Reclaiming the History of Crimea and the Crimean Tatars through One Family Story

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This personal essay presents stories told by three generations of Crimean Tatar women – my grandmother, my mother, and myself – about our evolving relationship with Crimea and its history from 1937 to 2022. Denied the right to know or remember tragic events, such as my great-grandfather's arrest and execution in 1937–1938 and the deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944, my grandmother was only able to reclaim her history after the collapse of the Soviet Union and our return to Crimea from Uzbekistan in 1990. This essay is based on my personal experiences living and working in Crimea and incorporates several in-depth biographical interviews that I recorded between 2008 and 2022 with my family members.

I interviewed my grandmother and mother on multiple occasions. The story became more complex as I was able to return and ask more questions about events and as I was considered mature enough to hear some of the answers. Personal memories often mix with and differ from the historical narratives that exist in society. They are not structured as linear narratives but rather as kaleidoscopic bits and descriptions of experience intertwined with collective memory. But these personal memories have the power to tell the story of a place more intimately and honestly, especially when historical narratives are twisted and rewritten for political purposes.

Historical Background

Crimean Tatars are an Indigenous, Turkic-speaking Muslim ethnic group with an estimated current population of 250,000 in Ukraine,[1] primarily on the Crimean Peninsula. Before the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire under the leadership of Catherine II in 1783, following the Russo–Ottoman Wars, Crimean

1 Derzhavnyi komitet statistyky Ukrainy (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine), "Vseukrainskii perepys naselennia 2001" ("The All-Ukrainian Population Census of 2001"), http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/ [accessed: 29.07.2024].

Tatars constituted the demographic majority in Crimea.[2] Before the annexation, Crimean Tatars lived under a state structure called the Crimean Khanate, which was under Ottoman rule. With the arrival of imperial Russia and its administrative and governance structures, Crimean Tatars lost their effective self-rule. Moreover, the demographic situation on the Crimean Peninsula also changed. First, there were several waves of emigration by the Crimean Tatars, primarily to Turkey. Second, the Russian Empire implemented policies of Russian immigration to Crimea.[3] By the early 20th century, when the Russian Empire collapsed and the Soviet Union superseded it, Crimean Tatars were no longer a demographic majority on the peninsula.

In 1944, the entire Crimean Tatar population was deported by the Stalin regime from Crimea, mainly to Central Asia. This was justified by false accusations of Crimean Tatar collaboration with Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Within a three-year period, more than one-third of the population died.[4] These two events – the annexation of Crimea by Catherine II in 1783 and the deportation of the Crimean Tatars by Stalin in 1944 – defined the Russian and Soviet historical narratives of Crimea and the role of Crimean Tatars in them. The intention was to justify Russian dominance on the peninsula and the inhumane deportation of an entire nation. These narratives therefore deemphasised the Crimean Tatar population and the culture and institutions that preceded Russian colonial rule. Instead, the narrative strove to establish the Russian ethnic and cultural presence on the peninsula. Additionally, many historical Crimean Tatar documents were destroyed,[5] lost, or became widely inaccessible due to language (Crimean Khanate documents were in the Crimean Tatar language but written in Arabic script, and there are not many researchers in Ukraine who can read and research them). Overall, this contributed to the reinforcement of Slavic and Russian dominance in the Crimean historical narrative and the absence of Crimean Tatar voices.

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2 O. M. Gladun, O. P. Rudnytskyi, and N. V. Kulyk, "Otsinka demografichnykh vtrat krymskotatarskoho narody vnaslidok deportatsii 1944 roku" ("Assessment of the Demographic Losses of the Crimean Tatar People as a Result of the 1944 Deportation"), *Demografiia ta sotsialna ekonomika* (*Demographics and the Social Economy*) 30/2, 2017, 11–28, https://dse.org.ua/arhcive/30/1.pdf [accessed: 29.07.2024].

3 Alan W. Fisher, "Emigration of Muslims from the Russian Empire in the Years After the Crimean War", Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas (*Yearbooks for the History of Eastern Europe*) 35/3, 1987, 356–371, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41047947 [accessed: 29.07.2024].

4 Brian Glyn Williams, "Hidden ethnocide in the Soviet Muslim borderlands: The ethnic cleansing of the Crimean Tatars", *Journal of Genocide Research* 4/3, 2002, 357–373, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623520220151952 [accessed: 29.07.2024].

