

"There is a danger — as the people become more and more pessimistic, they could become aggressive."

TIMUR DAGDJI, Integration Corps



Teacher Munira Useinova is luckier than most Tatars, as she has a job, and a home with no heat.

Home to Heartbreak



Photos By PETER BLAKELY / Special to The Chronicle

The prospects are more bleak than the landscape for Tatars who have come back to their Crimea homeland after nearly 50 years in exile.

Tatars end exile only to find despair in Crimea homeland

By Theresa Agovino
CHRONICLE FOREIGN SERVICE

MKAMENKA, UKRAINE
uydaba Selimov watched his mother die of starvation when he was 9 years old and now fears he will meet the same fate.

But Selimov says his plight is made easier by knowing that he has returned to the land of his birth, while his mother wasted away in exile.

"I may die from hunger, but I didn't come here to live in luxury but to die in my homeland," said the 63-year-old, whose pension is so meager that he cannot afford the \$100 worth of coal he needs to heat his one-room house for the winter.

Bread is also a rare luxury; the family relies heavily on potatoes and whatever else it is able to grow in a small plot nearby.

Selimov's homeland is the Crimea, the Ukrainian province that for centuries has been the cradle of the Crime-

CRIMEA AND THE TATARS

The Crimean Tatars are believed to be descendants of the Mongol hordes that swept into Europe in the 13th century.

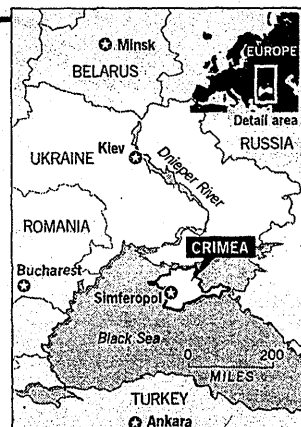
The Crimea was once a part of the Ottoman empire, and there have been tensions and distrust between Russians and Tatars ever since. This is due in part to the population breakdown. In 1782, when the Crimea became part of the Russian empire, 83 percent of residents were Tatars; only 5.7 percent were ethnic Russians and 2.9 percent Ukrainians. By 1937, Russians had become the dominant group and the Tatars accounted for only 20.7 percent. Today, there are between 250,000 to 300,000 Tatars in Crimea — about one-tenth of the population.

The Crimea was one of the strongest holdouts against the Red Army following the Russian Revolution of

1917, and Josef Stalin had a strong antipathy for the Tatars, purging much of the intelligentsia in 1927. Nazi troops occupied the peninsula from 1941 to 1944, and some Tatars believed at first that life might be better under the Germans. But once the Tatars learned that the Nazis were exterminating the Jews in the areas they conquered, such thoughts vanished.

Although no widespread evidence of Tatar collaboration with the Nazis was ever proved, Stalin deported the community to Uzbekistan after Soviet troops recaptured the Crimea. The action was not announced until two years after the fact.

The early years of the Tatars' exile were harsh. Many died of malaria and other diseases in the labor camps to which they were confined. The Tatars' status as "traitors" remained



until Nikita Khrushchev launched his destalinization campaign in the late 1950s.

— THERESA AGOVINO

Life Desperate After 45 Years in Exile

► TATAR

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an Tatars, a Turkic Muslim people.

But Selimov, his family and some 250,000 other Tatars were deported in 1944 after Josef Stalin accused them of collaborating with Nazis, charges regarded today as spurious.

Thousands, including Selimov's mother, died in the grueling three-week-plus train rides that transported the Tatars to their exile in central Asia. After being confined to labor camps for years, they slowly rebuilt their lives, unsure if they would ever be allowed to come home.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the Tatars have been flooding back to the Crimea, only to discover that while it is possible to go home again, it is not the welcoming place of memories.

In the intervening 4½ decades, the Tatars' houses were occupied by Ukrainians and Russians who had been told that the deported people were traitors. In the early '90s, clashes erupted when police and locals tried to evict Tatar returnees from the squatter settlements they erected on the outskirts of towns.

