

RECOVERING HISTORY: SOME ASPECTS OF GENOCIDE'S EXPERIENCE AT THE CRIMEAN TATARS OF DOBRUJA

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority in Dobruja, Romania, and it seeks to recover their largely unknown history. For this study I used a wide variety of unpublished sources in Ottoman and Romanian languages, as well as first-hand sources in Turkish language. This study was elaborated from the perspective of a native Crimean Tatar. After the Crimean Wars (1853-1856), my great-grandfather, Izzet Ismail together with his family had to leave their native home, Kerci, Crimea and settled down in Dobruja. It is a great pleasure for me to write and talk about the Crimean Tatars of Dobruja, their origins, homeland, history and day-to-day life, as I am the fourth generation of a Crimean Tatar family born in Dobruja, Romania.

The study begins with the Crimean Tatars' refuge in the mid-19th century, a period that is considered by the historian Alan Fisher to be the first great genocide in human history, and it goes on describing their settlement on the Ottoman territory, in the inner parts of Dobruja. Then, my study examines their assimilation process after 1877. Finally, this paper brings information about changes inside the community during the communism regime, and it concludes with the Crimean Tatars minority's slow road to extinction in the 21st century.

Keywords: *Crimean Tatars, Crimea, Dobruja, refugees, genocide.*

INTRODUCTION

After the events of 2014, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the history of Crimea and the Crimean Tatars, today an ethnic minority living in different parts of the world. There are communities of Crimean Tatars not only in

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Romania, but also in Bulgaria and Turkey. After many Ottoman-Russian wars of the 19th century, hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars and Noghays had to flee towards the Ottoman lands under unbearable conditions. During Stalin's Bolshevik period the Crimean Tatars were exiled to Central Asia. There are Crimean Tatars in Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; some of them took refuge in Western Europe, USA, and only a few in Romania.

In my studies, I prefer to use the denomination Crimean Tatars, even though in documents with the *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* (The Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister's Office) they are named *Kırım ahalisi* and the Noghays are named *Nogay kabilesi*. Alongside with the Crimean Tatars, many Noghays left Crimea and settled in the Ottoman lands of Dobruja. The Romanian census never had a separate column for Noghays. Romania, as the other countries, always mentioned the Noghays with the Crimean Tatars, in the same column, as *Tătari* (Tatars).

The Crimean Tatars have a long and tragic history of forced displacement that makes their case unique. Their experience as refugees and their forced displacement represents a significant silence in the history of Europe. Published research in the field on this theme is negligible in quantity, and is largely restricted to narrative descriptions of concepts of assimilation or integration. In Romania, researchers never talked about their historical refugee or about their cruel deportation of 1944. Many of us don't know anything about our homeland – Crimea and the history of our forefathers' refuge, which started during the tsarist Russia, after the Russian Annexation of Crimea (1783). Most of our ancestors runaway from Crimean peninsula and were forced to flee towards the Ottoman lands.

This study is a social-historical study of the small ethnic minority living in Dobruja, the easternmost region of today's Romania, extending from the northward course of the Danube to the shores of the Black Sea. Some paragraphs of this work covers their remarkable history related to inner Central Asia, nomadic Turkic tribes, Ottoman lands and Balkans. I emphasized the time when the Crimean Khanate and the Crimean people were the rulers of the *Dasht-i-Kipchak*, and their state was the most modern state of the Eastern Europe. This study attempts to highlight some aspects about political events experienced by masses of refugees after the annexation in 1783, the Crimean Wars (1853-1856) and the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878 based on documents with the *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi - BOA* (The Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister's Office) Istanbul and *Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale* (National Central Historical Archives) Bucharest. Moreover, I used periodicals as "Albina Carpaților", "Farul Constanței", "Gazeta Dobrogei", and "Analele Dobrogei", which are among the main contemporary periodicals with the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878, or were published shortly after the war.

There are two main research about Crimean Tatars of Dobruja: Müstecib Ülküsal's work published in 1966 (*Dobruca ve Türkler, Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü Yayınları, Ankara*), and Mehmet Ali Ekrem's book published in 1994

(*Din istoria turcilor dobrogeni, Editura Kriterion, București*). Both works provide general information about Crimean Tatars of Dobruja, and less information about unbearable events and suffering experienced by the masses of refugees after the Crimean War (1853–1856), the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–1878 and their settlement in Dobruja.

