

# EXILED PEOPLE: THE CASE OF CRIMEAN TATARS

A lesson plan for high school curriculum  
based on model lessons published in

***Communism: Its Ideology, Its History and Its Legacy***

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# Exiled People and the Case of Crimean Tatars

## OVERVIEW

During World War II, the Communist government of the Soviet Union forcibly removed millions of people from their homeland to distant parts of the country. Entire groups, based on their ethnicity, from the Baltics, the Volga region, Crimea and the Caucasus were uprooted and relocated mostly to Siberia and Central Asia. The authorities regarded them as potential collaborators with the invading German forces or charged them with subversive activities. The exiled people with their family members lived in special settlements under the control of the state, deprived of their basic rights. The deportation process itself was brutal and the places of exile often inhospitable, leading to many deaths. Crimean Tatars were one of the ethnic minorities of the Soviet Union, and their experience of deportation and life in exile was not that different from the other minority groups subjected to the same tragic fate.

## OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Understand how the Soviet policy of forced relocation (deportation) of entire groups of people based on ethnicity limited or eliminated their basic rights
- Explain the concept of collective punishment
- Analyze the documents to understand the value Stalin's regime put on human beings
- Empathize with the victims of forced relocation who lived in exile for many decades

## ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

How did Stalin's policy of forced relocation (deportation) of ethnic minorities affect their lives?

## MATERIALS:

- Background Essay: Exiled People: The Case of Crimean Tatars
- Student Handout A: "1944, May 18," a sketch by Zaur Ibragimov, a Crimean Tatar graphic artist
- Student Handout B: Map showing places of resettlement of the Crimean Tatars
- Student Handout C: Survivor Narratives / Eye Witness Accounts
- Answer Key
- Teacher Resource A: Timeline: Deportation and Exile of Crimean Tatars under Soviet Rule, and Teacher Resource B. Useful References

## CREATE THE CONTEXT

[for homework or in class the previous day]

- A. Play the audio clip, “Crimean Tatars,” prepared for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deportation of Crimean Tatars (9 minutes), BBC World Service Witness History: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00gmb5r>
- B. Have students read the Background Essay and think about the questions that follow the essay. (See the Answer Key for suggested responses.)

### PSA (Primary Source Activity) [10 minutes]

- A. Briefly review the Background Essay to clarify any terms and ideas.
- B. Distribute copies (or project an image) of the Student Handout A: “1944, May 18,” a sketch by Zaur Ibragimov. Give students 3 minutes, working in pairs, to discuss the mood in the picture. Who are the figures in the picture? What seems to be the attitude of the mother with three children? Where do you think the man of the house is? Help students to understand that families (mostly women and children) were informed by the military to leave their home promptly (usually 15-20 minutes) and could take very few belongings with them.

### ACTIVITY A [ 5 minutes]

- A. Distribute copies of Student Handout B. Map showing the places of resettlement of the Crimean Tatars after deportation in 1944. It will be helpful to have a world map or a globe available in the classroom.
- B. Give students 3-4 minutes, working in pairs, to note the long distances the exiles were transported from homeland Crimea. Most of the Crimean Tatars (78 percent) found themselves in special settlements in Uzbekistan, then a part of the Soviet Union, about 2,000 miles from Crimea. Families got separated and ended up in different locations, and Crimean Tatar men serving in the Soviet Army were mostly sent to Molotov Oblast. (Map credit: Krym Realii)

### ACTIVITY B [25 minutes]

- A. Review with students why personal narratives are important in understanding the experience of people involved in deportation from their homeland. In this case, the forced removal of people affected not only them but also those who were left behind or military personnel who carried out the process. These characters were real people and the five narratives are condensed from the published memoirs. Duplicate and distribute **Student Handout C: Personal Narratives by Survivors / Eye-witness accounts.**
- B. The entire class can participate. Ask for 5 volunteers who will read each narrative in class and the rest could fill in the appropriate boxes for each narrative.

**WRAP-UP [10 minutes]**

1. What basic rights did the ethnic minorities (or Crimean Tatars) in the Soviet Union lose when subjected to collective punishment?
2. Try to imagine what living in exile in a Soviet special settlement would be like.
3. Can you think of any cases when the United States government forcibly removed any ethnic groups in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries?

