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Crimean Exile of 18 May 1944

Abstract

Throughout history, Crimea has served as a center of countless persecutions, conflicts, and innumerable exiles. The group most profoundly affected by these events has undoubtedly been the Crimean Turks, the indigenous people of the region. A similar situation occurred during the years of the Second World War. Taking into account the oppressions and pressures they had endured under Tsarist Russia in earlier periods, the Crimean regarded the Germans who arrived in Crimea during the Second World War as “liberators.” Consequently, a portion of the Crimean Turk population joined the “Volunteer Self-Defense Battalions” and fought alongside German forces against the Red Army. Compelled by the conditions of the period, these individuals participated in the battalions solely with the aim of “survival” and the desire “to establish an independent state of their own.” However, their actions were interpreted as “treason” because they were deemed to be against the interests of the Soviet Union. Ultimately, the long-standing objective since the era of Tsarist Russia—namely, “to ender Crimea devoid of Turks”—was sought to be realized through this so-called “treason.”

Keywords: Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, Crimean Turks, 18 May 1944, Exile-Genocide

18 Mayıs 1944 Kırım Sürgünü

Öz

Kırım, tarih boyunca birçok zulmün, kavganın ve sayılamayacak kadar sürgünün merkezliğini yapmıştır. Bölgede meydana gelen olaylardan en fazla etkilenen ise kuşkusuz Kırım’ın yerel halkı olan Kırım Türkleri olmuştur. Böyle bir durum, II. Dünya Savaşı’nın zuhur ettiği yıllarda da yaşanmıştır. Kırım Türkleri, eski devirlerde Çarlık Rusya’nın eziyetlerini ve baskılarını göz önüne alarak, II. Dünya Savaşı’nda Kırım’a gelen Almanları “kurtarıcı” olarak görmüşlerdir. Dolayısıyla bir kısım Kırım Türkü, “Gönüllü Nefsi Müdafaa Taburları”na katılarak Alman askerleriyle birlikte Kızıl Ordu’ya karşı mücadele etmiştir. Dönemin şartları gereğince taburlara katılmak zorunda kalan bu insanlar, yalnızca “hayatta kalma” ve “kendilerine ait olan bağımsız bir devlet kurma” gayesiyle hareket etmişlerdi. Lakin onların bunların davranışları, Sovyetler Birliği’nin aleyhinde olduğu için bir “ihanet” olarak yorumlanmıştı. Neticede Çarlık Rusya’dan beri süregelen “Kırım’ı Türksüz bırakma” hedefi, bu sözde “ihanet” ile gerçeğe dönüştürülmek istenmişti.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sovyetler Birliği, Joseph Stalin, Kırım Türkleri, 18 Mayıs 1944, Sürgün-Soykırım.

1. Introduction

Crimea, with its unique natural beauty, rich underground and surface resources, geopolitically significant location from past to present, cultural diversity, and strong historical background stretching from ancient times to the modern era, has always held a position of great importance and attraction. For this reason, various peoples, nations, and powerful states have competed throughout history to dominate Crimea. Such a struggle also occurred between Germany and the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Prior to the war, it was known that both the Germans and the Russians had formulated regional plans concerning Crimea. The Germans initially intended to occupy Crimea and transform it into a resort and rest area for German officers (Dallin, 1957, p. 51-52). They even considered resettling the German people of South Tyrol in Crimea due to their disagreements with the Italians (Fisher, 2009, p. 22-23; Özcan, 2010, p. 22-23). Therefore, the Germans could realize those aims only by exiling all inhabitants of Crimea (Crimean Turks, Russians, Ukrainians, Armenians, etc.) (Nekriç, 1978, p. 24-25). On the other hand, the Russians' goals regarding Crimea were not much different from those of the Germans. Indeed, Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Soviet Union, had already planned, in the autumn of 1941, to exile the Crimean Turks to the vast steppes of Kazakhstan (Mühlen, 1984, p. 11; Kırimal, 1970, p. 11). Despite this, both Germany and the Soviet Union-unaware of each other's intentions-began to clarify and implement their respective projects for Crimea with the outbreak of the Second World War. Two years after the war began, in October 1941, German forces invaded Soviet territory and entered Crimea through Orkapı (Perekop) in the north, eventually seizing almost the entire peninsula (Abdülhamitoğlu, 1974, p. 43). As the Soviet troops withdrew from Crimea, they went so far as to burn down the hospitals where their own wounded soldiers were being treated (Kırimal, 1967, p. 65).

