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Silent Deportation: Russia's Crackdown On Crimean Tatars Echoes Soviet-Era Expulsions

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As Ukraine marks the anniversary of Stalin-era deportations of Crimean Tatars more than eight decades ago, members of the ethnic minority group living on the Russian-occupied Black Sea peninsula are enduring a renewed campaign of repression.

May 18 is known in Ukraine as the Day of Commemoration of the Victims of the Genocide of the Crimean Tatars.

They are members of the Turkic-speaking, predominantly Muslim ethnic group that is indigenous to Crimea.

Eighty-one years ago, over three days from May 18 to May 20, 1944, Soviet security forces rounded up at least 200,000 Crimean Tatars and sent them into exile in Soviet Uzbekistan and other remote places in the Soviet Union. Tens of thousands died during the deportation and under the harsh conditions of their first years in exile.

The Tatar minority has again found itself being targeted since Russian forces seized control of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, according to human rights activist Mumine Salieva.

"There are already dozens of criminal cases, hundreds of administrative penalties; more than 100 children have been deprived of their fathers," said Salieva in RFE/RL Ukrainian Service's award-winning [2024 documentary, Silent Deportation](#).

"All this shows that we're not witnessing isolated cases of discrimination. It is nothing else than the repression of the entire Crimean Tatar people," she said.

Salieva's husband, Seyran, was among several Crimean Tatars convicted of terrorism in 2020 after documenting human rights abuses following Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea.

"Basically, [he was arrested] because of his journalism, his coverage of the trials that took place in Crimea, and his participation in public campaigns to protect political prisoners," she said.

Salieva's husband had been looking into reports of arrests, disappearances, and killings of Tatar activists. In May 2016, the crackdown intensified, with raids in Bakhchysaray, the couple's hometown.

"The Bakhchysaray community got its first shocks when a massive wave of searches took place in the houses of a businessman, a builder, a well-known chef, and a dentist," said Salieva.

As her husband serves a 15-year sentence, Salieva continues his work documenting human rights abuses and supporting people whose loved ones have been arrested.

She is also raising four children. Her youngest is 7-year-old Safiya, who was a baby when her father was arrested. The girl only knew him from photographs until she met her father during an emotional prison visit.

"She came up to him and hugged his legs. She looked up at him and said, 'So this is you, my daddy.' And he picked her up, started squeezing her, hugging her," recalled Salieva. "She was playing with his beard. He was crying. She kissed him and wiped away his tears."

After generations of Crimean Tatars grew up far from their ancestral homeland, they were finally allowed to return to the peninsula in 1989 during the waning days of the Soviet Union. A new struggle for recognition and acceptance began two years later in the newly independent Ukraine as Crimean Tatars worked with the government establishing schools, mosques, and newspapers.

But all that came to an abrupt halt in 2014, and many Tatars decided to leave Crimea rather than face persecution from the Russian-controlled authorities.

A New Crimean Tatar Diaspora

Rinat Paralamov is among a new Crimean Tatar diaspora scattered across Europe. He fled to Germany in 2022 after he said he was tortured by Russia's Federal Security Force (FSB).

Paralamov was arrested in 2017 and was pressured to become an informant. He said he endured beatings and electrocution.

"They tied my hands behind my back with tape. They laid me face down on the floor, pulled down my trousers, and connected two wires," he recalled.

"They were twisting [a dial], and I was getting electrocuted. One [person] was pressing my head, the other my body. It was impossible to move. I was thinking, 'This is it. I'm done for.'"

The torture only ended once Paralamov agreed to work as an informant. But he quickly decided to get out Crimea rather than collaborate with Russian authorities.

Ernest Suleymanov is another Crimean Tatar who decided to flee. He owns a restaurant in the Polish capital, Warsaw, located across the street from the Russian Embassy.

"This is our way of fighting back, so that they know it and see it every day. It is like a slap in the face," said Suleymanov. "Crimea is not theirs. Crimea is the land of Crimean Tatars, and Crimea is Ukraine."

Suleymanov says he sees himself as an ambassador promoting Crimean Tatar culture around the world. But he's unsure if he'd ever want to return to his homeland.

"I wonder if I could be able to live with those people who betrayed Ukraine, who contributed to the occupation," he mused. "Would I be able to live in such an environment? Would I be able to live alongside them? Do I have the right to expel them?"

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