



Sürgün: The Crimean Tatars' deportation and exile

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Monday 16 June 2008

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A. Context

Crimea is a peninsula located on the Black Sea coast in the south of today's Ukraine. Part of the peninsula's population was forced into exile in May 1944. In April 1944, after two and half years of German occupation, the Soviet forces regained control of Crimea. The reconquest was hardly completed when the Crimean Tatars were deported *en masse* on the false accusation of having collectively collaborated with the Nazis. This Muslim Turkic-speaking minority then represented 19.4% of the population of the peninsula, where Russians represented over 50%.

Map of Crimean ASSR
On May 18, 1944, in the early morning, soldiers of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD, the former KGB) entered Tatars' houses by force and announced to their astonished and incredulous occupants their immediate deportation because of acts of massive collaboration. They were given only twenty to thirty minutes to gather some personal belongings. Without further delay, they were then conveyed to several stations, where they were loaded into cattle trains. In the matter of three days, nearly 180,014 Crimean Tatars were deported from the peninsula. At the same moment, most of the Crimean Tatar men who were fighting in the ranks of the Red Army were demobilized and sent into labor camps in Siberia and in the Ural mountain region. The demobilized soldiers were released after Stalin's death in 1953 and allowed to return to their families in their place of exile.

Over 151,000 Crimean Tatar deportees were sent to Uzbekistan; the rest of the population was conveyed to regions of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), mostly in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, the Ural region, the Mari Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, and for some, to the region of Moscow (Brojevan and Tygliânc, 1994: 85). The conditions of the transfer by train were particularly difficult; they were fatal for many of them, especially as the majority of the deportees were women, children and old people. The weakest ones were carried off by malnutrition, thirst, cold, overcrowding and diseases that spread rapidly in packed train carriages.

The conditions in the places of exile proved to be just as tragic. Even if their arrival was planned, the deportees' resettlement had been prepared poorly. Local authorities were informed belatedly, if at all. In a context marked by war and the flood of deported peoples to Central Asia, the local authorities did not have the necessary time and means to absorb physically and psychologically weakened people. The lack of accommodation and food, the failure to adapt to new climatic conditions and the rapid spread of diseases had a heavy demographical impact during the first years of exile.

The Tatar deportees, from now on considered « special settlers », were placed under the special settlement regime. This punitive regime had deprived them, for thirteen years, of their rights, and particularly of their freedom of movement. They could not go as far as five kilometers away from their imposed place of residence, and once or twice a month they had to go to the local *kommandatur* administered by the NKVD and sign an attendance register. Finally, they were forced to work in the collective State farms or factories and received meager wages.

Simultaneous to the deportation and the scattering of the Crimean Tatar people, the central authorities launched a policy of « detatarization » in the Crimean peninsula: the main monuments and places which recalled the Tatar presence were destroyed; books about Crimean Tatars or written by Crimean Tatar authors were removed from the library shelves and some were burnt; place names were russianized. The status of the peninsula was also changed: the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), which was established in 1921 (*in which Crimean Tatars enjoyed a positive discrimination*), became under the law of July 25, 1946 an oblast (an administrative term which means region), forming part of the Russian Soviet

Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). The passing of this law achieved the process of « detatarization », even as the settlement of Russian-speaking or Ukrainian settlers into the houses deserted by the Tatars was carried out. In 1954, the Crimean *oblast* was offered to Ukraine to mark the celebrations of the 300th anniversary of the union between Russia and Ukraine. That internal decision, which did not have an immediate effect, proved to be decisive after the USSR disintegrated.

Stalin's death in 1953 raised hope amongst Crimean Tatar special settlers. However, their hope was quickly dashed. Indeed, they were excluded from the processes of rehabilitation led by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956. Thus, whereas most of the punished people regained their political rights and were authorized to return to their former homelands, Crimean Tatars, as well as Volga Germans and Turk-Meskhetians, were sentenced to a prolonged exile. If from this year on they regained their civic rights as individuals, going back to Crimea remained forbidden. Moreover, this decision meant the negation of the collective existence of Crimean Tatars.

B. Decision-Makers, Organizers and Actors

The decision to deport the Crimean Tatars was taken at the Soviet State highest level. Beria, the NKVD Commissioner, proposed a plan to deport the Crimean Tatars in a telegram addressed to Stalin and dated May 10, 1944 (Bugaj, 2002, doc No. 55: 85). The day after, the State Committee for Defense, directed by Stalin, published a decree that ordered the mass deportation of Crimean Tatars. Not only did the decree go into all the details of the deportation, but it also justified the decision by denouncing the collective collaboration of Crimean Tatars with the Germans (Bugaj, 2002, doc No. 42, May 11, 1944: 70-72).

