



1944

MAY 18

**THE DAY OF REMEMBRANCE
OF THE VICTIMS OF THE
CRIMEAN TATAR GENOCIDE**



Mission
Of The President Of Ukraine
In The Autonomous Republic Of Crimea



CRIMEA
PLATFORM



18 May — Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Deportation of the Crimean Tatar People

The Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea has prepared an information brief containing key details on the preconditions and course of the forced deportation of the Crimean Tatar people in 1944, its consequences, the legal qualification of the act as genocide, as well as the decades-long nonviolent struggle for return to their historical homeland. The document is intended for use in informational, analytical, and educational efforts, particularly within the framework of events commemorating 18 May.

Historical Context

On 18 May 1944, the Soviet totalitarian regime committed **one of the gravest crimes in its history — the forced mass deportation of the entire Crimean Tatar people from their historical homeland, Crimea.** Acting on Joseph Stalin's personal order, the Soviet authorities resolved to «completely cleanse» the peninsula of Crimean Tatars — an act of ethnic cleansing aimed at destroying the Crimean Tatars as an Indigenous people and national community, thereby enabling the full-scale colonization of the region. **The majority of the victims were women, children, and the elderly,** as thousands of Crimean Tatar men were serving on the front lines of the Second World War as part of the Red Army.

At dawn on 18 May, **a large-scale operation by the NKVD (KGB)** began simultaneously across Crimea. Armed officers stormed into homes, giving families only 10-20 minutes to gather their belongings before being forcibly expelled.

By 8 a.m., **90,000 Crimean Tatars had already been loaded into 25 freight trains.** By the end of 19 May, more than 165,000 people had been deported. On 20 May, Soviet authorities reported to Moscow that Crimea had been «completely cleansed.» In total, **47,885 families — 193,865 individuals — were deported, including more than 92,000 children under the age of 16.**

The main destinations of exile for the Crimean Tatars were in Central Asia, primarily the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (over 151,000 individuals) and the Kazakh SSR (4,286 individuals). Others were sent to remote regions of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, including the Mari ASSR and the Molotov, Sverdlovsk, Kemerovo, Gorky, Yaroslavl, and Ivanovo regions.





Deportees were transported in overcrowded cattle cars, **without access to food, clean water, or medical care.** The journey to these remote settlements typically lasted two to three weeks. During transportation alone, **an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 people died from thirst, disease, exhaustion, and the inhumane conditions.**

Upon arrival at the places of exile, Crimean Tatars faced forced labor, starvation, unsanitary conditions, widespread disease, and total social isolation. **They were resettled in specially designated, segregated areas known as «special settlements,»** which functioned effectively as **Soviet reservations.** These settlements were subject to strict surveillance: mandatory registration at commandants' offices, **prohibition from leaving the area,** and constant oversight by repressive state organs.

The status of «special settlers» **imposed lifelong discrimination, restricting basic rights** such as freedom of movement, access to education, healthcare, and employment in qualified professions. In Uzbekistan alone, according to official Soviet records, approximately 30,000 Crimean Tatars died within the first 18 months. **In some areas, mortality rates reached 60–70%.** According to the Crimean Tatar national movement, the actual death toll was likely even higher.

In 1948, the special settlement regime was further intensified. **Any attempt to leave the settlements could result in arrest, with repeated violations punishable by up to 20 years of hard labor.** In addition, nearly 6,000 individuals were sent directly to GULAG labor camps during the deportation process.

Crimean Tatar soldiers and officers of the Red Army were subjected to separate acts of repression. After the end of the Second World War, nearly 9,000 of them were forcibly deported to special settlements or labor camps alongside the rest of their people. **Their military achievements and personal heroism did not spare them.** Despite the fact that 21 Crimean Tatars were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union — some more than once, such as pilot Amet-Khan Sultan, who received it twice (in 1943 and 1945) — **they were still branded as «traitors» and subjected to the same repressions.**

Following the mass expulsion, **the Soviet regime began erasing every trace of Crimean Tatar presence in Crimea.** The Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Crimean ASSR) was dissolved and replaced with a regular administrative region. **Crimean Tatar place names were Russified,** mosques were destroyed or converted into utility buildings, and settlers from other Soviet republics were relocated to the homes of the deportees. The Crimean Tatar language, literature, historical documents, and cultural artifacts were systematically destroyed or replaced with Russian ones. **Even mentioning the deportation — known as Sürgünlik — was prohibited, and the term «Crimean Tatar» itself was nearly eliminated from public use.**

International Recognition of the Crimean Tatar Genocide

Official recognition of the 1944 deportation as an act of genocide of the Crimean Tatars is a critically important step toward establishing historical truth and preventing similar crimes in the future. By calling the events by their proper name — genocide — states and international organizations clearly condemn the crimes of the Soviet regime against the Crimean Tatar people, honor the memory of the victims, and express solidarity with those who suffered. This is not merely a matter of historical justice; under today's conditions, such recognition also serves as a condemnation of the Russian Federation's current policies in the occupied Crimea, which in many ways continue the legacy of destruction and displacement targeting the indigenous population.

