

Evlogi Stanchev

Imagined or lost homeland? Representations of Crimea in the identity of Crimean Tatars in Vetovo, Bulgaria

Abstract

This essay discusses the diverse places, images and functions of the Crimean Peninsula within the identity of the demographically small Tatar community in present-day Vetovo, Bulgaria. Although the paper follows a multidisciplinary approach, anthropological fieldwork conducted with respondents of different profiles constitutes the backbone of the research. Based on Jan Assmann's influential paradigm of „cultural memory”, the text places special emphasis on the various mechanisms of reproduction of different notions and representations across generations. Following this framework, the author argues that Crimea is experienced differently depending on the individual's personal or family background. Nevertheless, in the long-term, the peninsula remains a main point of reference (as „the ancient homeland”) as well as a source of identification (because „we came from Crimea”) for the local community in the context of an assimilative, Turkish-dominated environment.

Keywords: Crimea, Crimean Tatars, Bulgaria, identity, cultural memory

Introduction

Although having a limited demographic weight, the Crimean Tatars in contemporary Bulgaria represent an interesting community that offers multiple directions for social scientists to consider. Typically, this group has been viewed as a private and isolated case of an ethnic minority that faces the challenge of cultural assimilation and de-ethnicization in an assimilationist environment. However, on the other hand, specific observations on Tatars in the country indicate some

particular mechanisms of identity reproduction that prove to be crucial for maintaining ethnic particularity. Fundamental to this resilience is the image of Crimea, which occupies a central place in the group's identity. Despite their undeniable importance, the various Crimea-related narratives within local Tatars have rarely been the subject of more coherent research, with a few isolated, albeit significant, exceptions¹. Exploring some of the main representations of Crimea in the identity of the discussed community, this paper sets itself the difficult task of contributing to filling this gap.

As it tackles largely the topic of collective memory and its various mechanisms of reproduction across generations, the text is based upon several important theoretical contributions in the field of memory studies. Of particular relevance to this analysis, therefore, is the framework proposed by German Egyptologist and cultural theorist Jan Assmann. Following Maurice Halbwachs's foundational notion of collective memory as an exclusively social category², Assmann makes an important distinction between what he sees as „communicative” and „cultural memory”. While the first category refers to the collective reproduction of memories from the past that spans roughly one human generation, „cultural memory” represents the production of symbolism and identity through reconstructive practices across many generations³. It is precisely this schema of long-term generation of cultural meaning that could offer a possible explanation of how Crimea functions in the minds of local Crimean Tatars, and what its meanings are for the production and reproduction of identity in this community. However, this study is not intended to refract its analysis through the never-ending theoretical debates on memory, identity, etc.; instead, the theoretical framework will only serve as a starting point for reflections based on empirical observations.

In terms of methodology, this research is based on an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing the fields of cultural history, culturology and social anthropology. Nevertheless, the backbone of the text is built on anthropological fieldwork as well as ethnographic observations „before entering” and „after exiting” the terrain. The preferred research approach is the semi-structured

¹ For example, see: S. Antonov, *Tatarite v Balgariya*, Dobrich 2004; Idem, *Tatarskata obshtnost v Balgariya: ot kulturna traditsiya kam kulturna politika*, [in:] *Vsekidnevната kultura na balgarite i sarbite v postsotsialisticheskiya period. Treta balgaro-srabska nauchna konferentsiya*, ed. R. Ivanova, Sofia 2005, pp. 285-293; V. Yankova, *Istoricheska pamet i obrazi na minaloto (po primeri ot Balgariya, Ungariya, Polsha i Litva)*, Sofia 2019, pp. 53-179; Y. Erolova, *Granitsi i identichnosti: krimskite tatar i v Dobrudzha*, [in:] *Dinamika na natsionalnata identichnost i transnatsionalnite identichnosti v protsesa na evropeyska integratsiya*, ed. M. Decheva, Sofia 2008, pp. 615-636; Idem, *Dobrudzha – granitsi i identichnosti*, Sofia 2010, pp. 27-102.

² M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Chicago 1992.

³ J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge 2011.

anthropological interview, the flexibility of which provides the opportunity to gather a sufficient amount of relevant information from the interviewee⁴. A particular focus in the interviews was the biographical perspective, which allowed us to reconstruct the mosaic of images of the Crimean Peninsula exclusively through the respondent's personal and family experiences⁵. This was an important requirement in the course of the research, since the analysis of identity (or ethnicity) – with memory constituting one of its essential components – requires maximum contextual sensitivity, as correctly remarked by Christoph Antweiler⁶.

The insights presented here are the result of extensive fieldwork with the Crimean Tatar community in Vetovo. This is a small ethnically mixed town⁷ located in Ruse Province, Bulgaria, where a significant Crimean Tatar community is concentrated. Currently, their cultural organization *Asabay* (lit. „kinsman”, „heir”) is headquartered in the Tatar neighborhood in the town. Respondents were selected from a variety of ages and social statuses.