## **BACKGROUND ESSAY**

### **Exiled People: The Case of Crimean Tatars**

The people living in the former Soviet Union or in annexed territories suffered in a variety of ways from the actions taken by their Communist government: restrictions imposed on basic human rights, arrests and imprisonment, forced relocation to labor camps (Gulag) and special settlements, and even artificially created famines. The rights to property and to fair trial became eliminated, and people's cultural and religious activities were curtailed. While forced removal of entire ethnic groups from their traditional areas was not new to the Communist regime, Joseph Stalin pursued this policy ruthlessly. During and after World War II, Stalin's government deported over 3 million people, based on their ethnicity, from their ancestral lands to far-away areas of the Soviet Union. National groups with cultural and ethnic ties to hostile states were also suspect. These people were seen as potential spies or collaborators with the enemy.

In 1941, the Finns, the Baltic nations (Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians) and Volga Germans became the first targeted groups who were forcibly removed because of security concerns. Between November 1943 and November 1944, Stalin's government deported nearly one million Soviet citizens: the Kalmyks, the Buddhist people living in the lower Volga region; the indigenous people of the North Caucasus (Karachays, Chechens and the Inguish); Crimean Tatars, Greeks, Bulgarians and Armenians, living in Crimea; and Meskhetian (or Ahiska) Turks inhabiting the mountainous Georgian and Turkish border. The Caucasus and Crimea fell into the areas that were occupied by the German forces from 1941 to 1944, and soon after the Germans withdrew, the Soviet government charged them with treason or aiding the enemy. The entire ethnic groups were uprooted and sent to exile in the Urals, Siberia and Central Asia. They lost their homeland, their property as well as thousands of their kinsmen, and their cultural and religious life became severely affected. They remained in special settlements, with limited rights and mobility, and provided cheap labor to help develop the interior areas of the Soviet Union.

Crimean Tatars are the native people of the Crimean peninsula, located north of the Black Sea. They speak a Turkic language and are moderate Muslims. Politically, they exercised considerable power in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries after forming their own state, Crimean Khanate in the 1440s. In 1783, Russian Empire annexed Crimea, and after the Bolshevik revolution, Crimea became part of the Soviet Union, with the establishment of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921. In the next two decades, Crimean Tatars experienced different forms of repression under Communist rule, including imprisonment and executions during Great Terror, and famines that claimed thousands of lives. During World War

II, Crimea was occupied by the military forces of Nazi Germany in the fall of 1941, and they stayed until April 1944.

A week after the German forces withdrew from Crimea, Stalin issued an order (Decree no. 5859ss) to remove the entire population of Crimean Tatars from their homeland, where they had lived for centuries. The Soviet government accused the indigenous population of Crimea of collaborating with the occupying authorities. The armed forces of the NKVD (Soviet state security police) were involved in removing nearly 200,000 people in 3 days. Today, 18 May 1944 is remembered by Crimean Tatars as the Day of Deportation. In the early hours of the morning, the soldiers arrived at people's houses, giving them 15-20 minutes to get ready and forcing them out of their homes. They were taken to collection points or the nearest train station and loaded onto freight trains. The boxcars were crowded and filthy, with no sanitary facilities or adequate fresh air. The journey took 3-6 weeks, depending on the destination, and those who died on the trains had no proper burial. The bodies were simply removed and left at train stations. The deportees who endured this long and arduous journey were mostly women, children and the elderly men, as the younger and able men were serving in the Soviet army, defending their country against the invading German forces. Eventually, the Crimean Tatar soldiers and officers were also removed from the military and sent to exile. The conditions in the special camps where the deportees lived were so poor that nearly half of the population perished during the process of deportation and within two years in exile due to malnutrition, disease and inadequate housing. They remained in special settlements until 1956, when some of the restrictions were lifted, but they continued to work with poor wages in collective farms and factories.