5 Aurélie Campana, "Sürgün: The Crimean Tatars' Deportation and Exile", *SciencesPo*, 16 June 2008, https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/suerguen-crimean-tatars-deportation-and-exile.html [accessed: 29.07.2024].

As depicted in various historical and media narratives of the Soviet period, Crimean Tatars first became an 'exotic Other' and champions of ethnic diversity, before being recast as traitors and deported by the Soviets. Soviet authorities allowed Crimean Tatars to legally return to and settle in Crimea only in 1989, where they soon became a largely ignored minority by the government and society of independent Ukraine. With the 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, many Ukrainian citizens have embraced a new perspective of Crimean Tatars as Ukraine's vulnerable Indigenous group and the most important cultural and ethnic minority. Yet, despite perceiving them as allies in the war against Russia since 2014, most of the Ukrainian population still considers Crimean Tatars as 'Others' and would struggle to integrate their history and identity into the larger Ukrainian historical narrative and identity. At the same time, on the other side of the Russian–Ukrainian border, the Russian regime portrays Crimean Tatars as extremist enemies of the state on the one hand and as lucky 'beneficiaries' of Russian largesse on the other.[6]

Beyond this, the historical narratives – as well as media representations – around Crimean Tatars are extremely politicised. Each time the group is mentioned, questions arise: To whom does Crimea belong? Is it Russian, Ukrainian, or Crimean Tatar? Is Crimea Slavic or Turkic? And is it part of the Muslim or Christian world? In these narratives, the voices, stories, and perspectives of the very people who experienced the historical events are often under- or misrepresented. As a journalist covering the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, I witnessed how this politicised narrative became propaganda and was about to turn violent.

The challenges of understanding the historical place and experience of Crimean Tatars in Crimea are further exacerbated by the efforts of the occupying Russian state to erase or override the 'post-Soviet Ukrainian' presence on the peninsula. This occurs in many ways, and one of them is the choreographed and ideologically informed narrative of Russian–Crimean unity and a shared historical destiny. The Russian government's current measures to improve local infrastructure in some areas of rural Crimea serve the same strategic purpose: to function as another reminder of how important reunification is for the Crimeans.

6 Andrew Wilson, "Imagining Crimean Tatar History since 2014: Indigenous Rights, Russian Recolonisation and the New Ukrainian Narrative of Cooperation", *Europe–Asia Studies* 73/5, 2021, 837–868, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668136.2020.1867709 [accessed: 29.07.2024].

Emine Ziyatdinova (Author), Born in 1987 on the Lenina Collective Farm in Uzbekistan

My family moved from Central Asia to Crimea in October 1990. I was three years old. I have no memories from before that, nor do I feel any connection to my place of birth, even though the words "Lenina, Uzbekistan" travel with me around the world and continue to define who I am – at least to border control staff. My paternal grandmother was forcefully deported to the Lenina Collective Farm from Crimea in 1944. It is the same collective farm where my parents held their wedding celebration, and where my brother and I spent our early childhood. It is also in the same village from which my family moved back to our homeland on the brink of the Soviet Union's collapse. We packed 46 years of life into a 20-tonne container and shipped it to the village of Berezovka in northern Crimea. Some relatives arranged a small temporary house for us to stay in for free.

"Otmekmen may", I demanded, asking for "bread with butter" for breakfast at the new house. My grandmother spread a layer of butter over bread, topped it with honey, and cut it into cubes for me. I followed my brother to play in the street with the neighbouring kids. I spoke to them in a mix of Crimean Tatar and Uzbek, while they shouted back in Russian.

It was relatively easy for repatriates to find a job doing manual labour on a collective farm, but my parents were both dentists and didn't want to give up their profession. It took a relative's Crimean Tatar friend, that friend's Russian coworker, the coworker's husband, and a 500-ruble bribe to the head of the district hospital (which came from the 5,000 rubles that my parents had saved for their move) to secure their jobs. The head of the district hospital even drove my parents to meet the heads of two collective farms and asked for their approval.

The following September, the collective farm that employed my dad as a dentist provided us with a vacant house in the neighbouring village of Serebryanka, which was an upgrade. My mom often repeated that she always dreamt of having a "spacious living room" like the one in our new house, where she could host guests. Waves of relatives would pass through that living room, sleeping on thin mattresses on the floor. Some who had just moved from Uzbekistan stayed with us, while others simply came to visit and spent the night, and some already living in Crimea needed the occasional dental treatment.