Formation of the Crimean Tatar community in Bulgaria

Before delving more deeply into the places that the notion of Crimea occupies within the identity of local Tatars, we need to briefly outline how they came as a distinct ethnic community in Bulgaria. However, the author has no intention of tracing the general Crimean Tatar history, which has been the subject of a plethora of studies in the past few decades⁸. Here, we will examine those episodes from the past that resulted in the formation of the Crimean Tatar group in a strictly Bulgarian context; it is worth noting that these episodes have caused this group to be separated from some of the significant events in the history of the other Crimean Tatars, which has its important implications today.

⁴ M. Albaret, J. Deas, *Semistructured Interviews*, [in:] *International Organizations and Research Methods: An Introduction*, eds. F. Badache et al., Ann Arbor 2023, pp. 82-89.

⁵ K. Kaźmierska, *Analysing Biographical Data – Different Approaches of Doing Biographical Research*, „Qualitative Sociology Review” 2014, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 6-17.

⁶ C. Antweiler, *Ethnicity from an anthropological perspective*, [in:] *Ethnicity as a Political Resource: Conceptualizations across Disciplines, Regions, and Periods*, Bielefeld 2015, pp. 25-38.

⁷ In Vetovo, there are five different communities, each having its own differing ethnocultural features: Eastern Orthodox Bulgarians, Muslim Turks, Christian Roma, Muslim Roma and Muslim Crimean Tatars.

⁸ Among the rich corpus of academic studies on the history of Crimean Tatars, one should necessarily mention the works of Brian Glyn Williams: B.G. Williams, *The Crimean Tatars: The Diaspora Experience and the Forging of a Nation*, Leiden 2001; Idem, *The Ethnogenesis of the Crimean Tatars. An Historical Reinterpretation*, „Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society” 2001, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 329-348; Idem, *The Crimean Tatars: From Soviet Genocide to Putin's Conquest*, Oxford 2016.

Although the territories of present-day Bulgaria witnessed some early migrations and settlements of groups known under the name „Tatars” – primarily in the context of the Mongol invasion of Eastern Europe and the subsequent influence of the Golden Horde and its local warlords⁹ – the majority of people who today identify with this ethnonym came to these lands later, as a result of several migration waves from the Crimean peninsula and its northern hinterland.

The first large-scale migration wave of Tatars from Crimea was in the years following the annexation of the peninsula by the Russian Empress Catherine II in 1783 and the deconsolidation of the Crimean Khanate. The decades that followed witnessed administrative pressure from the new Russian authorities toward local Muslims and a gradual colonization of Slavic-speaking population in the region. This provoked several subsequent waves of Tatar migrants from the peninsula – in the context and the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish wars of 1806-1812¹⁰ and 1828-1829. However, the largest-scale migration of Crimean Tatars was during and after the Crimean War of 1853-1856¹¹. The majority of Bulgaria’s Tatars today acknowledged that their community is a result of precisely this wave of exodus in the middle of the century. It is interesting to note that accounts of this migration, although rather blurred, occupy an important place in the memory of local respondents, as will be discussed later in this essay.

Tatar migrants settled mainly in two places in the then-Ottoman Empire – the eastern parts of the Balkan Peninsula and Anatolia. Of interest for this study is the southern part of the historical and geographical region of Dobrudja, which today occupies the northeastern part of Bulgaria (although de jure Vetovo is not located in Dobrudja). In the middle and second half of the 19th century, this region was dominated by Muslim Turks. After the signing of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, Dobrudja was divided into two parts – the northern part was incorporated into Romania, while the southern became part of the newly formed Principality of Bulgaria. Therefore, the Tatar population in the region found itself

⁹ For example, see: I. Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars: Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185-1365*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 69-98.

¹⁰ Following the Treaty of Bucharest (1812), the region of Budjak was left by most of its Tatar population who fled toward the Ottoman Empire; eventually, the region was gradually colonized by settlers of various ethnic backgrounds.

¹¹ On the Tatar migrations towards the Ottoman Empire in the context of the Crimean War, see: M. Pinson, *Ottoman Colonization of the Crimean Tatars in Bulgaria, 1854-1862*, [in:] *Proceedings of the Seventh Congress of the Türk Tarih Kumuru*, Ankara 1970, pp. 1040-1058; H. Kirmli, *Emigrations from the Crimea to the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean War*, „Middle Eastern Studies” 2008, vol. 44, no. 5, pp. 751-773; M. Kozelsky, *The Crimean War and the Tatar Exodus*, [in:] *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands: The Eastern Question Reconsidered*, eds. L.J. Frary, M. Kozelsky, Madison 2014, pp. 165-192; C. Hunt, *From Crimea to Dobruja: The Impact of the Crimean War on the Crimean Tatars of the Nineteenth Century*, [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of the Crimean War*, ed. C. Badem, London-New York 2021, pp. 384-396.