In 1967, the Soviet government issued an order (Decree 493) that cleared the Crimean Tatars of charges of collaboration with the enemy during World War II. After 23 years spent in exile, the government admitted that "Accusations of collaboration with German occupiers were unjustly levelled at the Tatar population of Crimea" and that "these indiscriminate accusations must be withdrawn." While absolving Crimean Tatars of any crime, the Soviet authorities did not permit them to return to their homeland. It would be another 22 years, in the final years of the Soviet Union that the official permission was granted to return to Crimea. The government offered no compensation, and the repatriates could not get back the property their parents or grandparents had left in Crimea in 1944.

While some Crimean Tatars were involved in subversive activities cooperating with the German occupiers, as other nations under German occupation had during World War II, they were not necessarily the ones who got deported, as most of them had left with the retreating German forces. Some collaborators were arrested and punished by the NKVD. Nevertheless, Stalin's government applied the perceived crimes of a few to the entire ethnic group and used it as a justification to punish all Crimean Tatars by expelling them from their homeland Crimea.

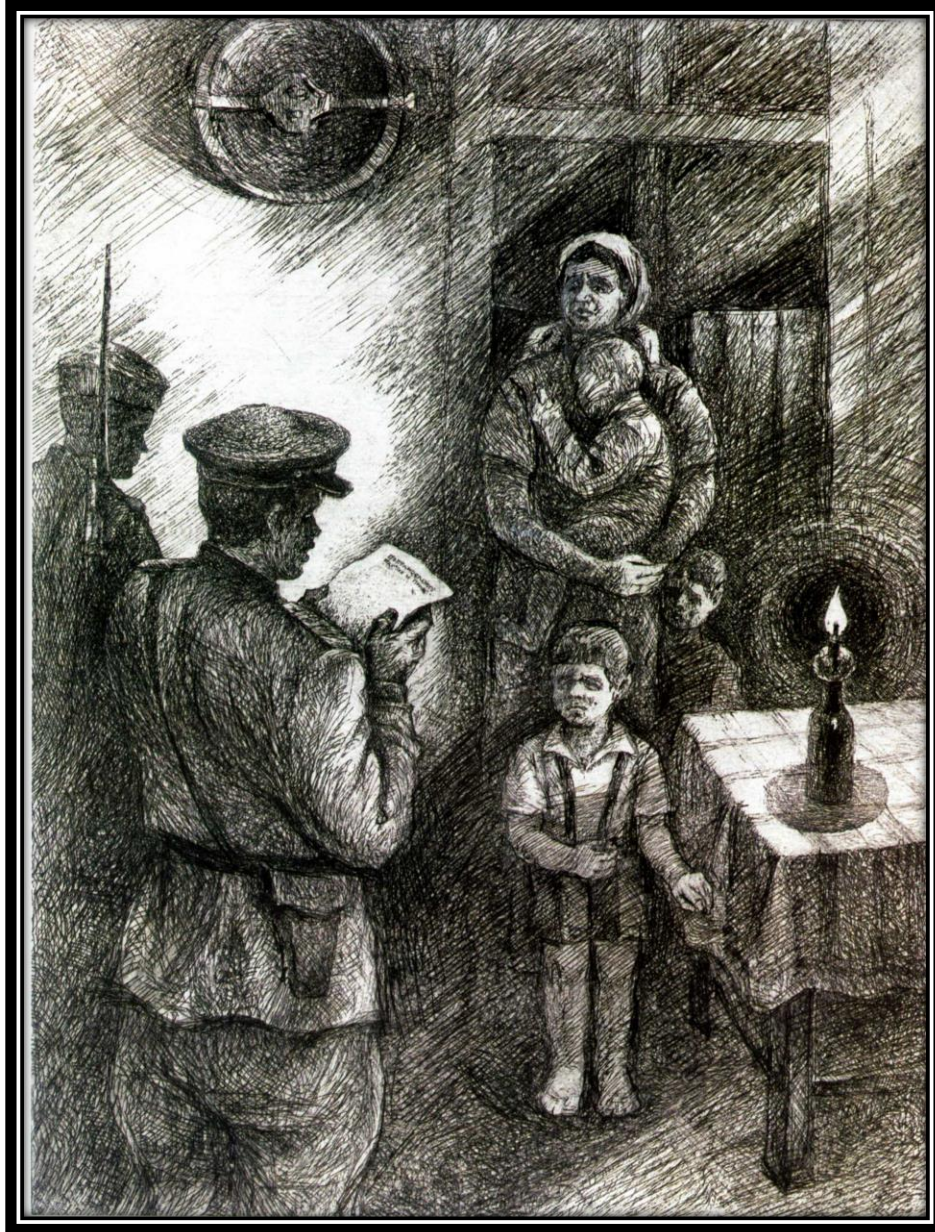
Women, children, and elderly men as well as men fighting within the Soviet Army thus became victims of “collective punishment,” a policy considered a war crime today. Many scholars and activists argue that the treatment of Crimean Tatars by the Soviet authorities amounted to genocide, as defined in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Today, governments of Ukraine and Latvia recognize Crimean Tatar deportation as genocide and there is a legislation in the Canadian Parliament to do so as well. According to a recent statement by a US State Department official (May 2019), the deportation of Crimean Tatars was a crime against humanity, committed on the orders of Joseph Stalin 75 years ago on May 18, 1944. Crimean Tatars were among the more than 100 million victims of Communism.

