# **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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# Polemics on the Ethno-political Narratives of the Disputed Political and Territorial Affiliation of the Crimean Peninsula

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# Abstract

The Crimean Peninsula continues to be at the center of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the post-Soviet space. The relevance of this conflict increased further after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation. The Crimean problem is extremely complex and has several dimensions: ethno-political, political & legal, economic, associated with various stages of its formation (prehistory, history, and current state). The article focuses on one of the less-studied aspects of the Crimean challenge, namely the initial stage of the evolution of the problem related to emerging the key prerequisites for the formation of contemporary ethno-political narratives about the political and territorial affiliation of the Crimean Peninsula.

#### 1. Introduction:

The key prerequisites of the formation of ethnopolitical narratives about the political and territorial affiliation of the Crimean Peninsula can be divided into three types: ethno-cultural, political and confessional. Due to a number of historical events, taking into account traditional migratory routes together with geographical isolation and complex relief, the Crimean Peninsula has become a unique depository of diverse peoples, who have manifested themselves in the historical arena both in Eastern Europe and in Asia Minor, and the Caucasus region. To name a few these are the Scythians, Taurus, Cimmerians, Sarmatians, Greeks, Caucasian tribes, Goths, Alans, Armenians, Bulgars, Khazars, Slavics, Kipchaks, Seljuk Turks, Genoese, Ottoman Turks. Specific geographical features of Crimea along with the historical as well as political alternation on its territory contributed to the formation of the unique (quite different from other regions of Eastern Europe) ethno-genetic, socialcultural and socio-economic landscape of the Crimean peninsula which contains three distinct areas: Steppe Crimea gravitating to the Black Sea steppes, Coastal Crimea associated with the Eastern Mediterranean culture, and Mountain Crimea having its own special sociocultural and ethnogenetic profile (Balanovskij, 2015, p.194).

But, despite such ethnic diversity, the toponymy of Crimea indicates a dominant historical role of the Turkicspeaking peoples (Ganieva & Osmanova & Mazinov, 2020). From the VII century after the of end Migration Period and until 1783, when the Crimean Khanate was annexed by the Russian Empire, the Crimean Peninsula and the adjacent steppe territories of Eastern Europe almost constantly were included in the state formations of various Turkic-speaking

tribes, from the Old Great Bulgaria to the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire, except for small territories belonging to other states formations on the coast and in the mountainous zone (Byzantine Empire, Republic of Genoa or Principality of Theodoro).

The third important aspect was the confessional profile of the population of the Crimean Peninsula. Historically, it was the northern outpost of the Greek world, and then of the Roman Empire, therefore it was actively involved in all religious processes of the Mediterranean civilization space. Hence, on the Crimean Peninsula, all three Abrahamic religions were always present, which gradually absorbed the traditional beliefs of the peoples living here and formed a kind of religious culture with a high degree of tolerance and in certain degree regions (Mountain Crimea) syncretism (Chernyisheva, 2018). This had resulted in two significant outcomes by the 18th century. Firstly, in the context of ethnogenetic processes, it led to the emergence of persistent ethno-confessional communities: Turkic-speaking Muslims, Turkic-speaking Christians (orthodox), Greek-speaking Christians (Orthodox), Turkic-speaking Karaites, Turkicspeaking Jews and other smaller communities such as Armenian-Gregorians, Armenian-Catholics, etc. Secondly, on the religious ideology dimension, the practices of confessional sacralization of various locations of the Crimean Peninsula emerged, influencing the formation of ethno-confessional consciousness and culture of every traditional ethnoconfessional community.

By the time of the annexation of the territory of the Crimean Khanate by the Russian Empire, the Crimean Peninsula entered the historical arena as a formed political and economic space with successive socio-cultural foundations.

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Its process of inclusion in the orbit of the Russian Empire (the cessation of the vassalage of the Crimean Khanate of the Ottoman Empire), and then into the Russian Empire itself (the annexation of the Crimean Khanate in 1783), was accompanied not only by the administrative introduction of the Russian model of power, but also by concrete actions to change the ethno-social and ethno-confessional landscapes. Namely the deportations of a significant part of the Turkicspeaking and Greek-speaking Orthodox population from the Crimean peninsula (Dmitrieva, 2020), and later, the deportations of the Turkic-speaking Muslim population to other regions of the Russian Empire and the exodus of a large number of the latter, especially from the steppe zone, to the territory of the Ottoman Empire. For these and a number of other reasons (famine, diseases), the number of Turkic-speaking Muslim population decreased and the structure of the population of the Crimean peninsula changed significantly, especially in the steppe zone of the peninsula and the adjacent Black Sea steppes (Kuzmina, 2016). Another significant fact was the reduction of the population of Crimea as a whole (Lugacheva, 2020).

