

# Identity of Crimean Tatars\*

Ülkü Nur Zengin\*\*

## Abstract

The Crimean Tatars are a community worthy of study without losing their conscience despite all the pressures in their history. Their loyalty to their history and their homeland has kept them together despite the genocide and exile they have experienced. The aim of this study is to evaluate the identity building process of the Crimean Tatars in the context of nationalist theories. It will be revealed in our work that Tatar nationalism, which is based on historical leader and symbolic values, can be explained by ethno-symbolism. In the study, firstly ethno-symbolism will be given and then the identity building process of the Crimean Tatars will be examined.

## Keywords

Crimean Tatars, nationalism, identity, ethno-symbolism, nation, USSR.

---

\* Date of Arrival: 06 February 2018 – Date of Acceptance: 04 September 2018

You can refer to this article as follows:

Zengin, Ülkü Nur (2020). "Identity of Crimean Tatars". *bilig – Journal of Social Sciences of the Turkic World* 92: 163-184.

\*\* Lecturer, Turkish National Police Academy, Security Sciences Institute – Ankara/Turkey

ORCID ID: [orcid.org/0000-0003-2159-2263](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2159-2263)

[unurzengin@hotmail.com](mailto:unurzengin@hotmail.com)

## **Introduction**

The subject of this study is the national identity of Crimean Tatars. We will examine the process of constructing identity and then comment this process according to the nationalism theories.

Despite the beginnings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was only in the twentieth century that nationalist debates could gain an academic dimension.

The main theories of nationalism are primordialism, modernism and ethno-symbolism. In this study it will be argued that the construction of national identity in Crimean Tatars can be explained by the theory of ethno-symbolism. So a brief definition of this approach will be given at the beginning.

Post-Soviet era is very suitable to observe the nationalist movements. As Bingöl (2004) argues on the contrary of the expectations after disintegration of the SSSR democratic regimes did not take place. Instead of democracies we can see growing nationalities. Not only the states but also the stateless ethnic groups began to construct national identities at that period. Because of the pressure of the former regime, all groups get aware of their ethnicities. Crimean Tatars is one of these stateless groups. They have been in exile since 1944 because of being Muslim and Turk. This event is the most important reason of nationalist feelings of them.

## **Ethno-Symbolism**

Ethno-symbolism emerges from the theoretical critique of modernism. Broadly speaking, the term refers to an approach which emphasizes the role of myths, symbols, memories, values and traditions in the formation, persistence and change of ethnicity and nationalism (Özkırıklı 2010: 143). According to Anthony D. Smith, the leading proponent of this approach, , an ethno-symbolic approach stresses the need for an analysis of collective cultural identities over *la longue durée*, that is a time span of many centuries; the importance of continuity, recurrence and appropriation as different modes of connecting the national past, present and future; the significance of pre-existing ethnic communities, or ethnies, in the formation of modern nations; the role of memories of golden ages, myths of origin and ethnic election, cults of heroes and ancestors, the attachment to a homeland in

the formation and persistence of national identities; the different kinds of ethnic groups that form the basis of various kinds of nations; and the special contribution of the modern ideology of nationalism to the dissemination of the ideal of the nation (2002: 14–15). Guided by a common reverence for the past, ethnosymbolists lay stress on similar processes in their explanations of nations and nationalism. For them, the emergence of today's nations cannot be understood properly without taking their ethnic forebears into account; in other words, the rise of nations needs to be contextualized within the larger phenomenon of ethnicity which shaped them (Hutchinson 1994: 7). The differences between modern nations and the collective cultural units of earlier eras are of degree rather than kind. This suggests that ethnic identities change more slowly than is generally assumed; once formed, they tend to be exceptionally durable under 'normal' vicissitudes of history, such as migrations, invasions, intermarriages, and to persist over many generations, even centuries (Smith 1986: 16).

Ethno-symbolists claim to reject the stark 'continuism' of the perennialists and to accord due weight to the transformations wrought by modernity. They also reject the claims of the modernists by arguing that a greater measure of continuity exists between 'traditional' and 'modern', or 'agrarian' and 'industrial' eras – hence the need for a wider theory of ethnic formation that will bring out the differences and similarities between contemporary national units and premodern ethnic communities (Smith 1986: 13). Smith contends that such an approach is more helpful than its alternatives in at least three ways. First, it helps to explain which populations are likely to start a nationalist movement under certain conditions and what the content of this movement would be. Second, it enables us to understand the important role of memories, values, myths and symbols. Nationalism, Smith argues, mostly involves the pursuit of symbolic goals such as education in a particular language, having a TV channel in one's own language or the protection of ancient sacred sites. Materialist and modernist theories of nationalism fail to illuminate these issues as they are unable to comprehend the emotive power of collective memories. Finally, the ethno-symbolist approach explains why and how nationalism is able to generate such a widespread popular support (Özkırıklı 2010:144).

John A. Armstrong first underlined the significance of *la longue durée*

for the study of nationalism in Nations before Nationalism (1982), and embedded it within a larger inquiry into the pre-modern bases of ethnicity. For Armstrong, ethnic consciousness has a long history; it is possible to come across its traces in ancient civilizations, for example in Egypt and Mesopotamia. In this sense, contemporary nationalism is nothing but the final stage of a larger cycle of ethnic consciousness reaching back to the earliest forms of collective organization. The most important feature of this consciousness, according to Armstrong, is its persistence (Özkırımlı 2010: 158).

