

# The Deported Peoples

CRIMEAN TATARS · VOLGA GERMANS · MESKHETIAN TURKS · KOREANS · GREEKS AND KURDS

UPDATE ▼

A MINORITY RIGHTS GROUP SOVIET UPDATE • BY DR JOHN RUSSELL

As the Soviet Union in the Gorbachev era attempts to come to grips with its past, one of the darkest pages of the country's history remains the deportation to Central Asia and Siberia of entire nations prior, during and after World War II. In the text of the new Soviet nationalities' policy published by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in August 1989, six peoples were identified as those that were still awaiting a return to their homelands. These were the Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Meskhetian Turks, Koreans, Greeks and Kurds. The Soviet census of 1989 gave for the first time more or less reliable figures of the numbers of the deported peoples, although it is claimed by the groups concerned that the numbers are still greatly understated. The official figures were as follows: 2.03 million Volga Germans; 265,000 Crimean Tatars; 207,000 Meskhetian Turks; 437,000 Koreans; 358,000 Greeks; 153,000 Kurds - a total of 3.45 million people.

Although only the Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans had clearly-defined territorial formations prior to deportation, a 'Red Kurdistan' around Lachin in Azerbaijan existed in the Soviet borderlands from 1923 to 1930 and the Greeks (many known as Pontian Greeks), Koreans and Turks all had traditional areas of residence. Apart from the Koreans, who were deported from the Soviet Far East, all of these groups traditionally inhabited areas in the Crimea and the Caucasus. Until very recently, only the Greeks and Kurds were allowed to return to their homelands in any numbers, although neither has as yet been successful in gaining any autonomous rights to self-determination. At present the Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans are seeking a restoration of their

territorial autonomy, the Greeks and Kurds the establishment of autonomous territories in the south of the Ukrainian and Russian republics respectively, and the Turks and some of the Koreans a return, with some guarantees of autonomy, to their traditional areas of settlement. Only those Koreans who have resettled successfully in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (where many have become integrated and urbanized) appear ready to settle for autonomous rights within their place of exile. At the same time, frustration at the lack of progress in the struggle for self-determination has led most of these groups to consider emigration abroad as an alternative solution.

The history of the deportation of the Volga Germans (1941/2), Crimean Tatars (1944) and the Meskhetian Turks (1944) has been well-documented elsewhere. The Kurds, however, were the first to suffer deportation to Central Asia in the early-1930's in order to nip in the bud irredentist aspirations following their dispersal on the abolition of 'Red Kurdistan' in 1930. Next were the Koreans when, at the height of Soviet-Japanese tension over Manchuria in 1937, *Pravda* published an article entitled 'Foreign Espionage in the Far East' accusing the Koreans of collaboration, (a ridiculous assertion given the history of Korean-Japanese relations). They were deported from the Pacific coast to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and still form significant minorities there. The Greeks, who had been resettled under Empress Catherine II from their historic home in the Crimea to the Black Sea coast around the city of Mariupol, were deported to Central Asia in 1944 and others who had settled in the Caucasus followed them in 1949 (including some refugees from the Greek Civil War).



THE GUARDIAN

## CONSTITUTION AND LAW

As the constitutional structure of the Soviet federation is based on national-territorial units, those nations lacking an autonomous territory are effectively deprived of representation and any form of statehood. Thus, the two million plus Germans represent the 15th largest nation in the USSR (more than both the 1.5 million Latvians and one million Estonians). However, in the country's highest legislative body — the Congress of People's Deputies — there are 44 Latvians, 41 Estonians and just 10 Germans (there are also 4 Koreans, one Crimean Tatar and one Greek, but no Kurds or Turks). A similar situation pertains in the country's full-time parliament — the Supreme Soviet — where there are 11 Latvians and 11 Estonians, but only three Germans.

For this reason, the Volga Germans are anxious to secure a territory with a status commensurate to their numbers and are unlikely to settle for less. A State Committee of the Supreme Soviet is considering the issue of German statehood but its recommendations have not yet been made public. Frustration at this delay, combined with the process of re-unification in Germany has prompted many thousands of Volga Germans to emigrate to the Federal Republic. State Commissions have also been established to consider the plight of the Crimean Tatars and Meskhetian Turks. The moves towards autonomy by the Crimeans would appear to facilitate the resettlement of the Tatars, whereas the upsurge of Georgian nationalism would seem to represent a further obstacle to the Turks.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

Prior to the advent of glasnost, only the high-profile civil rights' movements of the Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans and, to a lesser extent, that of the Meskhetian Turks, had attracted significant attention in the West. True, the plight of the Kurds in neighbouring countries has made the West aware of the minority in the USSR, but it would be true to say that, until very recently, the Greeks, Koreans and Kurds were not considered generally in the West as deported peoples. Now all six peoples have formed organizations to articulate their demands for self-determination.

