

## The False Charges of Treason against the Crimean Tatars

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The German *Wehrmacht* (regular armed forces) rapidly advanced against the disintegrating Red Army following its invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941. In late October the 11<sup>th</sup> German Army under General Manstein conquered most of the Crimean peninsula. During World War II the Crimean peninsula came under German occupation for almost three years. The Soviet military did not recapture the territory until April 1944. The native Crimean Tatar population responded in a variety of ways to this occupation. Many remained loyal to the Soviet regime, serving in the Red Army, assisting partisan units and otherwise opposing the Nazi regime. A number of Crimean Tatars, however, served in German organized self-defense units to fight against Soviet partisans. German records show the number of Crimean Tatars to serve in German formed battalions reached 9,225 men.<sup>1</sup> This number constitutes considerably less than 1% of the more than 1.3 million Soviet citizens to serve with the Germans during World War II. The vast majority of these men, over one million, came from the core Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian nationalities of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that Russians and Ukrainians formed the majority of Nazi collaborators in the USSR, the Stalin regime did not subject these nationalities to collective punishment. The Soviet government, however, did justify its deportation of the entire Crimean Tatar population in the USSR from their ancestral homeland to Uzbekistan and the Urals by reference to the alleged activities of Crimean Tatar self-defense battalions organized under the Germans.

The decision to deport the Crimean Tatars from their homeland to Uzbekistan came very shortly after the Red Army reoccupied the peninsula. The German occupation of Crimea had not been over for a full month yet when Stalin signed GKO Order 5859 on 11 May 1944 ordering the deportation of the entire Crimean Tatar population to Uzbekistan.<sup>3</sup> Like earlier deportations from the Caucasus it appears that the Soviet leadership first decided to use the cover of war to ethnically cleanse the Crimean Tatars from their homeland and then formulated the false charges of treason as a justification for this crime.<sup>4</sup> On 22 April 1944, Serov and Kobulov<sup>5</sup> sent a message to Beria claiming that 20,000 Crimean Tatars had

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<sup>1</sup> Document reproduced in T.S. Kulbaev and A. Iu. Khegai, *Deportatsiia* (Almaty: Deneker, 2000), pp. 206-207.

<sup>2</sup> V.A. Berdinskikh, *Spetsposelentsy: Politicheskaiia ssylka narodov Sovetskoi Rossii* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2005), p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Document reproduced in S.U. Alieva, ed., *Tak eto bylo: Natsional'nye repressii v SSSR, 1919-1953 gody* (Moscow: Insan, 1993), vol. 3, pp. 62-64.

<sup>4</sup> For a clear example of how this was done regarding the Balkars deported on 8-9 March 1944 see D.M. Ediev, *Demograficheskie poteri deportirovannykh narodov SSSR* (Stavropol': StGAU "AGRUS", 2003), pp. 26-27.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Serov and Bogdan Kobulov both held the position of Deputy People's Commissar of the NKVD at this time. This made them the second highest ranking men in the organization after Beria.

deserted from the 51<sup>st</sup> Army as it retreated from Crimea in 1941. They provide no evidence for how they arrived at this figure. Indeed it appears that they merely took the total number of Crimean Tatars serving in the Red Army at the time and arbitrarily and retroactively declared them deserters. In fact Kobulov and Serov claimed that the total number of Crimean Tatars conscripted into the Red Army was 20,000 out of a total of 90,000 men inducted from the territory. Thus Kobulov and Serov asserted that every single Crimean Tatar without exception conscripted into the Red Army had deserted. This same report, however, notes that Crimean Tatars constituted only 218,000 out of the 1,126,800 people in Crimea in April 1940.<sup>6</sup> Thus according to Kobulov and Serov's own figures Crimean Tatars represented 22% of all conscripts from the Crimean ASSR despite making up only 19% of the population. The claim that all 20,000 of them deserted is pure fantasy. The number of actual cases of desertion and shirking of military service verified by the NKVD's Section for the Struggle Against Banditism for the years 1941-1944 in the Crimean ASSR by all nationalities is only 479 out of a total of 1,666,891 for the USSR as a whole.<sup>7</sup> The report by Serov and Kobulov, however, served as the basis for a later report by Beria to Stalin.