in new, largely Christian nation-states that perceived Islam and its adherents as a remnant of the „unprestigious” Ottoman past. This is the reason why many Tatars, along with other local Muslims, migrated towards the remaining Ottoman territories. Those who remained were exposed to a decades-long process of what the author calls *double pressure* – on the one hand, Tatars were treated equally together with the rest of the Muslim minorities in Bulgaria; on the other hand, the majority of Tatar settlements were located in a predominantly Turkish ethnic environment, which was the cause of gradual assimilation, i.e., Turkification. In this regard, local Tatars were subject to the general anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish policies during the communist period (1944-1989), culminating in the so-called „Revival Process” (1984-1989) – a state-led campaign of renaming Muslim names into „Bulgarian” ones and an overall denial of Muslim identity in the country¹². After the collapse of the communist regime, the Crimean Tatars in Bulgaria went through a process of „ethnic revival”, a part of which was the founding of their cultural organization *Asabay*, today located in Vetovo.

Crimea as a topos in local memory

Ethnographic observations show unequivocally that Crimea has a dominant and sustainable image in the minds and memory of the Crimean Tatars in Bulgaria. Although heterogeneous, this image has major merits in the production and re-production of Tatar identity among the community and contributes to the consolidation of the latter across time and generations. It is of utmost importance to note that this Crimean symbolism has been preserved in the memory of local Tatars even in the absence of their own educational system and national intelligentsia. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss precisely what are the places and meanings of Crimea in Tatar cultural memory, and how these images are reproduced but also changed across generations. Since these narratives do not have an official form through an institutionalized national historiography, their registration today is usually done through the genre of oral history.

The majority of Tatar respondents unequivocally referred to the Crimean peninsula as their „ancient homeland” as well as the „land of the ancestors”, which the latter had to leave. In almost all cases, this idealized narrative is followed by the observation that this former homeland is forever „lost”. What is even more indicative for our discussion, „Crimea” and „Crimean” are almost always present in the ethnic self-identification of Tatar interlocutors: „we came from Crimea”, „we are Crimean Tatars”, etc. In this sense, the image of Crimea represents

¹² On the „Revival Process”, see: M. Gruev, A. Kalionski, *Vazroditelniyat protses. Myusyulmanskite obshtnosti i komunisticheskiyat rezhim: politiki, reaktsii i posleditsi*, Sofia 2008.

a primary marker of local Tatar identity. In addition to the private spaces of family narratives, these notions of „ancient homeland” have received their gradual stylization into persistent and widely shared folkloric motifs among the community. Accordingly, they are reproduced by every next generation and are (usually) situationally activated depending on the specific context. This palpable presence of the peninsula in the minds of local Tatars reveals the clear potential for political mobilization around this symbolism and largely explains the centrality of Crimea in the politicization of the group, which will be discussed later.

The persistence of memory about Crimea among the group is confirmed by the surprisingly detailed knowledge about the geography and topography of the peninsula that some of the respondents recalled during the fieldwork. For instance, some of the Tatars in Vetovo acknowledged that their families preserved memories about the exact places from where their ancestors once left – such places were Kerch, Or Qapı (present-day Perekop), Aqmescit (today Simferopol). Bulgarian anthropologist Veneta Yankova, who actively studies the history and culture of Crimean Tatars in Bulgaria, noted that in other places in the country, local respondents indicated as their points of departure places like Bakhchysarai, Eski Qırım, etc.¹³. However, we must acknowledge that this situation of detailed information regarding Crimea does not apply to all members of the Tatar community; rather, it is a phenomenon that is more pronounced among individuals who are related to *Asabay*, and therefore, have access to more knowledge and a wider network of contacts. As shown by Yankova, in their majority, the rest of the Crimean Tatars in Bulgaria refer only to „Crimea” as a topos of origin in their memory¹⁴.

In addition to these representations of Crimea, one should also pay attention to the specific family memories about the 19th-century migration itself, a topic that was discussed elsewhere by Yankova¹⁵. In this regard, many respondents in Vetovo shared some vague but resilient stories, mostly of a legendary nature, about the routes and living conditions during the migration of their ancestors after the Crimean War. For instance, quite popular within the community was the narrative about „three boats” with migrants from Crimea that traveled in the Black Sea and eventually split and landed in different places in the Ottoman Empire – Köstence (present-day Constanța), Varna and Anatolia:

¹³ V. Yankova, *Za „Drugiya” v slavyanskoto kulturno prostranstvo (Kam ustnata istoriya na tatarite v Yuzhna Dobrudzha)*, [in:] *Limes slavicus. Slavyanstvoto – granitsi na obshnostta*, Shumen 2016, pp. 311-322.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ V. Yankova, *The Tatars in Bulgaria and Their Oral History: The Migration from Crimea*, [in:] *Anticus Multicultural Association: The 1st Annual Kurultai of the Endangered Cultural Heritage*, ed. T. Murat, Constanța 2018, pp. 21-30.