### **National Identity of Crimean Tatars**

#### **A brief history of crimean tatars**

Following the weakening of the Golden Horde state, the Crimean Khanate was founded in the mid-fifteenth century (Fisher 1978: 1-8). Starting in 1475, the Crimean Khanate came under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire until the Küçük Kaynarca Treaty was signed at the end of the Ottoman Russian War in 1774. However, the protection of the Ottoman Empire continued until the Russian invasion of 1783, which caused a significant impoverishment of Crimea. Furthermore, the Russian invasion changed the demographic composition of Crimea drastically. This entailed important waves of migration by the Crimean Tatars mostly to the Ottoman Empire (Fisher 1978: 89, Kırımlı 1996: 12).

During the Crimean War, the Russian government charged the Crimean Tatars with espionage, provocation, betrayal, and collaborating with the enemy. For the Russian government, deeply embroiled in a war it was clearly losing, the Tatars posed a wild card. Many officials presumed Tatars to be a *fifth column*, ready to assist the Allies because, like the Ottomans, they were Muslim. In an era of heightened religious tension, Russian officials believed their own propaganda: that the Crimean War was a holy war, and that they had an internal as well as an external enemy (Kozelsky 2008: 866).

As the war dragged on, Tatars found themselves caught between Russian surveillance, marauding Cossacks, and hungry Allies. From fall 1854 through spring 1855, they began to leave Crimea in a slow trickle (Kozelsky 2008: 884).

Initially, however, Russian officials who may have encouraged migration were

restrained from taking any overt action by the Treaty of Paris. According to point five of this treaty, all warring nations had to “give full pardon to those of their subjects who appeared guilty of actively participating in the military affairs of the enemy.” The treaty further required that “each of the warring powers give full pardon to those who served for another warring power during the war.” This clause appeared in the treaty to protect, not only the Tatars, but the many Bulgarian and Greek subjects of the Ottoman Empire who sided with Russia during the Crimean War. Late in 1856, Russian authorities tested the provisions of the treaty for the first time when they attempted to negotiate the status of returnees who came back to Crimea either to be with their families or to bring more people to the Ottoman Empire. Russian authorities quickly made it clear that these returnees were not welcome. At first the local government in Crimea viewed Tatar emigrants as traitors and attempted to punish returnees with imprisonment or exile to Siberia (Kozelsky 2008: 886).

While Crimean Tatars constituted more than 80 percent of Crimea’s population, following the invasion this figure started to decrease continuously as a result of Russia’s policies of Russifying Crimea. During the period 1783-1922, nearly 1.8 million Crimean Tatars migrated to the Ottoman Empire (Kırımlı 1996: 12). Russia’s main objective in invading Crimea was to integrate it into Russia. Soon after the Russian Revolution in 1917, a group of nationalist Crimean Tatars sought to found an independent Crimean Tatar state in Crimea. The Bolsheviks immediately prevented this, and the nationalist leader of the Crimean Tatars, Noman Çelebi Cihan, was killed. Later, in 1921, the Bolsheviks themselves established the Crimean Autonomous Republic. The term Tatar was not used in the name of the Republic under the pretext that only a small percentage of the Crimean Tatars were living in Crimea. In fact, the Soviet nationalities policy of the 1920s paved the way for the development and revival of the Crimean Tatar culture (Aydingün & Aydingün 2007: 114). The relatively free atmosphere of the 1920s did not last long, however. The Soviet nationalities policy went through important changes from the end of the 1920s through the 1930s (Allworth 1998b: 180-204). During this period, Crimean Tatar intellectuals and leaders, who mostly believed in communism, were either killed or sent into exile (Kreindler 1986: 389-90). The early 1940s were characterized by strategic deportations resulting in *special settlement* under Stalin’s regime

(Nekrich 1978: 87-136). An example of these harsh policies was the 1944 Crimean Tatar deportation, which entailed the forceful move of an entire community from their homeland to Central Asia where they were subjected to special settlements. This was the most striking demographic change that took place in Crimea: as a result, no Crimean Tatar was left in the peninsula. In the case of Crimea, the Soviet government particularly encouraged Russian settlement. Most of the deported Crimean Tatars were settled in Uzbekistan.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev repudiated many Stalinist policies, most famously in his *Secret Speech* in 1956. On the contrary of the other groups Tatars couldn't return to the Crimea after 1956 speech. However, the Supreme Soviet's decision of 1989 regarding the repatriation of the Crimean Tatars to their homeland caused a large-scale return migration of the Crimean Tatars to Crimea. This was followed by significant social, economic and political changes as well as problems in Crimea (Aydingün & Aydingün 2007: 115).

Historical awareness is one of the most important bases of the nationalism. Ethnosymbolists argues that the nations have a long history consisting common memories. As it is seen above Tatars have a long history with ups and downs. That history never been forgotten and has been alive in all Tatar's mind while becoming and staying as a nation.