The purpose of my study is to reconstruct the social-historical dimensions of their refuge, as well as some aspects of the genocide experience that they were forced to endure. The forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, in a short period of time (1855–1866), is recognized by Alan Fisher, the only historian who studied the history of Crimea and the Crimean Tatars, as the first enormous influx of people caused by endless Ottoman-Russian wars.

SHORT HISTORY OF THE CRIMEAN TATARS

Central Asia is the homeland of Turkic peoples who built empires and nations, and influenced the fate of humanity. The Altay Mountain range is thought to be the birthplace of Turkic peoples. One of the first written evidence for the ethnonym Turkic dates from around 210 BC, and the denomination is attributed to Turkic nomadic tribes living in northern China, known as *hu* or *Xiongnu* (Roux, J.P., 2010: 48). A new era in the history of Turkic tribes begins with the Genghis Khan invasions at the very beginning of the thirteenth century.

Dasht-i-Kipchak included the vast steppes extending east and north of the Sea of Aral, the land north of the Caspian, and both sides of the Lower Volga. After Genghis Khan's death these broad realms were divided into two sections: the Eastern division, the habitat of the White Horde, and the Western wing, the habitat of the Golden Horde (Skrine, H., F., 2005: 122).

The origins of the Crimean Tatars are as obscure as the origins of the most Turkic peoples. In the mid-thirteenth century, during the invasion by the armies of Batu Khan, founder of the Golden Horde, the Turkic nomad tribes gained political ascendancy over the previously settled Slavic and Italian populations. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the khans at Saray on the Volga considered themselves the rulers of the Crimea, and they appointed governors of the Crimea and steppe provinces. At that time, the seat of power was Solhat, later called Eski Kırım (Old Crimea). The city remained the main centre of the peninsula, until the Giray dynasty ascended to the throne, after a long struggle against the khans of the Golden Horde, in the mid-fifteenth century. Historians agreed that Hacı Giray was the first khan of an independent Crimean Khanate (Fisher A., 1987: 3). The existence of the khanate is attested by historical sources from both Asia and Europe. In the early fifteenth century, there were several large towns along the coast, such as Kefe (Kaffa), Kezlev (Gözleve), and Azov (Azak), which were genuine cities by the European standards of the time.

THE RUSSIAN INTEREST IN CRIMEA AND THE RUSSIAN ANNEXATION IN 1783

At the end of the seventeenth century, the treaty of Karlowitz and tsar Peter the Great's conquest of Azov brought to an end the position of the Crimean Khanate as a powerful political entity in the *Dasht-i-Kipchak* steppe. The weakness of the Ottoman state and Russian strength came with a sudden change in the balance of power in Eastern Europe, and some *aşiret* (clan) leaders in the Crimea would entertain Russia's formal proposals. By 1770, during the early years of tsarina Catherine, the Noghays signed a treaty of friendship with the Russian supporter for the next fifteen years. In April 1783, Catherine issued a manifesto proclaiming the annexation. She justified her act by saying that her empire had not been able to enjoy the fruit of its victories in the wars of 1768–1774 (Fisher, A., 1987: 69).

THE RUNAWAY OF MUSLIMS FROM THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE IN THE YEARS AFTER THE CRIMEAN WAR

The Crimean Tatars began leaving their homeland in 1772, when their Khans lost effective political control, and the Russians began intervening forcefully in Crimean internal affairs.

The influx of people who had left the Crimean peninsula cannot be explained only by battles, and their runaway had many phases. For instance, the early phases of their runaway after the annexation of peninsula at the beginning of the 19th century showed no geographical pattern. The most significant consequence of the Ottoman-Russian wars was the enormous influx of the Ottoman subjects, mostly Muslims, who had been living in the area, now, subject to the Russian occupation. Hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars and Noghays had to flee towards the Ottoman lands under unbearable conditions.

The Crimean War 1853–1856 caused the second major phase of their refuge towards the Ottoman territories (Fisher, 1999: 179). Certainly, for the refugees when the area no longer proved to be safe, they joined the local Muslim families and proceeded to another area, village or town, which seemed to be more secure.