I know from rumors, from books, from Lenin Bayrağı, from the old... that three ships left from Crimea. But a storm came and they parted. One ship went to Turkey, the other to Varna, the third again to Istanbul, you know, out there somewhere. (An 83-years-old male respondent, Vetovo, Bulgaria)

Other respondents preserve the memory that their forefathers settled in the coastal area of Dobrudja (around the town of Balchik) because „the landscape and the climate resembled those in Crimea”. Furthermore, some Tatars reproduce narratives about the reasons for the exile of their forefathers. They mostly explain the departure with the repressive politics of the „Cossacks” (a traditional term for Russians) after Catherine II annexed the peninsula. However, it is usually hard to determine whether those memories were generationally reproduced or were a result of more recent influence by cultural and political entrepreneurs.

In summary, we must conclude that it is precisely these family narratives that constitute the authentic, historically grounded representation of Crimea for local Tatars. Although not sanctioned by external influence (of elites) or other types of contamination (mainly globalization and its unprecedented access to information), these notions carry enough cultural and social capital for the eventual endurance of Crimean Tatar identity even in the context of cultural pressure from the more influential and politically more active Turkish group in the region. The empirical data clearly shows that the notions of Crimea are one of the main factors that distinguish the Tatar community from ethnic Turks. It is evident that the various references to the „ancient Crimean homeland” have a fundamental role in drawing the ethnic boundary in the context of a demographically more dominant and assimilative Turkish environment.

What the author sees as even more important, this schema proves the contradiction of the „classical” constructivist approach in contemporary sociology according to which ethnic identities cannot be reproduced without the instrumental intervention of modern political elites¹⁶. The case of Crimean Tatars in Bulgaria reveals unequivocally that markers of ethnicity can prove quite resilient and adaptable even in a situation of long-term political anonymity. Without treating such markers as permanently fixed – which is the usual primordialist reception – they represent a constitutive part of a community’s cultural memory and, therefore, can serve as a transmitter of cultural meaning and collective identity across generations.

¹⁶ Among the most representative exponents of the view that ethnic identities are recent constructs is Eric Hobsbawm, who coined the term „invented traditions”. See: E.J. Hobsbawm, *Introduction: Inventing Traditions*, [in:] *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. E.J. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger, Cambridge 1983, pp. 1-14, cf. S. Jones, *The archaeology of ethnicity. Constructing identities in the past and present*, London-New York 1997, pp. 72-79. For a critique of the constructivist paradigm, see: A.D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford 1999.

Crimea as a source of political and cultural mobilization

In a significantly contrasting manner of the private spaces in family memory discussed so far are the representations of the Crimean peninsula in a strictly political context. Following the central place that Crimea occupies in the identity and cultural memory of local Tatars, it should not surprise us that the peninsula occupies a foundational place in the political culture of this community. Nevertheless, we should not assume a priori that the political narratives on Crimea necessarily contradict family memory; rather, these notions can complement each other, which is the case with some local Tatar activities that will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

Essentially, the political and cultural mobilization around Crimea among the local Tatar community is a recent phenomenon. It began after the end of the communist regime in Bulgaria in 1989 and is associated with new opportunities for free public expression for minorities. This process corresponds with what prominent French historian Pierre Nora defines as the „democratization of history”, by which he means the new possibilities for the expression of the historical past and identity of hitherto silenced groups in society¹⁷.

It should be noted that in the case of the Tatars in Bulgaria such a „democratization” practically means the creation and consolidation of an official historical narrative *de novo*. Despite the presence of Tatar schools in the past¹⁸, local Tatars had no political institutions of their own, nor a historiographical tradition both before and during communism. As correctly noted by Yankova, the case of Tatars clearly proves that oral history contributes significantly to the reproduction of identity when there are no other cultural channels¹⁹. However, there were some isolated sources of historical and even political knowledge before the end of the communist regime, although not widely distributed among the community – for example, the Tashkent-based *Lenin Bayrağı* („Lenin’s Flag”) newspaper²⁰ or several Turkish radio stations that were deemed illegal by the authorities of communist Bulgaria. Some respondents in Vetovo said that they had learned various facts about Crimea and the Crimean Tatars from these sources:

¹⁷ P. Nora, *Svetovniyat vazhod na pametta*, [in:] *Okolo Pier Nora: Mesta na pamet i konstruirane na nastoyasheto*, ed. I. Znepolski, Sofia 2004, pp. 19-35.

¹⁸ See: M. Mihaylova-Mravkarova, *Tatarite i tatarskite uchilishta v Balgariya*, „Minalo” 1995, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 44-58.

¹⁹ V. Yankova, *Family Memory and Popular Historiography About the Tatars from Bulgarian Dobrudja*, „Ethnologia Balkanica” 2018, 21, pp. 107-118.

²⁰ *Lenin Bayrağı* was a Crimean Tatar-language newspaper published in Tashkent, Uzbek SSR. It served as the organ of the local branch of the Soviet Communist Party. The newspaper was the sole officially available information channel for Crimean Tatars after their 1944 mass deportation to Central Asia and the parallel campaign of de-Tatarization.

