

In late July Crimean Tatars organised demonstrations in Moscow's Red Square. They were demanding the right to return to their original homeland in the Crimean peninsula. Their community was forcibly uprooted by Stalin in 1944, and deported to Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and the Urals.

The Crimean Tatars were annexed into the Russian Empire of Catherine II in 1783. Before then they had had an ambiguous relationship, half-vassal, half-independent, with the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Then numbering some 500,000, they were subjected to particularly brutal policies of Russification in the nineteenth century.

During the Crimean war, Tatars living on the coast were removed and 'resettled' inland. After the war, Tsar Alexander II declared, "It is not appropriate to oppose the overt or covert exodus of the Tatars... This voluntary emigration should be considered as a beneficial action calculated to free the territory from this unwanted population". By the end of the century the Crimean Tatar population had fallen below 300,000.

This repression helped stimulate the Crimean Tatar national identity. Fearful of an alliance between the aroused Tatars and the Pan-Turkic movement, the Tsarist regime responded by further repression in the opening years of this century. The Tatar organisation Vatan was declared illegal, Tsarist police agents spied on Tatar religious and educational activities, and Tatar newspapers were heavily censored or closed down.

In the years following the October Revolution of 1917, the Crimea was occupied by counter-revolutionary armies. Tatar newspapers were banned, printing presses seized, and Tatar schools closed.

The defeat of the counter-revolutionary armies by the Red Army paved the way for the declaration of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in October 1921, as an integral part of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic. Lenin had expressed his hopes for it two years earlier: "May the tiny Crimean Republic become one of the torches which cast the light of proletarian revolution onto the East".

In the early months of the Crimean ASSR, there were terrible food shortages, but conditions soon improved. Output increased. The autonomy granted by the decree of 1921 was put into practice by the Crimean Bolshevik administration, headed by the Crimean Tatar Veli Ibrahimov. The former repression of Crimean Tatar national culture was ended.

From the late '20s Stalinism brought back the Tsarist repression of national minorities. Ibrahimov was removed from his post, accused of 'indigenous nationalism', and executed in May 1928. Thousands of other Crimean Tatars were to share his fate.

Tens of thousands were deported under Stalin's policy of forced collectivisation of agriculture. The famine resulting from



Crimean Tatars demonstrate in Red Square

The nation Stalin deported

The Crimean Tatar nation was deported en masse by Stalin in 1944. Forty-three years later, the Crimean Tatars are still fighting for their rights. Stan Crooke looks at their history.

this policy cost thousands more lives in the early 1930s. A new wave of purges began in 1935, in the name of 'struggle against the nationalism of the native bourgeoisie', and was further intensified after Stalin's speech of December 1936 in which he denounced the 'indigenous nationalism' of the Crimea and declared the Crimean Tatars too few in number to have any right to autonomy.

The Tatar Latin alphabet (itself introduced only in 1928) was replaced by the Russian Cyrillic alphabet in 1938, in the full knowledge that this could not express all the sounds of the Crimean Tatars' language. Crimean Tatar books were withdrawn from circulation. By 1938 the number of surviving Tatar-language newspapers had fallen to nine, from 23 just three years earlier.

The impact of such policies on the size of the Crimean Tatar population is difficult to estimate. In 1917, after growth in the opening decades of the century, the Crimean Tatars numbered 320,000. The population further increased in the 1920s, partly through indigenous growth, partly through immigration. By 1941, however, the Crimean Tatar population had fallen

to about 250,000, which would suggest that Stalin's policies had already claimed some 100,000 victims by 1941.

In October 1941 the Nazis invaded the Crimea and soon occupied the entire peninsula. Hitler advocated deportation of the entire population — Russians and Ukrainians as well as Tatars — and the repopulation of the Crimea by Germans from South Tirol. This would 'solve' the problem of the South Tirol — an object of dispute with Italy — and create a 'fortress state' populated by reliable Germans in a strategically important area.

It wasn't done — partly because it would have disrupted Crimean industry and agriculture, which were being plundered for the German war effort, and partly because it would have alienated the Turkish government and pan-Turkic sentiment at a time when the Nazis were attempting to secure Turkish backing.

The Nazis even made some limited concessions to the Crimean Tatars. They were allowed a certain religious freedom, and Crimean Tatar schools and theatres were allowed to reopen. 'Muslim Committees' were also created, and efforts were made to recruit Crimean Tatars into military

units.

This policy was very limited, and had small success in winning Crimean Tatar support for the Nazis. As the Nazis gave up hope of backing from Turkey, they stepped up repression in the Crimea. Crimean Tatars were shipped off to Germany to work in war industries, censorship of Crimean Tatar publications was increased, and Crimean Tatar villages were destroyed in order to deny Soviet partisans access to them.

The Crimean Tatars fought back. According to a 1973 issue of the samizdat journal 'Chronicle of Current Affairs', 53,000 Crimean Tatars fought in the Red Army, and 12,000 in the Soviet partisans. 30,000 Crimean Tatars died fighting the Nazis.

By the spring of 1944 the Crimean peninsula had been reconquered by the Russian Army. Then, beginning on the night of 17-18 May, the entire Crimean Tatar population was deported and scattered across Soviet Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and the Urals. What had been planned first by the Tsars and then by Hitler but never carried out, was now achieved by Stalin — a Crimea devoid of Crimean Tatars.

Some 100,000 Crimean Tatars, 40% of the population, died in the course of the deportation and the first year of 'resettlement'. This was over three times as many as had been killed by the fascists during the war.

