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Crimean Tatars and Religious Diversity in Crimea

I am writing this article after my trip to Crimea in early October 2016. I travelled there together with my colleague and friend Roman Lunkin, senior research analyst at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences. Our methodology was based on fieldwork in Simferopol, a capital of Crimea. We visited different representatives of Crimean Tatar people including officials in the Crimean government, clerics responsible in their Muslim communities including members of two spiritual administrations of Muslims in Crimea and academic people in the area. We went for a trip to Bakhchisaray, a former capital of Crimean Khanate, where is a strongest concentration of Tatar population in Crimea (23%). We did there interviews with different specialists on Crimean history and ethnography. I also visited and largely talked with Karaites, a small religious and ethnic community, considered as a Judaic sect or a distinct religion of its own; German Lutheran congregation; a Pentecostal community; and a cathedral of Ukrainian Orthodox Patriarchate. After my return to Moscow I had many opportunities to meet again Crimean Tatars and had with them fruitful discussions.

Introduction and historical overview

The Crimean Tatars emerged as a nation in 1449, bringing together a variety of ethnic groups to constitute a single nation. Haci Giray Khan, a direct descendent of Ghengis Khan, established at that time the independent Crimean Khanate. This Turkic-speaking Muslim state was among the strongest powers in Eastern Europe. In 1475 the Ottoman forces, under the command of Gedik Ahmet Pasha, conquered the Greek Principality of Theodoro and the Genoese colonies at Cembalo, Soldaia and Caffa (modern Feodosia). Thenceforth the khanate was a protectorate of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman sultan enjoyed veto power over the selection of new Crimean khans. In 1774, the Khanate was proclaimed independent under the Treaty Küçük Kaynarca and later in 1783 was included into Russia during the time of Catherine the Great.

In October 1921 the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Crimean ASSR) was established as a member of Russian Federation. The years between 1923 and 1927 were remarkable for the vigorous renaissance of culture and education of the Crimean Tatars. However, this sense of nationalism ended when a leader of Crimean Tatar Republic Veli Ibrahim and his colleagues were arrested and executed for being “Bourgeois nationalists”. During the Second World War, following the capture of Sevastopol on 4 July 1942, the Crimea was occupied until German and Romanian forces were expelled in an offensive by Red Army ending in May 1944. In

1944, under the accusations of collective collaboration between the Crimean Tatars and the Nazis during the German and Romanian occupation of the Crimea in 1941–1944, the Soviet government evicted the Crimean Tatar people from Crimea on the orders of Joseph Stalin and Lavrentiy Beria. The State Defence Committee Decree 5859ss, issued on 11 May 1944, claimed that so-called "Tatar national committees" had attempted to infiltrate and sabotage the Red Army and "directed their activity at the persecution and oppression of the non-Tatar population of the Crimea" and ordered the deportation of Crimean Tatar people. The operation was to be completed before 1 June 1944 and all property left behind would be confiscated by state authorities. A total of 238,500 people were deported, compared to a recorded total of 9,225 Crimean Tatars who had served in anti-Soviet Tatar Legions and other German-formed battalions. Most of Crimean Tatars were deported to Uzbekistan, some of them to Urals and Siberia.

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. The deportation was carried out in sealed box cars, and thousands of deportees died because of thirst. Beria related to Stalin that "no excesses were committed" during the deportation.

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" (Fisher, Alan W. *The Crimean Tatars: Studies of Nationalities in the USSR*. Hoover Press. pp. 165–6). According to testimonies, the doors of the cars were only opened upon arrival to the Kazakh steppe and the dead were dumped along the railway track, with the deportees not given the time to bury them.

Men and women were deported together, which constituted a problem due to embarrassment when it came to personal hygiene. According to eyewitness reports, a girl had her intestines explode as she was too shy to defecate in the presence of the men on the train. While some wealthy Crimean Tatars did take gold jewelry, ornaments and coins with them, they often had to trade them for food along the journey.

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 adapt to new climatic conditions and the rapid spread of diseases had a heavy demographic impact during the first years of exile.

In Uzbekistan, Stalin ordered the settlement of Crimean Tatars in *kolkhozes* (collective farms), *sovkhazes* (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. Brian Glyn Williams estimates that the death toll in the first five years is closer to 30% of the deported Crimean Tatar population (Williams, Brian Glyn (2001). *The Crimean Tatars: The Diaspora Experience and the Forging of a Nation*. BRILL. p. 401).

On 28 April 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, but they weren't allowed to return to Crimea. Only in 1988, over Gorbachev time, the ban on return was lifted and a programme of resettlement for the next 20 years was elaborated, but never realized, because in the end of 1991 Soviet Union as a state disappeared.