### **Leaders of the Tatar's national movement**

Crimean Tatars have been blessed with a number of outstanding leaders over the past hundred years which are in large part responsible for the remarkable ability that Tatars have shown to survive, even thrive, as a vital nationality within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (Fisher 1998: 30). As ethnosymbolism states, these leaders transformed the passive people into an active form. They used sense of homeland and golden age myth during these process.

*Ismail Gaspıralı*: 'Dilde, fikirde, işte birlik'.

In the modern cultural history of the Crimean Tatar nationality, Gaspıralı has surely played a key part. His importance lies especially in the contributions he made to educational innovation and to a new, universalistic perspective for his and other Muslim Turkic people and, in retrospect, in the tremendous

amount he accomplished in renewing Crimean Tatar culture. In no sense a nationalist, only indirectly did he strengthen the singularity of his kinsmen's ethnic attachment through their reverence for his prominence and purity of motives for enlightenment of the Muslims in the Russian-wide Empire (Allworth 1998a: 8).

It is possible to divide his concerns into four main categories, which, although separate, are obviously interrelated: the general question of Islamic renewal and relations between the Islamic and various Western worlds; language and its role in Islamic renewal; women's rights and emancipation as an essential ingredient for renewal; and, finally, for Ismail Gaspiralı the panacea for the first three, education in a form new to the Islamic world. (Fisher 1998: 33)

Readers of the main writings of the great Crimean Tatar reformist Ismail Gaspiralı do not encounter in them calls for the ethnic self-determination of his people. Rather, Gaspiralı writes constantly of the Muslims of Russia, including his own people, as part of that community. In matters of language, Gaspiralı emphatically promotes the use of an ethnically neutral all Turkic tongue and literary medium more or less based on Ottoman Turkish, again avoiding any partiality for the distinctive linguistic identity of Crimean Tatars. In his collection of articles *Russian Islam*, he writes of 'Tatar-Muslim traits' but, significantly, does not choose the form Crimean Tatars. Later, he specifically attacks the narrow kind of nationalism put forward by Russians and other Europeans (Allworth 1998a:7).

*Mustafa Jemiloglu*: Mustafa Jemiloglu's restoration of Crimean Tatar history and his brave and triumphant speeches, both on the Crimean Tatar problem and in defense of repressed activists in the Crimean Tatar movement, have made him the preeminent figure within the movement. He has become the most authoritative ideologist of the new wave (Alexeyeva 1998: 214). As Reddaway (1998: 230-233) presents the main tactics of Tatar's that mostly formed by Jemiloglu.

For the leaders of the Soviet Union it was psychologically inconceivable to agree to settle Crimean Tatars in a strategically important border region like Crimea. The Tatars, on the one hand, have ancestral ties and a common religion with the Turkish population across the Black Sea and, on the other, have actively demonstrated for years the people's universal will to stand

up for their rights. They have courageously presented to the authorities an account of all the human victims, the destruction of national culture, and the unending discrimination. Mustafa Jemiloglu and his adherents were right: a solution to the Crimean Tatar problem was possible only as a result of democratization of the system or as the result of its enfeeblement. In any case, having preserved their national self-awareness and dream of returning to Crimea, most Crimean Tatar people shall be able to make the dream reality, for the people are protected by the support of democratic forces in the country, some of the present population of Crimea, and, possibly, the greater part of world public opinion (Alexeyeva 1998: 224).

### **Religion**

One such group-differentiating characteristic is religion. Tatars are Muslim and Sunni (Hansen & Hesli 2009: 4). Actually one of the reasons of Crimean War and deportation is their religion. According to the ethnosymbolism religion is also one of the main factors for renewing the nations.

This is especially the case in light of recent research that has shown that the Russian government integrated Muslims peaceably elsewhere in the Russian empire. While this may have been the experience of Muslims living in Russia's interior, it does not reflect the reality of Muslims who lived along imperial borders. These Muslims lining the northern coast of the Black Sea engaged in repeated episodes of mass migration or were subjected to state-orchestrated violence throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The religious hostilities surrounding the Crimean War highlight the confessional context of these migrations (Kozelsky 2008: 868).

The Crimean War further changed the peninsula by ushering in a new program of Christianization. At the war's end, Christianity had rooted itself firmly into the peninsula, which had more Christian churches, new monasteries, and even its own diocesan hierarchy (Kozelsky 2008: 888).

### **Political Struggle**

Although some scholars trace the roots of the Crimean Tatar Nationalist Movement to the period of the Crimean War (Altan 1992: 1-2), the movement's present-day structure and goals date from 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev gave his famous *Secret Speech* to the Twentieth Party Congress de binking Stalin's cult of personality and exonerating the victims of his



policies. The open criticism of Stalin and the warming of the political climate within the Soviet Union provided a political opening for the emergence of a consolidated and politically self-conscious group of Crimean Tatar activists who used non-violent, legalistic means to advocate for ethnic unity and demand compensation for past injustices (Uehling 2004: 140). It was then that the Crimean Tatars began the task of rebuilding their shattered society and assessing the damage to their devastated nation. Among their first tasks was the uniting of splintered families and discovering which neighbors, friends and family members had been lost in this communal disaster. Crimean Tatar activists and the remnants of the pre-deportation Crimean ASSR communist leadership (which had been deported despite its loyalty during the war) travelled throughout the settlements in Central Asia and conducted a census to ascertain the magnitude of the damage to the nation in demographic terms. As the results were correlated by daring activists, the enormity of the tragedy became strikingly apparent. The ad hoc Crimean Tatar census committees came to the conclusion that 46 percent of their nation had been killed in the deportation and resettlement process (Williams 2002: 340).