On 10 May 1944 Beria sent a letter to Stalin advocating the deportation of the entire Crimean Tatar population from their ancestral homeland to special settlements in Uzbekistan. This document repeated the accusation by Serov and Kobulov that 20,000 Crimean Tatars had deserted from the Red Army. Beria, however, added a few additional key alterations to the original charges made by his underlings. His report states that "From sections of the Red Army in 1944 deserted more than 20 thousand Tatars who betrayed the Motherland, and went over to serve the Germans with arms in their hands and fought against the Red Army..."<sup>8</sup> The figure of 20,000 appears to have come directly from the report sent to him by Serov and Kobulov. Beria embellished their claim by accusing not only 20,000 Crimean Tatars of deserting the Red Army, but also asserting that all 20,000 without exception later fought with the Germans against the Soviet Union. However, the date of 1944 appears odd, either it is a typographical error and Beria meant to write 1941 or Beria deliberately altered it to make the alleged crimes of the Crimean Tatars appear more recent and the need for deportation a more pressing matter.

The 20,000 figure used by Serov, Kobulov and Beria in their preparatory work for the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in April and May 1944, disappears from later communications and decrees regarding the operation. Indeed the actual deportation decree itself does not make any attempts to quantify the alleged number to have deserted from the Red Army or fought in German organized units. Instead it only speaks of "many Crimean Tatars" engaging in such activities.<sup>9</sup> In fact the claim of 20,000 Crimean Tatar deserters and collaborators was never published during the existence of the USSR. It

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<sup>6</sup> N.F. Bugai, ed., *Iosif Stalin – Lavrentiiu Berii: "Ikh nado deportirovat": dokumenty, fakty, kommentarii*, (Moscow: Druzhba narodov, 1992), doc. 2, p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> Bugai 1992, p. 286.

<sup>8</sup> Document reproduced in N.F. Bugai, ed., "Deportatsiia: Berii dokladyvaet Stalinu..," *Kommunist*, no. 1, 1991, p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> Document reproduced in Alieva 1993, vol. 3, pp. 62-64.

existed solely in the internal memos written by Serov, Kobulov and Beria during April and May 1944. The fact that it disappears from further correspondence after Beria's message on 10 May 1944 suggests that Stalin himself found the flights of fantasy by Beria's circle to be an embarrassment.

The arguments of mass desertion and treason made by Serov, Kobulov and Beria had a deductive rather than an inductive character. They seem to have concluded first that the Crimean Tatars needed to be deported and then used the standard argument of mass treason to justify this decision. The earlier deportations of the Russian-Germans, Karachais, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush and Balkars had all been justified with similar arguments. The deportation of the Volga Germans established a precedent in 1941 that the proper justification for punishing an entire nationality was to charge them with mass treason. The Soviet government repeated this pattern in 1943 and 1944 with the deportation of the Karachais, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars and Crimean Tatars. Indeed the decrees ordering the deportation of these nationalities used almost identical wording. In two cases, the Chechens and Ingush and the Balkars the decrees by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet accusing these nationalities of treason and ordering their deportation came after the resettlement operations had already been completed.<sup>10</sup> The charge of collective treason was a mere formality used to justify the wholesale deportation of nationalities. The real reasons for the deportations lie elsewhere and have been dealt with extensively by other scholars.<sup>11</sup> This article is too short to examine the real reasons behind the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in extensive detail. But, the geopolitical position of Crimea in relation to Turkey and the Black Sea, the historical conflict between Crimean Tatars and Russians extending back to the days of the Crimean Khanate, and the push for real national autonomy by the Crimean Tatar leadership of the Crimean ASSR all played an important role in Stalin's decision to ethnically cleanse the Crimean Tatars from their homeland.<sup>12</sup> The charge of treason was largely a cover story to justify the decision after it had already been made.