We would set a small table and serve coffee with refined sugar, followed by green tea and sweets. I was taught to pay respect to older folks by performing the 'k'ol almaga' ritual, which involved kissing an elder's hand and pressing it to my forehead. Older kids taught me how to cheat by moving the hand close enough to my lips but skipping the kiss and going straight to the forehead. This was especially useful during 'duvas', when many older people would come to pray and celebrate new beginnings or mourn the dead. During holidays like Kurban Bayram and Oraza Bayram,

performing the k'ol almaga was quite rewarding, as people would usually give candies or chocolates. My grandmother would also give us some money, and if not too many kids came to our house, I could hope for an extra Lion chocolate bar.

By 10 o'clock in the morning, my grandmother Ayriye would finish her household chores, which included feeding the dogs, cats, chickens, and other animals. My parents would be at work, and my brother would be at school. She would then prepare coffee in a jezve, the Turkish-style coffee pot with a long handle, and sit by the window in the kitchen, enjoying her quiet time by reading her magazines, newspapers, and the Turkish translation of the Koran. She had three subscriptions: a local newspaper in Russian called *Crimean News* (*Krymskiye Izvestiya*), a Crimean Tatar newspaper called *New World* (*Yani Dyunya*), and a Crimean Tatar magazine called *The Star* (*Yildiz*). Through them, she rediscovered the history, culture, and Islamic stories of Crimea.

At over 80 years old, she read an article about how the Italian scientist Guglielmo Marconi, not Alexander Popov, invented the radio. She recalled how every year she taught her high school students about Popov, the Russian physicist who was supposedly the first in the world to invent this technology. She laughed and said that it turned out that she had not only told lies about the radio to children, but she was also the "best propagandist" in the district for teaching "scientific atheism", which was part of Communist ideology. But she emphasised that she had never said directly that Allah does not exist.

I was excited to start school. I was able to read and count to 100. I was the child who rang the first bell of the school year of 1994 at the celebratory gathering on 1 September. One of the school graduates carried me on his shoulders while I swung the heavy metal bell with a red bow tied around it for the whole school. I was proud, thinking I must have been the smartest kid in class to be chosen for this important task. In reality, the school director was our neighbour, and my mom was friends with her. I was also friends with her son Maxim, whom I would call "achpit" ("greedy guts") behind his back because he ate more than me even though he was younger by a year.

My parents decided that I should join the 1-A class taught by Valentina Dmitriyevna. Everyone in the village respected her and thought she was better than Gulnara Ibragimovna, the 1-B class teacher. Ibragimovna was a newly hired Crimean Tatar teacher who arrived from Uzbekistan, just like us. In the eyes of the villagers, she wasn't equal to the local teachers. They never questioned their superiority and sometimes commented on Crimean Tatars' qualifications, including those of my parents, saying that their diplomas "were bought for a sheep" in Central Asia. On top of this, for the first time, Dmitriyevna taught Ukrainian as a second language to children in first grade; this was part of the changing curriculum in Ukrainian Crimea in 1994. My mom was convinced that I should learn Ukrainian right away, as we lived in Ukraine and it would be important for my future. "If you

live with wolves, you will have to howl like one", my mom repeated many times over the years.

I was the only Crimean Tatar child in the class. Ayshe, Lemara, Evelina, Elvina, Aider, and the others were in 1-B. They had Crimean Tatar as a second language. I have always been a fast learner, so Russian, Ukrainian, and English came quite naturally to me at different stages of my life. But my mother tongue was lost somewhere in the village of Serebryanka, between our house on Gorkogo Street and elementary school. Whenever I try to say something in Crimean Tatar, the words do not come to mind. When I remember the words, they do not form into sentences. And if the sentence is made, I have trouble pronouncing it, and it sounds foreign even to me.

