

What is behind the imperialist campaign over the Crimean Tatars?

Part 2: The imperialist exploitation of ethnic tensions on the Crimea—then and now

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This is the concluding part of a two part article on the imperialist campaign which ostensibly defends Crimean Tatars from Russian oppression. Part 1 was published on July 16.

Paschyn's unwillingness to raise the crimes and interests of German imperialism on the Crimea and the former Soviet Union more generally has much to do with another aspect of the Nazi policy which she seeks to cover up: their systematic collaboration with the nationalist elites of many peoples of the USSR, including the Crimean Tatars.

In an evident attempt to downplay the political significance of the collaboration of Crimean Tatar nationalists in the Nazi war against the USSR, she writes, it is "true that some did [collaborate with Nazi Germany] ...either because they were forced to by the invading army or because they believed the Germans would liberate them from the Soviet Union."

Paschyn's excuse of the nationalists' collaboration with the fascists by pointing out that they "believed the German would liberate from the Soviet Union" is in line with the excuses offered by those very nationalists themselves. The current operations of US and German imperialism in Ukraine and the peninsula on the Black Sea make it worth taking a closer look at this question.

In fact, it was not only during World War II that the Crimean Tatar nationalists put their bets on an alliance with German imperialism. They had done so already during World War I and in their struggle against Soviet Russia in the ensuing Civil War of 1917-21. Indeed, the history of the Crimean Tatar national elites provides ample proof for Leon Trotsky's assessment, elaborated in the theory of permanent revolution, that the national bourgeoisies of backward countries, including the many different national elites of the peoples of Tsarist Russia, were incapable of playing a historically progressive role. Their efforts to carve out an ethnic Crimean Tatar mini-state on the peninsula always relied first, on the support of the imperialist powers and, second, the promotion of extreme nationalism and religious obscurantism.

The presentation of these reactionary forces as fighters for "national liberation" goes back to the policies of German imperialism in World War I. Germany, as the "late comer" among the imperialist countries, had to wrest the economically and strategically most important colonies from the control of its rivals. Under these conditions, Berlin championed the policy of supporting "national liberation" movements in the colonial empires of Great Britain as well as within the Russian Empire.

A key component of this strategy was the fostering of Islamist tendencies and Muslim nationalist elites. For this goal, the German foreign ministry (Auswärtiges Amt) and the General Staff built up the so called Intelligence Bureau for the East (Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient).

Distributing pro-German, Islamist propaganda, the Bureau tried to recruit Muslim prisoners of war captured by the Entente powers—France, Great Britain and Russia—for Germany's war effort. The influential German diplomat Max von Oppenheim, who was to head the Bureau, outlined this strategy in his "Memorandum regarding the Revolutionization of the Islamic territories of our Enemies". He wrote in November 1914:

"In the first place, we now have to think about our self-defense, use Islam for our purpose and strengthen it as much as we can" [6].

The Intelligence Bureau's publications called for a "holy war" (jihad) against the Entente powers. They were published in Turko-Tatar, Georgian, Indian, Hindi, and Urdu, appealing to the nationalist elites of the Caucasus and the Indian subcontinent in particular.

Following the October Revolution in Russia and the Peace of Brest-Litovsk, that the Bolshevik government was forced to sign on March 3, 1918, the German government continued this strategy in Ukraine and the Crimea. While placing the Ukraine and the peninsula under German occupation, Berlin supported puppet nationalist governments. In Ukraine, the German occupation regime was propped up by the Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky. (See also: "Anti-Semitism and the Russian Revolution: Part two")

In Crimea, the German military could count on the support of the Crimean Tatar nationalists. Thus, Cafer Seidahmet played an important role in forming the so called "Muslim Corps" which served as an advance troop for the German army. The German military command considered his nationalist demands ("Crimea for the Crimeans") too radical and refused to recognize him as prime minister. Nevertheless, the German military allowed him to play a role in the Kurultay, a national assembly of the Tatars [7]. An appeal by the Tatar nationalists to the German High Command for "repatriating" the hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars living in the Balkans, Turkey and Central Asia was also granted by the German military [8].