The claims of Serov, Kobulov and Beria that 20,000 Crimean Tatar soldiers deserted the Red Army are completely without basis. The claim by Beria that all 20,000 Crimean Tatars in the Red Army went with arms in hands voluntarily to go fight for the Germans is even more fanciful, especially if the reference to desertions in 1944 is not a typographical error. During the purge of the peninsula of "anti-Soviet elements" during April and May 1944, the NKVD arrested only 5,989 Crimean Tatars out of a total population of over 197,000 people or just over three percent of the population.<sup>13</sup> The NKVD forcibly deported the vast majority of the remaining population, 183,155 people without the benefit of any individual

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<sup>10</sup> The decrees by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet accusing these nationalities of mass treason and ordering their deportation can be found in Alieva's three volume collection. For the Volga Germans see vol. 1, pp. 143-144. For the Karachais see vol. 1, pp. 258-259. For the Kalmyks see vol. 2, p. 39. For the Chechens and Ingush see vol. 2, p. 87. For the Balkars see vol. 2, p. 266.

<sup>11</sup> See the works cited above by Alieva, Berdinskikh, Bugai, Ediev, and Kulbaev and Khagai.

<sup>12</sup> Despite the passage of time the best general coverage of these issues and historical background on the Crimean Tatars available in English is still Alan Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute, 1978). See especially pp. 168-170 for a discussion of the geo-political issues involved in the deportation.

<sup>13</sup> Bugai 1992, doc. 13, pp. 138-139.

arrests or charges under the provisions of GKO order 5859.<sup>14</sup> On 8 June 1944, the NKVD in Uzbekistan reported to Beria that 151,529 Crimean Tatars had arrived in their republic of which over 80% were women and children.<sup>15</sup> An additional 31,551 Crimean Tatar deportees arrived in the Urals by 4 July 1944.<sup>16</sup> The percentage of women and children among the Crimean Tatars deported to the Urals was even higher than in Uzbekistan. Out of 9,177 Crimean Tatars to arrive in the Mari ASSR, women and children made up almost 84% of the contingent.<sup>17</sup> The Soviet government sent an additional 11,000 Crimean Tatars to forced labor detachments in Gur'ev, Rybinsk, Kubyshev, and the Moscow coal basin during the same time without charge or trial.<sup>18</sup> By the Soviet government's own logic they had evidence of anti-Soviet activity against less than 6,000 Crimean Tatars yet they brutally punished the entire population of nearly 200,000 people, the vast majority consisting of women and children.

The truth is that the 51<sup>st</sup> Army collapsed in face of the German onslaught as did most of the Soviet military in the summer and fall of 1941 due to poor leadership. As a result a large number of Crimean Tatars and other Soviet soldiers became POWs of the Germans. Some of these men later served in German organized self-defense battalions. In the face of lethal material conditions in German POW camps, racist attacks by Soviet partisan units against Crimean Tatar villages, and generally better treatment of the Crimean Tatar population by the Germans than they had endured under Stalin it is surprising that the number of collaborators was not much greater.

The motives for serving in the Crimean Tatar self-defense battalions formed by the Germans were varied. One reason was to avoid the horrible material conditions suffered by Soviet POWs in German internment camps. Most of the Crimean Tatar men recruited by the Germans had previously served in the Red Army and many of them had been captured when the 51<sup>st</sup> Army retreated from the peninsula. The German military authorities confined these men in POW camps in Simferopol and Nikolayev where starvation and disease threatened to kill most of the internees.<sup>19</sup> The fate of Soviet POWs in German hands that did not collaborate with the occupation forces can be seen by the fact that out of some seven million Red Army soldiers captured over three million of them died in captivity.<sup>20</sup> Among Soviet POWs that did not collaborate with the Germans the death rate was thus around 50%. This high mortality rate provided a strong incentive for Soviet POWs to accept putting on German issued uniforms.

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<sup>14</sup> Bugai 1992, doc. 20, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Document reproduced in Ali Hamzin, *Krymskie Tatary v Uzbekistane*, Working Paper No. 11, French Institute for the Study of Central Asia, Tashkent, Dec. 2004, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Bugai 1992, doc. 16, p. 140 and doc. 20, p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Bugai 1992, doc. 24, p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> Bugai 1992, doc. 13, pp. 138-139.

<sup>19</sup> Aleksandr Nekrich, trans. George Saunders, *The Punished Peoples: The Deportation And Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War*, (New York, W.W. Norton, 1979), pp. 20-21; Brian Glyn Williams, "The Hidden Ethnic Cleansing of Muslims in the Soviet Union: The Exile and Repatriation of the Crimean Tatars," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 37, no. 3 (July 2002), p. 328.