At a time when such brutality prevailed, the Crimean Turks regarded the German armies entering Crimea as "liberators." (Fisher, 2009, p. 219). Consequently, some Crimean Turks who lived outside the peninsula but aspired to achieve Crimea's independence chose to establish contact with the Germans. Among the most prominent figures of the Crimean diaspora, Mustafa Edige Kırimal and Müstecip Ülküsal-the founder of Emel magazine-went to Germany (Ülküsal, 1976, p. 19). On November 27, 1941, Kırimal and Ülküsal departed for Germany, and upon their arrival in Berlin, they submitted a report outlining their objectives to Adolf Hitler through the German ambassador of the time, Von Schulenberg (Özcan, 2018, p. 28). Within the political context of that period, Kırimal explained the purpose of their visit as follows: "We have not come here to make any political offer or demand. We have come to cooperate with the Germans, by means of the opportunities they can provide, in order to protect the interests and welfare of our people." (Ülküsal, 1976, p. 19). However, the initial contacts of Kırimal and his delegation yielded no concrete results. Given the circumstances, Kırimal and Ülküsal came to the conclusion that they were being deliberately stalled by the Germans. Consequently, they sought to establish contact with German diplomats who had previously served in Türkiye. Finally, in July 1942, a decision was made to establish a Crimean Turk Representation Office in Germany. Following this, in January 1943, the "Crimean Turks Dispatch Administration" was officially formed under the jurisdiction of a ministry in Germany (Kırimal, 1952, p. 310-313). As a result of these developments, a number of Crimean Turks in Crimea joined the battalions organized within the structure of the

German army, with the aim of breaking away from Soviet control and establishing an independent state of their own (Kırmal, 1970, p. 11). These battalions, known as the “Voluntary Self-Defense Battalions,” would later serve as a pretext for Joseph Stalin’s exile order issued on the night of May 18, 1944.

2. The Exile of the Crimean Turks

The recruitment process for the “Voluntary Self-Defense Battalions” was decided on January 2, 1942, during a meeting of the 11th Army Reconnaissance Unit held under the supervision of Adolf Hitler. Following this decision, the “Special Task Unit D,” commanded by SS Chief Otto Ohlendorf, was assigned the responsibility of recruiting volunteers from prisoner-of-war camps and overseeing the overall enlistment process (Broşçevan-Tıgliyants, 1994, p. 34). The duties entrusted to the Special Task Unit D were as follows (Litvin, 1991, p. 91):

- To conduct ethnographic research in the Turkish villages located in northern Crimea,
- To carry out the recruitment process with great diligence, monitor political activities, and establish a commission composed of representatives from the Special Task Unit D and the people selected among the Crimean Turks,
- To initiate activities for the recruitment of volunteer soldiers from prisoner-of-war camps,
- To ensure that Crimean Turks wishing to serve in the German army were exempted from their civilian employment obligations,
- To carry out the training and deployment of the soldiers registered in the battalions.

Within the scope of these responsibilities, a meeting was organized in Akmescit on January 3, 1942, to initiate the enlistment of Crimean Turks into the German army. The representatives of Crimean Turks and German officials attended the meeting. In the opening address, it was announced that “the demand of the Crimean Turks to defend their own homeland was accepted by the German army.” The following day, the registration of volunteer soldiers from among the Crimean Turks into the German forces began (Özcan, 2018, p. 35-36). The exact number of soldiers enrolled in the “Voluntary Self-Defense Battalions” remains uncertain; however, according to German military records, this figure is reported to have been 9,091 (TsDAGO Ukraini, 30-32).