The leading Nazi ideologist and strategist Alfred Rosenberg placed himself in this tradition when writing his pamphlet "The Future Path of a German Foreign Policy" in 1927. In this pamphlet, Rosenberg insisted that Germany had to hasten the break-up of the Soviet Union by taking "into account the strong separatist movement in the Ukraine and the Caucasus" [9].

In what now reads as a blue print for the Nazi war strategy in Eastern Europe in World War II, Rosenberg urged that it was necessary for German interests to destroy the Polish state, enter an alliance with an "independent" Ukraine, and then break off the Caucasus from the Soviet Union. This strategy was to underlie not only the alliance of Nazi Germany with the Ukrainian far-right in the Organization of Ukrainian

Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), but also with nationalist elements from the Muslim peoples of the Caucasus and the Crimean Tatars. (See also: “Nationalism and fascism in Ukraine: A historical overview”)

Much like the imperialist propagandists of today, Rosenberg propped up his advertisement of an alliance with the Ukrainian nationalists with flowery and false historical excursions about the desperate struggle of the heroic—and racially superior—Ukrainians against the yoke of Moscow.

Rosenberg’s main expert for the Turkic peoples was the academic Gerhard von Mende. Like Rosenberg, he was a former member of the Baltic German elite that had been disowned and forced into exile by the October Revolution. This background not only helped foster his fanatical anti-communism and anti-Semitism but also contributed to his awareness of the ethnic tensions within the Soviet Union which had been exacerbated by the Stalinist policies of the 1930s.

During the 1930s, von Mende worked at the Berlin University, the predecessor of today’s Humboldt University, and published extensively on the Turkic peoples in the USSR. One of the main slogans he advanced in his book “The Peoples of the USSR”, which appeared in a second edition in 1939, was: “The Great Non-Russian Peoples of the USSR Seek Their Own Statehood!”. On June 22, 1941, the day of the Nazi invasion of the USSR, Rosenberg employed him for his Ostministerium (Eastern Ministry). Soon thereafter he was put in charge of the Caucasus.

Many of the people von Mende recruited for his division had been members of the Promethean League, an anti-communist alliance of nationalists throughout Eastern Europe that was financed largely by the dictatorship of the Polish General Józef Piłsudski. (See also: “The Strategy of the Intermarium”) [10]. Crimean Tatar nationalist leaders such as Cafer Seidahmet had helped build the League. He edited one of its main publications in the Crimean Tatar language, *Emel* [11].

In 1941, he met with Nazi Germany’s ambassador in Istanbul, Franz von Papen. Following this meeting the Crimean Tatar nationalist leaders Mustecip Ülküsal and Edige Kirimal were invited to Germany to help formulate Nazi policy in the Ukraine and Crimea in 1941, even though apparently without much success [12]. Ülküsal was yet another member of the Promethean League and one of the main contributors to *Emel* [13].

In early 1942, the Wehrmacht launched a campaign for volunteers among the Crimean Tatars. It is now generally estimated that about 20,000 men could be recruited. They were promised an independent Crimean republic in case of a Nazi victory against the Soviet Union. Both the Wehrmacht and the SS integrated Turkish units which included Crimean Tatars and members of other Turkic peoples in the USSR [14]. In light of the planned advance to the Muslim-dominated Caucasus, the Nazis considered them of key importance for winning over the population in this region.

Although this strategy eventually failed due to the heroic struggle of the Red Army and growing working class opposition to Nazi rule throughout occupied Europe, it was in fact never entirely abandoned.

