Living Homeland and Speaking with the Dead: Crimean Tatars in Uzbekistan

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The Crimean Tatars in Uzbekistan: speaking with the dead and living homeland

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Of the many changes associated with the break-up of the Soviet Union, one of the most striking has been a spectacular demographic reshuffling. Populations have been moving across republican and now new state borders. The Crimean Tatars are among those who have been leaving Central Asia at a dramatic rate, having lived in the area since Stalin exiled them there in 1944. Although most of them have repatriated, at least 30,000 Tatars, and possibly as many as 150,000, remain in the newly independent Central Asian states. The question is do they, too, aspire to return? If not, how do they organize their lives in what are now former places of exile? Given the risks inherent in openly expressing potentially unfavourable or negative opinions in this region, it is difficult to ascertain.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork between 1996 and 1998, I suggest Crimean Tatars express both ambivalence and affection with regard to life in Central Asia by means of various idioms. Specifically, they use the imputed voices of the deceased to add weight and volume to their intense attachment to the historic homeland at the same time that they acknowledge they have little hope of moving there. Indeed, the very presence of Crimean Tatars in Uzbekistan is almost spectral. It is a ghostly existence if your ‘heart’ is located elsewhere and many assume you are almost, if not already, gone. One informant who has been waiting for her husband to finish home construction so the family can repatriate said that when people in Tashkent greet her with surprise and say that they thought that she was long gone, it feels like a ‘knife’ in her heart. It is hers and others’ experience that demand investigation if we are to better understand Crimean Tatars’ experience in Central Asia today.

The Tatars’ continued presence in Uzbekistan has generated a tremendous amount of confusion: Tatars who have already repatriated malign the Tatars remaining in Uzbekistan for what they perceive to be a lack of patriotism; international organizations question the sincerity of Tatar intentions to relocate; and the government of Uzbekistan alleges they have no reason to want to leave because Tatars enjoy a wide array of privileges living in this newly independent state. Adding to the confusion are the statements of potential repatriates themselves. Crimean Tatars in Uzbekistan say they intend to repatriate as soon as possible and yet postpone doing so.

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I aim to clarify this confusion by means of an examination of the ‘voices of the dead’ because they are meaningful in themselves and, as I will demonstrate, offer a window on much broader processes of nation-building and population displacement following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. What gives the voices of the deceased their effectiveness is both a high degree of plasticity and a capacity to imbue survivors’ views with legitimacy. As rendered in my informants’ discourse, the voices of the dead also have a discursive advantage in evoking the past in the present, thereby linking Soviet and post-Soviet realities. For the diasporic Crimean Tatar people, this is effectively an affirmation of the collectivity that is now divided across new state borders. Hence the voices of the dead are instrumental in the spatial and temporal redefinition of Tatar identity in the post-Soviet period.

In taking this approach, I draw on a rich line of post-socialist studies in which Katherine Verdery and Robert Hayden, among others, have documented how dead bodies are one of the vehicles through which people in post-socialist societies engage in symbolic politics and reconfigure worlds of meaning in the wake of massive changes. The difference is that whereas in their studies, the dead bodies were moving and the people stayed put, in my case, the dead bodies are stationary and the living are in motion. This is significant because even though the Tatars’ presence in Central Asia borders on the spectral, the deceased have the ability to physically anchor their presence and represent the history that has often been eclipsed and effaced.

‘It was as if he was saying …’

The voices of the deceased animate Crimean discourse about repatriation in two interrelated ways. First, the deceased are prominent on a substantive level in this society in which kin are absolutely central to the organization of social life. They are distinctly ‘present’ in informants’ thinking, reasoning and strategizing about their lives: second-generation Tatars (born in diaspora) often decide to stay in Uzbekistan or alternatively repatriate to Crimea, based on living parents’ needs and deceased parents’ wishes.