The territory of the former Crimean Khanate lost any format of autonomy and was included in the usual system of territorial-administrative division of the Russian Empire (Nikifirov, 2015). Since that time Crimea began to become the subject of disputes both in ideological and in international political context, especially in the light of the ongoing Russian-Turkish wars for almost a century (Konkin, 2020).

The next stage of transformation of the region was initiated by immigrants from the Russian Empire during the 19th century. The territory of the Crimean Peninsula was being populated in the majority by representatives of the Slavic-speaking and in the minority, other groups of the Christian population of different classes of the Russian Empire. Such a process led to a proportional reduction in the Turkic-speaking Muslim population of the Crimea, that was dominant until the end of the 18th century, from 98% to 34.1% at the end of the 19th century (although still retaining conditional leadership). Especially the ethnoconfessional structure of the population in the steppe zone of the peninsula and the Azov steppes changed radically (Krapivencey, 2014, p. 52).

Also in the 19th century, there was another additional sacralization of the territory of the Crimean Peninsula, no longer of a religious, but of a military-patriotic nature, namely, the glorification of Sevastopol as a place of "Russian glory", after the unsuccessful result of the Crimean War of 1853 for Russia (Pavlenko, 2014).

In fact, it can be said that by the time of the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, on the territory of the Crimean

peninsula there were two main dimensions of ethno-cultural reality within the framework of one socio-political format; a significant Muslim Turkic-speaking minority, which was the result of the most complex centuries-old ethnogenetic, socioeconomic, political-confessional processes, and on the other hand, the Slavic-speaking Christian majority, as a result of the mixture and evolution of several resettlement waves of the 19th century. The ethno-confessional and cultural identity of which was formed within the framework of the Russian Orthodox ideological picture of the world, in which the Crimea is given a place as one of the sacred foundations of the Russian Empire. Each of these two groups had its own vision and perception of Crimea, which was largely due to the ethno-confessional opposition and ethno-conditioned image of each other in the cultures of these two groups. In addition, there were no serious prerequisites for the assimilation of Turkic-speaking Muslims in Crimea, given the legality of the functioning of Muslim educational structures in the Russian Empire and the existence of the upper class inscribed in the estate structure of Russian society, as well as the presence of a developed written culture, together with an active intelligentsia. This status quo persisted until the collapse of the Russian Empire.

In parallel to the processes in the Russian Empire outlined above, starting from the middle of the 19th century, under the influence of political events and ideological movements in Europe, European ethno-political trends began to emerge. Russian socio-economic transformations and several other factors related to the liberalization of socio-political life stimulated the politicization of ethno-cultural movements throughout the Russian Empire. The Crimean Tatar intelligentsia, like the Ukrainian intelligentsia (Vynarchuk, 2019), were quite avant-garde in these processes. At the beginning of the 20th century, even the first ethno-political projects appeared (Kostenko, 2006).

Nevertheless, the processes of formation of ethnopolitical communities of the New European type in the Russian Empire were slow and contradictory, and did not have a strong influence on the identity of the majority of the population of the Russian Empire, with the exception of a number of regions of the Russian Empire that have a special status, such as the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Finland, etc. One of the main reasons for this was the lack of secularization in the Russian Empire compared to European countries of the same period. In the Russian Empire the orthodox doctrine played the role of a de facto state ideology. Another reason was the presence of an overwhelming majority of the peasant class, only recently finally freed from serfdom (1861). Peasant class in the Russian empire for a number of socio-cultural reasons and politico-economic conditions was quite conservative group. In majority its

representatives were weakly amenable to new ethnocultural trends, characteristic of the urban environment, which, in comparison with the state of affairs in Europe, was much narrower than the rural environment in Russia at that time (Geletiy, 2012). Because of this, the ethno-political discourse of the European type (in comparison with European socio-political trends) was often limited to a small circle of urban intellectuals who had a European education or were simply influenced by European cultural guidelines. Although, on the other hand, it would be erroneous to assert the fact of the complete absence of trends in the growth of European-type ethnopolitical consciousness among the general population of the Russian Empire. However, the results of such growth and the influence of European-type ethnopolitical projects on mass consciousness manifested themselves already after the February Revolution of 1917, in a period of cardinal transformation of the social and political structure of Russian society.

In the turbulent period after the February Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent period of Civil War (1918-1922) until the creation of the KASSR in 1921 as part of the RSFSR, on the territory of the Crimean Peninsula and neighboring regions of the Russian Empire (the territory of modern Ukraine), several nation-state projects arose consistently and in parallel fighting among themselves and claiming the Crimean Peninsula as a territory of their deployment.