From the Movement's inception in the 1950s, its leaders focused on uniting Crimean Tatars, who were dispersed throughout Central Asia. They purposefully mobilized the entire population of deportees around the ideas of unjust exile, their right to the Crimean homeland, and, eventually, the goals of returning to Crimea and gaining some degree of sovereignty on the peninsula. The centralized structure of the movement and the reliance of its leadership on lower-level groups created a basis for truly collective decision making and, eventually, the voluntary group migration of Crimean Tatars. The Movement was based on initiative groups that operated in most Central Asian villages and towns with Tatar settlers. These groups consisted of active members in direct contact with the Movements' leaders who organized regular meetings of the Crimean Tatar community, during which they clarified the goals of the Movement, collected money to fund the Movement's delegates to Moscow in support of repatriation, and gathered signatures for petitions and letters to Soviet authorities. Mustafa Jemilev, Ayse Seymuratova, Set-Amza, Marat Ymerov, and other Crimean Tatar activists conducted extensive research on the Crimean Tatars' ethnic origins, the era of the Khanate, Tatars' participation in World War II, and the deportation.

They then shared their knowledge with the broader population through public lectures, cultural events, discussions during meetings of initiative groups, and written petitions (Fisher 1978, Uehling 2004: 142-143).

Although the active core of the Movement was not large, it had a wide base within the community that formed as a result of the education-based mobilization efforts of its leadership. Grass-roots mobilization took full advantage of the oral tradition of parental narration of history in Crimean Tatar families. By turning children and women into agents of political struggle, the Movement's activists ensured effective mobilization when the time for mass repatriation arrived in the early 1990s.

The Crimean Tatars' letter-writing campaign was one of the most extensive of its kind among Soviet-era dissident movements. Initiative group leaders encouraged Tatars to write down the stories of their families and send their letters to Communist Party headquarters in Moscow, requesting recognition of injustices experienced by their relatives. According to underground (*samizdat*) press estimates, over 4 million individual and collective letters were posted by Crimean Tatars in the two decades after the campaign started in the mid-1950s (Uehling 2004: 140-141).

Another element of the written appeal strategy of the Movement, which had the added benefit of activating the population of deportees, involved signing petitions requesting acknowledgment that the deportation had been unjust. For instance, a 1966 petition to the Twenty-Third Party Congress was signed by over 120,000 Crimean Tatars, almost the entire adult population in Central Asia at the time (Sheehy 1971:78). More than 3 million signatures were collected in support of petitions for restitution sent to the Soviet authorities. By engaging the entire population from the beginning, the Crimean Tatar leadership legitimized the Tatars' demands for the return to their homeland in the eyes of the Movement's constituents. Subsequently, these collectively experienced grievances and feelings of entitlement for compensation and retribution were reinforced through protests and demonstrations. Crimean Tatars regularly marched in the capitals of Central Asian republics and in Moscow to show their determination to stand behind their claims and their readiness to act on them when presented with a political opportunity. Annually, on the anniversary of the deportation, the Movement organized large demonstrations assembling the vast majority of Crimean Tatars in exile.

## Education and Literature

In education, by the end of the 1920s the mother tongue became the language of instruction in primary education, and to some extent even secondary and higher education. However, the relatively free atmosphere of the 1920s was rapidly changing in the 1930s to control from the center. This however, did not spare the remaining Crimean Tatar intelligentsia from the subsequent purges in the 1930s (Kreindler 1986: 389-390).

For more than a decade each of the deported nationalities was also condemned to a near cultural death. Their institutions destroyed, books burned, typographies broken, each reverted to being a non-literate society. Even Crimean Tatar, the language of a people who boasted several institutions of higher learning in the early 16th century, had turned into a non-written language (Kreindler 1986: 393).

Since 1957 the Crimean Tatars have had their own newspaper, *Lenin Bayraghy*, and in 1980 a socio-literary review, *Yıldız*, was launched. A Crimean Tatar section has been set up within the Uzbekistan Writers Union and a section for Crimean publications established in the Ga'fur Publishing House in Tashkent. Crimean Tatar has not however returned as a medium of instruction; at best, parents occasionally succeed in having the language taught as an elective subject. The present cultural facilities appear especially meager when compared with what the Crimean Tatars enjoyed in their own republic even after the devastating Stalin purges. In 1940, for example, 218 books were published in Crimean Tatar while between 1944 and 1966 only ten appeared; between 1944 and 1973 the number was two. But there has been a slow improvement. Between 1975 and 1980 more than 60 books were published. There is also a Crimean Tatar samizdat journal, *Emel*, published in Tashkent (Kreindler 1986: 398).