Second, the voices of the deceased are recruited and serve in a more general way as a structuring device organizing the Tatars’ narrative means of expression. By eliciting respect and moral authority, the deceased provide certainty where there is ambiguity and bolster the Tatars’ stance in a whole number of discursive terrains. This can be illustrated with two examples from fieldwork: a tour of an estate and a cemetery visit. The first example is from 1996 fieldwork when I went to interview informants who I will call Servir and Rustem in the town of Yangiyul, Uzbekistan. They told me they had a surprise for me. Rather than sit and talk as we had planned, they wanted to take me to Rustem’s uncle’s house. The latter had died recently and when going into his house in preparation for the pominki or wake, my informants discovered what they referred to as his ‘inner world’. This in itself is not unusual. What the deceased leave behind ‘tells’ us many things about them. However, my informants used their perusal of his estate
and their reading of this inner world not just as a way of telling me about his life, but as a way of organizing their concept ‘homeland’ or vatan and conveying it to me.

If the methodological challenge was to hear the unsanctioned, perhaps even silenced statements of Crimean Tatars in Uzbekistan, my informants pointed to new ways of listening. As we were going through the house, one of my informants’ companions took the tape recorder out of my sheepish hands and turned it on. What he recorded was a reading of the way in which the voices of the deceased were used to come to terms with the reality of separation from the homeland. The tour of the house also suggests that rather than treating the Tatars as effectively silenced and restricting our analysis to ‘mute subject positions’, we can locate their voices within the cracks of the dominant history by attending to the rubrics employed.6 As the following discussion illustrates, the deceased, or their imputed intentions, were employed to communicate that the Crimean Tatars are temporary residents in Uzbekistan.

We stepped into a large room with a western exposure where the late afternoon sun was streaming in. The wooden floorboards were warped and scratched, which told them he was more interested in his garden, his homemade wine and his reading than doing the obviously necessary repairs on his house. As Rustem put it:

Do they look like real floors? Why didn’t he spend his time to make these floors into something that could actually be called floors? Why did he subscribe to newspapers and journals, write, and do all that instead? The answer is simple. Because of a feeling for homeland.

Servir and Rustem told me that three weeks before he died, the uncle had hired a team of carpenters to come and complete a number of repairs, including refinishing the exposed and weathered floorboards. Then, suddenly, he cancelled the repair. Rustem suggests that he was ‘saying’:

No—I haven’t forgotten the homeland and am not going to finish my house so that no one can have the pleasure of saying that we have ‘taken root’ in Uzbekistan—I won’t allow them that pleasure.7

Whether or not this was the uncle’s thinking, their rationale tells us a tremendous amount. Even though this uncle never made preparations to actually repatriate, his housekeeping practices are interpreted as a modality of loyalty to the nation. The deceased thereby legitimize the repatriation effort, even as contradictory interpretations might equally be drawn. If floorboards are inserted in a narrative about patriotism, then these ideas form part of the ontology conditioning the Tatar view of the world. It is entirely likely that they intensify the imperative to return and compound its emotional significance.

The tour is one in which first and second generations, as well as individual and collectivity come together.

You start thinking, where does the feeling of homeland come from? Take a look at this tray. You will not see trays like this anywhere, it is made from pure copper. You could sell this
for one thousand dollars! Why did he keep it here? You know, we only asked that question after he died. As I look at all this now, I find an answer to my own question: what made me what I am now? They made me this way. If they weren’t that way, I wouldn’t have been that way, either. I would have walked around and thought about all sorts of things, about marvelous power and wealth, but no.\(^8\)

Rather than profit from the sale of the artifact, the elderly man who had apparently lived in poverty chose to keep the vessel for the value it held for him personally. I should explain that copper vessels were made and used by Tatars in pre-deportation Crimea and have come to signify the old ways. The uncle’s rooms and possessions told the story of his life, which as Servir and Rustem explained, provided clues for unlocking aspects of their own identities, which they construed as national ones. As Servir put it ‘what made me what I am now’. Servir was also searching for a way to come to terms with his involvement in the National Movement. Its activities take up much of his time and he sometimes contemplates why he took on these responsibilities that are not remunerative. They are also extremely challenging because the authorities object to his promotion of the movement for repatriation. The uncle’s apparent priorities rendered his own more comprehensible.

The tray and other objects that were presented represent a symbolic entrenchment in a human and geographic world that is multiply threatened. Not only was a great deal lost in the process of the 1944 deportation, but the departure of so many Tatars from Uzbekistan to Crimea now represents another loss for those remaining. The \textit{chuvstvo rodini} (feeling of homeland) becomes condensed in the copper tray, the box of books, the old newspapers and warped floorboards. My informants read the house, its condition and its contents as a sign that the man did not need financial wealth but invested in the spiritual future of his nation.