During the Second World War, the peoples of the regions subjected to German occupation established contact with the Germans for a variety of reasons. Foremost among these was “the prisoners’ desire to survive” within the German prisoner-of-war camps. Those who were captured regarded the Germans as a potential “opportunity” for survival. Consequently, primarily in Akmescit and several other cities across Crimea, the battalions composed of Turkish prisoners fought both against the Red Army and against partisan forces (Sheehy, 1972, p. 22). As aforementioned, the primary objective behind the formation of these battalions was to create a state belonging to the Crimean Turks in Crimea. However, from the perspective of the Soviet Union, these battalions were interpreted as acting in opposition to Soviet interests. On the other hand, the extent to which the Crimean Turks who joined the battalions did so “voluntarily” remains a matter of debate. In reality, thousands of individuals who ostensibly enlisted “voluntarily” did so under immense coercion, violence, and even the threat of death, driven primarily by the instinct to survive. Those who refused to join under the guise of “voluntarism” were executed by German soldiers. For instance, it is reported that a Crimean Turk named Ablakim Kandar was shot dead by German troops merely for stating that he did not wish to enlist “voluntarily.” (Özcan, 2018, p. 40). Apart from the Crimean Turks

who joined the battalions, there were also partisan groups (gang) that resisted both the Red Army and the Germans. These groups were led by V. S. Bulatov, Secretary of the Crimean Regional Committee of the Communist Party. Composed of locals familiar with Crimea's geography-including Russians, Ukrainians, Romanians, and Jews-the partisans sought to gain dominance over both the Red Army and the Germans, with the ultimate aim of establishing an independent state of their own (for the Crimean Turks) (Kırım: Proşloye..., 1988, p. 83)¹.

During the war, there were also Crimean Turks who served in the ranks of the Red Army, engaging in armed combat against the Germans. Indeed, some Crimean Turks fought within the Red Army, clashing with German forces and receiving medals and decorations from Soviet authorities for their valor. Notably, one such award was bestowed upon Ahmet Han Sultan, who was named a "Hero of the Soviet Union" on August 24, 1943, after reportedly shooting down thirty German aircraft (Broşçevan-Tiglyants, 1994, p. 34). Nevertheless, Soviet authorities maintained the view that the Crimean Turks had committed "treason" by collaborating with the Germans (Nekriç, 1978, p. 35-37). Consequently, following the Red Army's victory over German forces at Stalingrad in November 1943 and its advance to Orkapı (Perekop), the Red Army regained control over Crimea on April 10, 1944, and immediately imposed a regime of terror over the Crimean Turks (Otar, 1964, p. 4). According to eyewitness accounts, streets in Akmescit were filled with the corpses of executed individuals, hung from tree branches, telephone poles, and any other locations visible to the public (Fisher, 2009, p. 233). In the aftermath of these atrocities, the Crimean Regional Committee of the Communist Party decided on April 20, 1944, to establish an "Extraordinary State Commission" to identify those who had collaborated with the Germans during the war. The commission commenced its work on June 5 and concluded in May 1945. Based on the reports prepared by the commission, it was determined that the exile of the Crimean Turks should be carried out without delay. Accordingly, a systematic effort was launched to purge Crimea of both those who had "collaborated with the Germans" and other "anti-Soviet elements." (Broşçevan-Tiglyants, 1994, p. 8-9, 27; Özcan, 2002, p. 353). To implement this operation, authorized units were established across various locations in Crimea, including Old Crimea, Akyar, Yalta, Akmescit, Canköy, Kerch, and Gözleve. The security of these units was initially maintained by 5,000 personnel from the NKVD. Ten days later, an additional 3,000 personnel were assigned, and to ensure their protection, another 20,000 NKVD officers were deployed (Özcan, 2018, p. 65).

The task of executing the exile was assigned to Bogdan Kobulov, Deputy Commissar of State Security of the Soviet Socialist Republics, and Ivan Serov, Deputy Commissar of Internal Affairs of the Soviet Socialist Republics (Guboglo-Çervonnaya, 1992, p. 42-43). Subsequently, in a report submitted on May 7, 1944, to Lavrenti Beriia, Commissar of Internal Affairs and Chief of State Security, Kobulov and Serov confirmed the definitive decision to exiler the Crimean Turks (Pogrujeni..., 1991, p. 151). On May 10, Beriia requested Stalin's approval for the report, asserting that the Crimean Turks were "traitors to the homeland" and proposing their removal from Crimea. He also recommended that the

¹ For instance, between 1939 and 1942, it is known that Mustafa Selimov established as many as twenty-five secret organizations against the German occupation, and that even his sister, Fatime Selimova, supported the activities of this partisan group. Consequently, this example clearly demonstrates that women, alongside men, were also actively involved in the partisan movements. Hande Gündüz, Kırım Mücadelesinin Kadınları (1960-1990), NEÜ Yayınları, Konya 2023, p. 11.