# Nation-state projects in Crimea:

# 1. Crimean Tatar projects:

- The ethno-national project: Crimean People's (Democratic) Republic (26.11.1917 - 23.02.1918) capital Bakhchisaray.
- The coalition project: The First Crimean Regional Government of General M.A. Sulkevich. 25.06.1918
  15.11.1919 (project "Crimean state" under the protectorate of Germany). The capital is Simferopol.

# 2.All-Russian projects of the White movement (conditionally Russian projects):

- The Second Crimean Regional Government 15.11.1918
  04.1919. (French Protectorate)
- Government of the South of Russia. 11.04.1920 11.11.1920. (recognized by France 10.08.1920)

## 3. Bolshevik party projects:

- Soviet Socialist Republic of Taurida (21.03.1918 -30.04.1918). Simferopol Capital.
- Crimean Soviet Socialist Republic within the RSFSR. 26.04.1919 28.06.1919.
- Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (direct rule). Since November 1920.

## 4. Ukrainian projects:

- Ethno-national project: Ukrainian People's Republic. (20.11.1917 29.04.1918, 14.11.1918 22.08.1992)
- Coalition project: The Ukrainian State of Hetman Skoropadsky. 29.04. 1918 -14.12.1918.

Ukrainian ethno-political ambitions on the issue of Crimea had their own peculiarity. They were derived from the actual settlement of Ukrainian-speaking representatives at the time of the collapse of the Russian Empire. Crimea,

at the time of the collapse of the Russian Empire, being part of the Taurida province, in which many Ukrainian-speaking residents lived since the end of the 18th century, began to be perceived as a presumed part of the future Ukrainian state by the leaders of Ukrainian autonomist movement. The following factor was the geopolitical and military significance of the Crimean peninsula for a future Ukrainian state and the Black Sea Fleet, as one of the foundations of the future Ukrainian army. These intentions of Ukrainian leaders gave rise to one more dimension of conflict around Crimea, which did not disappear despite the division of the Taurida province into the Northern part, where Ukrainian-speaking groups of the population dominated) and the Southern part (the Crimean Peninsula, where the Crimean Tatars relatively dominated) (Krapivencev, 2014, p. 68). Still, the Ukrainian state formations that claimed the territory of the Crimea rather declaratively, and carried out diplomatic and military steps, did not deploy their projects directly on the territory of the Crimean Peninsula.

Taking into account the class-confessional structure of the Russian society, and its destruction during the revolution and civil war along the above fault lines, and the periodic influence of external factors, each of these projects developed in its ethno-political and socio-political platforms. Moreover in the conditions of war and in the absence of a stablefunctioning political system, each change in political design entailed emigration (and moreover, mass) at best, or physical elimination at worst (Popkov, 2007, p. 144). Therefore such projects could not have covered all segments of the Crimean society and be footheld in it for a long time. The level of political volatility was so high that some state formations existed for not more than a month. Such political turbulence existed until the establishment by the RSFSR of its direct authority over the Crimean Peninsula in 1920 and the creation of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic as part of the RSFSR in 1921. As a result of the mass political repressions of 1920-21, accompanied by terror, the cardinal socio-economic transformations in the RSFSR and the characteristic Soviet national policy, the formation of the ethno-social and politicallegal design of the Crimean peninsula was not only completed until the end of World War II, but in a certain sense, a line was drawn between the two stages (prehistoric and historical) of the evolution of the Crimean problem, and a new dimension of the problem of the political and territorial belonging of Crimea was actualized, namely, political and legal.

Despite the emergence of the actualization of the political and legal dimension of the problem of Crimea, the ethno-political dimension continued to exist. Ethno-political projects and practices of their registration into state structures after the end of the Civil War moved from the sphere of real politics and armed confrontation to the pages of various kinds of literature in the emigrant environment: program documents of governments in exile and memoirs of individual participants in the events (Lizunova & Lbova, 2014), gradually moving more and more away from the realities of life of the population of the former Russian Empire. As a result, they acquired their independent existence as one of the main tools for maintaining an ethno-cultural identity in emigration by different groups of the former Russian population.

In the case of the Crimean Tatar group, these trends were complemented by the active interaction of a new wave



of emigrant intellectuals with the old diasporas that arose after the fall of the Crimean Khanate, especially this process was observed on the territory of the Ottoman Empire (a historical participant in the dispute about political and territorial affiliation), and then the Turkish Republic, forming a special ethno-cultural profile of the Crimean Tatars in the diaspora and giving rise to ethno-political doctrines, which will become popular in the post-Soviet period (Aydın, 2021).