\textbf{The pragmatics and practicalities of diaspora}

The preceding discussion requires us to re-examine why, given the desire to repatriate, my friends, their uncle and so many other Crimean Tatars are still living in Central Asia. After all, an organized movement for repatriation has been encouraging them to leave since the late 1960s and actively facilitated this process in the late 1980s. Crimean Tatars’ presence in Uzbekistan is therefore fraught with contradictions: on one hand they say they feel ‘at home’ in Uzbekistan and on the other hand the vast majority intend to leave. For many citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the ideologies of home, soil and roots fail to line up with the practicalities of residence so that territorial referents and civic loyalty are perplexingly divided. Family loyalties and national loyalties, career opportunities and housing availability create disparate registers of affiliation whether migration has occurred across large or small distances.\(^9\)

This sense of displacement is far from new, requiring us to reflect back on Crimean Tatar history. Having weathered Russification and massive emigrations

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following annexation by the Russian empire in 1783, Sovietization following the 1917 Revolution, and collectivization in the 1930s, the Tatars experienced wholesale deportation (some would say genocide) in the aftermath of World War II. They arrived in Central Asia after Stalin deported the group in 1944 for allegedly collaborating with the Nazis. We now understand Stalin’s motives as derived from his larger foreign and geopolitical strategy rather than the real or putative behaviour of the groups he deported. The Crimean Tatars were put in labour camps and collective farms and interned in what was called the ‘special settlement system’ where they lived under penal conditions and were required to check in with a commander on a monthly basis. At least 27 and possibly as high as 46 per cent of the population perished from hunger, disease and exposure in the first years of exile alone.\footnote{Following the death of Stalin, the system was dismantled and they were freer to move about. At this time (1956) many of the Crimean Tatars who had been living in the Ural Mountains relocated to Uzbekistan.}

A national movement began when elders and veterans began writing to the central authorities and requesting to be repatriated to the homeland. When these efforts proved unsuccessful, the Crimean Tatars began a rotating lobby in Moscow, demanding that they be returned. The movement spread to involve increasing numbers of people and brought together multiple layers of society. In 1967, a decree admitted the accusations had been wrongfully levelled against the entire population. Some Tatars tried to return at this time, only to be re-deported outside the Crimean peninsula. The 1967 decree appears to have been intended to placate Western human rights organizations that had been alerted to the Tatars’ plight and to generate the appearance that a solution would be reached. The Tatars redoubled their efforts, but it was not until the 1980s that they won official permission to return. At this time, the Tatars began repatriating at a dramatic pace that peaked at about 50,000 per year.

Still, many were left behind. Contrary to what many of the Tatars who relocated to Crimea suggest, the Tatars in Uzbekistan have remained there not out of a dearth of patriotism, but out of an inability, in the context of the dramatic transition in state structures, to navigate new bureaucratic regulations, customs and border regulations. Interviews conducted between 1996 and 1998 suggest that Tatars have remained in Uzbekistan not because they lack the desire to return to Crimea, but because for a host of reasons they hesitated during the peak of migration between 1987 and 1991 and then found themselves unable to surmount the formidable barriers that arose with the break-up of the Soviet Union.

To sketch out some of the reasons for hesitation, some families postponed leaving Uzbekistan so their children could complete their education and only later discovered that Uzbek educational credentials were not always honoured in Ukraine. Professional Crimean Tatars faced almost certain unemployment in Ukraine and hesitated to give up the positions they had worked hard to obtain. They postponed migration with the view of waiting until the Crimean economy could support them in their profession. By the time they found an acceptable
position, or more often resigned themselves to Crimean economic conditions, other barriers had arisen. Inter-ethnic marriage is sometimes cited as a reason for not returning, although there are also instances when mixed-marriage couples move to Crimea or alternatively divorce so the Crimean Tatar can repatriate and his or her spouse can stay. Departure was also postponed by those who had a sick or infirm family member, who would not have survived the transition, and by those who had recently buried a loved one and were reluctant to leave the grave behind. By the time health and grieving issues were resolved, it was often unfeasible to repatriate.