Crimean Turks be sent to Uzbekistan under the category of “Special Deportees” (Spetsposelentsy) to work in agricultural fields, transportation, and industrial sectors (Deportatsiya..., 1991, 107). It is evident that the information provided by Kobulov and Serov reached Stalin through Beriya. Indeed, the following day, Stalin responded to Beriya, approving the exile of the Crimean Turks through the issuance of the “top secret” decree No. 5859 (Guboglo-Çervonnaya, 1992, p. 44-46). The decree emphasized that during the Second World War, the Crimean Turks had “collaborated with the Germans,” fought against the Red Army, committed “brutal massacres” against Soviet soldiers, and even assisted the Germans in the mass executions of Soviet citizens in Crimea. Accordingly, the State Security Committee, taking into account the allegations outlined in the decree, sanctioned the exile of the Crimean Turks (Guboglo-Çervonnaya, 1992, 44-46; Broşçevan-Tiglyants, 1994, p. 40).

The exile operation was moved two days earlier than the date specified in the decree (20 May 1944) and was carried out at around 03:00 a.m. on the night of 18 May. (Özcan, 2002, p. 354). Although the operation was intended to be conducted in secrecy, some Crimean Turks were nonetheless aware that exile was imminent. Indeed, the following statement by Viladiye Nasırova, a resident of Bahçesaray, indicates that such a possibility existed (Nasırova, 1990: p. 117):

“...On May 15, Huriye Osmanova from the Komsomol (Young Communist League) entered my study and said, ‘Do you know? The Crimean Turks will be exiled.’ She had received this information from a wounded soldier who was staying in their home and advised taking warm clothing and necessary belongings for the exile.”

One individual who learned of the impending exile was a Crimean Turk named Aci Memet. Once he learned, he immediately fled from Akyar to Romania to avoid Stalin’s ruthless measures (Qırım’dan..., 2016, p. 15). The majority of the adults was serving in the Red Army; thus, those exiled primarily included women, children, and the elderly (Courtois vd., 2000, p. 287). Eyewitness accounts indicate significant discrepancies between the official instructions issued by the State Security Committee and their actual implementation. For example, in some locations, Crimean Turks were given fifteen minutes to prepare, while in others, the time ranged from five minutes to two hours. Some families were able to take up to 200 kilograms of belongings, whereas others were forced to leave their homes entirely empty-handed (Özcan, 2018, p. 72). Finally, those who managed to gather clothing, food, and other essentials were assembled in the town squares and awaited transport vehicles that would carry them to railway stations (Taşkentskiy..., 1976, p. 27; Conquest, 1970, p. 61). The Crimean Turks were then loaded onto railway transport vehicles, which were primarily cattle and freight wagons having previously been used during the exile of Chechens and Ingush, and sent on their journey (Özcan, 2010, p. 72-73). On the night of May 18, 1944, Even members of the Red Army were subject to exile: 524 officers, 1,392 non-commissioned officers, and 7,779 soldiers of various ranks were forcibly removed from their homeland and sent to different regions of the Soviet Union on the night of May 18, 1944 (40-50-e Godı..., 1992, p. 134).

There is no definitive information regarding the total number of Crimean Turks exiled. However, several claims have been made on this matter. The first of these is the official figure submitted by Beriya to Stalin. According to that figure, 183.155 Crimean Turks were removed from Crimea on the night of May 18, 1944 (Deportatsiya, 1991, p. 109). Another official

estimate, provided by the Central Committee of the Crimean Communist Party, reported the number as 187,859. The State Commission of the Council of People's Commissars determined the figure to be 188,626 (Broşçevan, 1995, p. 28). In addition to these official figures, there are also unofficial estimates. According to post-exile assessments, approximately 46.2% of the Crimean Turks died during the exile, while the surviving 54% implies that the total Turkish population in Crimea prior to the exile was around 423,100 (Avtarhanov, 1991, p. 206; Allworth, 1988, p. 6). The most comprehensive research regarding numerical data was conducted by the Crimean Turks themselves after reaching the places of exile. An unofficial census carried out in 1966 determined that the number of exiled Crimean Turks was 238,500 (Özcan, 2018, p. 85).