### **THINK ABOUT IT**

1. Why did Stalin forcibly remove entire groups of ethnic minorities during World War II?
2. Did Stalin’s government discriminate against people based on their religion?
3. What is collective punishment?
4. What basic human rights were violated when Crimean Tatars were deported?
5. What is the difference between forced labor camps (Gulag) and special settlements where exiled people lived?

**Student Handout A: "1944, May 18," by Zaur Ibragimov, a Crimean Tatar graphic artist**

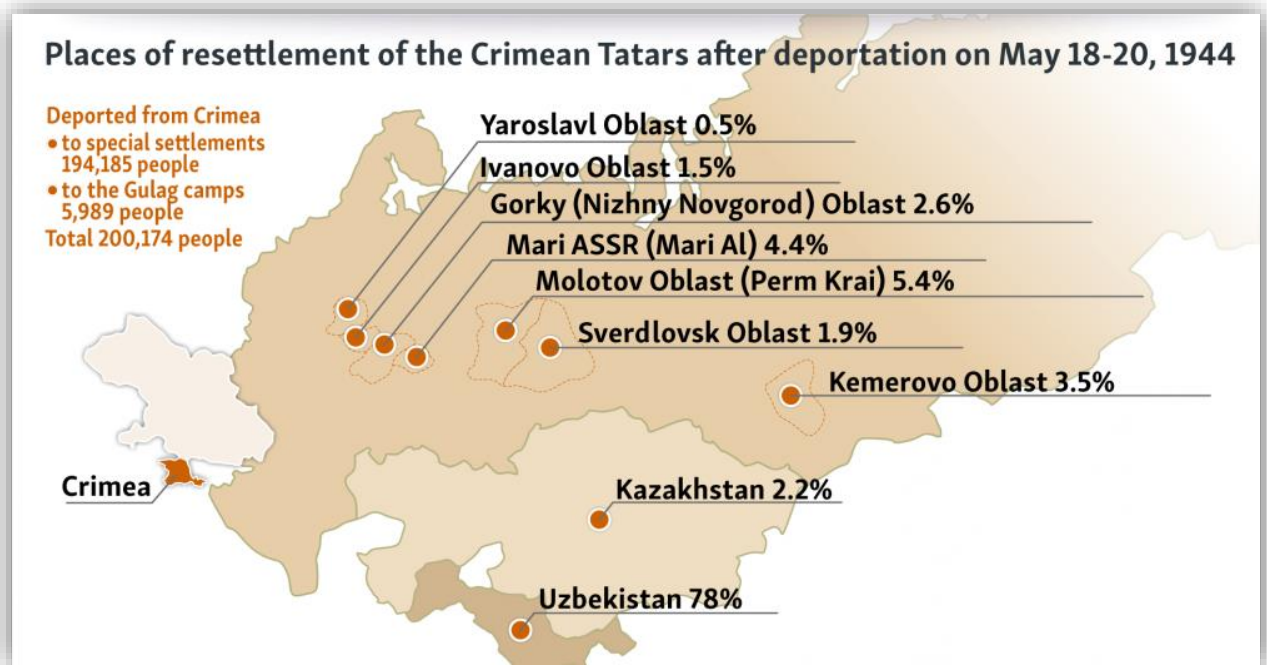
*Who are the figures in the picture? What is the attitude of the mother with three children? Where do you think their father is?*