There used to be a newspaper called „Lenin Bayrağı” – „Lenin’s Flag” for the Tatars [...] It was written in Russian [...] I used to read it... I was a small [kid] back in those days [...] And now, in democracy, I have learned more things. (A 54-years-old male respondent, Vetovo, Bulgaria)

Although the post-1989 period granted political and other freedoms, we should bear in mind that Crimean Tatars in Bulgaria never gained their own political representation. The community en masse recognizes and votes for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (hereafter, MRF) – a political party created in 1990 and widely perceived as representing Muslims in Bulgaria. However, as the MRF is overtly dominated by ethnic Turks – and local Tatars are a demographically marginal community – there is no place for the specific Crimean Tatar cause within the party’s agenda. This creates the paradoxical situation of a new kind of *silencing* the community, although in a pluralistic and democratic context. In this regard, Tatar respondents complained that the MRF often „forgets” them and is even functioning as another source for the „Turkification” of the group; nevertheless, the Movement still provides some financial support to the community and is the only option for partial political representation for the latter.

In this situation, the activity of the local Crimean Tatar cultural organization *Asabay* is of fundamental importance. It was founded in 1991 and initially headquartered in the city of Silistra but shortly afterwards it was moved to Vetovo. It is the leading – and currently the sole – cultural institution of the community in the country and eventually became the catalyst for the process of reproduction of Tatar culture and identity. Although its program does not include political objectives – as personally acknowledged by a former chief of the organization – *Asabay*’s activities are crucial for outlining a political sensitivity for specifically Tatar subjects within the local community. The organization makes and maintains contacts with representatives of the international Crimean Tatar movement, including with the official Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People. It should be mentioned that these contacts are often mediated via the much more numerous and politically influential Tatar communities in neighboring Romania and Turkey. These contacts – and the various materials that accompany them (books, periodicals and other publications) – bring new knowledge to the local community and make the latter sympathetic to the cause of the Crimean Tatars worldwide. Furthermore, these new sources create the feeling among the group that it is becoming part of a much wider Crimean Tatar network, covering many countries, with its center in Crimea.

This new kind of sensitivity to Crimea-related issues necessarily reaffirms the peninsula’s place at the center of the discussions of the local community, this time in a political manner. Traditional, largely folkloric notions of Crimea as the „ancient” or „lost homeland”, are complemented by an increased interest

in the contemporary dynamic developments in the region, especially in the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. Some Tatar respondents openly criticized the illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014; more recently, they condemned Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and expressed strong concerns about the current situation of Tatars in Crimea. The politically active part of the community even attended a protest against the annexation of Crimea in front of Russia's consulate in Ruse in 2016. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that this politicization among Bulgaria's Crimean Tatars is observable primarily among those individuals who are affiliated with or gravitate around *Asabay*. Therefore, we can raise the hypothesis that grassroots Tatars in other settlements are largely ignorant concerning politics. Even in Vetovo, the larger part of the community is relatively passive concerning political matters for reasons, some of which were already addressed; a striking and representative example in this regard is the ignorance towards Mustafa Dzhemilev²¹ among some of the interlocutors.

Maintaining international contacts as well as placing political emphasis on Crimea as an integral part of the cultural belonging of the local Tatar group has important implications for the latter's identity; it provokes specific notions of purported participation in a wider transborder Tatar community. If we adhere to the valuable understanding of Rogers Brubaker, who treats „diaspora” not as an objective sociological entity but as a claim (or project) by certain entrepreneurs²², we can be sure that the process of elaborating diasporic stances within Tatars in Bulgaria is largely consistent with part of *Asabay's* agenda. In addition to the activities already described, the organization holds the cultural festival *Tepreş*, which is a modern stylization of Tatar festive folklore²³. It is an important event that usually witnesses Tatar guests and visitors from abroad. Hence, it should come as no surprise that the dominant rhetoric during the festival elaborates on certain diasporic stances. What is more relevant for this research, such imagining of a „Tatar diaspora” is inextricably linked to the image and historical symbolism of Crimea, as locals articulate „kinship” exclusively with Crimean Tatars, and not with other communities that fall under this ethnic label (e.g., Volga Tatars). In essence, experiencing such diasporic stances of belonging serves as an effective means of demarginalizing the local community, which until recently was perceived as culturally isolated and practically politically invisible.

²¹ Mustafa Dzhemilev (born 1943) is a major Crimean Tatar political activist and Soviet-era dissident. Between 1991 and 2013, he served as the first Chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People. Dzhemilev is widely recognized as the leader of the Crimean Tatar national movement.

²² R. Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference*, Cambridge-London 2015, pp. 119-130.

²³ See: S. Sağlık Şahin, *Kırım Tatar Türklerinin Bahar Bayramı: Tepreş*, „Modern Türklük Araştırmaları Dergisi” 2012, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 69-87.

