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Review: Beyond Memory: The Crimean Tatars' Deportation and Return

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*Beyond Memory: The Crimean Tatars' Deportation and Return* by GRETA LYNN UEHLING. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; xiii + 294 pp., index; paperbound, \$24.95.

In spring of 1997 I made my way to the small village of Chirchik in eastern Uzbekistan in search of something that I thought no outsider had ever studied in this remote corner of the former Soviet Union, Crimean Tatars. The Crimean Tatars, a small Turkic Muslim ethnic group brutally deported from its Black Sea homeland to this desert republic by Stalin in 1944, had always fascinated me. Much to my surprise as I began a series of interviews in this inaccessible Uzbek village one of my interviewees, a Crimean Tatar woman who had lived through the deportation and 50 years of exile, handed me a *Lonely Planet* travel guide to Central Asia and explained, "This belongs to one of your *zemliaks* (countrymen) who was here a short time ago asking the same questions as you." Thus I became aware of the fact that one Greta Uehling was working on the Crimean Tatar deportation as well. I have been eagerly awaiting the publication of her work ever since.

Having waited so long, I must say I was disappointed with the history sections of Greta Uehling's *Beyond Memory* (chapters 1–3). The history section of this work is a condensed re-telling of the topics covered in much greater detail in my own book *The Crimean Tatars. The Diaspora Experience and the Forging of a Nation* (Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2001). But these details are worth recounting here and will be of interest to public historians who are engaged in the study of contested histories and the role of nationalist entrepreneurs in shaping ethnic history. The case of the Crimean Tatars has obvious implications for struggles for land in Israel/Palestine, the former Yugoslavia, Armenia/Azerbaijan/Turkey, Rwanda etc.

In essence, Russian nationalists have legitimized their claims to the post-deportation Crimea by arguing that the Crimean Tatars deportees are Mongol-era nomadic interlopers whose "removal" "back" to Asia eradicated a barbarian threat to Slavdom. Since the fall of the USSR, Crimean Tatar historians have de-bunked the myth that their people are "Mongols" by using unbiased Soviet archeology from the pre-deportation era. In the 1920s and 30s Soviet anthropologists, historians, and linguists definitively proved that the Crimean Tatars were predominantly made up of sedentary farmers.

As these scientists proved, the ethno-linguistic roots of the Crimean Tatars in the Crimea are traceable to the ancient Pontic Greeks, Scythians, Crimean Goths, and Medieval Black Sea Italians and Armenians. The vast majority of Crimean Tatars do not have a nomadic lifestyle, language, or physiognomy that resembles the Kazakhs who are the Turkic nomadic descendants of the Mongol Golden Horde (much less the true Mongols!). When the Crimean Tatars were later cleansed by Stalin under the spurious charges of "mass treason and collaboration with the Nazi invaders," this early example of objective Soviet science was replaced by Soviet propaganda, which depicted the Crimean Tatars as a horde of Mongol pillagers.

While Uehling is to be commended for having spent considerable time in the field with her subjects analyzing such political and historical issues, she does not seem to have an in depth knowledge of Central Asian culture or Turco-Tatar history. This is best demonstrated by such errors as her lengthy discussion of an (anti-Soviet!) Crimean Tatar newspaper *Azat Krym* (Free Crimea) which she mis-translates as “Red Crimea.” Presumably such errors come from Uehling’s use of Russian, the *lingua Sovietica* of the USSR, to interview her subjects. For those seeking to explore such topics as the Crimean Tatars’ history of conquest by the Ottomans and Russians, their migrations from Tsarist Russia to the collapsing Ottoman Empire, their experiences under the Soviets (including their ethnic cleansing and re-conceptualization of the Crimea as “Fatherland”), and their return to their romanticized “Zion” in 1990—from the Tatar perspective—my work on this issue offers more information. See also Alan Fisher’s classic *The Crimean Tatars* (Hoover Inst. Press, 1979), which first brought the relatively unknown case of the Crimean Tatars to the attention of Western scholars.