<sup>20</sup> Nekrich, p. 5.

Defense of Crimean Tatar villages targeted for attack by Soviet partisan units constituted another reason for serving in German organized military battalions. The Soviet partisan movement in Crimea was initially led by A.N. Mokrousov and A.V. Martynov. These men proved themselves to be both militarily incompetent and extreme racists against the native Crimean Tatar population. They prohibited Crimean Tatars from serving in the ranks of the partisans and forced them out of the protection provided by wooded areas. This action led to the deaths of a number of a number of prominent Crimean Tatar communists.<sup>21</sup> In July 1942 they sent the first report falsely claiming the majority of Crimean Tatars were Nazi collaborators to the military commander of the South Western Front, Marshal S.M. Budenny.<sup>22</sup> The reports from Mokrousov and Martynov and their followers appear to have been the original source for the NKVD's justification of its decision to deport the entire Crimean Tatar population.<sup>23</sup> Like the later reports by Serov, Kobulov and Beria, Mokrousov and Martynov provided no evidence to back up their libelous claims. They did, however, manage to alienate the Crimean Tatars from the partisan movement and in the process cripple effective resistance to the German occupation.

During their tenure leading the Soviet partisan movement in Crimea it suffered a series of failures against the Germans for which they blamed the Crimean Tatars. Under this pretext, Soviet partisans began a campaign of attacking Crimean Tatar villages, indiscriminately murdering civilians and stealing their food supplies thereby condemning the survivors to starvation.<sup>24</sup> For instance Mokrousov and Martynov called for air strikes leading to the destruction of Stil, Kuchuk-Ozenbash and other peaceful Crimean Tatar villages.<sup>25</sup> The military failures of the Crimean partisan movement which stemmed in part from their focus on plundering Crimean Tatar villages rather than fighting against the Germans became so great that in July 1942, the Soviet government removed Mokrosouov from his post. <sup>26</sup> As a result of Mokrousov's poor leadership the partisan movement in Crimea declined from 3,098 members in November 1941 to 150 in November 1942.<sup>27</sup> According to a number of official Soviet reports, Mokrosouov's incompetence stemmed from being an alcoholic.<sup>28</sup> Given the general acceptability of heavy drinking in Russian culture and especially in Russian military culture one must take this accusation to mean that Mokrosouov could not in fact carry out even his most basic military duties due to mental impairment resulting from drunkenness.

The pillaging of Crimean Tatar villages for food by Soviet partisans was far less effective as a guerilla tactic than actually sabotaging German supply lines. But, it did interfere with the ability of the German occupation forces to obtain supplies. On 2 January 1942, the German

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<sup>21</sup> Nekrich, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> Nekrich, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Nekrich, p. 31 and Alexander Statiev, "The Nature of Anti-Soviet Armed Resistance, 1942-1944: The North Caucasus, the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic, and Crimea," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 6, no. 2, spring, 2005, p. 310.

<sup>24</sup> Nekrich, pp. 28-30; Statiev, pp. 306-307; Williams, p. 329.

<sup>25</sup> Nekrich, pp. 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> Statiev, pp. 304-306.

<sup>27</sup> Statiev, p. 306.

<sup>28</sup> Statiev, p. 307.

government authorized the formation of Crimean Tatar self-defense battalions in order to guard their villages from such raids.<sup>29</sup> By 15 February 1942, they had organized 1,632 Crimean Tatars into 14 companies and six battalions.<sup>30</sup> These units engaged in anti-partisan warfare.

Finally, despite Soviet claims to the contrary even German military occupation complete with shipment to forced labor in Germany as *Ostarbeiter* (workers from Eastern Europe) proved preferable for much of the Crimean Tatar population to the Stalinist repression and man-made famine that had marked the 1930s. During this decade the Crimean Tatars suffered disproportionately even compared to most other nationalities later deported by the Stalin regime during World War II. Compared to the baseline of normal mortality among Crimean Tatars during the 1920s, the 1930s represented an increased death index of 1.966, almost double. The 1932-1933 famine and 1937-1938 Terror resulted in excess deaths totaling 4.51% of all Crimean Tatars during this decade.<sup>31</sup> Thus around 10,000 Crimean Tatars died from Stalinist repression and hunger during the 1930s. Given the brutality of the Soviet government towards the Crimean Tatars, it is not surprising that thousands of them sided with the Germans when given the opportunity. Rather what is surprising is that so few supported the Germans and that tens of thousands of Crimean Tatar men continued to loyally and actively participate in the Soviet struggle against the Nazis.