In a telegram sent by Kobulov and Serov to Beriia on May 20, it was stated that the exile had been completed by 4:00 p.m. More broadly, the operation to clear Crimea of "non-Slavic elements" was fully accomplished by July 4. Following the successful completion of the exile, those involved in the operation were officially rewarded by Soviet authorities in a ceremony held on July 19. However, at that very moment, Kobulov received alarming news that disrupted the ceremony. It was reported that the villagers of Arabat, who made their living from fishing and salt production, had been inadvertently forgotten to be exiled. Kobulov immediately issued orders to remove the Arabat population as well. By that time, however, the freight trains designated for the exile had already departed, making it impossible for the Arabat villagers to reach them. Therefore, the villagers were placed on a dilapidated ship, set out to sea, and the vessel was deliberately sunk in deep waters by opening the cargo hatches. Tragically, it is reported that not a single individual survived this incident (Özcan, 2010, p. 75-76). On the morning following the event, numerous soldiers were assigned the task of disposing of the victims' bodies. One of them, Mikhail Biloghin, recounted the scale and nature of the massacre years later with the following striking statement (Gündüz, 2023, p. 26):

"We were brought by truck to the shore of the Sea of Azov. Bulldozers were at work digging pits. As we approached the shore, the sight that met us horrified us. The beach was so full of human corpses that there was no room to step, and bodies floating in the water lined the sea. I have never been able to erase from my memory the image of a young mother clinging tightly to her child. My companion and I tried to separate them but failed. In the end we were forced to throw them both into the pit..."

Following the Arabat tragedy, Crimea was effectively stripped of its Turkish population. The international community, however, only became aware of the fate of the Crimean Turks-who had been sent to their deaths under Stalin's orders-two years after the exile. Indeed, on June 12, 1946, the Soviet authorities announced in the *Izvestiya* newspaper that the Crimean Turks had been exiled from their homeland to various regions of the Soviet Union under the pretext that they had "fought against the Red Army during the Second World War." (Crimean..., 1996, p. 139). This disclosure underscored the fact that the Soviet administration had "meticulously and secretly" controlled information and documents related to the exile. Unfortunately, the precise rationale behind the exile, beyond the stated "pretext," remains uncertain. However, in Russian history, the ideal of a "Turk-free Crimea" championed by Empress Catherine II ("Catherine the Great") can be seen as indicative of the objectives that Russians pursued in Crimea (Potichniyj, 1977, p. 16). This vision was evidently adopted as a target by Stalin as well. The close ties between the Crimean Turks and Türkiye

had raised Stalin's concerns. Accordingly, the Crimean Turks-being both Turkish and Muslim-were considered untrustworthy, and their immediate removal from Crimea was planned to ensure both the suppression of potential disloyalty and the strategic control of the Black Sea, hence, their expulsion was accompanied by the settlement of Slavic populations in Crimea (Richmond, 2002, p. 1516). For all these reasons, the Crimean Turks were exiled, leaving the region devastated; in their absence, Crimea transformed into a "desolate and unrecognizable" landscape.

3. General Condition of Crimea Following the Exile

After the Crimean Turks were forcibly removed from their homeland, all their movable and immovable property was confiscated. Specific assignments were made to carry out the confiscation. Accordingly, 250 personnel from the People's Commissariat of Trade, 300 from the People's Commissariat of Land Affairs, 400 from the People's Commissariat of Sovkhozes, and 500 from the People's Commissariat of Meat and Dairy Products were tasked with the confiscation process (Özcan, 2018, p. 89). As a result, agricultural products were seized by the People's Commissariat of Trade; foodstuffs and small and large livestock were confiscated by the People's Commissariat of Meat and Dairy Products; breeding animals by the People's Commissariat of Sovkhozes; and horses and other animals by the People's Commissariat of Land Affairs (Guboglo-Çervonnaya, 1992, p. 45). Furthermore, officials working in state institutions appropriated valuable belongings left behind by the Ciman Turks in various districts, including Kuybyshev, Lenin, Freydorf, Yalta, Seyitler, Alushta, and Karasubazar (Broşçevan-Tiglyants, 1994, p. 72).

