Displacement, Memory, and the Homeland of the Crimean Tatars

This short article examines how multiple forced displacements over the past two hundred fifty years shaped Crimean Tatar identities, collective memories and sense of belonging. Tracing the events and impacts of displacements instigated by the Russian Empire in the late 18th Century, by the Soviet Union in 1944, and by Russia in 2014, the author describes how Crimean Tatar communities currently displaced within and outside of Ukraine have drawn on shared recollections of past displacements and subsequent repatriations to understand the present. The Crimean Tatar 'grand narrative' of prolonged suffering and displacement at the hands of Russia, which includes an idealized and mythologized sense of 'homeland', serves as an essential strategy for coping with loss and preserving cultural identity in the face of assimilation pressures.

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Introduction

The 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia marked a profound turning point for many Crimean Tatars, creating a sharp divide between their lives 'before' and 'after' the event. Under de facto Russian control, Crimean Tatars have endured extensive political and religious persecution. Since the annexation, 228 Crimean Tatars have faced criminal prosecution, with 107 people currently serving sentences in Russian penal colonies. Additionally, 28 have been killed, and 18 have been abducted (Crimean Tatar Resource Centre, 2024). Key institutions representing Crimean Tatars, such as the Mejlis, the representative body of the Crimean Tatar people, which advocated for their collective rights, were banned and

labelled as extremist, while others, like the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea, were pressured into aligning with Russian state policies. As a result, many Crimean Tatars live in a state of fear for their safety and freedom, grappling with uncertainty and the inability to plan for their future.

These challenging circumstances have driven mass forced migration of Crimean Tatars from Crimea, beginning with the annexation in February and March 2014 and continuing to the present day. Thousands of Crimean Tatars became internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Ukraine, seeking refuge in cities such as Kyiv, Lviv, Kherson, and other places (Ukrainskaya Pravda, 2017). Other Crimean Tatars, following in the footsteps of earlier generations, relocated to Turkey, joining the extensive Crimean Tatar diaspora there. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further exacerbated the turmoil in Crimea, prompting many Crimean Tatars to flee the region to avoid being caught in the conflict or conscripted into the Russian military (Council of Europe, 2023). Rumours of a disproportionately high number of Crimean Tatars being conscripted and mobilized fuelled fears of targeted policies by Russian authorities. Migration paths have included destinations such as Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and various Western countries.

The forced displacement of Crimean Tatars following the 2014 annexation of Crimea ignited extensive intragroup discussions. Historical memories of previous displacements following the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire in the late 18th century and the 1944 deportation played a pivotal role in shaping these debates. These memories were invoked both to justify decisions to leave Crimea and support the choice to remain. In each case, historical events and their repercussions for the Crimean Tatar community were used to draw parallels with the present situation. Additionally, different groups of Crimean Tatars drew on these shared memories of past displacements to validate their coping strategies under occupation.

Crimean Tatars' forced displacements in the past

The first mass displacement of Crimean Tatars occurred in the late 18th and early 19th centuries following the Russian Empire's annexation and subsequent colonization of Crimea. Facing persecution, Russification, and land confiscation, many Crimean Tatars were forced to relocate to the Ottoman Empire. This exodus continued after the devastating Crimean War (1853–1856), driven by the Russian state's hostile policies, including

widespread suspicion of disloyalty and treason (Karpat, 1985, p.66). Further waves of forced migration occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, fuelled by land deprivation, poverty, and the imposition of universal military conscription into the Russian army. Between 1783 and 1922, an estimated 1.8 million Crimean Tatars migrated to Ottoman territories (ibid.). For many, leaving Crimea was a way to preserve one's cultural identity, which they felt was threatened under Russian rule (Aydin 2021, pp.7–8).

