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TRAUMA: THE DEPORTATIONS OF THE CRIMEAN TATARS IN 1944 IN THE LIGHT OF TESTIMONIES, MEMOIRS, AND DOCUMENTS

| Abstract

Goal – The purpose of this article is to present the traumatic experiences of the Crimean Tatars resulting from the mass deportation of 1944 and the living conditions of this community in exile, primarily in Central Asia. Drawing on eyewitness' accounts, memoirs, and documents, the authors reconstruct not only the course of the deportation itself but also the everyday realities of life in exile, the forms of adaptation to extreme living conditions, and the strategies employed to preserve the national identity. The article seeks to highlight the long-term consequences of the political, social, and cultural repressions suffered by the Crimean Tatars in the 20th century, and to indicate their impact on the contemporary identity processes, collective memory, and inter-ethnic relations within the territory of the former USSR.

Research methodology – The article employs a qualitative research approach aimed at presenting the experiences of the Crimean Tatars deported in 1944 and their lives both in exile and after returning to Crimea. The primary method was the analysis of autobiographical sources – including memoirs and oral and written testimonies – treated as carriers of individual and collective memory. The research also utilised content analysis of historical documents, including NKVD orders, resolutions of Soviet state bodies, and official statistics related to deportations and mortality. Comparing documentary data with memoir materials made it possible to capture the dissonance between the official narrative and individual experiences. Elements of the oral history method were also

applied, enabling an understanding of the emotional dimension of trauma as well as the mechanisms of cultural memory and intergenerational transmission. These methods were complemented by an interdisciplinary perspective, encompassing historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches, which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the deportation experience and life in exile.

Score/results – The analysis of the source material – including eyewitness accounts, memoirs, and historical documents – allows for the formulation of several significant conclusions regarding the consequences of the 1944 deportation of the Crimean Tatars and the conditions of their lives in exile and after repatriation.

Firstly, the deportation constituted a form of systemic state violence aimed at the permanent removal of the Tatars from their ancestral territory and at the severing of their cultural and social ties with Crimea. The repressions carried out against this ethnic group were part of a broader Soviet model of managing “politically uncertain elements” and exemplified an internal colonial policy.

Secondly, the research findings reveal the long-term effects of exclusion and stigmatisation. The deported Tatars were deprived of the fundamental civil rights, branded as a “nation of traitors”, and their children – seen as members of a group tainted by the stigma of betrayal – experienced discrimination in schools and educational institutions. The traumatic experiences of childhood proved particularly enduring, leaving a deep imprint on the identities of the entire generations.

Thirdly, the analysis of personal testimonies showed that, despite extremely harsh living conditions, the Crimean Tatars demonstrated strong survival mechanisms: mutual assistance, cultural resistance, intergenerational transmission, and the preservation of the memory of their homeland. These elements were crucial for maintaining their national identity and for their later efforts to return to Crimea.

Fourthly, the returns after 1989 revealed a new phase of exclusion – this time in their native land. Hostility from the local communities, administrative obstacles, and economic barriers demonstrated that repatriation did not mean the end of trauma but rather transformed it into a new form of marginalisation.

Ultimately, the research results indicate that the experience of the Crimean Tatars’ deportation should be analysed not only as a historical event but as an ongoing process shaping collective memory, social relations, and identity politics. The article confirms that deportation trauma is transgenerational and that the struggle of the Crimean Tatars for recognition and agency continues – both symbolically and practically.

Originality/value – The originality of this study lies in its combination of documentary source analysis with an extensive body of autobiographical and testimonial material, presenting the deportation of the Crimean Tatars from the perspective of witnesses and their descendants. A unique aspect of the research regards the inclusion of the voices of the deported individuals in the context of their lives in exile and during repatriation – taking into account local social relations, discrimination, interethnic conflicts, and efforts to rebuild the community. The study employs the oral history method, which makes it

possible to reveal the personal and emotional dimensions of the forced displacement, often overlooked in the traditional historical approaches.

