

What is behind the imperialist campaign over the Crimean Tatars?

Part 1: The Russian Revolution and the fate of the Crimean Tatars

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Since the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine, leading media outlets of the imperialist powers, in particular the *New York Times*, have been waging a campaign ostensibly directed at defending the Crimean Tatars from oppression by Russia.

The campaign reached a new high point with the victory of the Ukrainian candidate, Jamala, at this year's Eurovision Song Contest. Jamala, who herself is of Crimean Tatar origin, won the contest with a song entitled "1944" that treats the deportation of the Crimean Tatars by the Stalinist regime in that year. That the jury awarded her the first prize was a transparent political maneuver, aimed at propping up the imperialist campaign against Russia.

Shortly after the Eurovision Song Contest, on May 19, the *New York Times* published an editorial, celebrating Jamala's victory and seizing upon it as a welcome opportunity to intensify the imperialist campaign over the Crimean Tatars. The author, Christina Paschyn, is an assistant professor of journalism at Northwestern University in Qatar. Her recent documentary, "A Struggle for Home: The Crimean Tatars," won several awards.

In her piece for the *New York Times*, under the title "Russia Is Trying to Wipe Out Crimea's Tatars," Paschyn warns, "If the Crimean Tatars are to survive, Western governments must do more to help." This "help," she explains, would include the following measures: recognize the deportation of the Crimean Tatars at the hand of the Stalinist regime in 1944 as a "genocide," and step up sanctions against Russia.

Her case for harsher sanctions against Russia and stronger support for the Crimean Tatars rests on a mixture of historical distortions and omissions that deserve closer analysis.

The Crimean Tatars are a small, Turkic people that have lived on the Crimea for several centuries. As of today, the 250,000 Tatars living on the Crimea constitute around 12 percent of the peninsula's population. Far more Crimean Tatars live in the diaspora. According to official estimates, 150,000 Crimean Tatars are in Turkey and another 150,000 in Uzbekistan. About 50,000 Crimean Tatars also live in Romania and Bulgaria. Religious Crimean Tatars are for the most part adherents of the Sunni current in Islam.

In a manner and narrative typical of Crimean Tatar nationalists, Paschyn suggests some kind of never-ending historical conflict between "Russia" and the "Crimean Tatars," dating back to 1783, when the Tsarist Empire annexed Crimea as part of its conquest of territories in the Caucasus and Central Asia. She writes, "The Crimean Tatars have always been easy scapegoats for Russia."

Her essentially ethnic interpretation of the Crimean Tatars' history requires her to blur the distinction between Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation, which emerged out of the Stalinist bureaucracy's destruction of the USSR, referring exclusively to "Russia."

Contrary to what Paschyn suggests, the history of the Crimean Tatars is not one of permanent suffering under "Russian" rule. The October Revolution of 1917 granted the Crimean Tatars, along with all other oppressed nationalities, full citizen rights and the broadest national and cultural freedoms. In a crucial decree from December 11, 1917, the Bolshevik government declared:

"Muslims of Russia, Tatars of the Volga and the Crimea, Kirgiz and Sarts of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tatars of Transcaucasia, Chechens and mountaineers of the Caucasus, and all you whose mosques have been destroyed, whose beliefs and customs have been trampled underfoot by the tsars and the oppressors of Russia. Your beliefs and usage, your national and cultural institutions are henceforth free and inviolable. Organize your national life in complete freedom. You have the right. Know that your rights, like those of all the peoples of Russia are under the powerful safeguard of the revolution and its organs, the soviets of workers, soldiers, and peasants. Lend your support to this revolution and its government." [1]

In the following years, as part of the so called *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) policy that was initiated by Lenin, the Crimean Tatars and the hundreds of other national minorities in the USSR were granted far-reaching national freedoms with state programs fostering the development of their long-oppressed cultures and languages. In the Crimea, a substantial number of Tatar-run schools, scientific institutions, museums, libraries and theaters, and a university in Sevastopol were opened. The Crimean Tatar language was recognized, for the first time in centuries, as one of the official state languages of the Crimea. [2]

To the extent that this does not fit into her narrative of a permanent conflict between "Russia" and the "Crimean Tatars," Paschyn conveniently leaves this chapter of history out altogether. Instead, she exclusively refers to the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which arose under conditions of the international isolation of the October Revolution. Ignoring all historical context, Paschyn refers to the crimes of Stalinism, presenting them as yet another manifestation of Russian oppression against the Tatars, in order to create the false image of a historically permanent Russian evil.

The deportation of the Crimean Tatars, to which Paschyn falsely refers as "genocide," took place in spring 1944. It is now estimated that 240,000 Crimean Tatars, including the elderly and children, were deported. Between 25 and 44 percent died either in the trains to Central Asia or from hunger and forced labor in exile. They were branded "enemies of the people" and not allowed to return to Crimea or even leave the place of their forced exile until the late 1980s. On the Crimea, many religious monuments and libraries of the Tatars were destroyed and their houses and villages were settled by Ukrainians and Russians.

The two bureaucrats responsible for these deportations were Lavrentiy

Beryia, former head of the secret service NKVD and one of the bloodiest figures of the purges of the 1930s, and Ivan Serov, then first deputy people's commissar for internal affairs in the USSR. Serov had already organized the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians in 1939-1940. Later, he was to become head of the NKVD and led its bloody crackdown of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956.

