

CRIMEAN TATAR HERSTORY OF THE WAR IN MODERN UKRAINIAN CULTURE

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The subject of analysis is the process of interaction between Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar cultures in the context of decommunization. The center of attention is the story of a Crimean Tatar girl during the war, which became the plot of Akhtem Seitablayev's film "Another's Prayer" and Iren Rozdobudko's novel "Faride". The purpose of the article is to demonstrate how the Crimean Tatar herstory of the war is able to integrate into Ukrainian culture not as exotic, but as close and relatable, and what significance it has for contemporary Ukrainian culture.

Key words: decommunization, chosen trauma, deportation, herstory

Introduction

Nowadays, an important feature of Ukrainian culture is the anticolonial process (decommunization), which became more active after 2014. Ukrainians reclaim their history, heroes, and values. An important condition for this is the debunking of Soviet myths, particularly the myth of the Great Patriotic War. All this is reflected in modern literature, which found a place for a variety of stories about the war.

A special issue in this process is including Crimean Tatar history and culture as part of Ukrainian history and culture. Crimean Tatars were reliable allies in both Ukrainian Revolutions (2004, 2013) and they support decommunization. Soviet authorities deported Crimean Tatars from the peninsula in 1944 and this caused irreparable damage to people, language, culture, and land. Only in 1989 did the Crimean Tatars get the opportunity to return to Crimea. When Russia occupied the peninsula in 2014, the new authorities began to interpret the Crimean Tatars in the tradition of Stalinism, which has grown stronger in Russia over the past twenty years. Therefore, part of the Crimean Tatar people went from Crimea to Ukraine to

preserve and develop their culture¹. As researchers claim, “Post-annexation campaigns to explain the Crimean Tatar suffering to the world through memory politics increased with the support of Ukraine (re)claiming sovereignty over Crimea” (Buhari Gulmez and Budrytė 2022: 20).

The researchers have already analyzed the Crimean Tatars’ decolonization project, so in my paper, I will focus on the interaction of cultures in the context of decommunization. Austin Charron has stressed that Russian and Soviet colonialism were grounded in Orientalist discourses, which is why “Crimean Tatars often represented an exotic and menacing Other in Russian and Soviet imperial discourses, and this deeply-rooted perception contributed to rhetorical justifications for their displacement, deportation, and disenfranchisement in ways never experienced by ethnic Ukrainians” (Charron 2019: 28). My goal is to demonstrate how modern Ukrainian literature incorporates Crimean Tatar story not as exotic, but as close and relatable, and what significance it has for contemporary Ukrainian culture.

One of the factors that make such rapprochement possible is the appeal of *herstory*. This is a term for stories written from a woman’s perspective, which makes visible women in history. The term originated as an alternative to “history”, which is understood as written from a male point of view. In World War II, both Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars participated as colonized nations, but the national differences in their struggle histories are present. Marginalized women’s discourses have more points of contact and therefore affect the reader more effectively.

Hence the center of my attention is the story of a Crimean Tatar girl during the war, which became the plot of Akhtem Seitablayev’s film “Another’s Prayer” and Iren Rozdobudko’s novel “Faride”. I will characterize the deportation of the Crimean Tatars as a chosen trauma (Vamik Volkan), will analyze the creation of the story of Saide and its functionality in the artistic world of the film and the novel, and will introduce it into the context of the Soviet myth about the “Great Patriotic War”, which is currently actively used by the Russian Federation for propaganda purposes. The demonstration of how Crimean Tatar herstory undermines the monolithic myth makes it possible to talk about it as part of the Ukrainian decolonization project (decommunization).

¹ See more in Charron 2019.

Deportation as Crimean Tatar's chosen trauma

Indeed, few if any national communities suffered as greatly from Russian and Soviet colonizers as the Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of the Crimean Peninsula. There are different views regarding the ethnogenesis of the Crimean Tatars, but in general, scholars tend to consider them as an ethnically heterogeneous group, which was formed as a result of the amalgamation of various Turkic-speaking tribes of the Golden Horde coming from the north and the previously-settled peoples of South Crimea. The name Tatars has been used since the 13th century. In the mid-fifteenth century, Tatars formed an independent state known as the Crimean Khanate. As a result of the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 1783, the Crimean Khanate lost its autonomy. Since then Crimean Tatars have survived several traumas. By the 1920s, more than 1.8 million Tatars emigrated from the peninsula to Turkey. In the next two decades, the Crimean Tatars experienced repression and famine, which killed over 100,000 Crimeans, most of whom were Tatar.