## Student Handout B: Map showing Places of resettlement of the Crimean Tatars

The map shows the former Soviet Union and Central Asia. Note the location of Crimea, and the different places of settlement after forced relocation of the population. How far is Uzbekistan or any of the Oblasts from Crimea? (Ask Google.)



Map showing the places of resettlement of the Crimean Tatars in 1944

(Map credit: Krym Realii)

## **Student Handout C: Personal Narratives by Survivors / Eye-witness accounts**

*A student volunteer will read each Narrative, followed by a brief discussion in class. Complete the table at the end by filling in the appropriate boxes. Note that forced removal of an entire group not only affected them but also those in the community who stayed behind.*

### **Narrative 1**

I was fifteen when we were deported. I remember those days from the beginning to the end. I cannot forget them even if I wanted to. It was about four or five o'clock in the morning of May 18, soldiers came: "Get out. Quick. You are traitors! This is the Soviet government's decision. Hurry, get out." We were stunned and dazed. We were in a chaos. We were five at home. They took us to Simferopol and loaded us on to cattle cars. We traveled 28 days. We were fed only once in Saratov. Some of us were able to take along some food as we left. The ones who died on the journey were dumped along the road side without a chance to be buried. When we arrived in Samarkand, they gathered us at the stadium. They collected our belongings and piled them in a corner. They led us, pushing and shoving with their rifles, to baths. They brought us back but our belongings were searched and our valuables were taken away. I wonder how we survived those horrible days, those disasters. There must be one explanation to this: We survived by protecting and helping each other, sharing our food, and fighting together.

Condensed from: "From Yaliboyu to the Deserts of Uzbekistan" by Arire Nezetli Idrisli

<http://www.iccrimea.org/surgun/idrisli-yaliboyu.html>

### **Narrative 2**

I was one of the youths mobilized at the end of 1943 and trained by the NKVD for a month before we moved to Crimea. I was directly involved in the removal of Crimean Tatars in the morning of May 18. We went into the houses, got the owners out of bed and announced: "In the name of Soviet Authority, you are being exiled to other regions of the Soviet Union for betraying the homeland." Most people took the command with peaceful submissiveness. The operation itself was immoral but also on its basis arose repulsive scenes: An old woman, out of her mind with grief broke out running into the steppe and was cut down with a round of firing. A little more than a month after the Tatar population was sent out, we were equipped for battle again... In addition to Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians had to go. The Tatars, as it turns out, we deported humanely. After deportation, in the evening we heard the roar of unfed, unmilked and unwatered livestock and no one knew what to do with it. Deportation in this form, in which it was conducted - its infamy is incomparable with anything in terms of its physical and moral torture. I foresaw terrible scenes, not without reason expecting that what was done with these people was only a little better than death. At the same time, those feelings had to be hidden deeper inside.

Condensed from: "A Soviet Soldier's View" by A.L. Vesnin

<http://www.iccrimea.org/surgun/vesnin-view.html>

### **Narrative 3**

I was born in 1936 in Crimea. My father worked as the shepherd of the village, and my mother took care of the animals at home. My sisters worked in the Kolkhoz. There were 14 people living in the house, with my sisters and their children. My sisters' husbands were in the Soviet army, fighting at the front during World War II. We were also deported in 1944 along with the rest of our people. We were settled in a village near the city of Samarkand in Uzbekistan. Members of our family who could not bear the extremely hard conditions started dying one by one. Only my mother and I were left, living in the stable of the Kolkhoz. In less than a month, my mother also got sick. Losing all my family must have given me an enormous fear of being alone, a fear almost as intense as the fear of death. I did not want anyone to come and remove my mother. I went to bed and snuggled up to my mother's dead body. In the morning, I would stand in front of the door and tell the neighbors: "My mother is very sick, please don't disturb her." Four days later, the neighbors realized that my mother had passed away, and pulled me out of her bed. Since that day, I have not been able to sleep at night. It feels as if I sit and wait for my mother. Instead, I take naps late in the afternoon.