Crimea as an everyday experience

This discussion will certainly have serious gaps if it neglects how Crimea and its specific meanings are experienced and reproduced on a more grassroots and unmediated level within the community under consideration. Whether we denote fragments of cultural memory or a conscious political agenda, various Crimea-related narratives and images have a significant presence in the everyday lives of Crimean Tatars in Bulgaria. We assume that such an approach contains undeniable analytical potential, as it is based on the understanding that identity – both collective and individual – represents a process that changes and evolves also in an everyday environment. Here, it is reasonable to recall Michael Billig's seminal notion of „banal nationalism”, which treats the plethora of expressions of national identity – with its specific idioms – in our daily lives²⁴. Therefore, the last section of this essay will briefly outline several everyday situations that reaffirm the persistence of Crimean symbolism within the life of local Tatars.

When it comes to everyday expressions of identity, we should bear in mind that they can take different forms – they can be visual, written, verbal, etc. In the specific Tatar case, such mechanisms of cultural reproduction correspond to what locals call *Tatarlık* (lit. „Tatarness”). This phrase is part of the local slang and denotes those cultural features that are perceived as ethnically representative exclusively of the Crimean Tatar community. However, it will be certainly misleading to assume that the realms of the *Tatarlık* incorporate only aspects of traditional culture and folklore. In essence, the category covers a wide range of symbols, images, practices, etc. – these can be family stories or different types of conversations about history as well as depicting symbols in the urban space or making patriotic tattoos. Our empirical observations show that many of these different situations contain direct or indirect references to Crimea. Furthermore, through what can be labeled as schemes of „ethnicization” – which can be both collective and individual – the community stylizes various non-ethnic features into the symbolic spaces of its culture. Thereby, elements of the community's everyday life – such as religion or sport – gradually acquire ethnic meaning. Specifically concerning religion (Sunni Islam), a particular process of „ethnicization” of the sacred space is observed, which serves as a way of differentiation from the neighboring Turkish community²⁵.

Specific markers of Tatar identity are evoked during various folklore-related interactions and expressions. Some of these markers unambiguously contain the

²⁴ M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London 1995, cf. M. Antonsich, *The 'everyday' of banal nationalism – Ordinary people's views on Italy and Italian*, „Political Geography” 2016, vol. 54, pp. 32-42.

²⁵ In Vetovo, there is an apparent ethnic segregation in the religious life of local Muslims, as Turks and Tatars attend separate mosques.

image of Crimea as the „ancient homeland” of the community. Perhaps most representative in this regard is the stylistics of the aforementioned Tereş cultural festival – as noted, this gathering usually involves Crimean Tatars from abroad and one of its main tenets is centered around the idea of the existence of a trans-border Crimean Tatar diaspora. Moreover, local respondents shared that the first modern edition of Tereş was held on 18 V 1992 in the village of Cherkovna, which directly refers to the history of Crimea and Crimean Tatars²⁶. Various symbols associated with the peninsula also figure in other cultural expressions of the community – such are the cases of folk music or dances. In this regard, the town of Vetovo houses a dance ensemble whose performances include aspects of Crimean Tatar folklore. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that the image of Crimea does not always constitute a major identification marker in the traditional culture of the community – usually, the Tatar designation is present without explicit references to the peninsula. Here, we can point to the example of the specific cuisine, which the Tatar community itself perceives as its most representative ethnic marker. In the particularity of our case, the cuisine functions primarily as a means of differentiation with the neighboring Turkish community and its culture, rather than as an experience of specific diasporic notions. This is a possible explanation why, in the majority of cases, local respondents designate their dishes simply as „Tatar”, without the „Crimean” adjunction, although the obvious similarity with Crimean Tatar national cuisine.

Concerning the everyday reproduction of notions of Crimea, we should place particular emphasis on the various conversations on historical topics. Field observations show that history-related subjects have become increasingly popular within the local community in recent decades. Due to various influences (persistent family narratives as well as different cultural agents), such conversations are inevitably focused on the image of Crimea. On the one hand, they may be confined to a family environment and involve no more than genealogical features; on the other hand, they may take place in a broader social setting, in the form of public discussions. Nonetheless, we should not fall into the illusion that the ideas produced about Crimea and its history mobilize a sense of belonging equally among all members of the Tatar community. Rather, this symbolism is experienced differently, which largely depends on the personal background of each member of the community. It is reasonable to assume that historical notions of the Crimean peninsula are more blurred outside the institutional framework of *Asabay* and the group of individuals that gravitate around the organization.

²⁶ 18 V 1944 is the date when the Soviet government deported Crimean Tatars and other ethnic communities from the peninsula en masse to Central Asia on false accusations of collaboration with the Nazis.

Also, concerning the local production of historical narrative, our observations have shown that there is another trend, although within a minority segment of the community – some local individuals are deliberately trying to „fill the white spots” in their Tatar identity. They conduct their own amateur historical research and thus, produce a secondary, alternative narrative for their community. The majority of those individuals are predominantly young people, although this is not always the case. Eventually, this „new knowledge” is disseminated among other members of the group as some sort of compensation for the lack of an official historiography. The trend should be understood against the background of the globalization processes and the ensuing „information flow” via various channels such as the Internet, social media, etc.