Gerhard von Mende was one of the many Nazi war criminals who was never put on trial in post-war Germany. He continued his career in West Germany’s new intelligence apparatus, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), relying to a significant extent on his old contacts and co-workers from the Ostministerium. Moreover, US imperialism adopted strong elements of this strategy in the secret warfare during the “Cold War” against the Soviet Union. The CIA not only helped many of the Promethean League and Ostministerium members to escape to the West, but also hired them for operations such as “Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty” or the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of the USSR. (See also: “The Intermarium from 1921 to 1989”)

Early on in the Cold War, the US started to utilize right-wing Islamist forces against both the threat of the labor movement in the Middle East and North Africa and the USSR. Under the presidency of Dwight

Eisenhower in 1953-61, this policy was advanced as a central component of the covert warfare against the Soviet Union. A meeting by Eisenhower with US Secretary of State John F. Dulles and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1957, was described in an internal memo as follows:

“The President said he thought we should do everything possible to stress the ‘holy war’ aspect. Mr. Dulles commented that if the Arabs have a ‘holy war’ they would want it to be against Israel. The President recalled, however, that [King Ibn] Saud [of Saudi Arabia], after his visit here, had called on all Arabs to oppose Communism” [15].

The Crimean Tatar nationalists in Turkey for their part relaunched the Promethean journal *Emel* in 1960. It now enjoyed the support of sections of the Turkish state which had lined up behind Western imperialism against the Soviet Union. A report for the U.S. State Department from 1992 described the journal’s content as “proudly nationalistic and staunchly anti-communist”. Its essays “lambasted the Soviets in no uncertain terms, proclaiming the need for democracy and human rights in the USSR, freedom of conscience etc.” [16].

The same report also noted that this journal, and the politically active émigré community—which constituted only a tiny fraction of the Crimean Tatars living in Turkey—were close to nationalist and far-right Turkish parties such as the National Action Party (NAP). More so than other émigré communities, the Crimean Tatar nationalists in Turkey managed to maintain relatively close ties to the nationalists within the Soviet Union where several Crimean Tatar leaders came to play an important role in the emerging dissident movement [17].

Appealing to the imperialist governments in the West and the Stalinist bureaucracy at the same time, figures such as Mustafa Dzhemilev tried to pressure the Kremlin to grant the Crimean Tatars the right to return to the peninsula in the Black Sea by making use of US-controlled propaganda channels. Essentially, they placed themselves in the political tradition of those Crimean Tatar bourgeois nationalists who had time and again crawled before what they considered the most powerful imperialist ally in their struggle to carve out an ethnic Crimean Tatar mini-state.

Dzhemilev’s subsequent evolution is symptomatic of that of a tiny layer of Crimean Tatar nationalists who, in stark contrast to the overwhelming majority of the Crimean Tatars, benefited from the restoration of capitalism. Ever since 1991, they have been oriented consistently toward US imperialism and an alliance with the pro-Western section of the Ukrainian oligarchy. In 2004, the Crimean Tatar religious leadership backed the Orange Revolution, which was aimed at tightening the ring of encirclement of Russia. When a US-backed, fascistic mob took control of the government district in Kiev, they endorsed the coup d’état as a “revolution”.

Today, Dzhemilev, a member of the Ukrainian parliament since 1998, is a leading representative of the ruling Petro Poroshenko Bloc in Kiev. Before that, Dzhemilev had been a member of parliament for Yulia Tymoshenko’s nationalist “Fatherland” bloc. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, Dzhemilev was one of the most aggressive voices in the right-wing Ukrainian parliament. After the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014, he travelled to the NATO headquarters in Brussels, agitating for an armed intervention of the UN to bring back Crimea under Ukrainian control. Dzhemilev has been also one of the most militant proponents of sanctions against Russia, lobbying, in particular, in the Turkish government for a more aggressive stance vis-à-vis Russia.

It is for these reactionary elements, not the Crimean Tatar people as whole, that Paschyn speaks. For the overwhelming majority of the 250,000 Crimean Tatars who returned to the peninsula in 1989-1994, capitalist restoration resulted in an unmitigated social disaster. Most of the Crimean Tatar population has been living in poverty ever since with substantial portions of the population still lacking access to electricity and even hot water. Many had to build new houses from scratch with little to no support by the state. During the 1990s, the rate of unemployment was

at times double that among the Ukrainian and Russian population, reaching up to 45 percent.

In an interview with VICE news in April 2014, one young Crimean Tatar pointedly responded to the question whether he would trust the promises of the Russian government:

“We have been living here for 20 years and no one has done any good to us, and now, all of a sudden, everyone started to care about us. That’s why we can’t trust anyone at this point, neither the one nor the other side [meaning neither the Russian nor the Ukrainian governments, CW].”