This last point warrants attention because attachment to the burial site of kin poses a special dilemma for Tatars wishing to repatriate. They are caught between two competing logics: the first, a Turkic one, dissuades abandoning the graves of kin, while the second, a national one, urges them that the nation demands their presence for its strength and integrity. A recent widow weighed the factors and decided her conscience told her to wait, while another informant relocated because his dying father instructed him that he would be ‘waiting’ for him in Crimea and they would be reunited there. In this way, deceased ancestors figure prominently in decision making about repatriation and are capable of tipping the balance either way. In both the cases I mention, the idiom links the Crimean Tatar people with the geographic emplacement of their dead, whether in flesh or spirit.¹¹

With regard to the Tatars’ reasons for leaving, a factor that must not be pushed to the margins is fear of ethnic cleansing. The massacre of the Meskетian Turks in the Fergana valley in 1989 sparked many Crimean Tatars to want to leave. They witnessed tremendous violence at a time when the Uzbeks were admonishing the Tatars to ‘go home’, and had a rhyme to convey this message to each of the non-titular groups. Citing Leninist nationality principles, they stated that Uzbekistan was for the Uzbeks. This belied years of Soviet socialization about the ‘friendship of peoples’ in which individuals were equal and the politically correct ethos was one of co-operation.

In spite of Soviet nationalism, territorial tropes for the idea of the nation persisted because the Soviets’ idea of cultural coherence was linked to the idea of territorially based ethnic groups. The difficulty is that a sense of being a second-class citizen is an inevitable entailment of this approach, however plural the ethnic ideology and however flexible its accommodation of non-titular groups.¹² Even though the government of Uzbekistan would be the last to recognize itself as a ‘push’ factor in the departure of Crimean Tatars, there are many policy directives that continue to deliver the message that Uzbekistan is for the Uzbeks. For example, the police typically become nervous around the time of the 18 May holiday commemorating deportation and have often obstructed observances. As elsewhere in CIS, knowledge of the titular language became increasingly important to obtaining, maintaining and advancing in employment. They also cite more general discrimination. In the end, ethnic tensions coupled with policies of Uzbekification served as reminders to the Tatars that they would always be ‘guests’, not ‘hosts’, in the titular
republic of the Uzbeks and their long-term security and welfare was therefore at risk.

While Tatars hesitated for a whole range of personal reasons mentioned above, the disintegration of the Soviet Union into successor states also brought changes in passports, currency and citizenship that created state-structured obstacles to migration. From 1991 when Uzbekistan became a state until 1998, one of the most vexing barriers to repatriation was the difficulty of withdrawing from Uzbek citizenship and a corresponding difficulty in obtaining Ukrainian citizenship. While these laws apply to all populations (and while they have recently been ameliorated) they seemed unreasonable to Crimean Tatars who never asked to be Uzbek citizens in the first place. Withdrawing from Uzbek citizenship was initially accomplished only by presidential decree—a costly and time consuming process that involved gathering more than eight different documents and submitting them to various agencies.\(^\text{13}\) Compounding the difficulty was that instructions for going through the process were not available and the various state agencies involved provided conflicting information.\(^\text{14}\) After protracted negotiations, Uzbek citizens no longer have to return to Uzbekistan and proceed through the lengthy process, but may accomplish this particular transition in status by going to the embassy in Kyiv at a greatly reduced cost.

The economic changes that accompanied the break up of the Soviet Union also play an important role in Crimean Tatars’ ability to repatriate. One barrier has been a lack of liquidity of real estate. The sudden emigration of many non-Uzbek ethnic groups flooded the real estate market and depressed prices. When a house can be sold, it is only legal to conduct this transaction in Uzbek sum, which are non-negotiable outside Uzbekistan. Whereas those who left early were able to negotiate in roubles, those leaving now are technically required to use sum. They use far more convenient US dollars only at extreme risk. There is also an issue of currency that extends beyond real estate, which is the Uzbek government’s indexation of sum in the process of implementing economic reforms. This had a profound effect on individuals’ transactions, particularly when the sum declined in relative value to the rapidly inflating Ukrainian currency. One informant who wanted to sell his house in 1989 changed his mind when he saw the value of the currency decline. He feels he would have had enough money from the sale of his house in Uzbekistan to relocate to Crimea if it were not for economic reforms.