It would appear that the year of 1987 marked the first turning point in the Soviet regime's attitude to the campaigns of the deported peoples. In that year, a government commission chaired by the then USSR President, Andrei Gromyko, was set up to consider the **Crimean Tatar's** demands for a return to their homeland. In October of that year, a march by 2,000 Crimean Tatars from Taman to Simferopol in the Crimea was broken up by the police, but the government commission moved quickly to try and defuse the situation. Demonstrations followed in Moscow, Krasnodar and Tashkent early in 1988 and, on 18 May (the 44th anniversary of their deportation) up to 25,000 Crimean Tatars demonstrated in 22 Soviet villages and towns, followed by a major demonstration the following month in Moscow. Predictably, the Crimean Tatars were disappointed with the findings of the Gromyko Commission which reported later that month that 'Tatars who resided formerly in the Crimea had now

taken root in Uzbekistan and other republics' and that 'there were no grounds for a mass return and a re-establishment of Crimean autonomy'. The Commission did advocate, however, the improvement of cultural, educational and linguistic facilities for the Crimean Tatars in Central Asia.

A huge protest demonstration in Tashkent following the announcement of the Commission's findings was broken up by the police and it appeared that the movement for self-determination had reached a cul-de-sac. However, the series of bloody ethnic clashes that commenced with the Armenian-Azeri clashes in February 1988, followed by the upsurge of nationalist popular front movements in the Baltic republics, caused the Soviet authorities to begin a radical review of their nationalities' policy.

Initially, this consisted of a lifting of some of the restrictions imposed on the deported peoples. This allowed the spontaneous return to the homelands of individual groups and families, although at this stage, without any government assistance. By the autumn of 1988, the teaching of the Tatar language had begun in a number of Crimean schools and, in the summer of 1989, a supplement in Tatar to the regional newspaper began to be published. Hitherto, the Tashkent-based *Lenin bayragy* (Lenin's Flag) had been the only authorized periodical in the Crimean Tatar language.

The publication of the CPSU's new nationalities' policy in August 1989 and the establishment of a State Commission to re-examine the deported peoples' demands marked a further turning-point in the state's attitude to these minorities. For example, on 11 July 1990, a Soviet Government resolution 'On Top Priority Measures to Resolve Questions Connected with the Return of Crimean Tatars to the Crimean Region' reported that 90,000 had already returned under their own initiative and that, since 1989, 9,300 families had been resettled with government assistance in the region. In May 1990, the State Commission announced that it favoured the resettlement of all Crimean Tatars in the Crimea within the period 1991-96. Thus, the prospects for Tatar autonomy in their former homeland look brighter now than at any time since their deportation.

The same cannot be said of the **Volga Germans'** prospects for a restoration of their homeland. Attempts to establish some form of German autonomy have been resisted in both Kazakhstan and Saratov. Nevertheless groups of German activists began to meet openly from 1987 and, in the spring of 1989, the *Wiedergeburt* (Renaissance) society of Soviet Germans published its manifesto, which called for territorial and political autonomy as well as the cultural autonomy the Soviet authorities seemed prepared to grant. The movement is split between those seeking a return to their Volga homeland, those seeking autonomy in Central Asia and/or Siberia, those who formerly sought the establishment of a GDR-type of German state in the Kaliningrad Region on the Baltic and those that seek to emigrate to the Federal Republic of Germany. These splits were evident in 3-day meeting of *Wiedergeburt* in Moscow in April 1990. The alternative option of emigration to the Federal Republic of Germany is being taken up on a mass scale.

Between 1954 and 1984, 120,000 Soviet Germans emigrated, but this fell to 105,000 and around 150,000



are expected to emigrate in 1990. This trend, combined with the exceptionally high rates of inter-ethnic marriage (66%) of the Soviet Germans and assimilation (in 1979, 42.6% of all Soviet Germans gave Russian as their native language) has had a detrimental impact on their national cohesiveness and unity of purpose. The frustration at the lack of tangible progress towards the re-establishment of territorial autonomy (such as the anti-German demonstrations in Saratov on the Volga, and also in Kazakhstan, by indigenous peoples protesting at plans to recognize German areas of settlement) led to more direct forms of action, including camping out in front of the *Rossiya* hotel in Moscow to bring attention to the cause, and the arrest, in October 1990, of a leading *Wiedergeburt* activist by the KGB for allegedly economic crimes. The situation is clearly critical and the outcome of the Government enquiry and the founding congress of Soviet Germans, scheduled for January 1991, will need to address these concerns directly.

Of all the groups considered here, the fate of the **Meskhetian Turks** demanded the most direct action. This was due almost solely to the fact that the Turks were the victims of the savage pogroms in the Ferghana region of Uzbekistan in June 1989, which resulted in more than 100 deaths and 1000 injuries and a massive evacuation of the Turks to the Russian Federation (especially Smolensk, Kursk and Orlov) and the Caucasus (Azerbaijan and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR). An area to which they were not invited to go was their former homeland on the Turkish border (still a restricted zone that contains, reportedly, only 35 families of Meskhetian Turks), despite the fact that the region is still relatively underpopulated.