Condensed from: "Memoirs" by Serife Umer

<http://www.iccrimea.org/surgun/umer-memoirs.html>

### **Narrative 4**

I was born in the village of Tavbadrak in the Bahcesaray district [Crimea], in 1916. My family and I lived together with the Crimean Tatars in this village until they were all exiled from their Homeland. I have Crimean Tatar relatives. My husband's older sister married a Crimean Tatar. They became Muslims. I am Russian, so are my relatives. Yet they too were exiled because they did not want to be separated from their children and husbands. As they were Russians, the government was not going to exile them. They were going to leave three of her children with her and send the other three to exile with her husband. But she did not heed any of this. She said, "Wherever my children are sent, that is where I'll be." I could never forget the actual day of the deportation because we too were very scared. On May 18, 1944, they raided our village. Nobody explained anything to us. That was at four o'clock in the morning. They let go those who were Russians. Once the Tatar families were banished, our village turned into a ghost town. Their livestock, their cats and dogs, were all orphaned. Some time later, they came and took all the animals away and they also took our own cattle. In good times, Crimean Tatars and Russians celebrated joyful occasions such as weddings together. In those days we had learned some of the Crimean Tatar folk songs. A few of the lyrics are still in my memory. Crimean Tatars and we lived together as one for years and years until the calamity of May 18, 1944. Since then we could not come together as before. Yet, even now my Crimean Tatar friends and ex-neighbors seek and find me. And my home is always open to them.

Condensed from: "Memories," by Olga Korniyasenko

<http://www.iccrimea.org/surgun/korniyasenko-memories.html>

## **Narrative 5**

Two days before the deportation of our people, the chief of our squadron announced at a meeting that those who assisted the German soldiers would be deported. That night, in the early hours of the morning, they started deporting our people. They gathered the men and put them in cars. Concerned about the situation, my chief asked me to go to central headquarters in Akmescit (Simferopol). Perhaps, he said, they could leave your family here. Accompanied by three soldiers, I went to see the commander in charge. The colonel said that all of us would be deported. "This morning, war heroes and patriots came to see me. We are granting no exceptions." I returned to Fotisala but could not find my family. The car that had my family had already left. After May 18, we stayed in Crimea for two more months. We were transporting the needed supplies. One day, they called me to the headquarters and said "We received the order [to deport you] today. Let's change your name and give you a Jewish last name. The victory will be declared soon, and you can move to Odessa after the war." I was with them (the Army) since the beginning of the war, but I responded without hesitation and said "I do not know where my mother, wife, children, relatives, and my people [nation] are. I cannot accept your offer and will have to meet my destiny, whatever it may be." Later, when we got to the railway station, we were loaded onto a car with double bunks. They shut the doors of the car. In the same car, there were Greeks, Bulgarians, Germans and Turkish citizens, also being deported. It took us 18 days to reach the city of Kokand. There I searched for my family and found them.

Condensed from: "Memoirs of a Crimean Tatar soldier," by Memet Abdulla  
[http:// www.iccrimea.org/surgun/abdulla-memoirs.html](http://www.iccrimea.org/surgun/abdulla-memoirs.html)

**DIRECTIONS:**

*After class discussion of each narrative, fill in the appropriate box. Each character has a different perspective on the 1944 deportation of the native people from Crimea. Are there any common threads in the experiences of characters?*

Narrative	Ethnicity	Age and Gender	Perspective on the 1944 deportation
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

## **Answer Key:**

### **Background Essay**

1. Soviet government regarded certain minorities such as Volga Germans or Greeks as “enemy nationality” and relocated them to prevent possible collaboration with the enemy. Crimean Tatars or native people of the Caucasus were accused of aiding the enemy while their territory was under German occupation.
2. In forcibly relocating them, religion does not appear to have played a role. The Baltic people and Volga Germans were Christian, Crimean Tatars and the native peoples of the Caucasus were Muslim, and the Kalmyks Buddhist.
3. Those in power (government or occupying authorities) punish a larger group for the perceived crimes of a few individual, without due legal process. Innocent people have no right to fair trial.
4. The right to life, the right to liberty and freedom of movement, the right to own property, the right to fair trial.
5. The labor camps known as Gulag housed a variety of individual inmates, from common criminals to political prisoners. The special settlements were designated for individuals and their family members, usually for victims of forced relocation.