In October 1941, the peninsula was occupied by the Nazis. Despite the fact that the Crimean Tatars served in the ranks of the Soviet Army and put up partisan resistance, the Soviet government accused them of collaborationism and treason². On May 18, 1944, the Soviet authorities deported all Crimean Tatars to Uzbekistan and the Urals. As the genocide researcher Greta Uehling notes,

The death toll as a result of the 1944 deportation was catastrophic: 46 percent of the population is believed to have perished at that time. In addition to this physical destruction, efforts were made to cleanse all traces of them from the Crimean landscape, and to ensure the assimilation of survivors in places of exile.

(Uehling 2015: 3)

Since the deportation, the ethnonym Crimean Tatars has been banned from use in the Soviet Union. Crimean toponyms were changed to Russian ones, Crimean Tatar cemeteries and religious sites were destroyed, and the history of the peninsula was rewritten. Since the end of 1940s, the ideology has brainwashed the citizens of the USSR with the image of Crimean Tatar

² Cases of collaboration occurred throughout the Nazi-occupied territory, including Russia, due to the cruelty and injustice of the Soviet government, but the Crimean Tatars, Ingush, Chechens, Kalmyks, Volga Germans, and some other peoples of the Caucasus were blamed *en masse*.

as an eternal enemy³. The Crimean Tatars were pressured to lose their national culture, language, and identity through assimilation.

In 1954 Crimea became an autonomous part of Ukraine due to its economic connection: Ukraine rebuilt the peninsula destroyed by war and deportation. For more than 40 years, the Crimean Tatars fought to return to their homeland, but only after 1989 were around 250,000 Crimean Tatars able to return to the Crimea within the newly independent Ukraine. They began to build their national political and cultural life, actively participating in political events in Ukraine. Since 1998 their representatives have been members of the Ukrainian Parliament. In 2014 Russia occupied the peninsula, banned Crimean Tatar political organizations and media, persecuted activists, and caused a new wave of emigration, now to Ukraine.

Deportation has become a central narrative that now fits into Ukrainian culture, and the interests of both peoples meet in this story. For the Crimean Tatars, this is “chosen trauma”. Chosen trauma is “the shared mental representation of a massive trauma that the group’s ancestors suffered at the hand of an enemy” that “is reactivated in order to support the group’s threatened identity” (Volkan 2001: 87-88). Jeffrey C. Alexander’s social theory of trauma defines trauma as “a painful injury to the collectivity, [which] establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences” (Alexander 2012: 27). The researcher considers creating, broadcasting, and inhabiting trauma at the social and cultural levels.

The painful event is recognized as trauma when stories about it are constantly repeated in public spaces. These people who bring the stories become agents of trauma, presenting it in renewed forms and finding an audience that will accept it. However, due to the occupation of the peninsula, the narrative of deportation has become endangered, preventing the Russian Federation from glorifying the Soviet past, while “a living memorial to their people’s tragedy in every sense, is dying off and soon there will be no more living witnesses to this crime which has gone largely unnoticed by the outside world” (Williams 2002: 324).

The film “Haytarma” (2013) by Akhtem Seitablaiev was “the first step to visualize the collective trauma and share it in the cinemas around Ukraine” (Zubkovych 2019: 51). The film tells the story of the Crimean Tatar pilot Ahmet-Han Sultan, twice a Hero of the Soviet Union, who

³In 1948, Ivan Kozlov received the Stalin Prize for his memoirs *In the Crimean Underground*, and in 1949 Arkady Perventsev received this prize for his novel *Honor since Youth*, both texts depicted the Crimean Tatars as traitors to their homeland.

became a witness of deportation and could not prevent it. The film involved many non-professional actors – elderly people who survived deportation in childhood. The film was released on the eve of the Day of Mourning for the Victims of the Deportation of the Crimean Tatar People (May 18). Although this film was planned to be shown in Ukraine, the Ukrainian soundtrack was not created. In 2021 the “Toloka” community offered Ukrainian multi-voice dubbing. Despite the fact that the film was criticized for using the language and iconography of the colonizer, it is worth agreeing with Greta Uehling’s assessment of it: “the film punctured the silenced history of deportation and brought Crimean Tatar patriotism into public view” (Uehling 2015: 7).

The most successful attempt to tell the world about the tragedy of the Crimean Tatars was the performance of the Crimean Tatar singer Jamala at the 2016 Eurovision Song Contest, which brought victory to Ukraine. Her song “1944” was a reminder of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944 – a collective trauma of the people.

