

Amid a thousand and one stars: the Crimean Tatar language

Bin bir yıldız arasında: Kırım Tatarcası

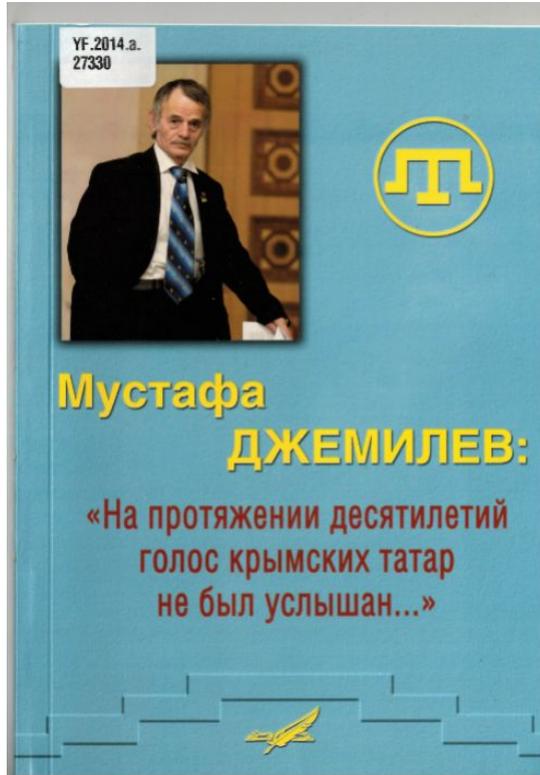
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Abstract

One of the most momentous historical events in Crimean Tatar history was when the Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Djemilev addressed his people in the Crimean Tatar language at the opening of the first Crimean Tatar Mejlis (Parliament) in 1991 after his return to Crimea. Although giving a speech in one's mother tongue might be considered as the most natural thing, in this case it proves the significance of preserving that mother tongue despite the Soviet Union's efforts to destroy the Crimean Tatar language. In 2009 Crimean Tatar was categorised as 'severely endangered' in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger.

Öz

Qırım tarihniñ eñ emiyetli tarihiy vaqialardan biri, Qırım yolbaşçı Mustafa Cemil 1991 yılda Qırımğa onıñ qaytuv soñ birinci Qırım Milliy Meclisniñ açılması vaqıtta Qırım tiliinde öz halqqa hitap etkende. İçolmağanda, ana tilinde nutuğı eñ añlaşılğan şey kibi saymaq mümkün, bu vaziyette Qırım tili yoq etmek Soviyet Birliğiniñ tırışuvğa baqmadan bu ana tiliniñ saqlavınıñ mühimligini köstere. 2009 yılda UNESCOniñ Dünya tehlikede olğan tilleriniñ Atlasında Qırım tili "ağır tehlikede olğan" kibi tanıldı.

Özet

Kırım Tatar tarihinin en önemli tarihi olaylarından biri, Kırım Tatar lideri Mustafa Abdülcemil Kırmıoğlu'nun (Djemilev), Kırım'a döndükten sonra 1991 yılında ilk Kırım Tatar Mejlisi'nin açılışında Kırım Tatar dilinde konuşmasıydı. Anadilde konuşma yapmak en doğal şey olarak düşünülse de, bu hadise, Sovyetler Birliği'nin Kırım Tatar dilini yok etme çabalarına rağmen bu anadili korumanın önemini kanıtlaması açısından büyük önem arz ediyor. 2009 yılında, Kırım Tatar dili, UNESCO Dünya Tehlike Altındaki Diller Atlası'nda "ciddi şekilde tehlike altında" olarak sınıflandırılmıştır.

(Cover of Mustafa Dzhemilev: "Na protiazhenii desiatiletiü golos krymskikh tatar ne byl uslyshan...", edited by G.Bekirova (Kyiv, 2014). YF.2014.a.27330)

The early history of the Crimean Tatars and the development of their language is naturally complex. The Mongols called themselves 'Tatars' and it was only after the death of Chingiz Khan that they were called 'Mongols'. Crimean Tatars are the descendants of Kipchak Turks who took a big part of the Mongol army, under the command of Batu Khan, grandson of Chingiz, to the doorstep of Europe. This western division of the Mongol Empire is called the Golden Horde; the Crimean Tatars belonging to this division settled in the Crimean Peninsula in the 12th century and consequently the Crimean Khanate was founded.