The most important problem that Tatars' have is teaching the Tatar language to the new generation which was born in the exile. The lack of the national schools Tatar youths and children cannot learn their own language (Kanlıdere 2016: 235). For almost fifty years, the Soviet government refused to permit a public educational program anywhere to teach in the Crimean Tatar language (Allworth 1998a: 15). A memorandum presented to the government of the Republic of Ukrayina by the Crimean Tatar Mejlis

confirms the existence of that policy. The first school using the Crimean Tatar language for instruction came into being in 1993. The community established another in the following year. Both schools owed their start to private funding (Allworth 1998a: 17).

Deprivation of the use of their tongue in education and other intellectual discourse has produced yet another side effect. Crimean Tatars regard the native language as a treasure worth preserving for its own, symbolic sake, not only for normal communication (Allworth 1998a: 18).

### **Importance of Family**

According to Uehling (2004: 148-149), the nationalist project of Crimean Tatars was organized around neighborhood and kin-based networks, civic organizations, and schools - all of which were accessible to women. Williams (2001: 412-413) notes that family members, particularly mothers and grandmothers, played key roles in preserving the unique identity of deportees through systematic observation of customs and rituals honoring their Crimean Tatar cultural heritage. Within Crimean Tatar families, the memory of the deportation became the chosen *drama* and the *communal grievance* that provided a basis for the politicization of the exiled community (Williams 2001: 414-415).

Without their autonomous republic, and without their homeland, the Crimean Tatar people would have been deprived of a cultural environment in which they could enjoy, as nearly all other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union did enjoy, the cultural heritage of their nationality. What happened to Crimean Tatars in this respect was tersely expressed in 1966 in one of many appeals by their representatives to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Everything was done in order (1) to destroy the statehood of Crimean Tatars; (2) to obliterate the culture, art, and literature of Crimean Tatars; (3) to destroy the history of these people; (4) to finish their language; (5) to terminate their customs; (6) to do everything possible to make every Crimean Tatar feel ashamed to call himself a Crimean Tatar; (7) to prove to every representative of this nation that neither he nor his children, nor his descendants still unborn has any future!

Notwithstanding the enormous pressure from the political authorities of the Soviet Union to keep this nationality totally disorganized, Crimean Tatars

most actively and determinedly stood up against the Soviet government. Where did Crimean Tatars get this stubborn will to survive? What makes this small ethnic group not only live on but also continue to fight for its rights against foreign politicians? One of the foremost reasons for that firm will to prevail appears to lie in the might of the Crimean Tatar family. It is a source of strength and faith (Altan 1998: 99).

The Soviet system publicly denied thousands of Crimean Tatar youths knowledge of their nationality's history, language, and culture, yet privately these children became quite aware of their nationality identity. In the absence of structured institutions to inculcate their group history, civilization, and tongue, it became an obligation of the family to fulfill this duty. Crimean Tatars born since the early 1940s grew up listening to stories about their families and their ancestral homeland. Families gave the youths understanding of and hope for the future, a sense of direction and goals, and a sense of identity. It has provided the backbone for the Crimean Tatar nationality's durability (Altan 1998: 101).

An important part of that strength derives from the tight family attachment that encourages younger Crimean Tatars to marry within the Crimean Tatar community. They were known as one of the most endogamous people in the Soviet Union. According to unofficial statistics, the rate of endogamy is 90-91 percent, which means that only 9 or 10 percent of Crimean Tatars marry outside the group. Such a rate compares favorably with the percentage for nationalities of Central Asia (Fisher 1980: 230- 236).

### **Sense of Homeland**

Typical forms of voluntary group migration include the voluntary repatriation of refugees to their country of origin, settler movements, and the relocation of ethnic groups to specific territories to make claims for national self-determination (Zaloznaya and Gerber 2012: 259).

Given the relative stability of life in exile and the predictable difficulty of relocation, what made over 250,000 people leave their jobs, homes, and acquaintances and move completely to an unfamiliar territory without any security in regard to resettlement and employment? According to opinion polls conducted among the repatriates, the main motive for returning to Crimea was the popular desire to "return to the roots" and the shared

conviction that the cultural and spiritual development of Crimean Tatars could only take place in what they considered their historic motherland on the Crimean peninsula. They viewed migration to Crimea as their natural right, or even obligation, and the slogan *Homeland or Death* was widely adopted by deportees (Uehling 2004: 199-201).

As ethnosymbolism states sense of homeland is the biggest motivation to create a national identity. So Tatar's leaders formulation of the Tatars' status as native people of the Crimean peninsula was directly associated with the foundation of the Crimean Tatar Nationalist Movement in 1956 (Allworth 1998b: 258). In articulating the indigenous status of Crimean Tatars on the Crimean peninsula, the group's leadership pursued two concrete goals: to mobilize Crimean Tatars around the idea of repatriation, and to harness material and symbolic support from domestic and international political actors. As Uehling (2004: 135) puts it, "by casting a particular glance on the past, and *speaking* with the state, participants in the movement gradually created an atmosphere in which return seemed self-evident, even obligatory. In many ways, the remembering the movement endorsed became a form of collective action."

### **Music and Anthem**

Movement leaders did not limit their informational campaign to political speeches and legalistic arguments. They wrote songs and poetry about the lost motherland, organized memorial celebrations, staged performances about the events of 1944, and held public history readings to educate young Crimean Tatars about their origins and the sufferings of their ancestors. These symbols were the biggest part of the national consciousness.