Concluding remarks

As this essay argues, although a fundamental aspect of local Tatar identity, Crimea is experienced markedly differently according to every respondent’s background. The peninsula can be experienced as the „land of the ancestors”; as a vague, although resilient part of family history; as a source of cultural or ethnic mobilization; as an abstraction that is secondary constructed by more recent processes of agency, etc.

Even though this analysis tried to discuss in detail the unambiguous roles of the Crimean peninsula for the cultural landscape of Tatars in Bulgaria, we are far from reaching definitive answers. A key question that should probably be addressed in future research is how the Crimean identification interacts with other forms of ethnic self-designations in the isolated local Tatar environment. Which identification is more fundamental for the community at hand – „Crimean Tatars”, „Dobrudjan Tatars”, or simply „Tatars”? Do these ethnic labels contradict each other? Or, conversely, they can complement each other? In this regard, the empirical data so far show that the geographical term „Dobrudja” – hence, the ethnonym „Dobrudjan Tatars” – may be rarely heard within the community. Rather, among the majority of interlocutors, the „Tatar” or „Crimean Tatar” designations dominate, while „Dobrudja” is usually present as a geographical clarification; as one of our interlocutors claimed: „I am a Crimean Tatar from Dobrudja” (a 36-years-old Tatar respondent, Vetovo, Bulgaria). However, the relations and possible tensions between the ethnonyms „Tatars” and „Crimean Tatars” in the case of the discussed community outline a promising direction for future research.

Although they go beyond the scope of this chapter, some of the insights gained during this work may outline further directions for new research. In this regard, our observations show that Bulgaria’s Tatars follow their peculiar trajectory of historical development that is rather distinct from the history of other Crimean

Tatar communities. Due to their migration in the mid-19th century, Tatars in Bulgaria didn't participate in some of the major events in Crimean Tatar history – e.g., nation-building, the ensuing projects for political autonomy, the Soviet indigenization campaign (*korenizatsiya*), etc. Therefore, it is reasonable to treat local Crimean Tatars as a much more „authentic” pre-modern Tatar community than their alleged „ethnic kinsmen” from Crimea proper.

At a broader level, some of the remarks in this study raise interesting theoretical questions. The isolated case of Crimean Tatars in Vetovo can be considered as a specific predicament for the „classical” theories of nationalism and nation-building. On the one hand, the group's ethnic identity and its material manifestations (raising flags, public gatherings, distribution of knowledge about history, etc.) were obviously „invented” by the cultural elite of the community in a situation of political mobilization after the end of communism. Such a constructivist perspective presupposes that a hitherto anonymous group at some point engaged in re-vitalizing suitable „fragments” of their culture to elaborate an „authentic” ethnic past – a situation that was once discussed by prominent anthropologist James Clifford²⁷. On the other hand, however, there is a possibility for another reading. For decades, without having an elite, education, and an available national narrative, generations of historically ignorant Tatars continuously reproduced family memories about their „Tatariness” using some overtly „primordial” metaphors (such as language, a memory of „common origin”, notions of kinship, etc.). This clearly demonstrates that a one-sided approach toward Tatar identity is irrelevant and even open to criticism. Instead, to get a more detailed, historically grounded view of the various aspects of the dynamics of Crimean Tatar identity, one should consider a variety of factors, both subjectivist as well as objectivist.

References

- Albaret, M. & Deas, J., *Semistructured Interviews*, [in:] *International Organizations and Research Methods: An Introduction*, ed. F. Badache, Ann Arbor 2023.
- Antonov, S., *Tatarite v Balgariya*, Dobrich 2004.
- Antonov, S., *Tatarskata obshtnost v Balgariya: ot kulturna traditsiya kam kulturna politika*, [in:] *Vsekidnevната kultura na balgarite i sarbite v postsotsialisticheskaya period. Treta balgaro-srabska nauchna konferentsiya*, ed. R. Ivanova, Sofia 2005.
- Antonsich, M., *The 'everyday' of banal nationalism – Ordinary people's views on Italy and Italian*, „Political Geography” 2016, vol. 54.

²⁷ J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge 1988.