A study by the World Bank from 2003 noted that the Crimean Tatars suffered from social and political exclusion, often resulting in ghettoization. It concluded that “the seeds of ethnic and civil conflicts remain in Crimea” [18].

The imperialist powers are deliberately trying to whip up these tensions so as to destabilize Russia, while at the same time dividing the working class. The campaign of the Crimean Tatars, in particular, is aimed at mobilizing the Muslim population of Russia. How else can Paschyn’s demand be interpreted that the US “formally recognize the Crimean Tatars as *the* indigenous people of Crimea” (emphasis added). What about the over 85 percent of the population who are not Tatar and not Muslim? The percentage of the Crimean Tatars on the Crimea has not exceeded 25 percent for well over a century.

The claim made in the article’s title—“Russia Is Trying to Wipe Out Crimea’s Tatars”—is not proven at any point. Paschyn only notes that the Kremlin has intensified its crackdown on Crimean Tatar institutions, banning the Mejlis, a special legislation of the Crimean Tatars, and arresting several Tatar “activists”. Paschyn does not provide any explanation as to how exactly this is supposedly part of an alleged attempt to “wipe out the Crimean Tatars”.

The truth is that something quite different from preventing genocide and the “Crimean Tatars” is involved here. Far from representing the interests of the Crimean Tatar population, the Mejlis has become a tool of imperialist provocations against Russia. It is headed by the aforementioned Dzhemilev and supports the right-wing government of Poroshenko, a puppet regime of the imperialist powers.

In spring 2015 the Mejlis was instrumental in forming a Muslim battalion that includes not only Crimean Tatars, but also Kazan Tatars, Uzbeks, Chechens, Azeris, Meskhetian Turks and other Muslim groups. The battalion is fighting alongside far-right Ukrainian nationalists in the civil war in eastern Ukraine and directly reports to the Ukrainian defense ministry. It is difficult not to see here echoes of Rosenberg’s strategy in World War II.

Moreover, the Mejlis is closely associated with the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea. The latter in turn is funded by the FIOE (Federation of Islamist Organizations in Europe), the European umbrella organization of the right-wing Islamist Muslim Brotherhood [19]. Sections of the Muslim Brotherhood reportedly maintain ties to terrorist organizations and CIA-spawned creatures like Al-Qaeda.

The Mejlis also enjoys the support of the authoritarian regime of Erdogan in Turkey with which the Mejlis representatives have been consulting repeatedly over the past few years. The crackdown on the Mejlis by the Kremlin in spring was largely fostered by the dramatic deterioration of Turkish-Russian relations in the wake of the Turkish shoot-down of a Russian jet.

The Kremlin has responded to what it perceives as an existential threat to the interests of the Russian oligarchy with police-state measures that are as reactionary as they are desperate and futile. Ultimately, the promotion of Russian nationalism and militarism by the Putin-regime not only fails to prevent or even slow the imperialist provocations. It also directly plays into the hands of the politics pursued by the imperialist powers.

The policies of Paschyn and her ilk and their filthy propaganda are in line with those pursued by German imperialism in two world wars and US

imperialism after World War II, with the active support of the same Crimean Tatar nationalist forces that they are today portraying as the genuine voice of the Crimean Tatar people and fighters for national emancipation. This is the more fundamental reason why Paschyn has no interest in recalling either the crimes or the geostrategic and political interests of German imperialism in the Crimea: by covering the Nazis’ traces, she also covers her own.

Then as now, the campaign over the Crimean Tatars, the single largest Muslim community west of Russia’s north Caucasus, is aimed at destabilizing the country by fostering ethnic divisions between the Muslim and the Russian population. An estimated 11.7 percent of Russia’s 140 million inhabitants were Muslims as of 2010, making Islam the second largest religion in the country. The CIA-linked intelligence service Stratfor suggested in 2013 that the percentage of Muslims of the total Russian population, which continues to shrink, would rise to 15.6 percent by 2030.