Another innovative element is the framing of deportation as a colonial process and a tool of spatial and demographic control, rather than merely as an episode of the repressive policies of the USSR. Juxtaposing these themes within the context of research on identity, memory, and long-term ethnic exclusion situates the article within the current interdisciplinary discourse that encompasses history, anthropology, sociology, and trauma studies.

The research also has a practical value: it may be applied in reflections on memory politics, the integration of national minorities, and the analysis of survival mechanisms within marginalised and forcibly displaced communities.

Keywords: Crimean Tatars, national and ethnic minorities, deportations 1944, testimonies, documents

1. The Tatars in Crimea

The Tatars appeared in Crimea as a community as early as the 7th century, but the peninsula became the center of Tatar life within the Kipchak Empire of the Golden Horde, founded by Jochi [Sejdamet, 1930: 20]. Over the centuries, the number of Tatars in Crimea gradually declined, a trend further reinforced by policies implemented by the occupying powers already in the 19th century. The first census of the Russian Empire, conducted in 1897, reported a total population of 546,592 in Crimea, of which Tatars constituted around 35% [Chazbijewicz, 2001: 11]. The displacement of the indigenous Tatar population from their lands was not solely a result of 20th-century forced resettlements [Voytyuk, 2012: 82]. This process had already begun following the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire in the late 18th century. The process was facilitated by land decrees. According to Sejdamet: “For those Tatars who are not of the nobility, the issue of land ownership does not exist” [Sejdamet, 1930: 68]. This was one of the reasons why Tatar lands passed out of their hands, leading to widespread emigration, most frequently to Turkey. In their place, the Tsarist authorities settled Jews, Bulgarians, Greeks, Czechs, and Estonians in Crimea. The 19th century was, on the one hand, a period of significant fragmentation for the Tatar community, but on the other hand, it was also a time of renewed intellectual activity due to the efforts of Gasprinsky. The period following 1917 was one in which the Tatars hoped to regain their independence, aided in no small part by Tatars from the “Western Country” – the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars [Voytyuk, 2018: 133–184].

The Second World War brought the greatest tragedy for the Tatar nation. In 1944, mass deportations of the Crimean Tatars from their homeland were carried out. It is worth noting that, contrary to long-held assumptions, the reason for these deportations was not the community's alleged collaboration with the Nazi Germany. As Chazbijewicz observes in the context of collaboration with Germany: "According to the account of Idris Asanin, these people [who had returned from exile after the dekulakisation campaign – AK], were not convinced of the benefits of the German occupation, but they believed that under relative calm they could begin working on the development of the Tatar intelligentsia. (...) In these schools, the Tatar national spirit was instilled regardless of the period of the German occupation, which was simply regarded as a change after the Soviet occupation" [Chazbijewicz, 2001: 81].

In this article, we do not intend to deliberate on the issue of collaboration or its absence, but rather to outline the context of the 1944 deportations as seen through the testimonies of those who survived them and to examine how these experiences affected their adult lives and the lives of the third generation.

2. The 1944 deportations

The deportation was prepared by the NKVD in secret Order No. 00419/00137, "On the application of measures to cleanse the Crimean ASSR of anti-Soviet elements". The document, delivered by Beria to Stalin and stipulating the removal of the population of Crimea, was justified by, as it stated, "taking into account their treacherous actions against the Soviet people" and signed on May 11, 1944 [Voytyuk 2018: 190].

The tragedy of the Crimean Tatars unfolded between May 18 and 20, 1944, when, under Lavrentiy Beria's orders, the mass deportation of Crimea's population was carried out. The operation primarily affected women, children, and the elderly, as many men were still serving on the front lines. The Crimean Tatar national movement estimates that approximately 140 000 people died as a result of the military operations, ethnic cleansing, and deportations, while 238 500 were deported from Crimea [Chazbijewicz 2001(b): 100]. Other sources indicate that 180 014 people were deported in 67 transport trains, and after the subsequent "cleansing" actions, the total number reached 191 044 Crimean Tatars [Chazbijewicz 2001(a): 83]. The deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944 to remote regions of the Soviet Union (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan)

was carried out under extremely harsh conditions: overcrowded railcars, with no access to food or water. During transport, around 7 890 people died; in Uzbekistan alone, 10 105 people died between May and November 1944 due to harsh living conditions and a malaria epidemic [Voytyuk 2018: 193].