For Crimean Tatars, speaking about their past “is also a sign of the choice, and a declaration of being a part of the Ukrainian society. It is a call to create a common narrative about the past, a history that will also include the Crimean Tatars, as well as the relations between the Ukrainians and Tatars, not only from the political, but also cultural perspective” (Gontarska 2018: 213).

For Ukrainians, the story of deportation is a story about the crime of the Soviet government (such as the Holodomor and the Executed Renaissance), and therefore it is an effective argument in the conflict over memory about different versions of the past. Overcoming the idealization of the Soviet past and nostalgia for it is one of the tasks of the Ukrainian decolonization project.

Herstory of war and deportation

The second film by Seitablaiev that features Crimean Tatars, “87 Children” or “Another’s Prayer”, was released on 18 May 2017, on the anniversary of the deportation. This is the story of the Crimean Tatar girl Saide Arifova, who was an orphanage teacher and, risking her life, rescued 87 Jewish children during Nazi occupation. She passed them off as Crimean Tatar, giving them Tatar names, inventing other families for them, and teaching them Muslim prayers. This saved them during the inspection. Saide herself was subjected to torture by the police, but she did not confess to anything. After the de-occupation, Saide and the children from the orphanage were deported as Crimean Tatars; however, Saide

managed to prove that some of the children were not Crimean Tatars, but Jews, and thereby saved them for the second time.

Seitablaiev positions his film as based on real events. However, there is currently no information confirming or disproving Saide Arifova's story, since the documents have not been preserved, just as there are no contacts of the survivors. After returning from Uzbekistan, the real Saide Arifova (1916-2007) unsuccessfully tried to find her former pupils.

The film is presented as a story of one of the rescued children, who relates it at the end of his life. He is already in hospital and wants to have the time to tell his story about Saide. Probably the director tried to encourage witnesses of events not to be silent.

The story of Saide is a story about survival during the war: Saide is haunted by the danger of being exposed for hiding Jews, starvation, harassment by a German officer, torture when the Nazis suspected her, and deportation. The plot of the film unfolds in a triangle: woman-children-power, making this story universal: the woman fulfills her traditional role – takes care of children, and the authorities' actions look cruel because both Nazis and communists hunt people not because of their actions, but because of their origin. So the story that Seitablaiev presents is about the pain caused by groundless accusations and the punishment of innocent people who were defenseless in a totalitarian state.

This idea is preserved in the novel by Iren Rozdobudko "Faride", which becomes a sign of acceptance by Ukrainians of the Crimean Tatar story as a part of their own. In the first part of the XX century, Ukrainian literature represented Crimean Tatars as the Others, after WWII they disappeared from the literature for half a century, remaining only in historical novels and repeating Soviet narratives about the enemy. The novel arose from the film script called "I will be back!" which the authoress wrote for Seitablaiev before 2014. However, the director chose another script for his film. After the Russian occupation of Crimea and the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine, Rozdobudko returned to the script and rewrote it into a novel (Bruchovetska, Rozdobudko 2021: 32). She said in the preface, that she wanted to stay, that "our HOME is always with us. The enemy can expel us from it, but it is impossible to take it away" (Rozdobudko 2021: 3). These words bring Faride's story home for all Ukrainian citizens, who were forced to become refugees as a result of the Russian attack.

Unlike the film, the novel does not pretend to be a documentary, indicating the genre as an "apocryphal novel". This genre gives the author the opportunity not to seek biographical accuracy and add events from the lives

of other Crimean Tatars to the story about the rescue of the children – escape during the deportation, arrest, imprisonment in the Gulag, participation in the movement for a return to Crimea. These events bring history closer to Ukrainian realities: after World War II, Ukrainians were massively arrested and sent to the Gulag and, in the 1970s, an active dissident movement developed. This is how the novel emphasized a shared history.

However, in the novel, Rozdobudko emphasizes not a nation, but gender, the world she creates is emphatically female. The novel spans sixty years, from Faride's childhood to her death. Rozdobudko builds the novel around a love story: Faride loves the non-Muslim Ukrainian Oleksiy Kovalenko. The characters are separated first by tradition, which does not allow them to marry, then by the war, and later by the Soviet authorities. Despite the fact that the central events of the novel, which change both the character system and the setting, are war and deportation, the composition of the novel emphasizes the unhappy marriage as a key event – this is the only thing that Faride wants to change in her life. The novel begins and ends with a lyrical fragment where everyone is happy after Faride ran away with Oleksiy. Thus, personal female happiness is placed above political events.