Another barrier is the difficulty of repatriating belongings. Shipping containers are exorbitantly expensive, there are strict stipulations about what can and cannot be exported from the republic and many complain about the necessity of bribing officials to have their freight sent. Some would move without their belongings but know they could not replace them in the inflated economy of Ukraine. Added to this is moral distaste at the idea of having to start over from scratch yet again.

Having discussed the various social as well as political and economic reasons, I must add that there is also a strong subjective component: many speak fondly of their lives there, noting how they have been raised on ‘Uzbek bread’ as a way
of indexing their link to Uzbek soil and sustenance. The subjective element is tied to Tatars’ sensory experience of Uzbekistan, from the warm and sunny weather, to the fruits and vegetables. Tatars in Crimea remember the taste of the melons and fruits they enjoyed while they lived there. They also mention the generosity of the Uzbek peoples in the early years of exile. Tatars frequently recall the weddings, which drew representatives of many different ethnic groups no matter what the ethnicity of the couple. Crimean Tatars lament that weddings today are not what they used to be. Rather than contradicting reports of ethnic tension, verbal re-enactments of the ‘friendship of peoples’ index the complexity of the situation. Recalling harmony among peoples may be a form of narrative resistance to contemporary hostility. In spite of positive experiences in Uzbekistan, the vast majority of Crimean Tatars still plan to repatriate, and this holds equally whether the individual was born in the historic homeland, or in diaspora.

Whether the voices of the dead are retrieved from their former homes as I explored above, or gravestones as I describe below, their place-centred narration suggests that far from an egalitarian ‘friendship of peoples’, the Soviet Union created a much more complicated social space, in which identity was in many ways rooted to territory and helped determine both rights and opportunities. Put slightly differently, people are able to claim identities and gain rights through their association with specific places. Throughout the post-Soviet areas, the problem of immigrants, cultural rights and state protection of national minorities is growing since very few states have effective ways of harmonizing the relationship of citizenship, birth, ethnic affiliation and religious and national identity.

A Crimean Tatar’s ‘Requiem’ for the deceased

Just as the personal reasons for staying in Uzbekistan had intensely political ramifications, the economic obstacles that Crimean Tatars have encountered have emotional corollaries. The house tour described above showed us how the imputed voices of the deceased are used to articulate post-Soviet national identity and encrypt a range of feelings about repatriation. The uncle did not want to give anyone the pleasure, least of all the Uzbek government, of thinking the Crimean Tatars had made their home in Uzbekistan. An informant named Ali Khamzin decided to show me the graves of Crimean Tatars in a local cemetery as a way of demonstrating the meaning of homeland and amplifying why I should not think of Tatars in Ukraine and Uzbekistan as anything but a unified whole. In this context, the voices of the deceased were not only enlisted to resist the reality of separation across the former Soviet Union but to communicate a silent and yet explicit protest about their presence in Uzbekistan.

We travelled in a route taxi from where I was staying in Tashkent to the nearby town of Yangiyul, where we were left at the gates of a Muslim cemetery marked with the traditional emblem of moon and star. The cemetery was deserted and while the paths were clear, many of the graves appeared
untended. We left the main path for a smaller one and began passing between the graves, each of which had a border marking its edges. Our shoes crackled through the dry grass. We pushed overgrown vegetation aside and came to a small clearing where Khamzin took the tape recorder out of my hands, turned it on and began to speak:

I believe that you and I have an official event today: you are participating in a meeting of Crimean Tatars at the central cemetery of the city of Yangiyul. I want to say that from one side the participants in the meeting are deceased Crimean Tatars, who have forever remained on this land, and the respected presidium consists of two people: the representative of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people, Ali, and visiting scholar Greta Uehling, ethnologist, citizen of the United States.\textsuperscript{18}

Khamzin smiled as if to welcome me to the ‘meeting’ and in spite of the warm and soothing morning sun, it was chilling to suddenly think that as far as he was concerned, we were not alone. Khamzin’s approach compelled me to take another look at what my surroundings were telling me. Khamzin continued:

I am positive that all those present here today express their immense thanks to you, your homeland, and your government for that support that you have shown us. But I want to underline one thing, you see. Your work consists of the feeling of homeland among Crimean Tatars in Ukraine and Uzbekistan. If your question was the feeling of homeland among Crimean Tatars, maybe I would … maybe I would not in this extreme method or not method but form, approach this cemetery and maybe I would not have tried to show you in this way. But because when we were at the reception, L. also asked that question so in other words, I got the impression that somehow you doubt, eh, our ideas, those principles that we put forward, returning to our homeland.\textsuperscript{19}

Khamzin explained that he would not have brought me to the cemetery if my topic had simply been the sense of homeland among Crimean Tatars. From his perspective, the way in which my project allowed for the possibility of different levels of attachment among Tatars in various republics betrayed incomprehension that homeland is so basic, so axiomatic to their existence, that it need not be questioned. Indeed it was troubling to him that I thought the topic of attachment to homeland needed exploration at all. Khamzin’s approach of holding a meeting with the deceased certainly underscored that while Tatars in Ukraine and Uzbekistan may lead radically different lives and may have made completely different choices about repatriation, at another level they share an obvious love for the homeland and an eternal protest against separation from it. However, Crimean Tatars in Ukraine and Uzbekistan have very divergent concerns today for their daily lives in the two states have diverged in significant ways.

Khamzin’s inclusion of the deceased counterbalanced the physical reality of a divided people with evidence of a spiritual–emotional unity in the inscriptions on gravestones. In spite of the ban on mentioning Crimea, the Crimean Tatars had ordered the villages, towns and oblasts (provinces or regions) where they had been born to be inscribed on their headstones. In most cases, these places
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did not even exist as such after their departure, having been renamed along Soviet lines with names like ‘Happy’, ‘Pretty’ and ‘Clean.’ As Khamzin put it:

The most important thing is, you know, they put the names—not those that the Russians used—but they intentionally, intentionally put the old names belonging to the Crimean Tatars. And I want to say to you, most importantly, that this is an eternal demonstration of Crimean Tatars in all the cemeteries of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This is an eternal form of protest. This will continue until they restore our people.  

Khamzin’s distinctive orchestration of a meeting at the cemetery created an opening for other, usually unnoticed ‘presences’ to be appreciated. By including the dead as important participants in our meeting (and the movement), he suspends our usual spatio-temporal assumptions about reality. From his perspective, the deceased ‘count’ as among us because they too were wronged. The deceased are part of the movement. If we accept their naming of natal villages as protest, the deceased imbue legitimacy to the Tatars’ project of repatriation, even if it can not be verified how they truly felt.

They weren’t brave participants in the National Movement. But dying here, remaining here for the rest of their lives, why do they write on their markers, write that place from which they were exiled by the government and cast out here to the place of deportation? (...) It is the idiosyncrasy of Crimean Tatars, I think, that even leaving this life they leave behind the last form of protest. I think it is not just to the Soviet empire but to all of humanity.

Khamzin’s point seemed to be that one reason the inscriptions of the deceased, their last words, constitute a protest is that the individuals who made them were not being political activists but simply their Crimean Tatar selves. Khamzin pointed to the massive black marble stone of an obviously affluent person and remarked that although he was a person who probably never participated in the National Movement, the inscription itself constitutes a form of protest and signals a primary and abiding allegiance to the historic homeland. The question is not an epistemological one of knowing where one belongs, but an ontological one: given the fundamental belonging of person to place, homeland just is. What Khamzin suggested standing in the cemetery is that homeland is not so much a name for a particular piece of real estate, as a way of being in a place.

In the following passage, Khamzin suggests that there is something essentially different about Crimean Tatars. Attachment to homeland is treated as an essence of being Tatar. I do not propose to dwell on a question of whether essences do or do not exist, but describing the scene in the cemetery is a way of capturing this kind of dialogue and the way in which the deceased are used to anchor a discourse about the unity of the collectivity, even in the face of what appears to be a bifurcation of the group across Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

And I have for a long time noticed that for example in Yangiyul, Okurgan, Tashkent and other places, on the Russian markers, the Uzbek markers, and the markers of other nationalities there is no mention of their former city or settlement they come from. Why do Crimean Tatars dying, maybe for their whole lives they were those who simply carried out orders, why do they put the names of the villages they come from?
That Tatars’ relation to place and their place-centred narratives are based on an ontological understanding of belonging does not make them esoteric. In fact, the imputed voices of the deceased support an entire complex of political claims that Khamzin does not hesitate to articulate.