By 1914, the state of affairs in Crimea had divested Crimean Tatars of their own imperial past and most national monuments. The only institution with which the people could now identify was the newspaper published by Ismail Bey Gaspıralı, *Terjuman* (Turkish *Tercuman*). From this situation arose the next generation of educators and leaders for the nationality. Outstanding among those was Numan Chelebi Jihan (1885-1918), first president of the Crimean national government, who had been educated in one of the new-method schools established by Gaspıralı before his death in 1914. Jihan also studied in Istanbul, becoming the first elected mufti (religious authority) of

Crimea since Russia annexed Crimea formally in 1783. He wrote the song that rose to the status of a national anthem.

Another cultural leader, Shevki Bektore's (1881-1961) song "My Tatarness" gained wide popularity and a permanent place in the repertory of Crimean Tatar patriotic music. A third intellectual leader, Bekir Sitki Chobanzade (1893-1938), studied in Crimea, then in Istanbul on a stipend offered by the Students' Benevolent Association established by Ismail Bey Gaspıralı. As a poet, he added verses to Bektore's original version of "My Tatarness," making the song even more popular than before. As professor of Oriental languages, Chobanzade later (1928) also participated in romanizing Bektore's Crimean Tatar alphabet. By using the vernacular language, these men helped form the Crimean Tatar national identity.

The very same thought-preserving the nationality by saving its literary language would recur much later during the Central Asian phase of Crimean Tatar history. On 26 November 1917, after Friday prayers and Muslim rituals, to the tune of the "Marseillaise," with the sky-blue field and golden scales of the Qyrlutay flag and a revolutionary banner flying, Crimean national government president Jihan opened the national parliament (Qyrlutay). As the parliament began its work on that day, its members sang "I Pledge" by popular demand as a kind of oath of office. Crimean Tatars found a new leader and fresh symbols to accompany remaining traditional signs of group identity. Under adverse conditions a nationality may yet look to its culture and art to provide the significant symbolism so necessary for group survival (Kırımca 1998: 71-72).

This early adoption of a national anthem by the Crimean Tatar public illustrates the rapid development of a sense of nationality consciousness and unity among them (Kırımca 1998: 73). Because singing "I Pledge" became a political gesture or symbol and therefore a political risk, Crimean Tatar exiles in Central Asia in later years adopted "My Tatarness" as an unofficial anthem (Kırımca 1998: 77).

The anthem "I Pledge" possesses great importance as a symbol of identity and cohesion from Crimean Tatars in the diaspora. In the absence of a true capital city, of a national museum, of a national seal and flag, and of other conventional marks of nationality, these songs have for a time become

the only palpable symbols remaining for Crimean Tatars to rally around (Kırımca 1998: 79).

Renditions by their creative intellectuals in the different fields of art, literature, and music, whether pessimistic or affirmative, contributed significantly to the regrowth of self-identity among Crimean Tatars. Familiar words set to popular melodies carve another facet into the sensory configuration making up the group's self-awareness (Allworth 1998a: 19).

### **Celebrations and Ceremonies**

Because of the pressure of the Soviet regime and the interaction with different cultures, the Christmas and birthday celebrations spread among the Crimean Tatars, but the bairams, births and wedding traditions did not undergo major changes as well. Religious-based traditions and customs such as circumcision and funeral have remained unchanged against all oppression and difficulties. For example, circumcision is an important religious practice for the Crimean Tatars, as Muslim people. In the years of exile, circumcision of male children could be carried out with difficulty as if other religious worship. It could be mostly confidential. Crimean Tatars who faced pressure to fulfill religious practices such as praying, fasting and reading the Qur'an, were unable to celebrate as they wish (Aydingün 2014: 59). But the struggle for preventing the religious sense made the Tatars aware of their identity.

### **Topographic Names and Architecture**

The majority of Crimean Tatar historical monuments have been destroyed due to political events and neglect. Crimean Tatars, who were only able to return to their homeland after a long struggle, claim ownership of the remaining monuments and are trying to restore them as well. There are strong ties between the past and present situation of the Tatars. They feel these ties much more than any other nation and they always encounter their historical past in their everyday lives. Also, they know the reality and value of historical consciousness and the protection of historical memory. Tatars' effort to revive their cultural heritage is a part of their struggle to rebuild their cultural and national identities, which were damaged because of their total deportation in 1944. Their special efforts to revive their memorial monuments and historical figures are the most vivid examples of recovering national memory, which was intentionally annihilated and made to be



forgotten under the despotic years of the Soviets (Kanlıdere 2016: 233).

Ancient Crimean Tatar village or topographic names (often with pre Mongol roots) were changed overnight by administrative caveat. This cultural and administrative Russification of the Crimean Tatars' homeland was paralleled by government-sponsored settlement of Russians and Ukrainians in the abandoned state and collective farms of the region (Williams 2002: 343).

The Crimean Tatars have erected in Simferopol two monuments to the deportation which have great symbolic significance for this people who lost so many of their relatives in this communal tragedy. The monuments have plaques on them that read in Russian and Tatar 'On this spot will be erected a monument to the genocide against the Crimean Tatar people' (Williams 2002: 346).

