activities and were not banned. Young people left to study Islam in Muslim countries. The political consciousness of the people began to develop; various parties and organizations freely operated.

*

In 2014, Russia invaded Crimea once again, and Crimean Tatars protested peacefully against the new occupation. Their opposition to Russian imperialism was heightened by their history and genetic memory. Having twice been pushed to the verge of extinction by Russian regimes – both Tsarist and Soviet – Crimean Tatars suffer from a collective trauma. This means that the majority of Crimean Tatars will not accept, or even enter into dialogue with, the usurping Russian authorities.

The authorities, in turn, have applied mass repression against the Crimean Tatar people. In the Kremlin, despite declarations concerning the rehabilitation of repressed peoples, there is still no admission of the scale of the long-term persecution of Muslim peoples under Russian rule. On the contrary, there is a continuation of the colonial policy of the Tsarist and Soviet eras. Searches of private homes and mosques, intimidation, administrative fines, arrests and physical attacks against Crimean Tatars have become commonplace.

Since 2014, more than 120 Crimean Tatars have been arrested under various articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. The charges have almost always been politically motivated. Islamic literature has been confiscated from mosques, and imams have been removed from their positions. Thousands of people have fled the peninsula to avoid prison. Speaking in court, Emir-Usein Kuku, one of the imprisoned Muslims of Crimea, connected these contemporary horrors to those perpetrated in the eighteenth Century: ‘Apparently, it was necessary to fulfil the goal set by Catherine II — that is, the cleansing of Crimea from the Crimean Tatars and other ‘unreliable’ Muslims, who, under the Ukrainian authorities, had fortified themselves in threatening proximity to Sevastopol, the main base of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. And now if someone

dares to raise their voice in defence of those who are unjustly accused and oppressed, they immediately fall under the gun of the FSB secret police.’

It is difficult not to draw these historical parallels. Practically every family of current political prisoners remembers its relatives deported and repressed by the previous Russian regime. The only difference is that at that time the Crimean Tatars were persecuted by the Soviet NKVD rather than the FSB, and were accused of ‘counter-revolutionary agitation.’

After his arrest, the political prisoner Lenur Khalilov told me in a letter from prison: ‘Now, every Muslim in Crimea faces a choice – either cooperation with the FSB, or his religious choice. If he opts for the second, pressure naturally awaits him. This is not a new practice either. My grandfather graduated from a madrasah and was an imam.’ (Lenur’s grandfather was an imam in Alushta, a small town by the sea.) ‘From the age of 20, he worked in the village of Ai-Serez. Before his expulsion, he taught the basics of religion and the Crimean Tatar language. After the deportation, he ended up in the Urals. On the second day of his exile, the commandants went from house to house making lists of people’s professions. My grandfather’s relatives told him they would give him a tool for sharpening saws and would tell the officers he was a saw sharpener, and not an imam. But when my grandfather was summoned he was unable to lie. He admitted that he was an imam, and after that he never returned. Many years later, we learned that he had been imprisoned for eight years. He ended up in the Yaroslavl region.’

By inventing a non-existent terrorist threat and initiating criminal cases against Crimean Muslims for supposed acts of terrorism, Russia is trying to convince international powers that its presence in Crimea is justified. The myth of Islamic terrorism is once again being manipulated in Russia to divert the public’s attention from the Russian state’s crimes against civilians in Ukraine and elsewhere.

In Bakhchysarai alone, where my father now lives, 60 Crimean Tatar children saw their fathers taken away on trumped-up charges as a result of four waves of mass detention. In Crimea as a whole, there are currently 210 children of political prisoners. Seytumer, the son of my father’s friend Shukri Seytumerov, has also been imprisoned since 2020, along with his brother and uncle. Speaking in court, he addressed the audience with the following words: ‘Because of Russia’s rule over our people, the Crimean

Tatar diaspora in Turkey numbers millions, and only several hundred thousand remain in their homeland in Crimea. However, even this small number of Crimean Tatars in Crimea does not allow any rest to the Russian leadership. Once again, Crimean Tatars, because of their loyalty to their life principles and their unshakable position, are being slandered and intimidated. Therefore, we no longer believe any false promises. We, Crimean Tatars, have our religion — Islam, our traditions and principles of life, according to which we wish to live peacefully and happily in Crimea, on the land that was given to us by Allah. We demand only our right to life, but even this is considered a luxury or a crime in Crimea today.'

Seytumer's great-grandfather, teacher and imam Murtaza Mustafa, was arrested in February 1938, and was sentenced to death by the NKVD troika of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. He was kept in the Ekaterininska prison in Simferopol, until the sentence was carried out on 4 April 1938. As my father unfolds a prayer mat, he laments the fate of this family: 'Their great-grandfather was shot, their grandmother was deported, their parents were not allowed into Crimea for a long time, and now he is under arrest. There are thousands of such stories in our nation. It's an endless spiral of evil.'

Despite all these troubles, my father believes that the Almighty will not abandon us. As we talk, I am brewing his favourite brand of coffee in our kitchen. We both feel very happy because we are in our own home. We might not be safe but we are on our land. And this fills us with strength.