And today the best would be a memorial, a *requiem* for these people so that the governments of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States would understand once and for all that our striving is definitive, determined, and unwavering, so that rendering practical help would be more active, so that among us less of the children and old people would die not having returned to the homeland. So that those of us who are living here desiring voluntarily to return to the homeland would be able to return and live at home. In other words, so that our national rights would be reinstated. Rights all the rest of the peoples have.²²

Khamzin is interested in enlisting more practical support for the repatriation effort and the eternal protest of the deceased compounds the egregiousness of Stalin’s error, as well as the need for concrete measures. Khamzin uses the word ‘voluntarily’ here because it is an important part of the lexicon of embassies and resettlement agencies, which want to avoid any implication of coercion being used. Tatars use the expression to simultaneously affirm the language of the resettlement agencies and stress that the people who have departed Uzbekistan for Crimea have done so of their own accord. This has the added benefit of serving as a proof of sorts: if it is a movement for the voluntary return of Crimean Tatars and if approximately 270,000 Tatars have returned, then they have done so voluntarily.

The grass crackled and Khamzin asked if I was glad I attended the meeting. His interpretation of the voices of the deceased as *protest* opened my eyes to the contentiousness inherent in the Crimean Tatar issue. I visited a number of cemeteries after that and was impressed by the imagination Crimean Tatars used in having their headstones inscribed, even though at the time they did so, it was forbidden to mention Crimea. Not only were the villages they loved named, but often there were very beautiful poems about the beauty of nature in Crimea or aphorisms about life in Crimean Tatar. One stone went a step farther in this direction. A piece of cement, about one meter across, had been poured in the shape of the Crimean peninsula and mounted on a supporting beam. There was three-dimensional relief for the Crimean mountains and an inscription on the part representing the peninsula. This design departs from the traditional but seems to perfectly encapsulate the search for a way to bring physical and spiritual geography together. Khamzin ‘closed’ our meeting with the deceased by saying a prayer in Crimean Tatar. Then, on the way out, we met the Uzbek caretaker of the cemetery and sat with him on one of the low benches while he said another prayer.

Understanding these informants involves responding to their presence within a silenced history. While their history may have been altered and suppressed during the Soviet years, they are far from mute subjects. In the ethnographic examples described above, my informants were very active participants.
in the research. They were self-conscious about their aims, which were deliberate and strategic in nature. The interview that was hijacked and became a house tour, and the ‘meeting’ at the cemetery provide two flashes of insight into the ways in which the idea of homeland is constructed at a distance through language and practice. My informants’ choices provided them with a way of talking about something that was otherwise difficult to express and their views on their relationship to their land are clearer for it.

My informant’s proactive stance with regard to my research demonstrates one of the ways in which they ‘lived’ homeland. What I mean by ‘living’ homeland is also encapsulated in an unusually direct conversation I had in a jeep at the border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Tension was running high as a result of the heat and the difficulty of crossing the border. Irritated at the naivety of a comment on my part about trying to understand, Reshat spun around in the passenger seat of the jeep and said: ‘trying to understand homeland? I’ve lived homeland with every cell of my body, every breath of my life and every day of my life.’ He did not have to add how painful it was, so many miles from Crimea.

**Conclusion**

The demographic reshuffling that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union raised some perplexing questions. Among them is the problem of why many Crimean Tatars remain in places of former exile. The many years of constraints placed on free expression complicates the task of discovering how the Crimean Tatars living in Uzbekistan perceive their lives. I have therefore argued that we will do well to listen to their rendering of the voices of the dead. They express both ambivalence and affection with regard to life in Central Asia by means of this idiom.