One summer day in the late '90s, my grandmother and I attended an event in Buyuk As, the village from which my great-grandmother came. It was only 20 kilometres away from Serebryanka. The sun was strong, and it was hot outside. I walked with my grandmother from a nearby settlement into the field. The landscape was too familiar, with a flat horizon interrupted by a thin line of trees that protected the road from the wind. Brownish thistle stems and drying tumbleweed, mixed with patches of faded green, covered the ground. Some cars were parked, and families were greeting each other. There was no shade to hide in, and the steppe wind carried the smell of plov, a traditional meal made on a fire several kilometres away. The only thing left of the village were the remains of one of several wells that used to serve the 70 families who lived there before their deportation in 1944. My grandmother had briefly lived here with her relatives during the Nazi occupation. My great-grandmother, Adjire, left the village at the age of 17 in 1913, when she was married off to someone in the village of Eski Burnaq, which was 40–50 kilometres away.

My Paternal Grandmother Ayriye, Born in 1932 in the Village of Eski Burnaq, Crimea[7]

When I was 5, in 1937, our house was searched at night. I needed to pee, so my mom and I went out into the corridor, where I sat on the potty. There was a small kerosene lamp barely burning. My mom said to me, "Don't cry, my dear daughter. Look, Sheikh Babai is also here". I looked over, and in the corner, an old man was sitting with a beard and a turban on his head. It turned out to be Sheikh Babai from the mosque. They searched our entire closet and everything in the bedroom. I was crying and afraid. When I finished, my mother put me to bed, and I fell asleep again. They took my father away [that night]. I remember it very well.

7 The text here and in the following section is an edited transcription of interviews that I conducted in Russian and Crimean Tatar. Additional information is provided in square brackets where necessary.

[According to the records of the State Archives of Ukraine, the Crimean branch of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) arrested Sheikh Mefa Abkerim[8] (born 1872) and my great-grandfather Emir Veli Abdul Kerim[9] (born 1889) on 6 November in Eski Burnaq. They were accused of anti-Soviet propaganda and sabotage. The files also mention that Sheikh Mefa conducted religious gatherings and that Emir Veli was a 'kulak' and used hired labour. Both were sentenced to death by an NKVD troika and executed in early 1938. My grandmother found out about her father's fate only after the Soviet Union collapsed.]

Our belongings were also taken away – the new duvet, the sheets – and sold to poorer people. If something cost three rubles in the shop, they [the authorities] sold it for one and a half rubles. Our uncle helped us run away from Eski Burnaq to Yevpatoria, so they wouldn't touch us. My mother and uncle were worried that my older brother would be taken as well. [Her older brother Shaib was mobilised to the Red Army in 1941].

[During the Nazi occupation of Crimea from 1941 to 1944], we were evacuated from Yevpatoria to Kenegez, which was a Jewish village with two streets. Our uncle Ismail lived in the middle of the street, we were at the top, and there was a kind woman down the street. She was the only one left there, and she baked very tasty gingerbread every day until she died. When you put it in your mouth, it melted. My mother talked to her a lot, and they became friends. My mother tried to convince her to stay with us, as we were in a big empty house. "Stay with us. Leave your windows and doors open; let them take everything. Put on my old clothes, throw away all your own, and cover your head with a scarf like this. Throw away all your documents, and I'll protect you". However, the Jewish woman refused, saying, "You have two children. They will bury them in the same pit as me. I'd rather go myself". So they took her alone and put her in the pit, where all the Jews were buried. The Germans did it, not the Soviet Union. Whomever the Soviet Union did not kill, the Germans did.

[By the end of 1945, the population of Crimea had drastically changed from the Holocaust carried out by the Nazi regime and the forced deportation of Crimean Tatars – as well as Italians, Armenians, and Greeks, among others – by the Soviets. In the 1939 census, the population of Crimea was about 19.4 percent Crimean Tatar and 5.8 percent Jewish.]

[After the deportations of 18 May 1944], people already began to starve on the way [to Central Asia]. The starving people started dying after a few months in Uzbek-

8 National Archival Service of Ukraine, digital copies of the Mentric books of the National Archive of the Autonomic Republic of Crimea, Fund N6 (R), Case N28 – Protocol 23 of the Crimean Autonomic Social Soviet Republic's NKVD Troika session from 02.12.1937, slide 99, https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/metric-books/?arch_id=39&fund_id=88&affair_id=6663#lg=1 [accessed: 29.07.2024].

9 Ibid., slide 98.

istan. But my mother did not sit still – she went around the village to the Uzbek neighbours and talked to the old ladies. She sewed up everything for them, not leaving a single garment torn. They fed her and even gave her pieces of flatbread, flour, or corn so that we children wouldn't die. They [the local Uzbeks] were also hungry; they didn't have it [food] either, but among them, there were those who gave this much [she shows her palm]. And she [her mother] ate half herself – and half, hidden, she brought to us. Then I made soup.