## **Conclusion**

The roots of Tatar nationalism are based on history. Crimean Tatars are the only group of different ethnic groups living on the peninsula who speak Turkish and Muslims. For this reason, there are always enough elements in the historical process to be qualified as "the other". Crimean Tatars, who are different as a race from the Slav and Russian groups living in the peninsula, formed group awareness and belonging long before the nationalist movements. The ethnicity, religion and the language are the basic factors of being a nation according to the ethnosymbolism. That's why this study is focused on ethnosymbolist approach.

Crimean War and the exile in 1944 have been the turning points for constructing the Tatar identity. The Crimean Tatars were exposed to the most severe consequences of the "we" and "other" distinction during these events. After these events, the Tatar people, who are interlinked as people who share the "common destiny", have begun a struggle for re-existence.

The period of Tatar identity consciousness is the period of the communist regime. This period, which rejects every kind of difference, has become even crueler for Tatars. Today, it is widely accepted that there is a genocide committed to the Tatars. All official records such as title deeds and population registration have been destroyed for remaining no connection of Tatars with the Crimean Peninsula, national history and each other. The official history has been rewritten as embarrassing for the Tatars. All books

in the Tatar language were burned, and even the tombstones were destroyed. It has become very difficult for “linguistic and historical consciousness”, which is the basis of national identity, to be formed in such a repressive environment. For this reason, family and oral transmission of family members has become very important. “National education” was possible only in the home environment. The only place where the Tatar language was used was once again home. By means of oral literature, the longing for the country, memories of the past, traditions and cultural values have been tried to be transmitted to the new generation. Since the families succeeded in this transfer, even today, generations who have never seen the Crimean Peninsula or who do not know the Tatar language have started to migrate to the Crimean peninsula. It can be explained only by the sense of homeland and missing the golden age of the nation which was lived in that homeland.

Cultural items such as traditional dances, folk songs, poems and ceremonies have become symbols of group affiliation during the oppression period. “I pledge” was the unique poem, Qaytarma was the symbol dance etc. These symbolic elements have served to keep the oppressed society together. The effect of these symbols in constructing the nation can only be understood by the ethnosymbolist approach.

As a result, we can say that the struggle for survival with a peaceful method against a communist rule is carried out only through the understanding of “common destiny” and symbols. The Crimean Tatars have long history but the construction of Crimean Tatar identity has begun in modern times. For this reason, the approach that best describes the formation process of Tatar national identity will be ethno-symbolism.

## References

- Aktürk, Şener (2011). “Regimes of Ethnicity: Comparative Analysis of Germany, the Soviet Union/Post-Soviet Russia, and Turkey”. *World Politics* 63 (1): 115-164.
- Alexeyeva, Ludmilla (1998). “Mustafa Jemiloglu, His Character and Convictions”. Ed. Edward A. Allworth. *The Tatars of Crimea Return to the Homeland*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 206-225.
- Allworth, Edward A. (1998a). “Renewing Self-Awareness”. Ed. Edward A. Allworth. *The Tatars of Crimea Return to The Homeland*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 1-26.

- Allworth, Edward A. (1998b). "The Elusive Homeland". Ed. Edward A. Allworth. *The Tatars of Crimea Return to The Homeland*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 251-280.
- Altan, Mübeyyin Batu (1992). *A Brief History of Crimean Tatar National Movement*. Kiev.
- Altan, Mübeyyin Batu (1998). "The Importance of Family-A Personal Memoir". Ed. Edward A. Allworth. *The Tatars of Crimea Return to the Homeland*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 99-109.
- Aydın, Filiz Turku (2000). *A Case in diaspora nationalism: Crimean Tatars in Turkey*. Master Thesis. Ankara: Bilkent University.
- Aydın, İsmail (2014). "Sürgün, Vatana Dönüş ve Kültürel Canlanma: Kırım Tatarlarında Kültürel Melezlik". *Karadeniz Araştırmaları Dergisi* 42: 53-67
- Aydın, İsmail & Ayşegül Aydın (2007). "Crimean Tatars Return Home: Identity and Cultural Revival". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33 (1): 113-128.
- Bingöl, Yılmaz (2004). "Nationalism and Democracy in Post-Communist Central Asia". *Asian Ethnicity* 5 (1): 43-60.
- Fisher, Alan W. (1978). *The Crimean Tatars*. Stanford: Hoover Press Publication.
- Fisher, Alan W. (1998). "A Model Leader of Asia, İsmail Gaspıralı". Ed. Edward A. Allworth. *The Tatars of Crimea Return to the Homeland*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 29-47.
- Fisher, Alan W. (1980). *The Soviet Marriage Market: Mate-Selection in Russia and the USSR*. New York: Praeger Press.
- Hansen, Holley E. & Vicki L. Hesli (2009). "National Identity: Civic, Ethnic, Hybrid, and Atomised Individuals". *Europe-Asia Studies* 61(1): 1-28.
- Hutchinson, John (1994). *Modern Nationalism*. London: Fontana Press.
- Ichijo, Atsuko & Gordana Uzelac (Eds.) (2005). *When is the Nation? Towards an Understanding of Theories of Nationalism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kanlıdere, Ahmet (2016). "Kırım Tatarlarının Kültürel Kimliklerini Yeniden İnşa Çabaları". *Karadeniz Araştırmaları* 51: 233-243.
- Kırımca, Seyit Ahmet (1998). "Symbols: The National Anthem and Patriotic Songs by Three Poets". Ed. Edward A. Allworth. *The Tatars of Crimea Return To The Homeland*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 71-84.
- Kırımlı, Hakan (1996). *National Movement and National Identity among the Crimean Tatars (1905-1916)*. Tr. E. J. Brill. New York, Leiden, Köln: Tuta Sub Aegide Pallas.
- Kozelsky, Mara (2008). "Casualties of Conflict: Crimean Tatars during the Crimean War". *Slavic Review* 67 (4): 866-891.
- Kreindler, Isabelle (1986). "The Soviet Deported Nationalities: A Summary and an