The two Chechen wars that took the lives of about a tenth of the Chechen population; the fostering of Russian chauvinist, anti-Muslim sentiments by the Russian state and media; and the socio-economic catastrophe that accompanied capitalist restoration—all this has contributed to considerable social and political discontent among Russia’s Muslim population. The imperialist powers try to exploit this discontent, basing themselves on the nationalist and Islamist elites, in order to channel it in a separatist direction.

While propping up Islamist forces in Russia’s North Caucasus, far-right nationalists in the Ukraine and nationalist faction of the Crimean Tatars, Washington simultaneously supports right-wing, anti-Muslim Russian nationalists such as Alexei Navalny in Russia as a “progressive” and “liberal” alternative to the authoritarian Putin-regime.

The clamor about “human rights”, the liberation of oppressed peoples, and preventing “genocide” serve to prepare a Yugoslav-like carve-up of the former Soviet Union compared to which even the bloody Balkan Wars of the 1990s would look like a dress-rehearsal.

Workers in both the United States and the former USSR must be warned of the filthy operations conducted by the imperialist governments and their petty-bourgeois lackeys. The present social crisis and increasing danger of world war are ultimately the outcome of the destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the Stalinist betrayal of the internationalist program of the October Revolution. For the working class, the only way out of this situation consists in fighting for unifying workers across all national, religious and ethnic boundaries on a socialist basis.

Notes

[6] Quoted in: Wolfgang G. Schwanitz: Max von Oppenheim und der Heilige Krieg. Zwei Denkschriften zur Revolutionierung islamischer Gebiete 1914 und 1940 [Max von Oppenheim and the Holy War. Two Memoranda on the Revolutionization of Islamic Regions 1914 and 1940], in: *Sozial. Geschichte Online*, Vol. 19 (2004), p. 55. Translation from the German by this author. The article is available online: <http://www.trafoberlin.de/pdf-dateien/Oppenheims%20Jihad%20Dokumente%20WGS%20%20120207.pdf>

[7] Alan Fisher: *The Crimean Tatars*, Hoover Institution Press 1972, p. 122.

[8] Bryan Glyn Williams: *The Crimean Tatars: The Diaspora Experience and the Forging of a Nation*, Brill 2001, pp. 346-47.

[9] Alfred Rosenberg: *Der Zukunftsweg einer deutschen Aussenpolitik*, München 1927, p. 93. Translation from the German by this author.

[10] Ian Johnson: *A Mosque in Munich. Nazis, the CIA and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West*, Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt 2010, p. 24.

[11] Lowell Bezanis: *Soviet Muslim Emigres in the Republic of Turkey*. Paper prepared for the Department of the State of the United States of America. May 1992, p. 68. PDF available under: www.dtic.mil/cgi-

bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA251103

[12] Alan Fisher: The Crimean Tatars, Hoover Institution Press 1972, pp. 153-54.

[13] Lowell Bezanis: Soviet Muslim Emigres in the Republic of Turkey. Paper prepared for the Department of the State of the United States of America. May 1992, p. 68.

[14] Ian Johnson: A Mosque in Munich. Nazis, the CIA and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West, Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt 2010, pp. 26-27.

[15] Quoted in: Ibid., p. 127.

[16] Lowell Bezanis: Soviet Muslim Emigres in the Republic of Turkey. Paper prepared for the Department of the State of the United States of America. May 1992, p. 68.

[17] Ibid., p. 35.

[18] Elizabeth Gomart: After the Return: The Struggle of the Crimean Tatars to Reintegrate, in: When Things Fall Apart: Qualitative Studies of Poverty in the Former Soviet Union, ed. by Nora Dudwick, Elizabeth Gomart and Alexandre Marc, World Bank 2003, p. 307. PDF available under:

http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSCContentServer/WDSP/IB/2003/03/14/000094946_03011004010512/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf

[19] Oleg Yarosh: Islam and Muslims in Ukraine after the “Revolution of Dignity”: Current Challenges and Perspectives, in: *Euxeinos* 17/2015, p. 35. PDF available under: http://www.gce.unisg.ch/~media/internet/content/dateien/instituteundcenters/gce/euxeinos/yarosh%20islam%20euxeinos%2017_2015.pdf



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