To limit the research field about war refugees, I referred here to those who left Crimea, settled and remained in today's Romania. In accordance with the documents found with the Ottoman Archives, I concentrated myself on the period of the end of the Crimean War and shortly after, which is from around 1860 until 1871, which I named it the second major wave of refugees and it had two directions. The first direction of the second major wave of refugees was from Crimea to *Dersaadet* (Istanbul) or different towns of the southern shore of the Black Sea coast and Anatolia; sometimes, at their demand the refugees were resettled and shipped from Istanbul to the Black Sea coastal towns of Dobruja, such

as *Köstence* (Constanța Romanian spelling) or Varna, in order to join their relatives. The second direction of the second wave of refugees is about those who came by boat from Crimea and were settled in Dobruja, in the Black Sea coastal towns or different towns of Dobruja such as *Mecidiye* (Medgidia, Romanian spelling), and *Babadağı* (Babadag, Romanian spelling).

Then I focused on the period of the end of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–1878 and shortly thereafter, around 1878 to 1913, which I named it the third major wave of refugees. I decided 1913 because from 1878 to 1913, Muslim refugees who remained in newly created Romania did not hold Romanian citizenship; after 1913 they became Romanian citizens. This study is dedicated only to those refugees who came by boat, as there were refugees who came by land, as my great-grand parents. They were not registered on Ottoman Archives, as probably they got passports from the Russian authorities. The third wave of Muslim population displaced by the war began after the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–1878, when the Crimean Tatars and Noghays found themselves again on the battlefield. Many of them left Dobruja, as it was given to the newly created state Romania, and established in Anatolian villages and towns. This time, their movement had only one direction from Dobruja, Romania to Istanbul or Anatolian towns (Ismail, 2017: 86).

GENOCIDE'S DEFINITION AND THE CRIMEAN TATARS' GENOCIDE EXPERIENCE

The official page of United Nations Office – Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect defines genocide as “... a term, which consists of the Greek prefix *genos*, meaning race or tribe, and the Latin suffix *cide*, meaning killing” (Lemkin, 1946: 228). The official page mentions that the Polish lawyer Raphäel Lemkin developed the term partly in response to the Nazi policies of systematic murder of Jewish people during the Holocaust, but also in response to previous instances in history of targeted actions aimed at the destruction of particular groups of people. Later on, Raphäel Lemkin led the campaign to have genocide recognised and codified as an international crime¹.

Alan Fisher, in his study “A Precarious Balance: Conflict, Trade, and Diplomacy on the Russian-Ottoman Frontier” states “Between 1855 and 1866, at least 500 000 and possibly as many as 900 000 Muslim subjects, of the Russian Tsar, emigrated to the Ottoman State. Of these, about one-third originated in the lands of the former Crimean Khanate, the other two-third from the north and West Caucasus. If the tenth all-Russian census (1857) is accurate, these emigrants accounted for between 15 and 23 percent of those sections of the Crimea, and for between 17 and 28 percent of those areas of the Caucasus. Clearly this was a

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>, accessed on 17 December 2019.

demographic event which must have resulted from a catastrophe of some magnitude, and which must have produced a significant alteration of the population of the southern regions of the Russian Empire” (Fisher, 1999: 171).

In the same study, the author mentions: “Alongside with Crimean Tatars and Noghays there were also Caucasians. According to Kemal Karpat, in the years 1862–1870, the total number of Çerkes who migrated during the first exodus varies between 1.2 and 2 million, according to various Russian, Ottoman and European sources” (Fisher, 1999: 180). Many of the Caucasians reached Anatolia through Crimea, which means that more than 2 million Muslims were forced to move. Among them many were counted dead, and many more dead were never counted. It was one of the worst human disasters in history, but is little known today. In his researches, Alan Fisher used different terms for this process: mass movement, forced displacement, mass transfer of people and exodus which, in fact was the first genocide in modern human history.

Justin McCarthy, professor of History, at the University of Louisville, in his research “Forced Migration and Mortality in the Ottoman Empire. An Annotated Map”, does a thorough analysis and draws a map on the Muslim population forced to move. The map covers the Caucasus, Crimea and the Balkans from 1790 to 1923². As regarding Crimea, the author used the selected data by Alan Fisher and Kemal Karpat in their studies. Today, the map has to be updated for the Caucasian-Pontic area, as after 2010 BOA revealed new documents about war refugees from Crimea and Caucasian area. In my book, “Balkan Turks. The Crimean Tatars of Dobruja” (2017), I tracked down three phases and four directions of their refuge from 1860 to 1870. When I began the book, my intention was to cover the whole period from 1860 to 1900, but I was overwhelmed by the great volume of documents and obliged to cover only a short period of ten years, from 1860–1870.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS - WHERE ARE THEY TODAY?