I found grass, horse sorrel, and onions, mixed them with flour, and made porridge. Not porridge, but rather a thin soup. We ate, and my mother gave me a few more spoonfuls in a separate, very little bowl: "Go, there is a girl who is dying of hunger. You stand next to her; feed this girl. But don't show your brother!" Of course, my brother was already a teenager and was protecting us: "We ourselves are dying of hunger. Do not give to others!" I hid the bowl under an apron, fed [her] and gave [her] water. Then my mother went to bury those who died. She used any old sheets and rags that she could find to wrap their bodies before burying them.

She also had several strings of pearls. In Uzbekistan, she divided them into pieces and sold them to wealthier Uzbeks. Clothes, scarves, whatever she had – she sold everything. There was no bed, either. We cut reeds ourselves, then made a bed. The satin duvet, which my father probably brought from Turkey, my mother reused in Uzbekistan. She took its satin, sewed an Uzbek dress, and sold it. And we made ourselves a cover – a simple cover from my mother's old dresses. And the three of us slept under one cover. And so, we survived.

As a child, I didn't know that this was a deportation. How could I know? We continued living, and I told everyone at school in Uzbekistan that we weren't deported; there was a war going on, and we were evacuated in 1944.

Throughout my childhood, my mother lived with the hope that my father would turn up one day and my brother would return from the Soviet Army. She claimed that many people were sent to Samarkand in 1938 and that some pilgrims had even spotted my father there. Whenever she acquired some jam or sugar, she would split it in half, saving one half in case my father or brother came back.

Every day, they prayed to return to Crimea. They cursed Stalin and said, "Allah boynini ursun onin [let God punish him on the neck]". When the older women gathered in our house, they used to say: "Soon, we will be going back to Crimea. Somebody saw that the wagons had already come. It was a mistake that they brought us here to Uzbekistan". I heard that.

My mother and Aunt Zylha were always whispering together and crying. Whenever I approached them, they would stop. I would ask, "Why is that?" My mother replied, "If you know everything, they'll kick you out of school. You won't go to school!" That's how we lived; they didn't tell me anything.

In 1953, Stalin died. I was in tenth grade. We attended the march and cried and cried that our leader had died. But then we went around the corner and laughed and laughed, wiping our eyes.

My Mother Katibe, Born in 1961 in Syrdarya, Uzbekistan

It was a known fact that the deportation had happened. In Uzbekistan, the Tatars were always called traitors. Even when I was a kid, other children would say things like "go back to your Crimea".

But, you see, we were brought up in a Soviet manner, so I thought it didn't include us. We believed we were all Soviets. We were always taught that we should love our motherland, that we were all so happy, that we had the happiest childhood, that the state cared for the children, and that we were building communism and all that. Develop socialism first, and then we would move on to communism.

19 May was Pioneer Day, so every year, a big fire was made in the school courtyard. There were marching and singing contests, and each class had to prepare a slogan for the marches. "Look who is marching in one line – a young Lenin-followers troop. Look who is marching all at the same time – give the way to the pioneers". There was music [and] singing, and everyone was running around the fire. It was fun for us.

During school, we were sent to pick cotton. You get tired and want to sit down after working the whole day. They don't let you. And if you didn't collect the standard quota, which was 50 kilogrammes a day, or if you went to the toilet more than two or three times, they would say it was an "apolitical protest"; that you did not support society. I was in ninth grade when the Komsomol committee called me and scolded me because my friends and I took a break for more than 10 minutes, and they said it was an apolitical protest. I came home crying. I still remember the teacher scolding me because we didn't harvest enough cotton.

I already knew something about our ethnicity and deportation. My mother always blamed Stalin and said that all our misfortunes were his fault. She said that he deported the Crimean Tatars to Uzbekistan. My mother used to listen to Crimean Tatar concerts on the radio. They were only [played] on certain dates and on certain radio stations. At weddings, they used to play "Alushtadan Esken Yeller" ("The Winds Blown from Alushta"). People must have felt nostalgic.

