For Crimea's Tatars, a Home That's Still Less than Welcoming

By James Marson / Simferopol, Ukraine Thursday, Apr. 16, 2009

When Shevket Osmanov moved to his family homeland in 1987 after spending all his life in Uzbekistan, the welcome he received was less than effusive. "People were terrified of us," says Osmanov, who was part of the first wave of Crimean Tatars to return to the Crimean peninsula on Ukraine's Black Sea coast during perestroika in the late 1980s. "Ten days before Eid al-Adha [the Muslim Festival of the Sacrifice], they closed all the schools because there were stories that we were going to sacrifice children."

Falsely accused by Stalin of mass collaboration with the Nazi German invaders, the entire Crimean Tatar population was loaded onto trains and deported to Central Asia over a period of just three days in May 1944. Almost half would die over the following year. Twenty years since they first began to return, there are over 250,000 Tatars in Crimea, around 13% of the population.

Once back, though, the Tatars' troubles were hardly ended. The houses many had once owned or lived in were now occupied by Russian settlers. "I came and saw an old couple living in my parents' house," says Osmanov, standing in the old Tatar quarter of Simferopol, Crimea's capital. "I couldn't have tried to kick them out. What would have been the difference between me doing that and what happened in 1944?"

So far, government land privatization schemes have failed to give the Tatars a fair share. Some have resorted to seizing land on which to build new homes. These often ramshackle settlements are scattered on barren land throughout Simferopol, immediately recognizable by their tiny stone houses on what look like permanent building sites. "We're not asking for favors," says Rustem Khalilov, who lives in Yani Qirim, a settlement built in Simferopol on land seized in 2006 and which now houses 80 families. "We just want somewhere to live. If we had been given land, we wouldn't need to seize it." The settlers of Yani Qirim say they had actually reached an agreement with the Ministry of Defense, which owned the land, before the local authorities stepped in on behalf of a developer, who claimed ownership. The developer has accused the settlers of an illegal land grab and of politicizing a legal issue.

Local government, with its control over land distribution, is often seen as the driving force behind the corruption that plagues Crimea.

"Only babies don't know that Crimean parliamentary deputies are criminals," Hennady Moskal, the Ukrainian president's former representative in Crimea, once remarked. Violent clashes between local law enforcement bodies and Tatar settlers have occurred in the past. Tensions over Yani Qirim threatened to boil over in January, when inhabitants say they got word of a police decision to storm the settlement, and 3,000 Tatars set up camp for several days to offer protection. "We will defend our homes and families," says Khalilov. And not only from the police. In 2007, Ukrainian media reported that representatives of the developer had clashed with Tatars at the site.
Descendents of the Mongol armies that swept through what is now southern Russia and Ukraine in the 13th century, the Muslim Tatar khans ruled the Crimean peninsula until it was annexed by Russia in 1783. A summer holiday destination during the Soviet period and still home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, many Russians see Crimea as part of their country, a fact that rankles the Tatars.

And land is far from their only problem. While local Russians often speak of respect for the Tatars' entrepreneurial skills and work ethic, Khalilov says he has been turned away from job interviews when they see he is a Tatar. "I'm not racist, but I wouldn't take them on," says Volodymyr, a retired Russian sailor and local business owner who declined to give his last name.

Some Tatars also see a religious element in their shoddy treatment: Muslim graves were desecrated in April last year, and for the past five years the Tatars have struggled unsuccessfully for an allocation of land to build a central mosque in Simferopol. The group of Tatars behind the mosque have twice spent two years meticulously collecting all the required bureaucratic permissions and even received some backing from the courts but still face a persistent refusal to give them a plot to build on. "They just don't want to give land to Muslims," says Jemil Bibishev, a member of the mosque's construction committee.

The local media's focus on Tatar land grabs often ignores the fact that land is regularly seized illegally by non-Tatars. "Our argument is not with ordinary people, but with the powers that be," says Khalilov, his voice filled with a mixture of anger and frustration. "The city is in a terrible state, so they think up other problems to distract people. They use the Tatars as an enemy." Indeed, the old myth of the Tatars' "betrayal" during World War II is still widely believed.

Tatar leaders are clear about who they think is behind the attempts to provoke conflicts and instability in Crimea. "I don't think Russia is counting on getting Crimea back, but for them it's important to keep it in a state of permanent stress," says Mustafa Jemilev, a deputy in Ukraine's parliament and the leader of the Tatars' unofficial parliament, the Mejlis. "Some Russian newspapers [in Crimea] publish such nasty rubbish about Tatars. There are provocations against us, but it's not our culture to respond to these with violence." Jemilev, who spent 15 years in prison camps during the Soviet period for campaigning for Tatar rights, contends that Russia is handing out Russian passports in the Crimea and could try to provoke the Tatars into providing a pretext to "protect" Russians, as it did in the Georgian enclave of South Ossetia last year. That invasion led many political analysts to suggest that Russia's next target would be Crimea, with its largely pro-Russian population. The Tatars, on the other hand, are vocal supporters of closer ties to Europe. "Many in Crimea want to be part of Russia, but we see our future as part of Ukraine," says Jemilev.

And even after over twenty years struggling for their rights, the Tatars retain a faith in a better, peaceful future. "Dogs bark, but the caravan goes on," says Osmanov, quoting an Arab proverb. "We'll get there, despite these problems. God sees everything and in the end he puts things in their rightful place."

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