The NKVD intervened during the different stages of the deportation, from the forced expulsion overseen by Beria and two of his assistants, Kobulov and Serov, to the management of the special camps. Thus thirty-two thousand soldiers were mobilized expressly for the operation of expulsion. The meticulous preparation, which stands out in the written exchanges between the different authorities, shows a certain routinization. Indeed, the deportation of Crimean Tatars took place after those organized in the Caucasus in 1943 and at the beginning of 1944. Moreover, those documents reflect a complete dehumanization of the deportees. Soldiers' brutality during the expulsion and the transfer by train as well as the orders to kill the recalcitrant or those who could not walk because of illness or age, tragically illustrate that dehumanization.

The terrible conditions, which characterized the first years of exile, prove that improvisation prevailed when the deportees arrived at the places of exile. In some camps, the deportees had to build themselves huts in order to shelter from winter harshness. The first year, especially the lack of food and clothes seem to have been deeply felt. The deportees were also deprived of the most basic health care (Brojevan and Tygliânc, 1994: 86). Several official reports acknowledged the situation. In October 1944, Colonel Malkov, the head of the NKVD "special settlers" department, noted that Crimean Tatar deportees' situation was catastrophic in some regions: the building of the huts was not finished; bread rations, of poor quality, were not sufficient (on average 150 grams per person and per day); clothes and shoes were lacking; wages had not been paid since July and several infectious diseases had appeared (Bugaj, 2002, doc. 130, October 10, 1994: 142-143). However no measures were planned to solve this situation, which confirms the little care made of the deported peoples.

The role of the Crimean local authorities in the deportation was also central. The Russian historian, Aleksandr Nekrich, even states that it was fatal (1978: 31). He underscores the responsibility of the local communist rulers and of the leaders of partisan movements. Their reports exaggerated the accusations against the Crimean Tatars for treason with the occupying Nazi army. They put forward allegations based on biased pieces of information and inflated figures. On one hand, they greatly exaggerated the

involvement of the self-defense units created by the Germans and composed in major part of Crimean Tatars. On the other hand, they inflated the figure of Crimean Tatar deserters, giving 20,000 whereas 479 are recognized (Bugaj, 2002, doc No. 12: 54; doc No. 13: 54-55; doc No. 55: 85; doc No.30: 62-63). The reports written before and after the deportation contributed to develop the thesis of massive collaboration. They also fed off the anti-Tatar propaganda that was broadcast in the places of exile before the deportees' arrival.

C. Victims

The number of victims among Crimean Tatars, which is still the subject of heated controversy, is as difficult to verify as in other cases of massive deportation. Official data are numerous but biased and imprecise. In addition to being biased, there are sometimes discrepancies between the documents and they do not concern only the Crimean Tatars. Thus, the documents published by the NKVD often referred to special settlers from Crimea , including in the same category all the peoples who were deported from Crimea: Tatars, but also Greeks, Armenians, Italians and Bulgarians from Crimea. Finally the scattering of the deported peoples caused a fragmentation of information. It is more important for those who were deported to Uzbekistan, the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) where most of the Crimean Tatars were deported.

An official document establishes that 44,887 special settlers from Crimea died in 1944-1945, that is to say 19.6% of the peninsula s population deported in 1944. In the Republic of Uzbekistan alone, 16,052 of them died in 1944 and 13,183 in 1945 (Bugaj, 1995: 156). These figures do not include the people who passed away during the transfer by train. Rywkin thinks there were 7,900 (1994: 67), an estimate that seems to be rather underestimated. It remains however very difficult to be more precise, failing that only a general census of the victims of the forced deportation can be done. A recent study, based on those same documents of the NKVD and on demographic projections, estimates that 18.01% of the deportees perished between 1944 and 1952, and that demographic deficit rose to 44.7% between those two dates (Ediev, 2004). These conclusions have to be considered cautiously again, because of the very nature of the documents consulted and of the uncertainties around them.