Deportation meant not only the loss of the homeland but also the necessity of adapting to extremely difficult living conditions. For many deportees, exile was synonymous with hunger. According to the State Defense Committee of the USSR Resolution “On the Crimean Tatars” of May 11, 1944 (No. 5859), “special deportees were allowed to take personal belongings, clothing, utensils, and food in an amount not exceeding 500 kg per family” [Voytyuk 2018: 192].

The testimonies of those who survived the exile are a record of their daily struggle for survival.¹ As our interviewees’ recall, the deportation was brutal and devoid of any human solidarity. It also had a lasting impact on the Tatar community. Firstly, it disrupted the cultural and historical continuity of the Tatars, who lost access to their traditions, language, and religion. Secondly, it forced them to live in foreign lands where they lacked full civil rights and where their national identity was systematically suppressed. Yet throughout their years in foreign lands, the longing for their homeland remained: “Grandparents, and later our parents, constantly said that they wanted to live in Crimea. Over time, they only wished to see it one last time before they died and to be buried in Crimea.”² Preserving identity and memory became essential for the survival. Despite the difficult conditions, the Crimean Tatars nurtured the memory of their homeland. Families passed on stories about life in Crimea, and the older generations ensured the preservation of the language and national traditions. This was a way to maintain identity in a foreign environment: “In the evenings, we would sit in a circle, and my grandmother would tell us about Crimea – the mountains, the sea, and our old life. For me, it was like a fairy tale, but she always said that one day we would return there.”³ Despite the harsh living conditions, the deported Tatars sought to support one another. Informal gatherings were organised where people

¹ The source material consists of testimonies of individuals who survived the deportations. The testimonies are held in the authors’ collections. Due to the fact that these individuals currently reside in Poland but intend to return to Crimea, and out of concern for their safety, the authors have decided not to disclose their identities in this text, providing only information about gender and year of birth. All interviews and recollections were collected in Białystok.

² The testimony of a man born in 1979 [W1], in the authors’ collections.

³ The testimony of a woman born in 1956 [W2], in the authors’ collections.

shared food, clothing, and assistance in difficult times. This solidarity was one of the foundations of survival in the exile. “We had nothing, but our neighbor would always share a piece of bread, even if he had little himself. At such moments, you felt that we were one family” – recalls an interview participant.

The living conditions of the Crimean Tatars in exile exemplified the systemic destruction of a nation. Nevertheless, their determination to preserve their national identity and their persistent desire to return to Crimea became the foundation for the later struggle for the rights and for repatriation. The testimonies of those who lived through these events serve as a reminder of the importance of community and memory during the most difficult moments in history.

3. A new reality in a new, foreign land

One of the major problems was how the new settlers – who had arrived not of their own free will – were perceived: “After arriving in Uzbekistan, my mother was unable to feed us and had to place me and my two sisters in an orphanage. We spent four years there. In the orphanage, we were taught about the Great Patriotic War, about how all the nations fought together and how, thanks to that, we now had a happy childhood. I almost believed it. The greatest blow for me was when I was not admitted into the children’s Komsomol organisation (ros. октябрят), which all the children my age were joining at the time. I studied very hard, but later I was also denied entry to the Pioneers. That was when I learned that I was the daughter of traitors to the homeland, and such children were not accepted.”⁴

In exile, the Crimean Tatars were perceived by the local population as “traitors to the homeland”. This stigma was the result of Soviet propaganda, which portrayed them as collaborators with the Nazi Germany. In schools, Tatar children were often mocked and isolated, while adults were barred from applying for positions that required public trust.

It was not until after 1974 that the Tatars began to receive certain privileges in the USSR, such as the possibility of holding managerial positions or obtaining higher education. However, they were still treated as outsiders, and their full reintegration into social life was impossible. Witness testimonies reveal how complex daily life in the exile was for the Tatars. On the one hand, they had to adapt to new political, social, and economic conditions; on the other hand, they

⁴ The testimony of a woman born in 1938 [W3], in the authors’ collections.

continued to be treated with suspicion and, at times, outright hostility by the Soviet authorities and the local communities.