On 12 November 2015, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine officially recognized the deportation of the Crimean Tatars as an act of genocide and designated 18 May as the Day of Remembrance of the victims of this crime. Ukraine condemned the policy of the Soviet totalitarian regime in accordance with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Each year on 18 May, Ukraine commemorates the victims at the state level: mourning ceremonies, memorial rallies, and educational events are held across the country. **In Kyiv and other cities, people light candles in the shape of the Crimean Peninsula and raise Crimean Tatar flags to show solidarity.**

Ukraine's recognition of the 1944 deportation as an act of genocide has served as a catalyst for similar decisions by other countries. **Parliaments in Latvia and Lithuania (2019), Canada (2022), as well as Poland, Estonia, and the Czech Republic (2024), have adopted resolutions** recognizing the Soviet regime's actions against the Crimean Tatar people as genocide. These documents also explicitly condemn the Russian Federation's ongoing repressive policies against Crimean Tatars in the context of the current occupation of Crimea. In particular, **the Polish Sejm firmly denounced both the crimes of 1944 and their modern-day continuations, while Estonian Riigikogu emphasized the continuity between the repressive policies of the Soviet Union and those of the Russian Federation.**

As a result, an emerging international consensus is taking shape around the classification of the Crimean Tatar tragedy as genocide. Ukraine continues to actively engage with governments and international organizations — including the United Nations, the European Parliament, and the Council of Europe — calling for a comprehensive legal and moral assessment of the events of 1944.



Revival and Return of the Crimean Tatar People after Deportation

Following the death of Joseph Stalin and the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Crimean Tatars were still denied the right to return to their homeland — Crimea. **In effect, their forced exile became indefinite.** During the late 1950s and early 1960s, a national movement emerged, advocating for the restoration of Crimean Tatars' rights and their return to their ancestral land. The movement employed peaceful methods: public appeals, large-scale petition campaigns, nonviolent protests, and unauthorized returns to Crimea despite the official ban. **It became one of the most extensive and longest-running human rights movements in the Soviet Union.** The movement reached a turning point in July 1987, when hundreds of Crimean Tatars staged a demonstration on Red Square in Moscow, **publicly demanding the right to return.** Under sustained civic pressure, **the Soviet government finally lifted the formal ban on Crimean Tatars residing in Crimea in November 1989.**

With this decision, **a mass return began, driven by grassroots organization.** By the late 1980s and especially in 1990–1991, thousands of families began their journey home. **The return was spontaneous and extremely difficult:** the state provided no housing or support. Many families had to live in tents, dugouts, or temporary shelters, building homes and infrastructure on their own. In response to bureaucratic resistance, particularly concerning land allocation, the community organized itself and founded around 300 new compact settlements throughout Crimea. Built through collective effort, these settlements became a powerful symbol of the people's return to their native land.

In 1991, the institutional representation of the Crimean Tatar people was restored. **On 26 June 1991, the historic Second Qurultay of the Crimean Tatar People was held in Simferopol, reviving the tradition of national self-governance that began in 1917.** The Qurultay proclaimed the restoration of the people's right to self-governance in Crimea and established the representative body — the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People. **The Mejlis became the legitimate voice of Crimean Tatars, working with Ukrainian state authorities and the international community on issues of repatriation, restitution of property rights, education, language, and cultural development.**

Upon returning home, the Crimean Tatar people actively engaged in reviving their culture, language, and religious life, despite significant initial challenges. In the early years of repatriation, the Crimean Tatar Drama Theatre resumed its work, **the folk ensemble Qırım was founded, and institutions such as the Ismail Hasprinskyi Library and the Museum of History and Culture of the Crimean Tatar People were established.** The media began to feature programming and publications in the Crimean Tatar language. Communities reopened mosques and reclaimed religious buildings that had been repurposed under Soviet rule. **Efforts also began to establish schools with instruction in the native language.**

Repressions by the Russian Federation in Occupied Crimea as a Continuation of Genocidal Policy

The current policy of the Russian Federation in occupied Crimea is a direct continuation of the genocidal practices initiated during the Soviet period. Following the occupation of the peninsula in 2014, the Russian occupation administration launched a systematic campaign of pressure, persecution, and displacement targeting the Crimean Tatar community — one of the most prominent centers of nonviolent resistance to the occupation. **From the very beginning, the actions of the occupation regime have aimed to suppress the identity, culture, political expression, and self-organization of Indigenous people of Ukraine in Crimea.**

Within the first years of occupation, **the activities of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People** — the legitimate representative body recognized by the international community — **were banned. In 2016, a Russian court declared the Mejlis an «extremist organization,» effectively depriving Crimean Tatars of the right to collective representation.** Peaceful assemblies, including commemorative events marking the anniversary of the 1944 deportation on 18 May, the use of Crimean Tatar symbols, and public remembrance of genocide victims were either banned or severely restricted. Prominent leaders, activists, and human rights defenders were forced to leave the peninsula, while others became targets of criminal prosecution, political pressure, and smear campaigns in the media.