After the Crimean Turks were forcibly removed from the homeland where they had lived for centuries, Crimea-renowned for its vineyards and gardens-became "a ghost city," and agricultural production came to a halt. Anticipating such difficulties accompanying the exile, Soviet authorities had taken precautionary measures well in advance. Indeed, prior to the implementation of the exile operation, on May 15 the People's Commissariat issued a directive stipulating that individuals responsible for agriculture were to be settled in southern Crimea. Following the exile, a new directive issued on May 27 organized the agricultural work in Crimea. Approximately 14,000 people from various cities in Ukraine (Chernihiv, Tsum, Zhytomyr, Poltava, Kyiv, Vinnytsia, Kamianets-Podilskyi, etc.) were brought to Crimea in August and September to maintain agricultural production (Broşçevan-Tiglyants, 1994, p. 74). This "artificial migration" clearly demonstrates that Soviet authorities had long planned the "Slavicization" and, consequently, the "Russification" of Crimea. In addition to agriculture, disruptions occurred in administrative systems, education, arts, culture, religion, and the press. To address these gaps, state positions and offices were filled through arbitrary appointments, assigning responsibilities to Slavs who often lacked experience and formal education (Özcan, 2018, p. 96). Subsequently, the process of cultural destruction began, aiming to obliterate all traces of the Crimean Turks from Crimea. As a result, on December 14, 1944, a decree was issued mandating the replacement of all Turkish toponyms in Crimea with Russian names. Under this decree, names such as Gözleve were changed to Yevpatoriya; Fraydorf to Novoselov; Akmescit to Simferopol; Seyitler to Nijnigor; İçki to Soviet; Ak Şeyh to Razdolnen; and Karasubazar to Belogor (Guboglo-Çervonnaya, 1992, p. 45).

On July 30, 1945, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued a decree that abolished Crimea's autonomy (Guboglo-Çervonnaya, 1992, p. 48). This act was accompanied by an effort to erase all traces of Crimean Turkish history and culture. Even the graves of the deceased were desecrated, with tombstones removed for use in construction, so that the suffering of the living would be mirrored by the dead (Vozgrin, 1995, p. 28). Manuscripts and all works translated into Turkish (brochures, magazines, and books...) were burned (Kırmıskiye..., 1997, p. 77). Religious classes were removed from schools, and the celebration of religious holidays was prohibited. Prominent mosques such as the Bahçesaray Han Mosque, Akmescit Kebir Mosque, Kefe Müftü Mosque, and Gözleve Cuma Mosque were repurposed as atheist museums or storage facilities (Kanlıdere, 2016, p. 234). Alongside cultural destruction, a defamation campaign targeted the Crimean Turks. They were disparagingly labeled as "bandits" and "brigands". However, in the thirty-fifth volume of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, published in 1937, prior to the outbreak of World War II, Crimea and the Crimean Turks were described in laudatory terms (Başaya..., 1937, p. 320). The 1953 edition described them not only as "bandits and brigands" but also as "representatives of Ottoman expansionism." (Başaya..., 1953, p. 551-553). Travel guides introducing Crimea and written for tourists similarly claimed that Slavs had originally inhabited the region, while alleging that the Crimean Turks had invaded the peninsula, destroying vineyards and gardens and devastating the entire territory (TsDAGO Ukraini, 50-55).

4. The Lives of the Crimean Turks in the Exile Regions

The Crimean Turks endured unimaginable torment for nearly two weeks in the death trains where even breathing was difficult. Deprived of food and water, and unable to meet even their most basic needs, they were transported thousands of kilometers under inhumane conditions. At the train stations, they were usually given 200 grams of bread, a few pieces of dried potatoes, and a soup made with rotten anchovies (Nuzetova, 2008, p. 39). After consuming this salty fish soup, many became unbearably thirsty, yet the authorities refused to give them even a drop of water and the elderly cut their veins and moistened the cracked lips of the children with their own blood (Gündüz, 2023, p. 60). Many who perished from thirst requested, with their final breaths, to be buried near water (Zalımlıqqa..., 2018, p. 27). However, most of those who died of starvation, thirst, or suffocation were simply thrown from the train cars along the railway, without burial. Later investigations revealed the full magnitude of this tragedy: it was determined that approximately 46.2% of the exiled Crimean Turk population perished during the journey (Seyitmuratova, 1997, p. 3). At first, the Crimean Turks held Beriya, the head of the Soviet secret police (NKVD), responsible for their misfortune. They believed that "the Great Leader" Stalin was unaware of what had been done, and that once he learned of their suffering, he would allow them to return to Crimea. However, Beriya's statement following the exile shattered these hopes, revealing that Stalin himself had personally ordered this cruel operation. In his own words, Beriya declared (Kolendiç, 1993, p. 137-138; Pulatov, 1988, p. 203):

