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DOI https://doi.org/10.36059/978-966-397-444-6-11

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RECONSTRUCTING CRIMEA: MEMORY POLITICS, CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND THE CHALLENGE OF MEMORIALIZATION

It has been 10 years since the unlawful annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation. Normally, people rely on the government for decision-making regarding national memory and related procedures. However, as Alla Shapovalova points out, Ukraine can implement its memory policy only in collaboration with non-governmental human rights organizations [3, p. 216]. She believes that civil society human rights organizations play a key role, comparable to that of the Ukrainian government, in matters related to human rights protection, de-occupation, and the eventual reintegration of temporarily occupied Crimea. These organizations engage in international advocacy, document war crimes and

crimes against humanity, monitor human rights in Crimea, and provide support and protection to those affected by repressive actions [4, p. 217].

The policymaking process takes place in the capital of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory and many other governmental bodies are located in Kyiv and may be far removed from an understanding of Crimean cultural heritage. Therefore, national collaboration with organizations such as "Qardaşlıq", "Alem", "Voice of Crimea" and others, as well as with scholars in Crimean Tatar studies, who remain relatively niche and are not widely studied abroad, is crucial at this point.

When Crimea is returned to Ukraine, the country will face numerous challenges, including the deportation of Russians who illegally settled in the region and the reintegration of Crimea into the nation's memory politics. This will require not only logistical and political efforts but also a deep engagement with how Crimea's historical and contemporary narratives fit into the broader Ukrainian identity.

As Iryna Kovalska-Pavlenko emphasizes, Ukraine's memory policy is often shaped by what she terms "memory wars" [3, p. 13]. These "memory wars" are not productive conversations about the past but rather are utilized by policymakers to control the narrative, stifling open dialogue. This is particularly relevant in the context of Crimea, whose history is complex and involves diverse ethnic groups like the Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, and many others. Thus, the reconstruction of Crimea cannot be a purely physical process, it must also involve cultural and memorial reconstruction, addressing the layered traumas experienced by these different groups. This is especially important given Crimea's history as a place where both victims and perpetrators have coexisted.

In his seminal work "Presidents and Memory" Oleksandr Grytsenko provides many relevant examples of how memory politics have been mismanaged in Ukraine. Just for example let's look at what he writes about L. Kuchma: "L. Kuchma's commemorative policy became more active during election campaigns, yet even then, he avoided honoring controversial historical figures like Ivan Vyhovsky, Ivan Mazepa, Symon Petliura, or Stepan Bandera" [2, p. 269]. Grytsenko also points out that Kuchma's decrees often preserved Soviet phraseology, such as the "activation of educational and patriotic work," and avoided using terms like "nation," replacing them with "people" or "society." This cautious approach extended to discussions about the cultural genocide of the Crimean Tatars, where Kuchma refrained from labeling it as forced deportation [2, p. 54].

Ukrainian memory politics have traditionally centered on genocides and wars, but these narratives are usually framed from the perspective of Kyiv or Western Ukraine. Crimea's unique history, including its annexation by Catherine II in 1783, the forced deportation of Crimean Tatars by Stalin in 1944, and ongoing efforts at Russification, has often been marginalized in these discussions. An essential goal of post-occupation Ukraine will be

to reframe the national narrative to include Crimea as a distinct region, one that is not only politically but also culturally and historically significant.

Excluding the history of the Crimean Tatars from Ukraine's national narrative is inconsistent with the vision of a sovereign nation that coexists with the autonomous republics within its borders. Ukraine was not originally a colonizer of Crimea, Ukrainians share a similar history of loss and suffering from Russian imperialism. However, Ukrainian memory politics have sometimes employed colonial approaches in managing intercultural relations with Crimea within the country, as well as its political status [1, p. 37–38].

Ukrainian historian Martin-Olexandr Kisly, who was born in Crimea, hypothesized that the Crimean Tatars represent a test of Ukraine's imperialist tendencies [3, p. 23]. Therefore, in addition to rebuilding damaged infrastructure and removing Communist and Russian symbols, Ukraine must also foster an authentic relationship with the Crimean Tatars. It is crucial to shift the understanding of "Ukrainian" from an ethnic identity to one of shared values and experiences. Such an approach aligns with modern global ideals and will allow Ukrainians to avoid acting as oppressors while embracing "the Other" with respect and dignity.

Reconstruction in Crimea will require not only the rebuilding of infrastructure damaged during the war and years of neglect under Russian occupation but also a cultural and ideological transformation. This includes removing Soviet and Russian symbols, such as monuments to Soviet heroes or Russian imperial figures, which serve as constant reminders of colonial domination.

Yevhenia Horiunova mentioned an important aspect that should be kept in mind for such a transformation. She notes that after the failed attempt to seize Tuzla Island by Russia in 2003, they focused more on "soft power" [1, p. 38]. This led to increased support for pro-Russian parties, the erection of a monument to Catherine II, the conduct of the annual festival "Great Russian Word" (from Russian, "Великое Русское Слово"), and greater Russian investment [1, p. 39].

Such mental artifacts of the past should not be preserved, just like physical ones. Therefore, as Ukraine moves toward reintegrating Crimea, it will be essential to develop a memory policy that reflects this complexity. The process of memorialization should not simply replace Russian symbols with Ukrainian ones but should create a space where multiple narratives can coexist. This may involve preserving certain Soviet-era and modern Russian structures not as celebrations of that period but as reminders of the repression that occurred. At the same time, new monuments and memorials must be built to honor the victims of more recent events, as well as to establish educational programs about these historical lessons. It is crucial for this effort to be nationwide and not just a local battle. By incorporating such knowledge into every Ukrainian's understanding, we can help Crimean

Tatars win their fight for their memory and cultural identity, which has been stolen by Russian colonial politics.

The reconstruction of Crimea, both physically and culturally, presents Ukraine with an opportunity to rethink its approach to memory politics. Rather than engaging in another round of memory wars, where emotional appeals are used to stifle debate, Ukraine can use the reintegration of Crimea to create a more inclusive and nuanced national narrative. By acknowledging the layered history of the peninsula and finding ways to memorialize its diverse past, Ukraine can build a future where Crimea is fully integrated into the country's political and cultural landscape.

Ultimately, decent reconstruction is impossible without proper memorialization. This means not just rebuilding roads and bridges but also addressing the deep historical wounds that have shaped Crimea's identity. By creating a space where all voices are heard, Ukraine can move toward a future where memory becomes a tool for reconciliation rather than division.

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