Russian security forces in occupied Crimea carry out systematic **searches of Crimean Tatar homes, arrests on fabricated charges, torture, abuse, and enforced disappearances.** One of the key tools of repression is the so-called «Crimean Muslims case» — a set of prosecutions based on accusations of involvement in the organization Hizb ut-Tahrir. Dozens of community members — primarily Muslim activists — **have received lengthy sentences (up to 17–20 years) for alleged terrorism, without any evidence of involvement in violent acts.** Among the victims are civic journalists, human rights defenders, members of the Crimean Solidarity movement, and other pro-Ukrainian activists.

At the same time, the occupation administration pursues a deliberate policy of cultural erasure and forced assimilation. All independent Crimean Tatar media outlets, including the ATR channel, have been shut down. Opportunities to receive education in the Crimean Tatar language have been severely reduced, and **the content of historical narratives in schools has been systematically altered to reflect imperial Russian interpretations.** Traditional cultural events are banned, and the public use of the Crimean Tatar language, symbols, and religious practices is increasingly restricted.

All these repressive actions occur against the backdrop of demographic shifts: **thousands of Crimean Tatars are once again being forced to leave their homeland** due to an atmosphere of fear, continuous searches, political persecution, and compulsory military conscription. In parallel, **the Russian Federation is actively resettling its own citizens to the occupied peninsula.** According to the Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, this involves hundreds of thousands of people — a direct violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and an act that qualifies as a war crime.

This policy of «hybrid» deportation serves the same purpose as previous repressive campaigns: **to erase the Crimean Tatar presence in Crimea** and construct a false narrative of a «Russian» peninsula.

This experience resonates far beyond Ukraine's borders. **Nations and communities that have endured similar tragedies** — mass deportations, occupations, ethnic cleansing, or colonial subjugation — **understand the depth of the Crimean Tatar people's suffering.** Their solidarity with Ukraine and the Crimean Tatars stems from a shared history of struggle for freedom, dignity, and identity. **These states and societies are increasingly supporting international efforts to restore justice, ensure the de-occupation of Crimea,** and hold the Russian Federation accountable as an aggressor state that continues imperial and Soviet-era practices of eliminating communities seen as inconvenient or resistant.

How to Cover the Deportation of Crimean Tatars Without Echoing Russian Propaganda

When preparing materials for the commemoration of May 18 — the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Crimean Tatar Genocide — it is crucial to use accurate language and framing. This ensures the narrative upholds historical truth and justice without unintentionally echoing the rhetoric of Russian imperial propaganda.

- ▶ **Use the term «genocide».** Avoid softened or neutral expressions like «forced relocation» or «resettlement.» Make it clear that what happened in 1944 was a deliberate **attempt to destroy an entire people** — a textbook **act of genocide**. This terminology is supported by the Ukrainian Parliament and recognized by several national parliaments worldwide. Its usage is not only justified but necessary.
- ▶ **Focus not only on the tragedy but on resilience and revival.** Coverage of May 18 should not center exclusively on mourning. Highlight the strength of the Crimean Tatar people, who survived the trauma and rebuilt their national life. Emphasize decades of **peaceful resistance** in exile, the return to Crimea in the late 1980s, and the rebirth of self-governance institutions like the Qurultay and Mejlis. Share stories of national leaders — like Mustafa Dzhemilev, who spent 15 years in Soviet camps for defending the truth about the deportation. Show how the community restored its schools, culture, media, and civil society — turning suffering into a story of **strength and survival**.
- ▶ **Connect past and present.** Draw a clear line between 1944 and today. Remind audiences that **Russia’s occupation of Crimea** brought a renewed wave of repression against Crimean Tatars. Include concrete examples: the ban on the Mejlis, over 100 political prisoners from the Crimean Tatar community, the systematic crackdown on dissent, and the near-daily home raids. Note that even commemorating May 18 in Crimea today is prohibited.

We speak the truth about the crimes of the totalitarian regime and counter attempts to rewrite the history of Crimea. Only the de-occupation of Crimea, the restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty, and the guarantees of the rights of the Indigenous people can ensure that Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, and other citizens of Ukraine can live freely, develop, and create on their native land.

***If you have any further questions, please contact us at:
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