- Antweiler, C., *Ethnicity from an anthropological perspective*, [in:] *Ethnicity as a Political Resource: Conceptualizations across Disciplines, Regions, and Periods*, Bielefeld 2015.
- Assmann, J., *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge 2011.
- Billig, M., *Banal Nationalism*, London 1995.
- Brubaker, R., *Grounds for Difference*, Cambridge-London 2015.
- Clifford, J., *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge 1988.
- Erolova, Y., *Dobrudzha – granitsi i identichnosti*, Sofia 2010.
- Erolova, Y., *Granitsi i identichnosti: krimskite tatarı v Dobrudzha*, [in:] *Dinamika na natsionalnata identichnost i transnatsionalnite identichnosti v protsesa na evropeyska integratsiya*, ed. M. Decheva, Sofia 2008.
- Gruev, M. & Kalionski, A., *Vazroditelniyat protses. Myusyulmanskite obshtnosti i komunisticheskiyat rezhim: politiki, reaktsii i posleditsi*, Sofia 2008.
- Halbwachs, M., *On Collective Memory*, Chicago 1992.
- Hobsbawm, E.J., *Introduction: Inventing Traditions*, [in:] *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. E.J. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger, Cambridge 1983.
- Hunt, C., *From Crimea to Dobruja: The Impact of the Crimean War on the Crimean Tatars of the Nineteenth Century*, [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of the Crimean War*, ed. C. Badem, London-New York 2021.
- Jones, S., *The archaeology of ethnicity. Constructing identities in the past and present*, London-New York 1997.
- Kaźmierska, K., *Analysing Biographical Data – Different Approaches of Doing Biographical Research*, „Qualitative Sociology Review” 2014, vol. 10, no. 1.
- Kirimli, H., *Emigrations from the Crimea to the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean War*, „Middle Eastern Studies” 2008, vol. 44, no. 5.
- Kozelsky, M., *The Crimean War and the Tatar Exodus*, [in:] *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands: The Eastern Question Reconsidered*, eds. L.J. Frary, M. Kozelsky, Madison 2014.
- Mihaylova-Mravkarova, M., *Tatarite i tatarskite uchilishta v Balgariya*, „Minalo” 1995, vol. 2, no. 4.
- Nora, P., *Svetovniyat vazhod na pametta*, [in:] *Okolo Pier Nora: Mesta na pamet i konstruirane na nastoyashteto*, ed. I. Znepolski, Sofia 2004.
- Pinson, M., *Ottoman Colonization of the Crimean Tatars in Bulgaria, 1854-1862*, [in:] *Proceedings of the Seventh Congress of the Türk Tarih Kumuru*, Ankara 1970.
- Sağlık Şahin, S., *Kırım Tatar Türklerinin Bahar Bayramı: Tepreş*, „Modern Türklük Araştırmaları Dergisi” 2012, vol. 9, no. 2.
- Smith, A.D., *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford 1999.

- Vásáry, I., *Cumans and Tatars: Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185-1365*, Cambridge 2005.
- Williams, B.G., *The Crimean Tatars: From Soviet Genocide to Putin's Conquest*, Oxford 2016.
- Williams, B.G., *The Crimean Tatars: The Diaspora Experience and the Forging of a Nation*, Leiden 2001.
- Williams, B.G., *The Ethnogenesis of the Crimean Tatars. An Historical Reinterpretation*, „Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society” 2001, vol. 11, no. 3.
- Yankova, V., *Family Memory and Popular Historiography About the Tatars from Bulgarian Dobrudja*, „Ethnologia Balkanica” 2018, 21.
- Yankova, V., *Istoricheska pamet i obrazi na minaloto (po primeri ot Balgariya, Ungariya, Polsha i Litva)*, Sofia 2019.
- Yankova, V., *The Tatars in Bulgaria and Their Oral History: The Migration from Crimea*, [in:] *Anticus Multicultural Association: The 1st Annual Kurultai of the Endangered Cultural Heritage*, ed. T. Murat, Constanța 2018.
- Yankova, V., *Za „Drugiya” v slavyanskoto kulturno prostranstvo (Kam ustnata istoriya na tatarite v Yuzhna Dobrudzha)*, [in:] *Limes slavicus. Slavyanstvoto – granitsi na obshtnostta*, Shumen 2016.

Abstrakt

Evlogi Stanchev

Ojczyzna wyobrażona czy utracona? Reprezentacje Krymu w tożsamości Tatarów Krymskich z Wetowa w Bułgarii

Niniejszy esej omawia różnorodne miejsca, obrazy i funkcje Półwyspu Krymskiego w tożsamości demograficznie małej społeczności tatarskiej w dzisiejszym Wetowie w Bułgarii. Chociaż artykuł opiera się na podejściu multidyscyplinarnym, podstawą studiów są antropologiczne badania terenowe, przeprowadzone z respondentami o różnych profilach. Opierając się na wpływowym paradygmacie „pamięci kulturowej” Jana Assmanna, w rozważaniach został położony szczególny nacisk na różne mechanizmy reprodukcji różnych pojęć i reprezentacji między pokoleniami. Podążając za tymi ramami, autor argumentuje, że Krym jest doświadczany w różny sposób w zależności od osobistego lub rodzinnego pochodzenia jednostki. Niemniej jednak w dłuższej perspektywie półwysep pozostaje głównym punktem odniesienia (jako „starożytna ojczyzna”), a także źródłem identyfikacji (ponieważ „pochodzimy z Krymu”) dla lokalnej społeczności w kontekście asymilacyjnego, zdominowanego przez Turków środowiska.

Słowa kluczowe: Krym, Tatarzy Krymscy, Bułgaria, tożsamość, pamięć kulturowa

Evlogi Stanchev – dr historii, adiunkt w Instytucie Studiów Bałkańskich z Centrum Trakologii Bułgarskiej Akademii Nauk. ORCID: 0000-0003-1437-9376