- Update". *Soviet Studies* 38 (3): 387-405.
- Nekrich, Aleksandr M. (1978). *The Punished Peoples: The Deportation and the Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War*. Toronto: W.W. Norton.
- Özkırımlı, Umut (2010). *Theories of Nationalism a Critical Introduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reddaway, Peter (1998). "The Crimean Tatar Drive for Repatriation: Some Comparisons with Other Movements of Dissent in the Soviet Union". Ed. Edward A. Allworth. *The Tatars of Crimea Return to the Homeland*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 226-236.
- Sheehy, A. (1971). *Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans: Soviet Treatment of Two National Minorities*. London: Minority Rights Group.
- Smith, Anthony D. (1986). *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Smith, Anthony D. (1998). *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Anthony D. (2002) 'When is a Nation?'. *Geopolitics* 7 (2): 5-32.
- Uehling, Greta Lynce (2004). *The Crimean Tatars' Deportation and Return*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Williams, Brian Glyn (2002). "The Hidden Ethnic Cleansing of Muslims in the Soviet Union: The Exile and Repatriation of the Crimean Tatars". *Journal of Contemporary History* 37(3): 323-347.
- Zaloznaya, Marina & Theodore P. Gerber (2012). "Migration as Social Movement: Voluntary Group Migration and the Crimean Tatar Repatriation". *Population and Development Review* 38 (2): 259-284.

# Kırım Tatarları'nda Kimlik\*

Ülkü Nur Zengin\*\*

## Öz

Kırım Tatarları tarihlerindeki her türlü baskıya rağmen millet bilincini kaybetmemesiyle incelemeye değer bir topluluktur. Tarihlerine ve vatanlarına olan bağlılıkları yaşadıkları soykırım ve sürgüne rağmen onları bir arada tutmuştur. Bu çalışmanın amacı da Kırım Tatarları'nın kimlik inşa sürecini milliyetçilik kuramları bağlamında değerlendirmektir. Tarihten kopmadan lider ve sembolik değerler üzerine inşa edilen Tatar milliyetçiliğinin etno-sembolizm ile açıklanabileceği çalışmamızda ortaya konulacaktır. Çalışmada öncelikle etno-sembolizm hakkında bilgi verilip ardından Kırım Tatarlarının kimlik inşa süreçleri incelenecektir.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Kırım Tatarları, milliyetçilik, kimlik, etno-sembolizm, millet, SSCB.

\* Geliş Tarihi: 06 Şubat 2018 – Kabul Tarihi: 04 Eylül 2018

Bu makaleyi şu şekilde kaynak gösterebilirsiniz:

Zengin, Ülkü Nur (2020). "Identity of Crimean Tatars". *bilig – Türk Dünyası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 92: 163-184.

\*\* Öğretim Görevlisi, Polis Akademisi, Güvenlik Bilimleri Enstitüsü – Ankara/Türkiye

ORCID ID: [orcid.org/0000-0003-2159-2263](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2159-2263)

[unurzengin@hotmail.com](mailto:unurzengin@hotmail.com)

# Идентичность Крымских Татар\*

Улькю Нур Зенгин\*\*

## Аннотация

Крымские татары представляют собой достойное изучения сообщество, которое не утратило национального самосознания, несмотря на все перипетии истории народа. Их верность своей истории и своей родине удерживает их вместе, несмотря на геноцид и изгнание, которые они пережили. Целью данного исследования является оценка процесса формирования идентичности крымских татар в контексте национальной идеологии. В работе будет показано, что татарское национальное движение, основанный на связи лидеров, символов и ценностей с историей, может быть объяснено с позиций этносимволического подхода. В первую очередь уделено внимание этносимволизму, затем изучен процесс формирования идентичности крымских татар.

## Ключевые слова

крымские татары, национализм, идентичность, этносимволизм, нация, СССР.

\* Поступило в редакцию: 06 февраля 2018 г. – Принято в номер: 04 сентября 2018 г.

Ссылка на статью:

Zengin, Ülkü Nur (2020). "Identity of Crimean Tatars". *bilig – Journal of Social Sciences of the Turkic World* 92: 163-184.

\*\* Преподаватель, Полицейская Академия, Институт наук о безопасности – Анкара / Турция  
ORCID ID: [orcid.org/0000-0003-2159-2263](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2159-2263)  
[unurzengin@hotmail.com](mailto:unurzengin@hotmail.com)