Crimean Tatar is linguistically a part of the Kipchak branch of the Turkic family. Edward Lazzerini points out that "a semi-nomadic eastern Kipchak people who settled eventually in the north-east of the peninsula, the Nogays enriched Tatar vocabulary with respect to natural objects, the concerns of daily life and certain forms of economic activity." He adds that these elements "were of limited though significant influence, affecting the lexicon primarily and providing the literary language with an unusual array of synonyms". As the Crimean Tatars are followers of Islam, Arabic and Persian served to broaden the Crimean Tatar language.

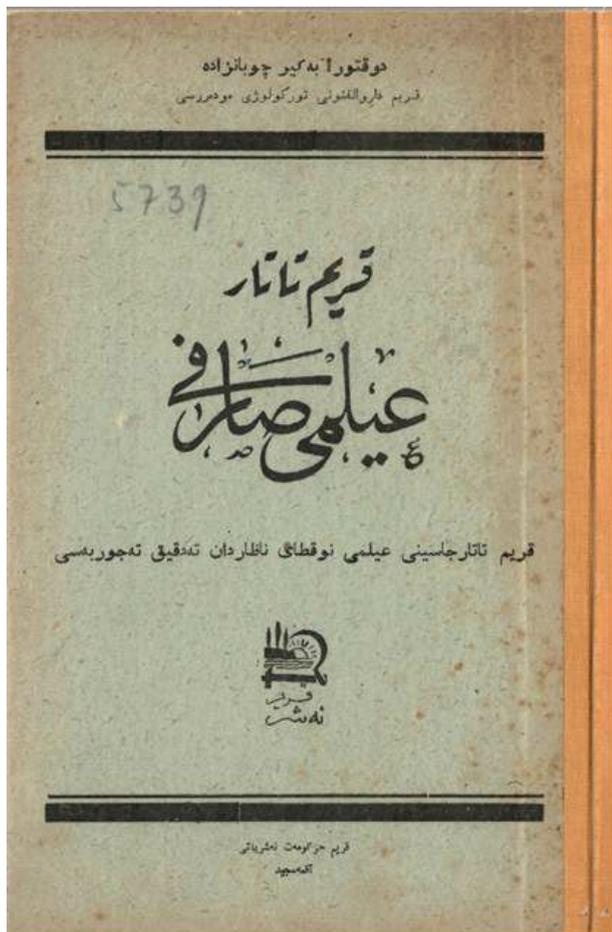
In the 19th century, Ismail Bey Gaspirali/Ismail Gasprinski realised the need for reform in education for the Turco-Muslim peoples of tsarist Russia, recognising the resolution of the language question as the first condition. Gaspirali wanted to create a pure Turkic lexicon of Crimean Tatar and simplify its syntax. Following these changes, he tried to modify the Arabic script by including vowel symbols and eliminating redundant letters as well as introducing punctuation. In 1883 Gaspirali, whose dream was "unity in thought, unity in language, unity in action", founded the newspaper *Tercuman/Perevodchik*, which lasted until 1918. The language Gaspirali used in *Tercuman* was simplified in form that it would be understood by Turkic readers not only in Crimea but in Ottoman lands, Central Asia,

and the Volga regions. Gaspirali was interested in one simple common literary language that would bring all the Turkic people in Russia together.