Although the Crimean Tatars are divided across the republics, face formidable barriers to complete repatriation and may never be physically united as a group, the dead provide a respected voice of authority. They seem to reassure Crimean Tatars that they have *not* taken root in places of former exile and will continue their eternal protest until united, even if that protest has to be a silent one. The dead, or their imputed voices at least, offer reassurance to the living, thereby stabilizing Crimean Tatars’ diasporic presence in the CIS. The sentiments and sensibilities that are attributed to the deceased suggest that however comfortable life in Central Asia may be, the Crimean Tatars’ real home is on the Crimean peninsula.

Although the Soviet Union was imagined as an egalitarian ‘friendship of peoples’ in which individuals of all ethnicities could develop and prosper, what the deceased are trying to tell us, according to my Tatar informants, is that Soviet (and post-Soviet) space is more complicated than that. Social tensions coupled with policies of Uzbekification suggest the Tatars will always be ‘guests’, which is to say never completely ‘at home’, in the titular republic of the Uzbeks. The deceased also point to an important dimension of place-centred discourse, which is its ability to link past and present. In ‘listening’ to what their
deceased kin and compatriots are ‘saying’ the Crimean Tatars simultaneously pay homage to ancestors and make sense of themselves.

Notes and References


2. Under the Soviet system, not only was it extremely dangerous to say anything that could be glossed as unpatriotic about Uzbekistan, but mentioning Crimea was interpreted as anti-Soviet. Those who tried to study Crimean Tatar history were expelled from university and a young girl who changed the lyrics of a song to include the word ‘Crimea’ when she sang at a school assembly was sent to the principle’s office and interrogated by the KGB. In general, Tatars learned that they must be careful to whom they spoke about it. Any form of citing Crimea was taken as highly subversive because the Marxist conception of history dictated that history has teleology. Given this teleology, reference to Crimea was taken as a code for return.

   Added to this is the Soviet attempt to erase them from official accounts. Not only was mention of the deportation unprintable until long afterward, but the Tatars were eliminated from the census. Most text pertaining to them was deleted from the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia, and books in their language were destroyed. After their departure, the names of their villages, and natural landmarks were changed to Soviet ones. Finally, the passports they were issued once in Uzbekistan read ‘Tatar’, instead of Crimean Tatar. So Crimean Tatars were deeply affected by the risks they felt adhered to speaking positively about Crimea, or unfavourably about Uzbekistan.


4. Although deported Chechens repatriated their dead when they returned to their historic homeland in the 1950s, the Crimean Tatars do not even speak of repatriating remains. I suspect it will remain unimaginable for as long as the scale, cost and the complications of such an operation remain prohibitive.

5. Interview with anonymous male informants in Yangiyul, Uzbekistan on 24 March 1997.


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


10. There are divergent accounts of just how substantial the losses were. According to NKVD estimates, 27 per cent of the population perished in the first three years (N. Zemskov, ‘Spetsposelentsy iz Kryma: 1944–1956’ [Special settlers from Crimea 1944–1956], Krymskie Muzel No 1, 1994, (Simferopol: Tavria, 1995), p 75). According to popular Crimean Tatar accounts, however, the losses are much higher: 46 per cent, or ‘half’ the population perished as a result of hunger and disease.

11. Verdery, op cit, Ref 2.

12. Appadurai, op cit, Ref 6, p 50.

13. The documents included a copy of the passport with valid residence permit or propiska for the place one is currently living; a notice of the number of people in the family and their place of residence referred to as sostav s’emi; a completed, signed and notarized application form given to Ovir; two copies of a questionnaire with data that are in the domovai kniga (more detailed data on family members); a one-page autobiography; a letter to president Karimov requesting release from Uzbek citizenship; and eight photographs.

14. This list of documentation was supplied by an informant who was nearing the end of the process. I went with another informant to various state offices to try to find instructions explaining the procedure, but we found none. She suggested that there are politics in the lack of information. The way in which applications are processed is changing. At first, it was treated as a collective issue. However, to avoid creating the appearance of liability for deportation and repatriation, applications for Crimean Tatars were subsequently processed only on an individual basis.

15. Following their deportation to the area in 1944, wariness and animosity were propagated by the authorities who alleged that cannibals, thieves, a ‘wild’ and ‘barbaric’ people had come. But as this propaganda was
gradually dispelled, the peoples of Central Asia are said to have assisted the Tatars, who they saw as religious kin, to the best of their abilities.


17. Verderay, op cit, Ref 2.


19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.