## Teacher Resource A: Timeline

### Deportation and Exile of Crimean Tatars under Soviet Rule\* 1944-1989

**11 May 1944.** Soviets recapture Crimea. Stalin issues the notorious Decree 5859ss, "All Tatars are to be exiled from the territory of Crimea...."

**18-20 May 1944.** Stalin's government deports over 183,000 Crimean Tatars to the Urals, Siberia and Central Asia. Another 11,000 Crimean Tatar men mobilized into forced labor brigades.

**August 1944.** Soviet authorities allow the settlement of 50,000 Russians and Ukrainians in Crimea to replace the deported Crimean Tatars.

**June 1945.** The Crimean ASSR is officially dissolved.

**November 1948.** Soviet government makes the exile of Crimean Tatars and other deported nationalities permanent.

**April 1956.** After Stalin's death in 1953, Crimean Tatars are freed from restrictions, but cannot return to Crimea. They report that 45% of the Tatar deportees died within two years in exile.

**September 1967.** Soviet authorities issue Decree 493, lifting charges of treason leveled against the entire Crimean Tatar population in 1944.

**September 1967 - July 1968.** Over 12,000 Crimean Tatars return to Crimea, but very few people (18 families and 13 individuals) are able to obtain residency permits, and the rest are expelled. Over 300 Crimean Tatars in Moscow, seeking their rights to return to homeland Crimea, are also expelled.

**January 1974.** Andrei Sakharov, Soviet scientist and dissident, appeals to Kurt Waldheim, UN Secretary-General, about the plight of Crimean Tatars.

**1975.** Mustafa Jemilev, a prominent Crimean Tatar activist, stages the longest hunger strike known in the history of human rights movement, lasting 303 days, but survives due to forced feeding.

**July 1987.** Over 2,000 Crimean Tatars demonstrate in Red Square, Moscow, drawing the world's attention to their demands to repatriate.

**November 1989.** The permission to return to Crimea finally comes with the publication of a Soviet decree "On Recognizing the Illegal and Criminal Repressive Acts Against Peoples Subjected to Forcible Resettlement and Ensuring their Rights."

**1989-1994.** Over 220,000 Crimean Tatars, return to Crimea, the number of repatriates eventually reaching nearly 300,000.

**March 2014.** Russian Federation occupies and annexes Crimea in response to Euromaidan demonstrations in Kyiv. (November 2013-February 2014).

\*Condensed from: Otto Pohl's Timeline: <http://www.iccrimea.org/surgun/timeline.html>

## Teacher Resource B: Useful References

Aurelie, Campana. "The Soviet Massive Deportations—A Chronology," 2007. Online article: <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/soviet-massive-deportations-chronology>

Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, 1967. Online document: <http://www.iccrimea.org/surgun/sovietdecree1967.html>

Kent, George P. (US Department of State), "75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Soviet Deportation of Crimean Tatars," 18 May 2019. Video clip: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1363455917127844>

Perelsvaig, Asya. "Stalin's Ethnic Deportations—and the Gerrymandered Ethnic Map," 2014. Online article: <https://www.languagesoftheworld.info/russia-ukraine-and-the-caucasus/stalins-ethnic-deportations-gerrymandered-ethnic-map.html>

Pohl, J. Otto. *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999

"Revelations from the Russian Archives," an exhibit at the Library of Congress, 1992. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html>. The section "Memorandum on Crimean Tatars" includes the original Soviet decree, authorizing the 1944 deportation, and its English translation: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#obj18>

Uehling, Greta. "The Crimean Tatars as Victims of Communism," 2015. Online article: <http://www.iccrimea.org/scholarly/uehling-crimeantatars.html>. (Also published as part of "Dissident," blog of Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation in 2017, but currently offline.)