The forced displacement of Crimean Tatars during the 1944 deportation was distinct in its suddenness, scale, and brutality. In just a few days, approximately 200,000 Crimean Tatars – virtually the entire population – were forcibly removed from Crimea and relocated to various regions across the Soviet Union, primarily in Central Asia. The deportation led to catastrophic losses in the first months, with entire families succumbing to starvation and disease (Uehling 2004, p.38). In exile, Crimean Tatars were confined to special settlements under strict surveillance, stripped of their civil rights and subjected to harsh living conditions. The Soviet government even erased the Crimean Tatars from the official register of nationalities and prohibited their return to Crimea. It would take nearly five decades for the community to regain the right to repatriate *en masse*, which happened just before and after the collapse of the USSR.

The repatriation to Crimea was more than just a physical return to the homeland; it embodied aspirations for the realization of their collective rights as Indigenous people of Crimea – the restoration of national statehood, cultural renewal, and the symbolic and economic reclamation of Crimea. While not all these goals were fully realized, the period saw a mix of confrontation and cooperation between Crimean Tatars and the Ukrainian government as well as the regional authorities in Crimea (Shevel, 2001; Mikelic, 2012). Despite these challenges, the post-Soviet era is retrospectively regarded as a relatively positive chapter in the history of the Crimean Tatars. However, this chapter was abruptly interrupted by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, marking the beginning of a new wave of forced displacement.

Crimean Tatar IDPs after 2014

Researchers identify three primary communities among Crimean Tatar IDPs, distinguished by their goals and plans: those prioritizing proximity to Crimea for an eventual return who settled in the neighbouring Kherson region; others, seeking closeness to the central government to advocate

for their needs, who relocated to Kyiv; and highly devout Muslims, for whom religiosity was a key marker of identity, who chose Lviv, a city renowned for its strong religious culture (Sereda, 2023, 10).

A study conducted by the author among Crimean Tatar IDPs in Lviv during the summer of 2014 identified three main reasons for their relocation: insecurity, restrictions on practicing Islam, and difficulties in pursuing their livelihoods. Insecurity was frequently linked to the actual and perceived oppression of Crimean Tatars by Russian authorities. Interviewees described being summoned for interrogations by law enforcement and having their homes searched. Particular concern was raised about the establishment of an Anti-Terrorism Committee, one of the Russian authorities' first actions in Crimea. As one participant of the study observed, "We lived there for almost 30 years, and there was no terrorism...Now there will be terrorism, there will be explosions, and all these will be blamed on Muslims, as it was in Chechnya, as it is done today in Tatarstan, in Bashkiria, and everywhere in Russia" (Male, 36, Lviv).

The sense of insecurity among some Crimean Tatar IDPs was heightened by fears that Ukraine might launch a military campaign to reclaim Crimea, making the region too dangerous to remain. Crimea's geographic isolation exacerbated these concerns, as the peninsula's limited escape routes created a perception of entrapment. One interviewee expressed this fear by likening the situation to a potential concentration camp:

> Staying with my family in the area where the fighting was going on would have been dangerous. Now, we can see from Donetsk what is going on: a woman from Luhansk told us that they fled across fields. However, one cannot escape the fields of Crimea. If something happens in Crimea, it will become a big concentration camp (Male, 41, Lviv).

For some Crimean Tatar IDPs, the sense of insecurity was further intensified by their involvement in and support for Euromaidan, the wave of protests and civil unrest in Ukraine from late 2013 to early 2014, sparked by President Yanukovych's decision to abandon an association and free trade agreement with the EU. While some Crimean Tatars joined the demonstrations on Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv, others patrolled their local communities in Crimea, participating in rallies and clashes with members of the so-called 'self-defence' – a Russian-backed militia that facilitated Crimea's annexation. After the illegal March referendum, many Crimean Tatar activists realized they

could not rely on support from the Ukrainian army or security services. They also recognized that the new Russian legal system would favour their adversaries, intensifying fears for their safety and prompting them to leave Crimea. One interviewee described these safety concerns:

> During the entire Maidan period, I was active in my community, and they [the self-defence forces] knew about it. When they started saying things to me like 'you this, you that,' I began to feel danger. They drew crosses in my entrance where outsiders couldn't enter. I felt like they were breathing down my neck. Especially since I have children, and I was worried about them (Male, 44, Lviv).