I remember the first time someone from our family tried to move back to Crimea. My mother's aunt, Ayshe-anay, and her husband left. We all took a bus to see them off from the railway station in Syrdarya. It must have been 1967. I remember they cried and said goodbye. But something didn't work out because they came back within a few months. Ayshe-anay never made it back to Crimea and was buried in Uzbekistan. In those years, the Tatars were trying to go back but were

not allowed to settle in Crimea. Many ended up in the Kherson Oblast of Ukraine or Krasnodar Krai in Russia.

The first time we went to Crimea for vacation, I was in ninth grade, in 1977. We were shocked because everything was [available] in the shops there. Everything was cheap. Borscht with chicken at the diner cost 36 kopecks. Cheap cherries were sold everywhere. In Uzbekistan, cherries were expensive and in short supply. We could buy a whole wheel of cheese. Eating cheese with bread every morning was a luxury we couldn't afford in Uzbekistan. Probably, Crimea was supplied differently because it was a resort destination.

We went to Bakhchisarai, and it was the beginning of June. Everything was in bloom. The lavender fields and poppy fields were beautiful. My mother said, "Look how beautiful it is; the Tatars lived here. They took everything away from us".

When we went on excursions, my mother always got mad. The guides always said that Turkic people and Greeks lived here, but they never mentioned Crimean Tatars at any point. Of course, that made her angry. But she didn't argue with them; it was not acceptable then. She told us her ancestors had lived there, that we Crimean Tatars had always lived there, and that what they said wasn't true.

We decided to move back to Crimea in 1990. At the time, everyone was going, and the events with the Meskhetian Turks in 1989 provided an additional push. The neighbours living on either side of my mother-in-law were Meskhetian Turks. Their wives used to make flatbread in a tandir [a special oven], while my son played with their kids. In the spring of 1989, there were events in Namangan – local disputes and fights between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks. Then the Uzbeks started to kick out the Meshetian Turks deliberately and set their houses on fire.

In our village [in Uzbekistan], the Uzbeks filled a whole truck with stones, and someone pointed out where the Turks lived. They drove slowly down the street and started to throw stones at the Turks' houses. There was a loud banging. They threw stones at the windows and roof shingles, and I woke up from the loud noise. I was scared. My husband Bakhtiyar grabbed a knife, which he had under the pillow. I told him, "Please don't go". Of course, everyone was afraid for their own life. I think he didn't leave the courtyard. When they drove to the next house to throw the stones, someone [in it] had a shotgun and fired it, killing one of the Uzbeks. The next day, the whole village was cordoned off by the police and internal troops.

They all knew each other, and Bakhtiyar knew all of them: the one who was killed and the one who shot the gun. They all lived together for many years and went to the same school. And they had done it anyway. By human standards, I don't even know what to call it. It was a stab in the back. Our neighbours had to leave and had to hide at their relatives' places first. Many years later, they came to visit us here in Crimea. Some of them immigrated to the USA, some settled in the Krasnodar Krai, and some settled in Kherson – [they ended up] all over the world.

We thought that it could happen to Crimean Tatars as well, because we, too, were a minority. If they started to kick out the Turks, then they could do the same to the Tatars. That's why the following year, in autumn, we moved.

We weren't the first to move, and we weren't going to an empty place. We knew that there was already a house in Berezovka that we would move into. We sent a container there, and our relatives had already been living there for almost a year.

Emine Ziyatdinova (Author)

I had always thought of Crimea as a place to recharge and return to when things got tough, but in 2014, that all changed within just one month. The ground beneath my feet felt like it was cracking, and it took me years to redefine what home meant for me.

As a journalist, I covered the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014. On the evening of 16 March, my Danish colleagues and I were stationed at Lenin Square in Simferopol, where the local pro-Russian government organised a concert and celebration for the upcoming illegitimate polling result, which they called a 'referendum'. There were no sane people in the square; those who had never believed they could change anything played their roles in the Russian performance and were rewarded with entitlement.

We finished the final live broadcast at 11 o'clock in the evening. A barely standing, intoxicated woman with straight blonde hair and a sense of privilege wanted to be on camera. The crowd chanted, "Crimea – Russia – Forever!" I had to deal with her, explaining that we were finished with work and that the reporters did not speak Russian. She shouted at me and pushed me. As the Danish reporters packed up their cameras, they didn't pay any attention to me. I looked at our driver, Misha, the husband of my dear childhood friend, who was leaning against the bumper of the car and watching the whole scene with a slight smile on his face. I felt alone and surrounded by a hostile world.