The violent outbreaks have subsided, but concerns about future flareups simmer beneath the surface and the financial crisis gripping Ukraine exacerbates the Tatars' already bleak circumstances.

The Tatars' legal status remains hazy; their employment prospects are poor; their savings were long ago eaten away by inflation. Most of the makeshift villages they built lack paved roads, running water and basic services such as schools.

"People had a different vision of returning to their homeland. They now live in such difficult conditions," said Timur Dagdji, coordination committee chairman of Integration Corps, a local Tatar nongovernmental organization.

"They try to remain optimistic. But there is a danger — as the people become more and more pessimistic, they could become aggressive."

Indeed, the Tatars demonstrated earlier last year against laws that prevented them from voting, and the elimination of designated seats for Tatars in the Ukrainian parliament.

About half the estimated 250,000 Tatars who have returned have been unable to obtain the Ukrainian citizenship necessary for employment because they could not afford to pay the \$100 required by Uzbekistan, where most deportees were sent, to relinquish citizenship in that newly created post-Soviet nation.

The protests pushed the government to work out a deal that should pave the way for Tatars to relinquish their citizenship without the fee, and the Tatar seats in the parliament were reinstated.

Still, those victories have failed so far to translate into tangible benefits for the Tatar population.

"Without a doubt, there will be more demonstrations and protests," said Mustafa Dzhemilyou, one of two Tatars in Ukraine's Parliament.

The Tatars are unhappy with a draft of the new Crimean constitution because they say it fails to guarantee the right to education in their own language and does not allot specific seats for their representatives in the provincial parliament.

Dzhemilyou and other Tatar leaders say the Ukrainian government has not done enough to make amends for their years in exile, either financially or ethically. The government has yet to formally acknowledge that there was no widespread conspiracy among the Tatars to collaborate with the Nazis.

Meanwhile, only 20 percent of the \$6 million earmarked to help the Tatars in 1998 has been distributed, and a special allotment for construction of housing, schools and infrastructure has been eliminated from this year's budget.

That is not surprising, since Ukraine is struggling under a mountain of debt. Public service employees have not been paid for months, and the government is scrambling to win aid from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The Tatar problem, however, has gotten the attention of the international community, which is eager to puncture any ethnic tensions before they flare into another version of the

Wars in Bosnia and Chechnya. There are some radicals among Tatar activists but overall there is no call for an independent state.

Relations between the Tatars and Crimea's ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, who are Christian Orthodox, range from cool to cordial. Inter-mingling is limited since most Tatars live in squatter settlements.

"There is potential for violent conflict here so to avoid it, it is better to invest now," said Merlin Udho, chief technical adviser for the U.N.'s Crimea Integration and Development Program.

The UNDP has spent \$4 million to improve life in the settlements. So far, it has built a school, a health center and started a loan program in Kamenka, which is a short distance from Simferopol, Crimea's capital.

Teacher Munira Useinova says the bright, airy 2-month-old school is a source of warmth, literally and figuratively. She lives in a semifinished house with no heat because her family cannot afford to complete the building.

She had been unemployed since she came to Crimea last year after growing up in Uzbekistan.

"It killed me to be away from students," said Useinova, who has been a teacher for 24 years.

Only a few in the community have had such luck. The unemployment rate among Tatars is 67 percent; only 10 percent of their settlements have electricity and only 8 percent have running water; mortality rates are rising along with despair.

"We are just so helpless," said Abkerimov Enver, a 45-year-old truck driver who has found only sporadic work since he moved to the Crimea five years ago.

"(In Uzbekistan) we had jobs and a house," he said. "It is hard to have a normal life with no job."

He gazed at his 10-year-old daughter in the next room and said, "I hope her life will be better."

But he quickly adds that he has his doubts. "Nobody pays attention to us. Nobody cares," he said. "It is hard to believe in the future."