The processes among the groups competing the Crimean Tatars were slightly different, namely in the Russian émigré movement, in which in ethno-political myths Crimea was:

- An integral symbol of the greatness and power of the Russian Empire, a symbol of victory over the last fragment of the Golden Horde and personifying the final and irrevocable eradication of the Mongol-Tatar yoke, a key ideologem in the justification of Russian statehood.
- 2. A sacralized place of military glory of the last fighters against Bolshevism
- 3. The ideological cradle of Russian Orthodox culture and the key element of connection with the Byzantine heritage

The ethno-political vision of the Ukrainian group was based on more practical attitudes, as already indicated above, in comparison to their competitors. In the case of Crimea, for many ideologists of the Ukrainian national state, the fact of the actual resettlement of the Ukrainian-speaking population by the beginning of the 20th century, rather than the existence of the boundaries of the traditional residence of Ukrainians, was decisive. At the same time, Crimea was important for them in terms of geopolitical value for the future Ukrainian state. But also a sacralizing attitude was added to these practical attitudes. The Ukrainian ethno-political community, being Orthodox Slavic-speaking, like the Russian one, claimed the Crimea as a sacred Orthodox shrine and the cradle of the spiritual culture of Kievan Rus, for the heritage of which they competed with Russian national projects. In this context, it is important to note that in both Ukrainian and Russian ethno-mythological constructions, the image of the Tatar as an "alien-other" was constructed. In ethno-political dimension such ethno-mythological construction led to the political practice of ignoring the autochthonous nature of the Tatar population, which in fact was a real distortion of the complex ethnogenetic and ethno-cultural processes in Crimea but made it possible to consider Crimea outside its connection to the Turkic-speaking Muslim population, and to strengthen its position in the dispute over its affiliation.

Sum up the results of the review of the prerequisites for the formation of ethno-political narratives around the problem of political and territorial affiliation of the Crimean peninsula and note their importance:

 The sacralization of sporadic statehood and ethnopolitical projects deeply rooted in the emigrant environment, separate from real ethno-social processes in the USSR, became, one of the key elements of modern ethno-political narratives both among Russians, Ukrainians, and among the Crimean Tatars during the post-Soviet period. In fact an ontologization of intellectual constructions of a narrow circle of intellectuals in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century and their further identification with modern ethno-political communities, formed and evolved since the period of the emergence of the USSR. The reason lies in the fact that mass repressions, cardinal socio-economic reforms, the innovative political and legal project of the Soviet Socialist Republics created the conditions for the formation of a new ethno-political reality, in which the old ethnosocial and ethno-cultural problems were rethought in a new ethno-political phenomenon, namely, the "Soviet nationality" and its political formation in the form of republics and autonomous republics. The ideological unification of this format and its legal consolidation in the Constitutions of both the USSR and the Union republics made it simply impossible for alternative approaches and concepts to exist within the USSR, at least in the legal field. Which, in turn, after the fall of the Soviet Union generated the mass introduction into the ethno-political discourse of post-Soviet societies of independent states and ideologies of emigrant ethno-political narratives.

- The rise of religious consciousness in the post-Soviet period actualized the confessional prerequisites for justifying their rights to the Crimean Peninsula. The reason lies in the fact that the constructed ideologemes of the period of the Russian Empire and introduced into the ethno-confessional consciousness of the Orthodox population (ancestors of modern Ukrainians and Russians) about Crimea as the cradle of Eastern European Orthodoxy and about Muslim culture as introduced and hostile to the "originally Christian" Crimea smoothly flowed into modern ethno-political narratives that determine the right of these two ethnopolitical communities to the Crimean Peninsula as an integral part of their ethno-political culture. and ethnoconfessional spaces.
- Ignoring the fact of complex ethnogenetic evolution of the population of the Crimean Peninsula and the peculiarities of the ethno-cultural formation of modern Crimean Tatars entailed a real violation of the justified political rights of the Crimean Tatars. Special attention in the light of this deserves the mythologization of the image of the Crimean Tatars in Russian and Ukrainian ethno-political myths and doctrines, in which it was caused the otherness of the Crimean Tatars and their alienity to the "primordial" Christian and politically sacralized Crimean Peninsula.
- The traditionally superficial comprehension of historical vicissitudes and biased interpretation of historical facts and processes of each of the parties in constructing a justification for their rights in relation to the Crimean Peninsula led to the incorporation into modern state ideological projects and political practice of a number of mythologemes that greatly complicate the possibility of a constructive dialogue in solving the Crimean problem. Moreover, the method of mythologization gradually penetrates into the legal dimension of the conflict and affects the interpretation of legal facts and decisions, as in the cases of the change in the political and territorial affiliation of the Crimean peninsula in the Soviet period



in 1954 (transfer from the RSFSR to the Ukrainian SSR), the deportation of the Crimean Tatar people and the subsequent liquidation of the Crimean ASSR in 1944-45 and the problem of political and legal rehabilitation of the Crimean Tatar people.

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