Despite unsubstantiated claims by Serov and Kobulov that all 20,000 Crimean Tatars serving in the 51<sup>st</sup> Army deserted to the Germans in 1941, a very substantial number of Crimean Tatars continued to fight in the Soviet ranks until the defeat of Nazi Germany on 9 May 1945. On 30 July 1944, the NKVD issued a decree "On adding to special settlement registration Kalmyks, Karachais, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Crimean Tatars, Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians demobilized from the Red Army coming to join their families in places of resettlement." Later decrees published at the front removed men of these nationalities from the ranks of the Red Army and sent them to special settlements.<sup>32</sup> NKVD records show 8,927 Crimean Tatars including 524 officers and 1,392 sergeants demobilized from the Soviet military and sent to special settlements during 1945 and 1946.<sup>33</sup> Thus, about 5% of the total Crimean Tatar population and 15% of the adult male population fought in the Soviet army against Nazi Germany until the end of the war in 1945.

Crimean Tatars also fought in the ranks of the partisans after the Soviet government removed Mokrousov from his position and lifted the racist ban on their membership in its ranks. By January 1944, the partisan movement had reached 3,783 members up from its nadir of 150 members under Mokrousov. A full 630 (17%) of these members consisted of

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<sup>29</sup> Statiev, p. 307.

<sup>30</sup> Nekrich, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Ediev, table 2, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> V.N. Zemskov, *Spetsposeleltsy v SSSR: 1930-1960* (Moscow: Nauka, 2005), p. 109.

<sup>33</sup> N.F. Bugai, ed., *Deportatsiia narodov kryma: Dokumenty, fakty, kommentarii* (Moscow: Insan, 2002), doc. 140, p. 150.

Crimean Tatars.<sup>34</sup> Thus once they were allowed to serve in the partisans their participation in the movement was proportionate to their total population. A large number of Crimean Tatar villages also provided assistance to the partisan movement after they abandoned their racist attacks against them in July 1942 despite the great physical risk of German reprisals.<sup>35</sup> The failures of the partisan movement in Crimea had little to do with any shortcomings of the Crimean Tatars and everything to do with the incompetence and racism of its Russian leadership.

The earlier conflict between the Crimean Tatars and the partisan movement under Mokrousov, however, played into the preconceived needs of the NKVD to tar the entire population with the tag of treason in order to justify their wholesale deportation. Hence in April 1944, the reports of Mokrousov, Martynov and other racists became the basis for Serov, Kobulov and Beria constructing a rationale for their decision to deport the Crimean Tatars. However, this cover story is completely unbelievable. The vast majority of the deported Crimean Tatars can only be described as completely innocent of any wrong doing. Over four fifths of the deportees consisted of women and children. More Crimean Tatars fought in the Red Army and in the partisans than did with German units. Nationalities with far more collaborators avoided collective punishment. Indeed a comparative study between collaboration with the Germans and wholesale deportation reveals little actual connection between the two. All Soviet nationalities collaborated with the Nazis to some extent. The vast majority of collaborators, however, were ethnic Russians, Ukrainians or Belorussians. The NKVD only used the issue of collaboration as an excuse to deport nationalities already disfavored by the regime. The charges of collective treason were brought against the Crimean Tatars by Stalin and Beria because they had already decided to deport the entire population and such charges were the standard justification for this crime against humanity. It had earlier been used to publicly justify the deportation of the Russian-Germans, Karachais, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush and Balkars. The fact is that the charges of collective treason were false in all these cases.

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<sup>34</sup> N.F. Bugai, *L. Beria – I. Stalin: "Soglasno vashemu ukazaniiu..."* (Moscow: "AIRO XX", 1995), p. 146.

<sup>35</sup> Nekrich, p. 30.

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