The Tatars lived in various Soviet republics, and their experiences were shaped by regional differences. In Uzbekistan, for instance, the phenomenon of Uzbek nationalism became increasingly visible in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, many Tatars began to experience not only marginalisation within the Soviet society but also growing tensions with other ethnic groups living in the same areas. “Our situation in Uzbekistan in 1989 was changing from day to day. The streets were restless and dangerous. The USSR was weakening before our eyes. Communism was collapsing, and nationalism was taking its place. The Soviet authorities allowed the Crimean Tatars to return to Crimea. Our parents and grandparents decided immediately. All minorities were leaving Uzbekistan. Everyone was afraid of the unpredictable Uzbeks – until then calm and hospitable. My grandfather and grandmother were the happiest to leave. They were happier than they were afraid.”⁵ “Soon after, the Uzbeks began driving everyone out. Firstly, the Meskhetian Turks. They had long been disliked. The Meskhetian Turks were a proud, defiant people, much like the Chechens. There weren’t many of them, but they were giving the Uzbeks a hard time – especially in the bazaars, where they had pushed the Uzbeks to the margins while making good money themselves. The final straw was a rumor about the rape of an Uzbek girl. A wave of bloody pogroms broke out in the Ferghana region. The Turkish women who worked with my mother at the main hospital for the entire Sirdaryo Region would not leave the hospital after work. They slept there in fear of armed Uzbeks. In Gulistan, all the Turks lived in one district – the Sixth Quarter. In a single night, they abandoned everything and left. They fled from the Uzbeks. Suddenly, Uzbekistan became dangerous for everyone”.⁶ Many respondents confirm that life in Uzbekistan became increasingly dangerous, partly because of ordinary neighborhood disputes – often related to trade in the bazaars – and partly because of the growing Uzbek nationalism, which sought national self-determination and was embodied by figures such as Kadyrov [Konopacki, 2024: 85–92]. “Until perestroika, everyone lived in harmony with the Uzbeks. Uzbeks are good people, hospitable. Everything fell apart around 1985. The communist system was visibly weakening, and that was when the Uzbeks wanted to become the masters of

⁵ The testimony of a woman born in 1980 [W4], in the authors’ collections.

⁶ The testimony of a woman born in 1983 [W5], in the authors’ collections.

their republic. Nationalisms awoke.”⁷ And yet another example of testimony and recollections: “From 1987 on, street names in Uzbekistan were being changed. All the Uzbeks were seized by nationalism. They would ask: when will you leave for your own country?”⁸

Such testimonies as those presented here reveal how, as a result of the settlement of the Tatars in Central Asia, various conflicts emerged – both among minority groups themselves and between these minorities and the Uzbek majority – which reached their peak in the 1980s.

Like other nationalities deported to Central Asia, the Tatars were treated as outsiders, even though, over the years, they became an integral part of local communities. Nevertheless, as the witnesses emphasise, life in this region was far from easy: they lacked full civil rights and often faced restrictions on professional opportunities. Testimonies speak of Tatars struggling with overwhelming bureaucracy, xenophobia, and difficulties in accessing education. The yearning for a return to Crimea was deeply felt among the Tatars, not only because of political activists such as Mustafa Dzhemilev, the symbolic figure of the struggle for the Tatars’ return [see: Gołabek, 2017: 335–348]. “I lived with my parents in Samarkand. My grandfather and grandmother were small children when they were deported from Crimea. For as long as I can remember, there were always conversations at home about returning to Crimea. My grandparents always wanted to go back. They managed to visit a sanatorium in the 1970s with a *vzyatka* [bribe, in Russian]. In Crimea my grandfather’s cousin lived. His mother was Ukrainian. Her husband had been deported, and she stayed in Crimea with her young son.”⁹

After 1989, when Mikhail Gorbachev announced the possibility of repatriation for the deported peoples, the Crimean Tatars began to return en masse to Crimea, hoping to rebuild their homeland. It seemed that, after 45 years of exile, it would finally be possible to restore the Tatar national identity and that Crimea would once again become a place where the Tatars could reclaim their rightful place in society. However, these returns came with enormous difficulties, and the returning Tatars became the target of hostility from both local Ukrainians and Russians who had settled in Crimea after the deportation of the Tatars. The return of the Tatars was initially to be controlled by the State Commission on the

⁷ The testimony of a woman born in 1986 [W6], in the authors’ collections.