"...Do our people, the Party, and the Communists truly know the reality? Do they genuinely believe that I, Lavrenti Beriya, possessed the power to convict-or even execute without trial-thousands, even tens of thousands of people? Do they truly believe that those who now pass judgment upon me are clean and innocent? The documents I have gathered over the years, which prove that I did nothing other than carry out the decisions of Stalin, the Politburo, and the Central Committee, are now at the disposal of the court."

According to Soviet authorities, the Crimean Turks were mostly exiled to Uzbekistan because Russia did not want its territories to be “contaminated,” Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were already filled with peoples exiled from the Caucasus, and Turkmenistan and Tajikistan lacked the economic capacity to receive the exiled people at that time (Deportatsiya..., 1991, p. 108). The first trains carrying them arrived in Uzbekistan on 29 May 1944. To receive and resettle these exiled people, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), and the Council of People’s Commissars were officially assigned to coordinate efforts. After being received at Tashkent, Kagan, and Arys, the Crimean Turks were distributed across the regions of Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Fergana, Andijan, Namangan, and Qashqadarya (Broşçevan-Tiglyants, 1994, p. 86; Hayali, 1997). Subsequently, in 1945, a special department within the NKVD called the “Special Settlement Administration” (Spetsposeleniye Otdel) was established to supervise and control the exiled people. Under this system, the exiles were placed under the strict oversight of district and regional NKVD officials. The exiled people were forbidden to leave their assigned settlement zones by more than five kilometers without permission; any violation of this rule was treated as an escape attempt, punishable by sanctions. Therefore, every exiled person was required to report monthly to the local NKVD commandant’s office to sign the attendance register. Failure to comply with this regulation was considered an act of disobedience, and those who failed to appear risked being sentenced to an additional 20 to 25 years of exile in Siberia (40-50-e Godı..., 1992, p. 125-126; Seyitmuratova, 1997, p. 5).

As a consequence of the exile, the most critical problems encountered by the Crimean Turks who arrived in Uzbekistan were hunger and disease. The shortage of food led to a severe weakening of their immune systems. Indeed, the famine is vividly reflected in the account of one eyewitness from that period as follows (Özcan, 2018, p. 118).

“The men were at the front, and there was no one left to bury the dead. Many times, the corpses lay for days among the living. Hacıgülsüm Hacımambetova’s husband had been captured by the fascists, leaving her with three children—two boys and a girl. Like our own family, they too suffered from starvation. In the end, the girl died first, followed a day later by the two boys. Their mother was so weakened by hunger that she could not move. The landlord at that time threw the bodies of the two boys into the street, beside the ditch. Later, they managed to dig a grave and bury the children.”

At the same time, due to the differences in climate and natural conditions, the Crimean Turks unfortunately encountered malaria—a disease they had never known before—in Uzbekistan (Fisher, 2009, p. 243). In Samarkand, Bukhara, and Kashkadarya alone, more than 11,500 Crimean Turks contracted the illness (Hayali, 1997).

According to the decree of the State Security Committee dated May 11, 1944, the USSR Agricultural Bank was tasked with helping Crimean Turks find homes and jobs in the exile regions. Thus, the Agricultural Bank was instructed to allocate a seven-year loan of 5,000 rubles per family for the Crimean Turks exiled to Uzbekistan (Guboglo-Çervonnaya, 1992, p. 47). However, the actual amount required to start a new business at that time ranged between 8,000 and 9,000 rubles. Therefore, the loan granted to the Crimean Turks was by no means sufficient for them (Broşçevan-Tiglyants, 1994, p. 107). Consequently, the Crimean Turks lived in basements of collective farms, barns, vegetable warehouses, and dilapidated houses without doors or windows, and they began working in state-assigned enterprises

(mines, construction, and cotton sovkhozes...) to sustain their livelihoods (Özcan, 2010, p. 109). This was part of a strategy to transform the Crimean Turks into a “working-class nation” (Aleksiyeva, 1984, p. 110). It is highly significant that in the censuses conducted across the Soviet Union in 1959, 1970, and 1979, all other communities were recorded, yet there was not a single entry for the Crimean Turks. In fact, this situation serves as evidence that, from the perspective of Soviet authorities, the Crimean Turks were not simply overlooked (Pain, 1990, p. 19).