The official justification provided by the Stalinist bureaucracy was that the Crimean Tatar people as a whole had collaborated with the Nazis, and they were declared a people hostile to the USSR. This was a lie. While there was collaboration among the Crimean Tatars—as it occurred in sections of all other peoples of the USSR—tens of thousands fought for the Red Army and with the partisans. They too were deported in 1944.

Rather, it is likely that Stalin feared pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic sentiments in the southern Soviet Union under conditions of heightening social tensions within the USSR itself, and increasing tensions with the United States. Turkey, soon to become a key NATO ally in the region, was feared to be able to appeal to pan-Turkic sentiments among these peoples. Moreover, Stalin laid claim to the eastern Turkish provinces bordering the Black Sea, and it is possible that the deportations formed part of preparations for war with Turkey.

There is no question that the deportation of the Crimean Tatars and the many other national minorities—the Chechens, Dagestanis, many of the Baltic peoples, and also hundreds of thousands of Poles—was criminal. It was criminal not only because of the immediate damage done to these people, but above all from a political standpoint. Fundamentally, the deportations under Stalin were an outcome of the nationalist reaction against the October Revolution and the rise of a privileged bureaucracy, whose greatest fear was a mobilization of the working class on an internationalist and socialist program.

If the Russian Revolution attracted and exerted tremendous influence on the oppressed peoples of the Arab World, Africa and Latin America, precisely because of the extraordinary attention Lenin and the Bolsheviks paid to their problems, the national oppression, the purges and the deportation of entire peoples under Stalinism dealt a devastating blow to the cause of socialism.

They discredited the Soviet Union and the October Revolution in the eyes of hundreds of millions of oppressed workers and peasants. At least as damaging was the conception of the collective guilt of entire peoples, which the Stalinist regime propagated not only with regard to the Crimean Tatars, but also in relation to several Caucasian and the Baltic peoples, and above all the German working class. This myth served not only to divert from the crimes of Stalinism that had helped Hitler come to power and invade the Soviet Union, it also helped divide the Soviet and international working class, obscuring the class issues involved in the struggle against fascism.

The resulting confusion and frustration have been systematically exploited by nationalist forces in and outside the Soviet Union ever since and have served as grist for the mills of imperialist propagandists—as is demonstrated by Paschyn's piece itself.

Paschyn tears the deportation out of its historical context and speaks of "genocide," implicitly trying to equate the crimes of Stalin with those of Hitler, specifically the Holocaust in which the Nazis murdered 6 million European Jews. First, it must be noted that this implicit equation is false. All recognized legal definitions of the term "genocide" include two conditions for its application, namely: (1) the murder of an entire people; (2) that it be systematically planned and enacted. Not the slightest evidence to prove either point has ever been put forward by Paschyn or anyone else.

Second, Paschyn, like all imperialist propagandists, uses the crimes of Stalinism not in the interests of the Crimean Tatars or any other people, but in order to cover up the crimes of imperialism, both in history and

today. While she clamors about "genocide" under Stalin, she devotes no syllable to the crimes committed by the Nazis on Crimea, which included the actual physical elimination of virtually the entire island's Jewish population and two thirds of its Sinti and Roma.

German imperialism occupied the Crimea in both world wars and considered the peninsula of strategic importance for its broader plans to bring under its control what was then the Soviet Union as well as the Middle East. It was seen as a guarantee for control of the Ukraine and as a bridge providing access to the Black Sea and thus the energy-rich Caucasus and the Middle East.

At a conference on July 16, 1941, Hitler declared that the Crimea "was to become a purely German colony, from which all foreigners were to be deported or evacuated." [3] The Nazis invaded the Crimea in the fall of 1941. For more than half a year, from November 1941 through July 1942, battles raged between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army over the port city of Sevastopol. The Battle of Sevastopol was one of the strategically most important battles of 1941-1942. Once the city was taken after a 250-day siege, the Nazis could proceed with their planned invasion of the Caucasus, whose main goal was the seizure of the oil fields of Azerbaijan.

The plans for an ethnic cleansing of the peninsula were swiftly enacted. Einsatzgruppen, special paramilitary units under the control of the SS, raided the Crimea and murdered most of its Jewish and Gypsy population within just a few months. The Nazis killed about 80 percent of the Jews and the so-called Krimchaks, a specific Jewish group that had been living on the Crimea since antiquity. An "Ereignismeldung" (Incident Report) from April 8, 1942, proudly noted that, with a few exceptions in the north, "Jews, Krimchaks, and the Gypsies no longer exist." [4] The fact that around 30 percent of the Roma population survived is largely due to the solidarity of the Tatar population, which hid many of them and presented persecuted Roma before the Nazis as Tatars. [5]

In total, an estimated 27 million citizens of the USSR fell victim to the Nazi aggression against the Soviet Union, including about 1.5 million Soviet Jews and more than 100,000 Sinti and Roma.

Notes

[1] Quoted in: Alan Fisher: *The Crimean Tatars*. Hoover Institution Press 1972, p. 117.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

[3] Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 152.

[4] Martin Holler: "Extending the Genocidal Programme. Did Otto Ohlendorf Initiate the Systematic Extermination of Soviet 'Gypsies'?", in: Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, David Stahel (eds.): *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*. University of Rochester Press 2012, p. 271.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 272-73.



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