Where *Beyond Memory* offers original findings is in its anthropological discussions and in its collection of interviews with Crimean Tatar deportation survivors. Here Uehling comes into her own and in interview after interview carefully brings this people’s tragedy to life. Her work will have wide applications for those looking at the transgenerational transmission of a sense of grievance (as in the case of Hutus, Palestinians, Armenians, and Jews). It will also serve as an excellent case study of the ways in which “chosen traumas” (a concept first explored by Vamik Volkhan in his seminal *Life After Loss. The Lessons of Grief* (Scribner, 1993) can be used by ethnic entrepreneurs to politically mobilize victimized groups.

Uehling has an ability to weave these often tragic narratives together to give us an idea of how the Crimean Tatars memorialized their people’s tragedy and kept their people’s losses alive as an ethnic marker even as the Soviet state sought their assimilation. I was also pleased to note that Uehling did not fall into the trap of over-identifying with her subjects and on the contrary allows us to feel sympathy for the victims of Stalin’s crimes while she confines herself to the role of analyzing their responses. Such scholarly objectivity is hard to maintain when hearing horrific first-hand accounts of night raids on Tatar villages by the NKVD (KGB), of dead family members being thrown from the deportation trains by callous guards, and the horrors of re-adaptation and the fight for survival in unwelcoming places of exile in the deserts of Central Asia and wastes of Siberia.

Those who read Uehling’s powerful anthropological-interview sections on the ways in which the Crimean Tatars outwitted the KGB in exile, fought to survive, and eventually returned to their cherished homeland cannot help but identify with this long-suffering people’s struggle. And as Uehling brings to life the Tatars’ resettlement in their cherished “Zion” one cannot help but begin to root for them as they attempt to rebuild their shattered community in a hostile land that was Russified during their fifty-year absence.

The true value of Uehling's work is thus to be found in her four chapters dealing with life in the Crimean Tatar repatriate settlements. She records for posterity their struggles to survive and cope with the frustration of living in an idealized "Eden" that is lacking in jobs, riven with anti-Tatar discrimination, and defined by its primitive Tatar settlements that can only be described as "squatter camps." In final analysis one hopes that Uehling's work will help expose the largely unstudied case of the injustice concerning the Crimean Tatar exile and shed light on their ongoing struggle to rebuild their nation in a land it defines as its *anavatan* ("motherland"). It is also hoped that through the publication of works such as Uehling's, the Crimean Tatars will be included in future discussions of genocide and ethnic cleansing. For as several Crimean Tatars told me, "The dark lie behind Stalin's hidden deportation of their people will triumph unless the truth is told to the outside world."

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*Memory, Oblivion, and Jewish Culture in Latin America* edited by MARJORIE AGOSÍN. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005; xxii + 248 pp., index; paperbound, \$19.95.

Chilean writer, poet, and human rights activist Marjorie Agosín's edited collection *Memory, Oblivion, and Jewish Culture in Latin America* invites readers to understand what it "has meant to be Jewish in a Catholic society" (p. xv). The sections, written by historians, literary critics, translators, writers, sociologists, and anthropologists, present various responses to this question. Some articles offer autobiographical narratives about immigration, community life, and family history, while others provide historical and literary analysis of different moments in Jewish life in Latin America. Together, the articles highlight the centrality of the diasporic quality of Jewish identity, and the various creative responses of the Jews in an effort to find their own voice and space in societies where both subtle and overt discrimination has been constant.

Memory plays an important role in this collection, as contributors weave recollections, stories, and history to suggest the interconnection between these elements. Overall, however, this collection lacks unity. The articles are individually rich, but the reader wonders where to go with the material, or how to put it together. More troubling is the suggestion that Jewish life in Latin America was always (and mostly) defined by discrimination, as several of these sections deal with this topic in particular. Ranaan Rein, in his article "Nationalism, Education, and Identity," cleverly reminds us, however, "of the gap that existed between anti-Semitic public discourse and its actual influence on the daily lives of most Jews" (p. 163).

The collection is divided into five sections, "Sephardim in Our Memory," "Journeys," "The Paradox of Communities," "A Literature of Transformation,"