The activists of the Crimean Tatar national movement also tried to evaluate the demographic consequences of the deportation. They 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 Crimean Tatars of the 238,500 deportees died between July 1, 1944 and January 1, 1947. Thus 46.2 % of the deported Tatar population would have died during the first eighteen months of forced exile. Beyond the discrepancy between the figure of deportees given by the official data and that proposed by the Crimean Tatars, that high percentage forms part of a strategy of victimization followed by the Crimean Tatar movement. Besides, several studies questioned it. Ann Sheehy and Bogdan Nahylo think indeed that the figure of 30% is more likely (1980: 8). Every scientific evaluation is surely uncertain. That's why there are such great discrepancies between one's calculations and others' evaluations. It is nevertheless a fact that the deportation had a very heavy demographic impact on the Tatar population of Crimea. The official figures, albeit one-sided, cannot deny this.

D. Witnesses

The deportation of the Crimean Tatars took place in the presence of numerous external witnesses. And yet few of them reported what they saw or, for some, what they lived through. Among the available testimonies, there is that of Vesnine, a soldier who participated in the deportation. He gives us details on the progress of the operation. He especially insists on the fact that only the commanders knew what kind of

mission was assigned to the troops. His officer revealed to his men the final target of the operation only once they got into position around the Crimean Tatars' houses. That testimony published in 1989 also shows the very good preparation of the forced expulsion, in a USSR at war and much dependent on the equipment delivered by the Americans. Thus, as Vesnine and also many accounts of deportees report, the vehicles and trucks used for the transportation of the Tatars from the villages to the stations from where they were conveyed to the places of exile were essentially provided by the American Army Studebakers and Fords - (Vesnine quoted by Marie, 1995: 101-102). That detail is very often mentioned and proves both the high degree of preparation of the operations of mass deportation and the involvement at the highest levels of the State in their realization.

The censorship concerning the mass deportations during the Soviet period explains why testimonies are rare and belated relative to the event. On one hand, it was strictly forbidden, even after the destalinization, to refer to it and, even for the punished peoples, to commemorate these events. On the other hand, the propaganda against the Crimean Tatars played an important part in eclipsing the deportations, all the more since the official Soviet account emphasizes their treason, and the barbarity and cruelty they would have shown throughout the past centuries (Nekrich: 167-172). It also insists on the fact that they cannot be considered as a native people of the peninsula, but that they are the descendants of the Turkic-Mongols arrived in the thirteenth century. The deportation to Central Asia is consequently perceived as a return and thus justified. And yet, throughout the 1920s, the Soviet ethnography endeavored to demonstrate the native character of the Crimean Tatars, an argument that is nowadays widely taken up and developed by the Tatar nationalists (for a discussion of the indigenous nature of the Crimean Tatars see William, 2001: 7-38).

The rewriting of history which accompanied the deportation firmly took root in people's minds. The images conveyed by the propaganda and the Soviet account, reinforced by the non-rehabilitation, were not erased from the memories after the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, today they nourish the tensions in the political field and, to a lesser extent, the interethnic tensions, which have accompanied the return of some 260,000 Tatars to Crimea (Campana, 2004).

E. Memories

The term *Sürgün* is used to refer to the deportation. It means expulsion, as well as exile in Turkish. By extension, *Sürgün* refers to violent expulsion and the prolonged exile. It has to be noticed that this term is mainly used by members of the Crimean Tatar Diaspora.

The deportation is the central event in the narratives that constitute individual memories and Crimean Tatars' collective memory. It can be considered as the cement of the Crimean Tatar identity. The concept of chosen trauma (Volkan, 1997: 48) has been widely used in the studies to characterize the importance of this event and the diffusion of the memories still focused on it (Williams, 2001; Uelhing, 2004; Campana, 2003).

The censorship concerning the deportation, as well as the non-rehabilitation, has deeply marked the Crimean Tatars' memories and their externalization. In most cases, the narratives broadcast from the 1960s to the 1980s were included in the appeals and the petitions that representatives of the dissident Crimean Tatar national movement wrote. They served a strategy of victimization and of consciousness-raising.

In general, the main social frameworks of memory are mixed up with the living memories of deportation, which are mainly passed on within the family circle. Memories of deportation thus can be assimilated to transgenerational memories. The survivors' recollections constitute a cultural framework that the second and third generations of Crimean Tatars adopted as their own and took with them to Crimea (Uelhing,

2004: 9). A poem by Lilia Bujurova speaks of the desire of knowledge typical of the generations of Crimean Tatars who did not have a direct experience of the deportation or, because they were too young, have only partial memories. It is about a Crimean Tatar descendant who asks his father to talk about the house where he was born, an allegory used to describe Crimea. In a meaningful excerpt, he asks him:

Tell me once more who survived!
I want to know everything about that,
To be able to tell your grandson "
Your sorrow, that screams in me and in my son
In every living moment!