⁸ The testimony of a man born in 1980 [W7], in the authors’ collections.

⁹ The testimony of a man born in 1984 [W8], in the authors’ collections.

Crimean Tatars, established in 1989. The original plan called for the creation of 80 Tatar settlements, to house the incoming population mainly from Uzbekistan [Voytyuk, 2018: 236]. Efforts were also made to avoid forming large settlements composed solely of Tatars. By decision of the Crimean Regional Council, the Tatar community in any one location could not exceed 23–25% of the total population [Voytyuk, 2018: 240]. These measures were aimed at the further disintegration of the community; in this case, the authorities of newly independent Ukraine feared large and strong concentrations of the Tatar population because, at that time, the young Ukrainian nation was struggling for self-preservation and its own identity, a task made difficult by the demographic predominance of Russians (over 67% of Crimea's population in the 1990s). For the Tatars, concentrated settlement was essential for reviving their language and traditions, including religion. It should be noted that Tatars living together were better and quicker at addressing socio-economic challenges.

Testimonies such as those by [W9] and [W3] illustrate how difficult living conditions were after their return. Many Tatar families did not have enough resources to buy houses in Crimea, and the bureaucratic procedures for legalising residence and obtaining registration were exceedingly complex. “With the money from selling our house in Uchqo’rg’on in Uzbekistan, we barely managed to build a ‘vremyanka’ 5 kilometers from Simferopol. A small house, 5 by 6 meters, as a ‘samozakhvat’. I worked at the bazaar and on construction sites. Later we managed to legalize the ‘samozakhvat’ and built a proper house there. Before 1995, OMON would bulldoze such ‘samozakhvats’. No Tatar was accepted into any state job in Crimea. If someone privately hired a Tatar, they risked trouble from the authorities. We cultivated vegetables and fruit and traded at the bazaar, which practically did not exist in Crimea before the return of the Tatars. Before our return, the Simferopol bazaar was an overgrown, weed-covered square, open one day a week, with stray dogs roaming around. We restored its former life. Without a bazaar, there is no city. Trade drives development and creates wealth.”¹⁰

These memories, contained in personal testimonies, point to the discrimination experienced by returning Tatars, both at the administrative and social levels. “The Tatars in Crimea managed to cope. They were used to not getting state jobs. Now, there was hardly any work for anyone.

¹⁰ The testimony of a man born in 1974 [W9], in the authors’ collections.

My uncle once found several wild grapevines in an orchard abandoned for 45 years. He dug them up, brought them to his newly purchased plot. He pruned and cared for them, and the vines grew so well that each produced several buckets of grapes. A Soviet person cannot do that. A Russian does nothing – just sits, drinks, and wants to rule everything. The old Tatars used to say: don't plant birch trees in your garden, because a Russian will come and claim it's his. The primitive Russian people, after the deportation, didn't even spare our trees. Fools cut down cypresses, peach trees, and vines because they didn't know how to cultivate them. If they grew anything at all, it was only potatoes, sometimes tomatoes and cucumbers.”¹¹

Most Crimean Tatars were forced to work in collective farms (*kolkhozes*) or in building industrial infrastructure. Working conditions were extremely harsh – long hours, low wages, and a lack of adequate tools or support from the authorities. Many deportees recounted that for years they lived in extreme poverty. One testimony described children as young as a few years old working in the cotton fields: “My mother told me that I was so small I couldn't even reach the plants, yet they still made me pick cotton.”

The lack of food often forced families to limit meals, leading to malnutrition. Adults and children alike suffered from illnesses caused by vitamin deficiencies and inadequate diets.