It is important that Rozdobudko abandons the traditional plot scheme of (anti)colonial novels, in which depictions of the relationship between powerful male colonizers and colonized women become metaphors for the power that empires have over dependent territories. Rejecting traditional cultural patterns, Rozdobudko focuses not on political metaphors, but on real women's experiences.

Herstory of the war by Rozdobudko is a story of many women, who lost their loved ones during the war, kept working for the sake of others, survived the trauma of witnessing atrocities, and suffered from malnutrition. This is also a story of those who, during the occupation, fall pregnant and give birth, relying only on other women and nature. And this is also the story of those women who risk their lives for the sake of human values. Rozdobudko repeats the main points of the children's rescue story: the character invents new names, makes new documents, and experiences arrest and torture. Faride's pregnancy heightens the drama and reinforces the value of self-sacrifice. Further, deportation is shown as grave injustice that leads to the deaths of four characters.

The novel deconstructs the narrative of the Great Patriotic War, brings together the history of Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians, depicts Crimea before the deportation as a place of harmonious cooperation between the different peoples, and emphasizes return as a value worth fighting for.

How Crimean Tatar herstory contradicts the Soviet war discourse

Soviet culture presented the war experience maximally generalized, as the experience of the “Soviet people”, which made it possible to “overlook” the peculiarities of gender and national experience. As Olena Styazhkina points out, the universal image of a woman during the war presented women’s suffering “not as specifically female, but specifically Soviet, since most women brutally punished by invaders were communists, partisans, liaisons, and underground women” (Styazhkina 2015: 43), the suffering of the rest of the women remained unnoticed.

Literature played an important role in the construction of this monolithic image of the Soviet woman during the war, just as it now helps to debunk it, offering individual experiences and emotions that had no place in the official version of history. As Daisy Neumann rightly points out, “literature can also be instrumental in the construction of public memory and forgetting, by giving narrative shape to confusing, uncontainable experiences, creating discursive order out of chaos, and providing convenient explanations and justifications to protect a national sense of self against profoundly unsettling anxieties in the face of a perceived overwhelming threat” (Neumann 2016: 98). The herstory helps to avoid acute national confrontations and radical cultural and political divisions because the story of Saide can be universal.

The Crimean Tatar herstory contradicts the Soviet war narrative, which universalized the experience of the war, legitimizing Soviet power and Stalinism. Debunking this narrative is important because the strengthening of Stalinism is causing new crimes against humanity. As Greta Uehling points out, “the Crimean Tatar genocide is treated first by Soviet and now Russian Federation authorities as something the Crimean Tatars brought upon themselves” (Uehling 2015: 4) and this biased belief makes the persecution of the Crimean Tatars more brutal after the occupation of the peninsula.

Here it is worth mentioning that in 2015 the Crimean Tatars in the occupied Crimea wanted to honor the 100th anniversary of the birth of the real Saide Arifova with the documentary film “88 prayers of a mother”, a biographical book and a series of commemorating events. Their story included mentioning that Saide was connected with the *guerrillas*: they tried to fit her into the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War to give her story the traditional form of the story of Soviet *guerrillas*. In this way, the authors of the project wanted to justify her right to be visible and honored. However, that did not help, and their intentions did not become reality.

On the other hand, both Seitablayev's film and Rozdobudko's book ask the question: can women and children be responsible for collaborationism as a form of power relations, if at that time women in the majority did not have power; if their story is not about fighting, but about survival? In Rozdobudko's novel, the world is emphatically feminine, revealing different herstories (apart from Faride's, Jewish Sara's and Tamila's, Crimean Tatar Marietta's, Bashyra's, Aglikamal's and Anelia's, Ukrainian Lidia's). None of them leave the domestic private space, but all suffer or die. Their fates prompt readers to repeat the Ukrainian slogan of WWII commemoration: "Never again".

Conclusion

Ukrainian decommunization created an opportunity not only for a dialogue between the official and personal narrative but also for an inter-ethnic one, forming an inclusive history. The common goal – the deconstruction of Soviet myths – contributed to this interaction. As a result, Crimean Tatar chosen trauma is involved in the Ukrainian decolonization project. The deportation not only becomes the main narrative of the Crimean Tatars, but also penetrates the stories created by Ukrainian writers. The herstory, considered in the example of the film and the novel, shifts the focus of the story about the war from the front to the occupied territory. This story is about survival. The herstory also highlights the issue of power/arbitrariness to which women and children are subjected during the war. The film and the novel destroy the monolithic idea of a victorious war because they tell about those for whom the war ended not in victory, but in deportation. Such dialogic coordination of the vision of the past is intended to form an agreed vision of the future by Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars.

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