Considering Guibernau’s definition “... a term that needs to be defined and distinguished: the nation without a state. A nation without state is defined by the lack of its own state and by an impossibility to act as a political institution on the international scene” (Guibernau, 2004:1255), and I can state that we are a stateless nation. For the Crimean Tatars of Dobruja, Crimea is the homeland, and our collective memory is related to the refuge of our ancestors from Crimea, so our common myths and historical memories are related to Dobruja and Crimea. The Crimean Tatars of Dobruja, Crimea and those living in the rest of the world carry the same flag recognized in the Turkic world, but not mentioned on political map³.

² https://www.tc-america.org/files/grants/Forced_Displacement.pdf, accessed on 19th January, 2020.

³ <http://old.qha.com.ua/ro/evenimente/azi-este-ziua-drapelului-tatarilor-crimeeni/1803/> accessed on 19th January 2020.

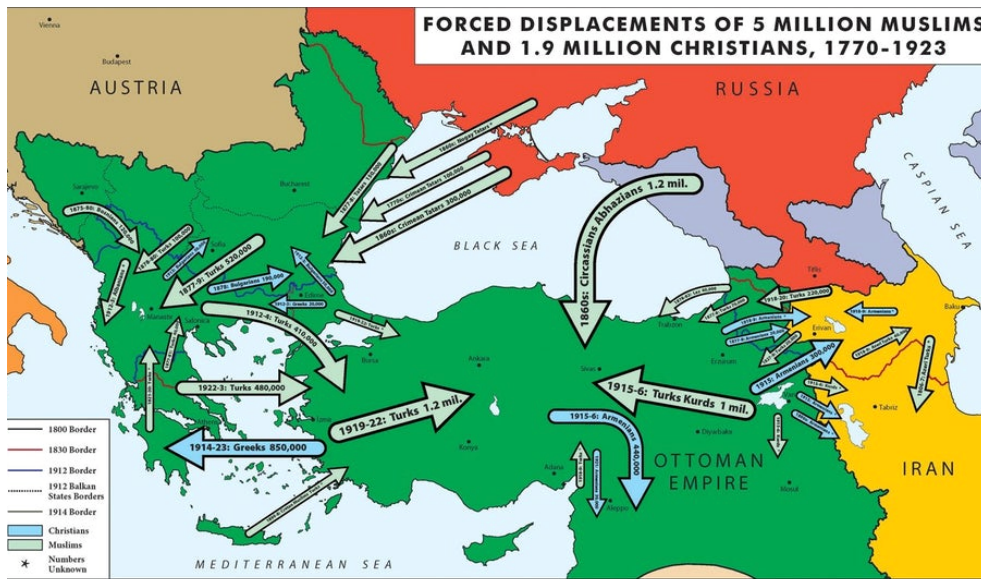


Figure 1.

Source: extracted from “Forced Migration and Mortality in the Ottoman Empire. An Annotated Map”, by Justin McCarthy, professor of History, University of Louisville, available at https://www.tc-america.org/files/grants/Forced_Displacement.pdf accessed on 19 January, 2020.

During those years under the communist regime rule, they, like many others, were not allowed to fully identify with their own national traditions or language.

At present, in accordance with All Minorities at Risk (AMAR) project, the ethnic minority of Crimean Tatars is categorized as “socially relevant”, and in accordance with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) the Crimean Tatar language is qualified as severely endangered language “This framework lists 7 levels of vitality; five of these levels deal with languages which are endangered. These classifications were: safe; stable yet threatened; vulnerable; definitely endangered; severely endangered; critically endangered; extinct. Severely endangered (2) if the language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; the parental generation may still understand it but will not pass it on to their children”⁴.

The case of the Crimean Tatars of Dobruja, Romania and their historical experience is an example of understanding the issues related to genocide, historical minority and nationalism on Muslim minorities of the Eastern Europe who have to live in-between Orthodox and Muslim worlds.

⁴ <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/> accessed on 12 January 2020.

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