Another key reason for the forced displacement of Crimean Tatars from Crimea in 2014 was the difficulty they anticipated in practicing their Islamic faith. The majority of the study participants identified as devout Muslims, and adherence to Islamic principles was a vital part of their identity and daily life. Interestingly, most of them left Crimea in March and April 2014, before significant religious persecution against Crimean Tatars began. The widespread targeting of religious practices started later in 2014 as part of Russia's broader campaign to suppress opposition in Crimea. Nevertheless, the IDPs were already fearful and aware of the challenges faced by observant Muslims in Russia. As one interviewee explained: "We also know that Russia is the aggressor. We follow the news and see that observant Muslims in Russia are not doing well" (Female, 25).

Studies on Crimean Tatar IDPs reveal their common strategy of preserving group identity through family narratives that connect historical events and periods, even if they are not directly related to their own family history. Sereda's study (2023, p.61) emphasizes that the Crimean Tatar historical narrative shapes their sense of belonging around a feeling of symbolic trauma – particularly the 1944 deportation – while also incorporating other historical events (such as the 18th-century seizure of Crimea by Catherine II) and contemporary events (like the 2014 annexation). Similarly, Charron's research (2022, p.95) shows that many Crimean Tatar IDPs recognize the 2014 annexation as their people's third major displacement, following the waves of emigration in the 19th century and the 1944 deportation. These findings highlight the prominence of the Crimean Tatar grand narrative of forced displacement, both past and present, and its role in helping individuals make sense of their current situation and develop coping strategies.

Identity, homeland and return in the narratives of displaced Crimean Tatars

A 2024 study on displaced Crimean Tatars in Ukraine and beyond reveals the existence of various layers of homeland perceptions. Attachment to Crimea is a central theme in the narratives of Crimean Tatars. Similar to the post-deportation period, this attachment is viewed as a key, and at times indispensable, aspect of Crimean Tatar identity and worldview. However, some interviewees recognized that this connection is not always easy to explain. As one middle-aged male migrant from Germany remarked, "It is a subject for future studies by neurobiologists."

In interviews, Crimean Tatars often highlighted the difficulty of preserving their cultural identity while separated from their homeland. This concern was most frequently expressed by IDPs in mainland Ukraine, likely due to their prolonged exposure to a different cultural context. Many began their reflections on the Crimean Tatar identity 'in exile' by noting that the absence of a 'native land' strips this identity of the space that nurtures it, limiting the energy necessary for its development and full self-realization. This homeland is seen as a place filled with loved ones, familiar landscapes, and social networks that sustain their sense of belonging.

Most interviewees mentioned assimilation that was commonly linked to the loss of the native language, interethnic marriages, and the replacement of Crimean Tatar cultural codes with Ukrainian ones. Some expressed concern over the lack of organized efforts to teach and promote the Crimean Tatar language in mainland Ukraine. They noted that while individual initiatives have been launched since 2014, these efforts have yet to develop into a formal system capable of creating a sustainable 'ecosystem' for the preservation and growth of the Crimean Tatar language.