In fact Crimean Tatars started to return to their homeland mostly during Ukrainian independent time. According to the report “*The Adaptation and Integration of Formerly Deported Crimean Tatars in Ukraine*” of Rustem M. Ablyatfov, the unemployment level among Crimean Tatars was three times higher than the average level in Crimea. In many cases, the Crimean Tatars lived in the slum areas, engineering and social infrastructure was either minimal or didn't exist. For the Crimean Tatars medical services were insufficient both in quantity and quality.

The Crimean Tatars suffered under Ukrainian government from a shortage in the number of schools and a limited access to education. The OSCE pointed out in 2007 that only 3,472 pupils studied 15 schools in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea where the language of instruction was Crimean Tatar. There was a small progress in the last years. 5083 pupils (+188 to 2014 year) study in Crimean Tatar language in 53 schools in 17 districts. There have been opened 37 the 1st grade classes of primary school.

In 1991, the Crimean Tatars founded the Kurultai, or a sort of ethnic Parliament, to act as a representative body for the Crimean Tatars which could address grievances to the Ukrainian central government, the Crimean government, and international bodies. Then Kurultai elected Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People as the executive body of the Kurultai. It is important to notice that during Ukrainian time in Crimea Mejlis was

never legally recognized. It happened in Ukraine only on 20th March 2014, two days after Crimea joined Russia.

Today Republic of Crimea is a part of Russian Federation. All population of Crimea is around 2.5 million, Crimean Tatars are around 300 000 (12% of Crimean population).

Meetings and discussions in Crimea

During our stay in Crimea with my colleague Roman Lunkin we have met different people mostly from different Crimean Tatar and Muslim organizations, but also representatives of some minorities. Our visit was understood by local people as an impartial visit of two staff members of Russian Academy of Sciences

<http://www.qirimbirliqi.ru/news/ran-u-kyrym-birliqi.html>

All Crimean Tatar people we have met are still longing on their status as a title nation which existed before the Second World War when Crimea was an autonomous republic of Russian Federation. This status was lost after the war, the deportation and other dramatic events. It is difficult, almost impossible to return back to this golden time of the first Soviet years. I found that a vice-mufti of Crimean Muslim Administration Aider Ismailov has probably more realistic and pragmatic approach. This a rather young man who is about 40 and who got his PhD in islamic law in Turkey thinks that it is important for Crimean Tatars to have a honorable position in the actual Crimean state. It means that would be reasonable to share power in the Crimean Republic with other significant ethnic communities. Aider-efendi thinks that during last two years there is some progress reached by Muslim and Crimean Tatars. He has met already a few times with President Putin and after many years of interminable discussions with previous Ukrainian authorities it was finally reached an agreement about a place and a start of building a central mosque in Simferopol. Today Crimean Muslim Administration is considered as de-facto the most important organization of Crimean Tatars.

There are a few key positions in the Crimean government controlled today by Crimean Tatar people. First of all I would mention Zaur Smirnov who used to be a first vice-president of Mejlis and is today a minister of nationalities in the Crimean government. He deals with different ethnicities and religions in Crimea and works

very hard in particular for a full rehabilitation of Crimean Tatars. The decree on rehabilitation of Crimean people was signed by President Putin on April, 21, 2014 and it includes not only Crimean Tatars, but also Armenians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Germans and even Italians. There are some bureaucratic problems that still complicate the process of rehabilitation, but at least it started.

I would mention also Ruslan Balbek, a deputy of State Duma of Russian Federation and a vice-president of committee for nationalities there. Ruslan Balbek is a real leader of Crimean Tatar people nowadays.

We have met also with leaders of Tavrida's Muftiat which is more orientated to Sufi values and practices. Sheikh Ruslan Saitvaliev is a spiritual leader (mufti) of Tavrida's Spiritual Administration. Sheikh Ruslan is a disciple of Abdullah al-Harari al-Habashi (1910 – 2008), a known Muslim scholar who in terms of tariqa (sufi brotherhood) was affiliated with Qadiriyya orders in Jerusalem, Damascus and Beirut. Abdullah al-Harari signed the Amman Message, a statement calling for tolerance and unity in the Muslim world that was issued on 9 November 2004 by King Abdullah II of Jordan. According to a report issued by the International Crisis Group, "The sermon stressed the need to re-emphasise Islam's core values of compassion, mutual respect, tolerance, acceptance and freedom of religion" (Jordan's 9/11: Dealing with Jihadi Islamism", Crisis Group Middle East Report N°47, 23 November 2005). Sheikh Ruslan and the second person of Tavrida's Muftiat Enver-efendi Akhtemov invited us to visit a dhikr (remembrance in Arabic) ceremony on the Thursday evening. We saw with Roman that during this ceremony many young people were present. This Muftiat has an active website (see, please, pictures where young Crimean Muslims celebrate an anniversary of prophet Muhammad <http://www.cdumk.ru/novosti/842-molodezhnaya-organizatsiya-altyn-yaryk-provela-maulid-v-glavnoj-mecheti-kryma>

We visited also one important NGO of Crimean Tatars *Qyrym Birligi* (Unity of Crimea) and had an interesting discussion with people working there. A leader of this organization Seitumer Nemitullaev was interested to share his tolerant and peacemaking approach for actual problems of Crimea. Seitumer Nemitullaev has his own business mostly in agriculture in Genichesk district situated on Ukrainian part of border with Crimea. After the peninsula was reintegrated with Russia his business

was taken by radicals from Mejlis and Seitumer himself was obliged to move to Simferopol.