I grabbed the driver's arm and said, "Misha, we're paying you. Get her away from me", and then I hid behind him. I was exhausted and ready to cry. They announced the 96.77 percent vote for joining Russia, and even though I knew this fraudulent result was coming, I was still not ready to hear it. I saw Jenya, a photographer from Kyiv and a friend, in the crowd. I wailed on his shoulder for a while, grieving the loss of my homeland.

Eight years later, in March 2022, Jenya was trapped in Mariupol as the city was being erased by Russian forces. I didn't find the strength to text him; instead, I prayed that he had someone to lean on.

Around the same time, my relatives in Crimea gathered to pray for my grandmother's soul to find peace a year after her death. It was the first day of Ramadan and over a month since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

My mom entered the room and saw that people were talking in loud and agitated voices. The imam from the local mosque asked for donations to support wounded Russian soldiers, and one of my aunts gave a pack of pasta. My other aunt Zekie's two sons were in Kyiv living under threat of Russian missile attacks. She was angry, saying, "Why should you be giving it? I hope your children experience the same as mine".

Someone from my street in Serebryanka, whom I remember from when he was a small boy, was killed near Energodar. He probably should have known better than to sign a contract with the Russian Army. I felt sorry for his mother and grandmother. He was the only son and the only grandchild.

My Crimean Tatar neighbour, who lived across from my backyard, was taken during a raid for Russian Army mobilisation in September. He openly supported Ukraine before they forced him to join the Russian Army. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) had already searched his house several times before that. The last I heard from him was that he was wounded in a Russian hospital.

My brother decided to leave for Poland with his family, leaving their life behind. After five days on the road, they arrived in Warsaw, where I met them. I hugged the kids. They hadn't been told what was going on.

"Mom, we're not going back home because they could take away Dad, right?" my nephew asked.

I embraced the identity of being a 'Ukrainian Crimean Tatar' in 2004, when I was 16. That year, I moved from my home in Crimea to the Lviv Oblast to pursue my studies. Many around the university had a hard time understanding how Crimean Tatars could be 'truly' Ukrainian. Crimean Tatars can speak Ukrainian, but many thought that Muslims with Asian features did not make the cut to share the Ukrainian national identity. Back in Crimea, many believed that adopting a Ukrainian identity meant assimilation, a concept my people had resisted for years. A significant shift in perception occurred around 2014 due to the political turmoil in the country and the need to redefine Ukraine and Ukrainian identity in the face of external threats from Russia.

In 2014, the Ukrainian government finally recognised Crimean Tatars as an ethnic group indigenous to Ukraine and Crimea, after three decades of efforts by the Crimean Tatar movement to achieve this. This incorporation of our ethnic group into the macro-political discourse of the nation and statehood is an illustrative example of a shift towards perceiving Ukraine as a multicultural, multiethnic, and secular state (in contrast to the history of excluding rather than including ethnic and religious minorities). This process has become even more pronounced since the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. The increased media representation of

the Roma (as discussed in the chapter of this volume by Mykola Homanyuk and Janush Panchenko) and other ethnic and minority groups in the war effort serves a clear campaigning purpose while simultaneously legitimising, on a larger scale, the belonging of these groups to the political nation. The government's efforts to recognise the contributions of fighting the aggressor go beyond verbal statements on an individual or community level and extend to legislation, state recognitions, and making various religious services, including Muslim, Orthodox, and Protestant ones, available.

It appears that my adapted identity has now become viable and easily understood by most people around me. My friends in Kyiv and Lviv no longer question it, and it is now generally accepted in the community of Crimean Tatars displaced since 2014. However, the gap in the perception and experience of Crimean Tatars living in government-controlled Ukraine and those continuing to live under Russian occupation grows larger as the years pass. Holding a Russian passport and working for various state institutions — from schools and hospitals to government administrations and the military (including due to forced conscription) — are some survival strategies often perceived as unacceptable collaboration. The majority of Crimean Tatars still live in Crimea, and their reality is vastly different and distant from Kyiv politics.

All these processes depend on government policies. The inclusion of ethnic and other minority groups into the idea of Ukrainian statehood could potentially become fragile with changes in government policies. Additionally, there is the risk that the positive dynamics of recent years could reverse when these groups no longer play a role that the state and society perceive as contributing to the war effort and national unity. The question of whether these groups have invested enough in the national cause and Ukrainian identity could arise once again.

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