After the exile, the Crimean Turks were subjected to various educational and cultural policies. One of the most significant measures was the mandatory use of Russian in education, which, in effect, aimed to erode their native language. However, the requirement to learn Russian also provided the Crimean Turks with vocational skills, enabling them to succeed in their professional life (40-50-e Godı..., 1992, p. 124; Krimskiye Tatarı..., 1997, p. 46). A crucial factor in preserving their mother tongue was the publication of the newspaper “Lenin Bayrağı”. It began in 1957 and allowed the Crimean Turks to maintain and develop their language (Devlet, 1983, p. 231). Through this initiative, they also published their first anthology in Crimean Turk, titled “Baar (Spring) Ezgileri” (Kırımlı, 1989, p. 3). Furthermore, the establishment of the “Kaytarma” song and folklore ensemble in 1957 within the Uzbek State Theatre marked a significant step in reclaiming and sustaining their endangered cultural heritage (Kırımlı, 1970, p. 19). Finally, the Crimean Turks began to emerge from the hardships of the May 18, 1944 exile only in the 1960s. Indeed, thanks to the leadership and guidance of the intellectuals regarded as “aksakals,” the Crimean Turks, after 1960, were able to have the charges of exile lifted and embarked on a relentless struggle to return to their homeland, Crimea.

5. Conclusion

With Joseph Stalin’s rise to power in the Soviet Union on April 3, 1922, a process of “Sovietization” and, therefore, a process of “Russification” began across the country. The Crimean Turks were negatively affected by this process. Fundamentally, Stalin’s aim was only to realize the vision of Catherine the Great for a “Turk-free Crimea.” The pretext that allowed Stalin to pursue this objective emerged during World War II. During the early stages of the war, the Crimean Turks, weary of the oppression and persecution under Tsarist Russia and later Stalin, viewed the Germans who arrived in Crimea as an “opportunity” and even as “liberators.” This perception led to the formation of the “Voluntary Self-Defense Battalions,” composed entirely of Crimean Turks and organized by the Germans. However, it should be noted with caution that the participation in these battalions was not entirely “voluntary” in the genuine sense. Because most of those who saw the Germans as “an opportunity to survive” had joined the battalions out of necessity. Moreover, their dream of establishing an independent Crimean state could, in their view, only be realized in this way. Absolutely, there were also those who did not join the “Voluntary Self-Defense Battalions” and instead fought in the Red Army or as partisans (gangs) to defend Crimea and the Crimean Turks. Yet even they bore the full brunt of the exile carried out on the night of May 18, 1944.

When the Red Army began taking control of Crimea on April 10, the “Voluntary Self-Defense Battalions” were later used as a pretext to justify the exile of everyone in Crimea. Since adult men were serving in the Red Army or in partisan groups defending their homeland, the exile operation primarily targeted children, the elderly, and women. This defenseless group,

suddenly awakened in the middle of the night by the sounds of Soviet soldiers, was crammed into livestock and freight wagons and exiled from their homeland. Tragically, up to half of the exiled population (46.2%) perished along the way due to starvation, thirst, suffocation in overcrowded train wagons, and disease. For these reasons, those who died were, without doubt, victims of “Genocide” according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Crimean Turks who survived the exile faced further material and moral losses upon arrival at the places of exile. Thousands, unable to find homes or work, had to live in dilapidated buildings and survive through hard labor. It is known that following their forced removal, Crimea underwent a structural transformation: Slavic populations were brought in, nearly all Turkish place names were replaced with Russian ones, mosques were destroyed, and most academic and cultural works were burned. In the end, the Crimean Turks, emerging from this tragic period, began to revive in the 1960s and embarked on an unyielding struggle to reclaim their lost rights and return to their homeland, Crimea.

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