There is a certain mythologization of Crimea among Crimean Tatars displaced internally and outside Ukraine after 2014. Many are unable to visit or return due to security concerns, which has transformed Crimea into a 'forbidden place', providing fertile ground for new myths. For those who have lived in mainland Ukraine for over a decade, this often manifests as an idealization of their pre-2014 life in Crimea, constructing a myth of a 'happy life' there. In interviews, they recalled political and cultural events they regularly attended, such as the mourning rally on the Day of Deportation and *Hıdırlez* celebrations, as well as frequent

gatherings with neighbours and friends where they shared a sense of empowerment and joy in being together in their homeland:

> I remember 2013 and think back to *Hıdırlez*. For me, it's like a dramatic movie that begins with everything being perfect and everyone having fun. That's exactly how *Hıdırlez* in Bakhchisaray felt – Jamala came, and everyone was happy. I asked everyone, and they all said yes, [we are happy], and I felt so happy myself. But then something dark appeared, and it was like the Game of Thrones started – it felt like it was written about us (Male, 29, Germany).

Some interviewees confessed to seeking traces of Crimea in their surroundings and even dreaming about it. "You see Crimea everywhere, even in places where it technically can't be. You see familiar places everywhere, you miss it so much that it appears in your dreams" (Male, 29, Germany).

At the same time, the idealization of Crimea among displaced Crimean Tatars after 2014 differs from the one held by those exiled after the deportation. For the second and third generations of exiled Crimean Tatars, memories of Crimea were largely collective and 'inherited' rather than based on personal experience. This led to a more abstract and sometimes romanticized view of the homeland, where elements like air, water, milk, or fruit were attributed with exceptional qualities.

In contrast, the perceptions of Crimean Tatars displaced after 2014, particularly after 2022, are rooted in their personal experiences and memories, through which they create a sense of place and connect it to their identities. Their attachment to Crimea is based on individually held meanings rather than collective ones. While some negative memories are overshadowed by positive images and an idealized view of pre-2014 life in Crimea, there is also critical reflection on past relations with Ukrainian authorities and the local population.

For Crimean Tatars displaced since 2014, their 'homeland' is also seen as the place where their community resides. Unlike the post-deportation era, when the community relocated to Crimea while individuals stayed in Central Asia, the community is now seen as 'residing' in Crimea while individuals have been forced to leave. This shift creates the perception of 'returning' not to a distant historical homeland but to a home – the place where your people live and where you yourself lived not long ago.

In interviews, IDPs, similar to cross-border migrants, frequently expressed a profound longing for the Crimean Tatar environment – the language, people, and national symbols that were once integral to their daily lives. Many interviewees admitted that they hadn't fully valued these cultural aspects until they were no longer immersed in them. They particularly mourned things like stores with signs in Crimean Tatar and the vendors and neighbours with whom they could casually speak in their native language.

Our study found that Crimean Tatars' perceptions and plans for return differ. The majority of those interviewed, whether in mainland Ukraine or abroad, view their future as connected to Crimea. Most are eagerly awaiting the day when Crimea will be liberated by Ukrainian military forces and look forward to returning to their homeland to play a role in its reconstruction and development. Some respondents shared that the very thought of returning to Crimea provides them with hope and motivation. They often imagine their return vividly and have specific plans for what they will do once they are back.

While many displaced Crimean Tatars and migrants stated they would return to Crimea only after it is de-occupied by Ukraine, some expressed a willingness to return earlier, provided the repressive Russian regime weakens and security guarantees are established. On the other hand, some respondents do not plan to return to Crimea in the near future, even after its de-occupation. Their reasons primarily stem from a desire for personal fulfilment, which they believe would be limited in Crimea.

Conclusion

There are multiple similarities between Crimean Tatars and other displaced communities worldwide regarding their longing for their homeland, its idealization and mythologization, and the desire to return. However, the Crimean Tatar case is unique in that this community has been displaced several times by the same state from the same place. The 2014 displacement marks a new chapter in the Crimean Tatar grand narrative of prolonged suffering and displacement caused by Russia. Adding to the tragedy is that this displacement occurred after the mass repatriation of Crimean Tatars and their reunification with their long dreamt-about homeland at the end of the Soviet era. The gradual integration into Crimean society was abruptly disrupted by the second annexation of Crimea, leaving the realization of their collective rights as the Indigenous people of Crimea deferred for an unforeseeable future.

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