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THE MILITARY HISTORY OF CRIMEA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

Those who have ever been within the Russian information field can immediately recognise the phrase ‘Sevastopol is a city of Russian glory’. The expression became the hallmark of the entire Crimea, supporting the construction of the peninsula’s Russian affiliation for decades. This cliché is associated with the historical memory of Sevastopol’s defence in 1854 and 1941, during the Crimean and Second World Wars. In the Russian political and media space, however, it continues to play a role as an ideological justification for the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This example is one of a number of instances when instrumentalised history is used in the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, it is the topic of military history that occupies one of the leading places, when it comes to the collective memory relating to Crimea.

This paper aims to summarise some observations on the evolution of the military history of Crimea as part of the public historical discourse and the commemorative practices in Ukraine and Russia since the annexation of the peninsula in 2014. The key task will be a subjective assessment of Ukraine’s capabilities in the competition for interpreting the military history of Crimea in the perspective of its de-occupation.

It was during the annexation of Crimea in 2014 that it became clear that creating a collective memory is an effective tool in hybrid warfare. In the Ukrainian public sphere, this led to the active deconstruction of a number of historical myths such as ‘Crimea is the original Russian land’, ‘Crimea is the spiritual cradle of Russia’, ‘Crimea is a gift from Khrushchev’ and others [3]. It was a targeted post-facto reaction against myths. The discussions raised a more complex question. Why was the spread of these myths generally so successful? One of the answers was that during the years of independence, the grand narrative of Ukraine’s history failed to offer an inclusive version of Ukraine-Crimea relations or rather failed

to adequately include Crimea in Ukraine's history. The historical narrative about Crimea was undoubtedly bound with the history of Ukraine. Nevertheless, it barely covered the connections between cultures in their entirety and mutual influence [1, p. 16]. The most painful point was the historical narrative about Ukrainian-Tatar relations, which were based mainly on the military component of the interaction between the nations during the 15th-18th centuries. The permanent military conflict on the steppe frontier during this period was associated with devastating raids by Crimean Tatars and the capture of the local populations, which then became commodities in the slave markets of Crimea. Against the backdrop of this confrontation, the Cossacks acquired the image of heroes and a symbol of the nation as border defenders and avengers. Thus, the narrative of military history had a national optic and was important primarily for the Ukrainian national identity, which was based on a binary opposition. The Crimean Khanate and the Tatars were represented as the enemy of Ukrainians, in the confrontation with whom Ukrainians were victims and heroes at the same time. The preservation of the binary opposition of defender/aggressor, victim/enemy in the representation of Ukrainian-Tatar history has in no way contributed to the positive development of civil understanding between ethnic groups in modern Ukraine [1, p. 43]. Indirectly, this paradigm corresponded to the Russian imperial tradition of explaining the conquest of the Khanate as an historical necessity for the reconciliation of the borderlands. Further events in the Crimean military history were portrayed as important for the Russian Empire. Crimea was mostly absent in descriptions of the Ukrainian revolution and the wars of 1917–1921.

The occupation of Crimea and the recognition of distortions in the formation of the historical memory have become catalysts for certain changes. New chapters on the history of Crimea have been added to textbooks [4, p. 139–141]. Some new monographs that emphasise the interaction between Ukrainians and Tatars have appeared [6]. The commemoration of the deportation of Crimean Tatars during World War II has been strengthened [5]. It seems that Ukraine's strength in the battle for memory is pluralism of opinion and academic freedom. It seems that one of the most productive trends is the gradual shift from a monocultural to a multicultural dimension of Ukrainian history. Another trend is a change in attitudes towards the military conflict. Indeed, in the case of the Crimean Khanate, the long-lasting military confrontations cannot be erased or ignored. However, according to Ukrainian historian Oleksandr Halenko, the conflict should be treated responsibly, without making it a priority and a pretext for national grievances [2, min.1.38]. It should be acknowledged that Ukrainians and Tatars were united by a long-lasting military conflict. This conflict intensified interaction and, accordingly, the mutual influence of cultures at various levels, from military art to food.

Perceiving history through this lens allows us to realise that the military history of the 15th–18th centuries strongly connected the historical tracks of Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians, rather than dividing them.

The Russia's historical memory of Crimea today is largely based on the meanings that were formed during the times of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Several key topics are actively used to shape the collective memory. Among them, military themes occupy a prominent place. These are the topics of the conquest of Crimea and the battles of the armies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in Crimea against various coalitions of Western powers. Having occupied Crimea, Russia has the opportunity to support commemorative practices relating to these topics. They promote a scheme of history in which Russian conquest meant inevitable improvements in the life of Crimea and the Empire as a whole. The emotional appeal to the image of Crimea as a 'shield', 'advanced foothold', 'land drenched with Russian blood' not only attempts to make sacred the space of Crimea as part of Russia, but also imposes a scheme of Russia's fatal strategic dependence on Crimea. The military history of the peninsula in contemporary Russian literature only begins in the 16th century, the time of Ivan the Terrible, and continues until 2014. Thus, the representation of the military history of Crimea is made purely through the dimension of the Russian state project and broadly speaking is a colonial discourse.

The colonial discourse is an important part of Russia's propaganda. The latter is systemic, institutional and centralised. It is mostly implemented through the Russian Historical Society and its Crimean branch, which was established immediately after the occupation in 2014. These structures are bureaucratic, using resources to access schools, organise public events, etc. This ensures the unity and mass coverage of the messages that are broadcasted. At the same time, these are rather inert structures that neglect local initiatives. To give you an example the local Crimean journal 'Military Crimea' has long demonstrated absolute loyalty to the imperial discourse and to the Russian authorities on the peninsula. At the beginning of 2023, the editors of this journal began to publicly and desperately complain about the lack of money, the ignoring of their initiatives by the authorities, and announced the termination of the publication of the paper version of the journal. Thus, the propaganda is locked into Russian state structures. If they are eliminated, impulses to reproduce the imperial narrative at the public level will probably be insignificant. Another weakness of Russian propaganda in the field of military history is the nature of the commemorative practices. The events of the Second World War remain the most commonly used for educating young people and the most represented in the public space of memory as the Great Fatherland War. The cult of defence and liberation of Crimea, created during the Soviet era, is reproduced in numerous educational activities in schools, museums, exhibitions, military tourist routes, military reconstructions and victory celebrations. These

activities rely on the Soviet infrastructure of memory sites and repeat the scenarios of commemorative events of the Soviet era. As in the Soviet Union, they are mandatory, routine, and uniform. They are effective in part. However, they also increasingly resemble a formal obligation. During the 10 years of occupation, few new places of memory were created, and all of them are quite traditional in form. The majority of the places of memory are physically old and unattractive. All this turns the peninsula into a location of anachronism.

What are the prospects of the battle concerning the interpretation of the military history of Crimea? Certainly, the first and most important is the actual battle for Crimea and its subsequent de-occupation. Does Ukraine have the potential to fight in the historical arena right now? Yes, and this is the way to change the historical grand narrative to a multicultural one. A memory policy built accordingly will contribute to the formation of an open society. This project seems more attractive than the totalitarian one. Another advantage of Ukraine is the real opportunity to build historical solidarity with Crimea based on an anti-colonial discourse about the past, because both Ukrainians and the peoples of the Crimean peninsula were subjected to colonial influence. This is a priority, because Russia is actually re-colonising the peninsula with the help of instrumentalised history. The policy of memory is only part of a set of measures to reintegrate Crimea after de-occupation, and Ukraine has a chance to formulate the necessary strategies for the future right now.

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