Probably the most brilliant person I have met in Crimea was Fewzi Yakubov, a scholar in engineering, who got his education in Tashkent during deportation period and after his return back to Crimea started Crimean University of Engineering and Pedagogy. There are in this university faculties in engineering and technology, but also in humanities for the study of Crimean Tatar language and culture. Fewzi Yakubov in front of main building of the university build a monument "Revival" consecrated to the deportation of Crimean Tatar people

http://tat.rus4all.ru/city_msk/20150519/725907280.html He tries to establish firm bridge of understanding and friendship between Crimean Tatars and Slavic (Russian and Ukrainian) population of the peninsula. Fewzi is very committed person and he believes in ideas of Ismail Gasprinsky (1851 – 1914), a known reformer of Islam and Muslim education not only in Crimea, but in all Russia.

Although today most of Crimean Tatar population lives in Simferopol or around it, Bakhchisaray is always venerated by them as a historical capital of Crimean Khanate. We visited this historical city and noticed that young Tatar couples prefer to go for weddings to the majestic Mosque of the Khans. We saw the tower of Khan's wives which gave them a splendid overview around. This city gives a real sense how Tatar population is deeply connected with history and nature of Crimea.

In the end of my notes I would like to tell a little about Crimean Karaites. They can be regarded as a small Judaic sect, they believe in Torah, but don't believe in Talmud. There are around 800 Karaites in Crimea. Their original language is of Turkic origin. Some scholars consider them as descendents of Khazar. During German and Rumanian invasion of Crimea (1941 – 1944) Karaites were exempted from the anti-Semitic regulations and weren't persecuted. Leon Kull and Kevin Alan Brook a few years ago led the first scientific study of Crimean Karaites using genetic testing of both Y chromosomal DNA and mitochondrial DNA and the results showed that Crimean Karaites are indeed partially of Middle Eastern origin and related to the descendants of rabbinic Jews (Kevin Alan Brook, Leon Kull, and Adam J. Levin, "The Genetic Signatures of East European Karaites," August 28, 2013). During our stay in Crimea we have met with Anna Polkanova who is a scholar in Karaite anthropology and one of the leaders of Karaite community.

I visited also a cathedral of Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Simferopol where I spoke pleasantly with a priest Ivan Oleshchuk who showed me the church inside with a few altars and beautiful icons. He recognized that there are some legal problems with existing authorities. Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate) started its activity in Crimea in 1992 and realized a significant progress in the last years. There are altogether 5 congregations around Crimea.

After that I visited a Simferopol congregation of German Lutheran Church where I spoke with a warden of it Marina Gusarova-Schmidt. She told me that most of members are of mixed German-Russian origin. There are congregations in Yalta, Feodosia, Sudak, Eupatoria, Kerch, Koktebel. The pastor of Simferopol congregation is Elsa Gerko-Fischer, 80-years old lady.

At the same day I visited one Pentecostal Church in the city and spoke with its pastor Dmitri Gula. He told me that his mother is from Russia (Tula province in Russia), but his father is from Western Ukraine. So he has a sort of divided personality. In the beginning he was for Maidan Revolution in Kiev, but later understood that most of his congregation in Simferopol was for integration process with Russia. At that time Dmitri prayed to the Lord searching the right issue and he felt that can't leave his community. There are many Pentecostal congregations around Crimea. Most of believers are from Slavic (Russian or Ukrainian) background, but there are also Tatar believers and two Tatar pastors. For example services in Belogorsk are held in Crimean Tatar. Dmitri Gula said me: "I am not interested in politics my duty is to help brothers and sisters to hear the Lord".

After my return back from Crimea I feel that my trip was helpful for my own spiritual journey and somehow for people whom I have been met. I found that religious and spiritual life in Crimea is active and flourishing. Only on the ground you can discern between the truth and legends.

Quite recently on 18th April 2017 after I have already finished my text President Putin signed a law about benefits giving opportunities for previously deported people from Crimean Autonomous Soviet Republic in 1944 and their families to return back to their homeland in Crimea. This law in particular concerns

Crimean Tatars living in Uzbekistan, but also Greeks, Germans, Italians, Armenians and Bulgarians.