As [W11] recalls: “The Tatars bought houses without any documents, just based on a written note – an agreement with the current occupant scribbled on a piece of paper. There was an unofficial rule: it was forbidden to sell property to Tatars. We lived without registration until 1985, with no right to work, no electricity. We couldn't even use the piece of land by the house. We kept a garden. Late in the spring, a tractor from the collective farm would arrive, smash the fence, drive through the garden, destroying everything like a tank.”¹²

For many, the return to Crimea turned out to be yet another trauma. Although they realised they were returning to a “different” Crimea, the reception from some of the new inhabitants was a painful experience. “The local population was hostile towards us. They treated us nastily and constantly humiliated us. They would ask: why are you coming back? The Tatars would answer: we have returned to our homeland. The locals used vulgar Russian. On the street, we were not allowed to speak Tatar. On the bus, we could only speak Russian because the

¹¹ The testimony of a man born in 1972 [W10], in the authors' collections.

¹² The testimony of a man born in 1971 [W11], in the authors' collections.

Russians had to hear and know what we were saying. Until 1985, there was no legal work. My father gathered wild rose hips, herbs, and nuts from the forest and sold them; in one week, he earned more than a collective farm worker made in a month. At school, I sat alone at a desk until the fourth grade. I was the only Tatar in my class. In the entire school, only a few students were Tatars. On every occasion, other students and teachers would bully us. Nationalist teachers pushed propaganda. They signed us up for the Pioneers when I was in the second grade. They didn't ask anyone; they signed everyone up. I never joined the Komsomol. I wasn't worthy of it. I was the son of a nation of *priedateley*.”¹³

Despite these hardships, the Tatars began to rebuild their presence in Crimea, establishing businesses, organising education for their children, and promoting the Tatar culture and language. These returns, though fraught with political and social obstacles, also marked the beginning of the Tatar community's revival in Crimea, which later formed the foundation for the creation of the Mejlis, a key institution in the fight for the rights of the Crimean Tatars. An important role in these efforts was played by the difficult negotiations with representatives of the Ukrainian state, as the “problem” of the Crimean Tatars remained unresolved. A significant step was the convening of the Kurultai and, on 26–30 June 1991, the establishment of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People [Voytyuk, 2018: 233].

4. Strangers among “their own”

One of the elements that deserves particular attention is the network of neighborly relations, which became a natural part of the social life of the deportees. The attitude of Russians towards the Crimean Tatars over the centuries was marked by hostility, prejudice, and systematic discrimination. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 1783, the Crimean Tatars were subjected to a brutal colonial policy aimed at marginalising and displacing them from the Crimean Peninsula. This attitude was rooted in the perception of the Tatars as “foreign”, both culturally and religiously, a notion that was used to justify actions taken against their community.

In exile, Crimean Tatars often faced hostility from Russians living in the Soviet republics. They were labeled as “traitors” and blamed for alleged collaboration

¹³ The testimony of W11, in the authors' collections.

with the Germans during World War II. Many Russians viewed them as a “wild” and “disloyal” community, which only deepened their social isolation. Many testimonies from the Tatars include examples of hostility from their Russian neighbors. One female respondent recalled: “The Russians always reminded us that we were not from here. Even when we worked hard and lived in extreme poverty, they still called us traitors.”

The Russians’ attitude toward the Crimean Tatars, rooted in prejudice and stereotypes, is a prime example of the colonial and imperialist policies toward indigenous peoples. This hostility, firmly rooted in history, evolved over time, but its essence – marginalisation and discrimination – remains relevant even today. These accounts serve as a warning about the consequences of policies based on exclusion and intolerance towards cultural and religious diversity.

The deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, organised by the Soviet authorities under the pretext of collaboration with the Germans during World War II, left deep scars in the national memory of this ethnic group. The forced resettlement of the Tatars to remote parts of the USSR – such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan – marked the beginning of decades of exile, during which many generations of Tatars lived with a profound sense of alienation and loss of their homeland. Eyewitness accounts, such as those of [W2], contain vivid descriptions of the hardships of daily life in the USSR, where Tatars struggled with the absence of property rights, the inability to engage in independent economic activities, and the systematic suppression of their national identity.