The recollections are not simply reproduced and passed on, but circulate through families circles. Thus, the style that parents adopted in their accounts is, implicitly or explicitly, rejected by the youngest ones who, as they appropriated their parents recollections, gave them a stronger emotional significance (Uelhing: 17 and 116). This trend can be partly explained by the nationalist contexts in which many Tatars evolved between the 1960s and the 1990s and after the USSR split. The centrality of the Crimean Tatars return and the restoration of their political rights lost in 1944 are constructed as arguments based on a past seen through the nationalist prism.

The political mobilization promoted by the movement activists largely contributed to establish the sharing of traumatic recollections within formalized frameworks, whose diffusion led to a certain homogenization of the speeches and narratives. The historical narrative elaborated by the activists of the movement had a strong impact on memories. Terms as genocide or destruction are found in numerous narratives, which are a singular demonstration of the pain suffered by the group. Indeed, the Tatar historical account considers the deportation as the last stage of a genocide planned since the annexation of Crimea in 1783. The deportation is regarded as a break. The National Mourning Day, May 18, also represents the birth of a new solidarity that appeared in the places of exile and that was duplicated in a context of scattering and negation. The deportation is placed at the center of the timeline produced by the Crimean Tatar historical narrative which includes all the events perceived as tragedies: the annexation of the peninsula by the Tsarist Empire in 1783, the emigration of almost two million Tatars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the actions of expropriation and russianization& Therefore, the historical account is one of the most efficient homogenizing frameworks of the Tatar memories (Campana, 2003).

Beyond the individual traumas exist traumas considered as collective peppered narratives. Many testimonies insist on the behavior presented as a humiliation and attacks against the Tatar identity: the physical and symbolic violence perpetrated against old people and women; the confinement of men and women in the same trucks mixed together; soldiers disrespect for religious symbols; their refusal to bury people who died during the transfer& The narratives also underline the destruction caused by the detatarization of Crimea, although those events, which took place after the forced expulsion, cannot be remembered by the deportees and their descendants. In parallel, they give an idealized view of life in Crimea before the forced displacement. The deportation gave birth to a new sense of identity and to new perceptions, which are the origin of the development of an idealized connection with a territory set up as a Homeland (Campana, 2006).

Crimean Tatars memories are in direct competition not only with the Soviet official narrative, but also with the memories of the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Crimea. Indeed, those inhabitants remember the Crimean Tatars collaboration with the occupying German army (Uelhing, 2004: 49-61). Conversely, the Crimean Tatars recall their active involvement in the ranks of the Red Army and in the Soviet partisan movement (Williams, 2001: 414). The Crimean Tatar soldiers who were decorated during the Second World War or killed in the line of duty are celebrated as personification of Crimean Tatars patriotism. Beyond that subjectivity of the memories, some aspects of Crimean Tatar history are ignored. Thus, the

acts of collaboration of hundreds of Crimean Tatars are avoided, as well as the formation of self-defense units and their role during the German occupation. This period is greatly emotionally invested and gives still rise nowadays to competing interpretations.

F. Interpretations and Qualifications of the Facts

There are two main questions in the studies concerning the Crimean Tatars' deportation: the first is about the motivations that led to the deportation, and, to another extent, to the non-rehabilitation; the second deals with the very qualification of the facts.

Several authors establish a link between the deportation and the Soviet foreign policy. The decision to deport the Crimean Tatars would mainly be a result of the evolution of the relationship between the USSR and Turkey at the beginning of 1944. Indeed, the Crimean Tatar deportation would have followed the statement made by Viatcheslav Mikhaïlovitch Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, by which the Neutrality Treaty signed in 1925 with Turkey was no longer effective (Fisher, 1978: 169). Similarly, Greta Uelhing considers the Soviet national policy pursued against the Crimean Tatars as a derivative of Stalin's State security policy (Uelhing, 2004: 41).

Crimean Tatars' non-rehabilitation can be explained by similar arguments, which underscore the political and geostrategic importance of the peninsula (Fisher: 168-170). However, the actual reasons of that decision are not one-dimensional. Indeed, the non-rehabilitation reflects also a determination to intimidate the other nationalities by using coercion and expresses a "Russian bias against the Crimean Tatar nationality" (Allworth, 1998: 202-203).