The previous summer (August 1988) an All-Union Congress of Meskhetian Turks brought together 250 delegates near the settlement of Psykod in the Kabardin-Balkar ASSR (Northern Caucasus). A major split occurred at the Congress between those stressing

their Georgian ethnicity and those claiming Turkish origin. There is some dispute even amongst scholars over this problem, but two points may be made: the Meskhetians were subject to far greater Turkish influence than, for example, the Adzharians (Muslim Georgians), who merely adopted the religion of their Ottoman conquerors while retaining their Georgian culture; moreover, all the Muslim groups were cleared from Meskhetia in 1944 (and in another sweep of the border region in 1947) and Abkhazians, Adzharians, Karakapakh Azeris, Khemshili Armenians, Kurds, Laz and Turkmen were deported along with the Turks. In the event, the majority view prevailed and the Turkish identity was established.

In the wake of the tragic events of June 1989, the USSR established a State Commission on Problems of the Meskhetian Turkish population which has yet to deliver its findings. The Meskhetians themselves focused their activities on the Provisional Organizational Committee of Meskhetian Turks for Return to their Homeland. The Azeri authorities (in previous Soviet census returns the Turks were classified as Azeris) were especially sympathetic and some 40,000 of the 60,000 refugees elected to go there. About 16,000 others went to the Russian Federation and more than 5000 applied for emigration to Turkey.

Although the **Greeks**, **Koreans** and the **Kurds** have not mounted campaigns for self-determination on the scale of the Germans, Tatars or Turks (and, therefore, have not come into sharp conflict with either the Soviet authorities of their neighbours), all have made progress in their quest for self-determination. In July 1989, an All-Union Society of Soviet **Greeks** was formed and the election of one of its activists, the economist Gavriil Popov, as Mayor of Moscow in April 1990 raised the profile of this numerous group (some sources claim that there are up to one million Greeks in the USSR). Although Soviet Greeks speak a variety of languages (Russian, Ukrainian, Turkish, Crimean Tatar - only the Pontian Greeks on the Black Sea coast speak an archaic form of Greek) they all identify themselves as Greek. Six thousand Soviet Greeks emigrated to Greece in 1989 and up to 25,000 are expected to follow them in 1990. Their return has not always been greeted with enthusiasm by indigenous Greeks, with whom they have little in common. Attempts to form a Greek autonomous territory around the Ukrainian city of Mariupol are likely to meet with opposition from the local authorities. However, one might anticipate a resurgence of Greek culture as a result of the current changes in Soviet language laws.

Only a small minority of **Koreans** resettled in the Far East after they were cleared of Stalin's accusations by Khrushchev, but the wartime acquisition of Southern Sakhalin resulted in a further colony, now numbering 35,000 on the island. Many are stateless persons awaiting repatriation to North or South Korea. The recent re-establishment of diplomatic links between the USSR and South Korea should lead to some emigration and the granting of citizenship to this group. Already quite well catered for in Korean language publications (*Lenin kichi* — 'Lenin's Banner' — in Kazakhstan, and *Lenin-killo* — 'Lenin's Path' in Southern Sakhalin, as well as Korean-language editions of the journals *Soviet Union* and *Soviet Woman*), the Koreans are concentrating on

establishing cultural centres and educational facilities in the areas of compact settlement. An Association of Soviet Koreans was formed in Moscow in April 1990 and may be expected to push for some resettlement in the Far East and the establishment of autonomous regions within areas of compact settlement.

The **Kurds** (it is claimed that there are up to one million spread across the Soviet Union, many being labelled as Azeris and other nationalities) are far too dispersed as yet to mount an effective and coordinated campaign for self-determination, although an All-Union Kurdish Conference was held in Moscow in June 1990. Caught in the cauldron of both Middle East and Transcaucasian national conflicts, it is hardly surprising that Kurdish leaders are seeking an autonomous territory within the Russian Federation. Kurds living in the strip of Azerbaijani territory that separates Armenia from Nagorno-Karabagh (formerly Red Kurdistan) have proposed that this area be re-established as an autonomous Kurdish territory. Although most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, there are Shi'ite Kurds in Azerbaijan and Yezidi or Zoroastrian Kurds in Armenia. There are Kurdish-language publications, radio broadcasts, some educational facilities and cultural centres in most areas of compact Kurdish settlement (and a cultural centre has been opened recently in Moscow). In October 1989 Professor Nadir Nadirov represented Soviet Kurds at a Paris conference on Kurdish rights. The lack of a compact unified territory on borders contiguous to areas of Kurdish settlement in neighbouring countries has prevented the issue of Kurdish irredentism being regarded as a serious political threat by the Soviet authorities.

The recent Soviet laws on language and citizenship, combined with the revised nationalities' policy, and implicit acceptance of the principle of national self-determination, would appear to offer the deported peoples some prospect of compensation in the near future for the injustices suffered. Whether their national territorial aspirations can be fulfilled without alienating other national groups and stirring up further ethnic conflicts remains to be seen.

## Sources

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