No-one was spared the deportation, neither the old nor the young, neither Tatar Communists nor Tatars who had been in partisan units. Tatars still serving in the Russian Army were deported on demobilisation.

An 'Open Letter in Defence of Crimean Tatars', circulating in Moscow in 1969, describes the journey into 'resettlement'.

"This was the journey of slow death in railway carriages for cattle, stuffed full of people like sponges. The journey lasted three or four weeks and passed through the burning summer steppes of Kazakhstan. They transported the red partisans of the Crimea, the fighters of the Bolshevik underground, Soviet and party activists, but invalids and old men as well. The other men were fighting the fascists at the front, and exile awaited them at the end of the war..."

"The Crimean Tatars were taken to reservations in the Urals, Kazakhstan, and — principally — Uzbekistan. That is how the Tatars found themselves in this area. The deportation was completed, but the destruction of the people had only begun."

The Crimean Tatars were not the only national minority to meet this fate. The Volga Germans, the Karachai, the Kalmyks, the Balkars, the Chechens, and the Ingushi were all likewise uprooted and deported.

The long-standing Great-Russian fear of the Crimean Tatars possibly allying with Turkey was compounded in this period by the USSR's more hostile attitude towards Turkey from late 1944 onwards. In March 1945 the USSR renounc-

ed the Turco-Soviet treaty of neutrality of 1925, and in July 1945 it raised the question of the 'return' of the Turkish provinces of Kars and Ardahan which, according to Soviet foreign minister Molotov, had been "ceded to Turkey at the end of the First World War at a moment when the Russians' weakness left them with no alternative to acceding to Turkish demands".

The mass deportations and the death of 100,000 people were nothing to do with any supposed 'collective guilt' on the part of the Crimean Tatars, but were the result of Stalinism's contempt for the rights of national minorities and its great-power foreign policies.

Having physically removed the Crimean Tatar community and scattered it across Soviet Central Asia, the Kremlin set about



Stalin

denying that it had ever existed and wiping out every vestige of its former presence in the Crimea. In October 1944, "all inhabited districts, rivers and mountains of which the names are of Tatar, Greek or German origin" were re-named.

The Crimean Tatars faced discrimination even in the 'resettlement' areas. The 'Appeal of the Crimean Tatar people to the 23rd Congress of the CPSU' complained: "People with higher education, qualified specialists, could work only as unskilled workers. We were not permitted to work in party, soviet or administrative organs, in transport or on the railways, in organs of popular education, in enterprises with defence contracts, in the militia, in the State Bank, etc."

Crimean Tatars were expelled from the Communist Party and others banned from joining it, especially those who supported the Crimean Tatars' campaign for restoration of their homeland.

In the 1950s some minor concessions were made. In 1954 some of the restrictions on Tatars in Uzbekistan were lifted. In 1956 they were allowed to leave the 'resettlement' areas (but not to return to the Crimea). In 1957 they were allowed to begin publication of a Crimean Tatar language newspaper.

Such concessions, and Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU

in 1956, encouraged further campaigning by the Crimean Tatars. In 1957 a petition with 14,000 names was sent to the Central Committee of the CPSU. In 1958, petitions with 12,000 and 16,000 signatures were sent to the Central Committee. Further petitions with between 10,000 and 18,000 signatures, demanding rehabilitation, restoration of lost property, and the right of return to the Crimea, were submitted in 1959, 1961, and 1964.

At the same time Crimean Tatar committees were established in the towns and villages to which the Crimean Tatars had been exiled, in order to coordinate the campaigning and organise education of Tatar youth in their language and culture. Delegations were repeatedly sent to Moscow to present the petitions and lobby members of the government. Despite arrests and expulsions from Moscow, by mid-1967 over 400 Crimean Tatars were resident there as official representatives of their community.

Threats to demonstrate publicly in Red Square resulted in a meeting with the government in July 1967. In September 1967 a decree officially withdrew the Stalinist accusations that the Tatars had collaborated with the Nazis, but avoided any commitment to redress. The Crimean Tatars continued to campaign. In the months following the September 1967 decree, some 10,000 attempted to resettle in the Crimea. They were barred, expelled, or forced out by discrimination and repression.

Leading Crimean Tatar campaigners, such as Reshat Dzhemilyov, one of the leaders of the most recent demonstrations in Moscow, linked up with the broader Soviet dissident movement and won support from such people as Sakharov and Grigorenko. Lobbying of government ministers continued in Moscow, and demonstrations were organised in the Tatars' places of exile.

The Crimean Tatars also began to regain their national culture. A textbook for the study of the Crimean Tatar language was produced, and several collections of Crimean Tatar literature published. A department for the publication of Crimean Tatar literature was set up in the Tashkent Gafur Gulam publishing house.

Repression continued. Crimean Tatar leaders such as Dzhelimov faced repeated trials and prison sentences for 'anti-Soviet activities'. Demonstrations were broken up, and mass arrests made.

But the recent demonstrations in Moscow shows that the Crimean Tatars' 43-year struggle for restoration of their rights continues. For Gorbachev to continue his predecessors' policies of repression will expose the limits of his liberalisation. To make concessions will encourage further activity by the Crimean Tatars and the hundred other oppressed national minorities of the Soviet Union.

Socialists can only welcome this dilemma now faced by Gorbachev and his colleagues, and give full support to the just demands of the oppressed nationalities imprisoned in the Soviet Union.