In addition to the Soviet authorities' motivations, the studies also dispute the terms that should be used to describe the deportation. Since the beginning of the 1960s, the activists of the Crimean Tatar national movement employ the concept of genocide. It has found some echoes in the scientific community. Edige Kirimal, for instance, a Crimean Tatar historian who lived at that time in Berlin, uses it in an activist publication written in the 1950s (Kirimal, 1958). Others used it too, but being more careful about the terms. Greta Uelhing notes that the deportation and the exile to which the Crimean Tatars were forced under the special settlement regime go into the definition of genocide expressed in the Nuremberg Convention in 1948 (Uelhing, 2004: 91).

The concept of ethnocide is used by several other authors. It describes the fact that, behind the forced displacement, appears a policy of eradication of the Crimean Tatar identity. The authors base their demonstration on the Crimea "detatarization" and the attempts of assimilation of the exiled Crimean Tatar people, mainly through banning the teaching of the Crimean Tatar language and the negation of their cultural specificities. In the same way, Guboglo and Chervonnaia maintain that the forced recruitment of the Tatars in factories located in Central Asia, in the *sovkhoses* and the *kolkhozes* in order to practice an intensive agriculture, as well as limiting the intellectuals to manual tasks, can be assimilated to the destruction of the traditional economic production processes (Guboglo and Chervonnaia, 1992: 76). That ethnocide thesis is also supported by Brian Glyn Williams, Edward Allworth, Svetlana Chervonnaia and Viktor Zemskov among others. By contrast, Grégory Dufaud considers that talking of ethnocide is questionable, but that we cannot contest the fact that, at some points, the decision to deport the Crimean Tatars has been supported by the intention to destruct a particular culture, at least until 1956 (Dufaud, 2007).

The concept of ethnic cleansing operation is often linked to that of ethnocide, if not mixed with it (Williams, 2001: 386; Williams, 2002). Norman Nairmak shows that, if today the abundant documentation

found in the archives of the NKVD largely proved the intended character of the deportations, the real aim that Stalin pursued was not extermination, but assimilation and implementation of a stricter control over the groups scattered over the territory (Nairmak, 2001: 104-107). Pavel Polian also considers the Crimean Tatars' deportation as an operation of ethnic cleansing of the borders. He recalls that the Crimean Tatars were not the only ones in the peninsula to have suffered from such a policy. After the Crimean Tatars, the Crimean Bulgarians, Greeks, Armenians and Italians all endured a similar fate (Polian: 153). However, he thinks that, in general, it is better not to talk of the deportations in terms of ethnic cleansing. Instead, he suggests interpreting them as policies conceived by a repression system characterized by its administrative nature and its collective application (2). Thus, he accurately observes that all the deportations involved a policy decision and were all perceived as punishments (43-44).

G. Conclusion

Since 1944, the deportation is at the center of the Crimean Tatar collective life. With the Crimean Tatars' non-rehabilitation in 1956, a strong feeling of injustice and of incomprehension aroused. This acted as a catalyst for the birth of a nationalist movement. Its main claims were focused on the return to Crimea and the restoration of the Crimean Tatars' political rights (about the history of the movement, Guboglo, Chervonnaia: 1991; 1993). In spite of the repression that its most active members were victims of, and in spite of its divisions, the movement survived throughout the Soviet period. Thereby, it contributed to the diffusion, amongst the scattered Crimean Tatar communities, of a political identity of their own and a strong feeling of belonging based on a community of fate.

From 1988, during the Perestroika, thousands of Crimean Tatars began to return illegally to Crimea, despite the openly declared hostility of the peninsula's local authorities. This movement intensified before and after the USSR split, until it was almost stopped from 1994 on, mainly because of the deterioration of the economic conditions and the lack of economic and social assistance. Thus, 260,000 of them returned to the peninsula in 2002, out of the 500,000 estimated in the ex-USSR territory. Crimean Tatar institutions, an assembly (the *Kurultaj*) and its executive committee (the *Mejlis*), were instituted in 1991. They have not been recognized, neither by the peninsula's authorities, nor by the Ukrainian government. But they progressively imposed themselves as the only negotiating partners of those same authorities and as promoters of the Crimean Tatar identity in Crimea. The eradication of the deportation's consequences and the restoration of the collective rights considered as lost in 1944 remained one of the main concerns of the Crimean Tatar institutions, which acquired over the 1990s a strong political weight in the Crimean peninsula.

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