Although Crimean Tatars were initially treated as outsiders by the Soviet authorities, after 1974 they gradually began to gain certain rights, such as the opportunity to take up professional occupations that had previously been closed to them. Nonetheless, life in the exile continued to involve many restrictions, particularly in the face of rising nationalism in the Asian republics of the USSR. Recollections, such as those of [W4] and [W5], highlight the inter-ethnic tensions and growing sense of insecurity that intensified during the final years of the Soviet Union. In this atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, many Tatars decided to return to Crimea, hoping to regain their homeland.

After the collapse of the USSR and the resettlement of Crimean Tatars on the peninsula, their relations with the local population – especially with Russians and Ukrainians – became highly complex. Russians who had remained in Crimea after the Tatars’ deportation felt like the rightful owners of the land and perceived the Tatars’ return as a threat to their dominant position. As many witnesses, including [W4] and [W9] recounted, Tatars in Crimea encountered

prejudice manifested through difficulties in finding work, the inability to purchase property, and strained interpersonal relations, especially in schools, where Tatar children were often isolated and bullied. Ukrainians, initially neutral, gradually moved closer to the Tatars, as [W8] noted, due to the challenging political situation and a growing awareness of their shared struggle for the rights of national minorities.

Relations with the local population became particularly tense in the face of political changes and the new reality after 1991. Testimonies show that Tatars lacked full civil rights, and their integration into local communities was hindered by local authorities who implemented various forms of discrimination, such as refusing to recognise their educational qualifications or denying them employment. Nevertheless, as [W9] observed, the Tatars – accustomed to the realities of the Soviet system – learned how to survive, supporting themselves through small-scale trade at bazaars, which, in the later period after 1993, allowed them to regain some of their lost economic independence.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of eyewitness testimonies and documents concerning the 1944 deportation of the Crimean Tatars reveals the multilayered nature of this community's traumatic experiences.

Firstly, the deportation was not merely the physical displacement of a population but an act of systemic, colonial violence intended to sever the Crimean Tatars' ties with their historical homeland – Crimea. Soviet policy towards the Tatars fits into a broader context of repression aimed at peoples deemed “disloyal” to the central authorities. In the case of the Crimean Tatars, these repressions were exceptionally brutal and long-lasting, resulting in social exclusion, economic marginalization, and intergenerational trauma.

Secondly, the living conditions in exile can be understood as part of a strategy of gradual destruction of this community. The lack of access to basic means of subsistence, restrictions on employment, education, and healthcare, as well as ethnic tensions in the Central Asian republics, led to a lasting sense of alienation. The testimonies of children, who experienced discrimination from an early age – in orphanages, schools, and youth organisations are particularly significant here. The stigma of a “nation of traitors” accompanied the Tatars for decades and became an element of their collective memory and identity.

Thirdly, despite systemic repression, the Crimean Tatars demonstrated an extraordinary ability to survive and preserve their national identity. Everyday practices of resistance – such as passing down memories of Crimea, cultivating language and culture, mutual aid under harsh conditions – allowed the community to maintain cohesion in exile. A particularly important element was the strong intergenerational bond and the cultivation of cultural and emotional memory of their homeland.

Fourthly, the returns to Crimea after 1989, although long awaited and highly symbolic, represented for many Tatars yet another act of humiliation and exclusion. The confrontation with administrative barriers, hostility from local populations, and limited access to the labor market revealed that repatriation was a dramatically complex process, often devoid of real state support. The trauma of exile was often replaced by a new trauma – marginalisation in their own homeland.

Finally, the testimonies discussed here show that the experience of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars did not end with their physical return to their homeland. On the contrary – it endures in collective memory, and its consequences continue to manifest as social, psychological, and cultural difficulties even in the 21st century. This article makes it clear that the fate of the Crimean Tatars should be analysed not only in the context of historical events but also in relation to contemporary forms of exclusion and identity politics. It documents a process of long-term, systemic human rights violations against an entire nation and highlights the strength of community as a key factor of survival.

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