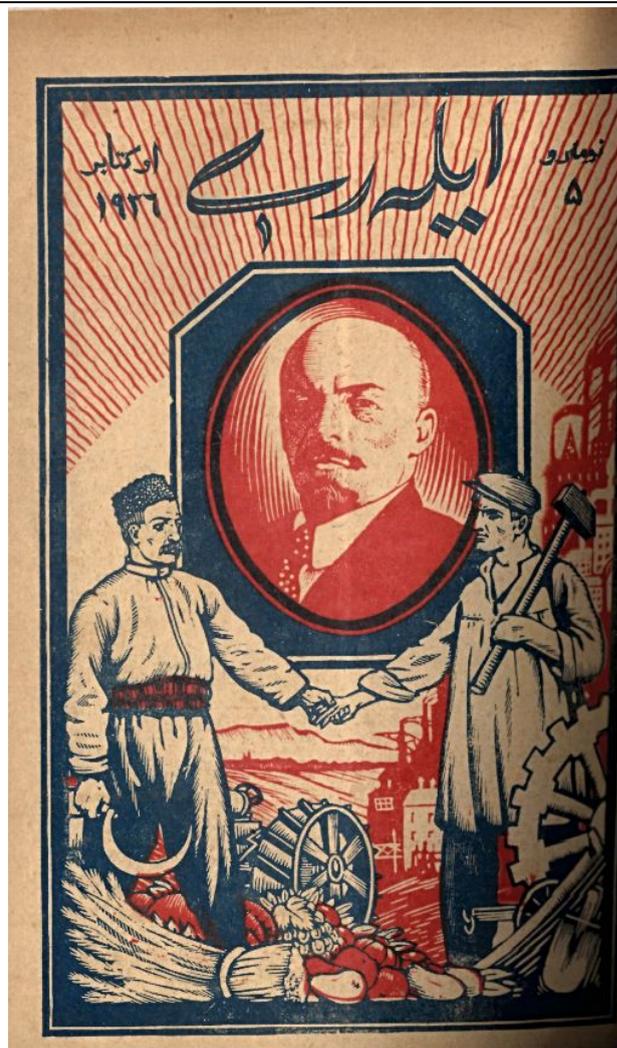
Crimean Tatars in traditional costumes from Th. de Pauly, Description ethnographique des Peuples de la Russie (St Petersburg, 1862). Tab.435.a.14

After October Revolution in 1917, Crimean Tatar's fate followed that of other minority languages in the USSR.



Cover of Bekir Choban-Zade. *Qırım Tatar ilmi sarfı* (Simferopol, 1925), a grammar of the Crimean Tatar language in Perso-Arabic script: 14499.s.84.

The new language policy of the Soviet Union replaced the Arabic script with a 31-letter Latin alphabet in 1929, only be replaced by Cyrillic as it was for all other nations in 1938. The changes of script have meant that not only the Crimean Tatars but the Central Asians and other nations lost the whole of their pre-revolutionary written culture as well as the first hand sources regarding the formative first decades of Soviet rule.



Cover of the journal *İleri: Ayda bir kere çıkar siyasi, ictimai, 'ilmi ve edebi jurnaldır* (Simferopol, 1926-[1927?]). 14499.tt26)

The Crimean Tatar people were deported on the orders of Stalin on 18 May 1944 to Central Asia, the Urals and Siberia where they were forced to live in 'special settlements' for more than a decade, stripped of all the rights they had enjoyed as Soviet citizens – including that of calling themselves Crimean Tatars. Schooling for the Crimean Tatars was either in Russian, or in the national language of the region where they had been settled. The national literature was destroyed and the Crimean Tatar language reduced to a pre-literate state. Esher Shemizade, Crimean Tatar poet, rightfully voiced what all the Crimean Tatars were feeling

“a nation can exist only under the condition that it has its own literary language.”

With the lift of the ban by the Soviet Authorities, the Crimean Tatars managed to publish their first newspaper Lenin Bayragi (‘The Banner of Lenin’) in Uzbekistan in 1957. It appeared three times a week, with an initial circulation of 23,000. It used to be four pages and only the last page gave a glimpse of the language, the meaning of words and explanations for preserving the Crimean Tatar language and teaching it to the younger generation. This newspaper was published until 1990, when the Crimean Tatars started to return home. At this time its title was changed to Yani Bunya (‘New World’) and publication moved to Simferopol in Crimea.



Recent acquisitions: Bi-lingual (Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian) anthologies of Crimean Tatar poetry and prose: *Molytva lastivok: antolohia kryms'kotatars'koi prozy XIV-XX st.* (Kyiv, 2005-2006) ZF.9.a.6651 and *Kuneshten bir parcha = Okrushyna sontsia* (Kyiv, 2003). YF.2006.a.11779)

The Crimean Tatars regard their native language as a treasure worth preserving for its own sake. The poet Remzi Burnish captured this essence in his poem ‘Ana tilim’ (‘My Mother Tongue’):

*Each nation has its own tongue
in which lovers confide,
To it, that tongue is sweeter than honey,
It will never be forgotten.
My nation is kinsmen, too.
Has its own tongue that sings,
Amid a thousand and one stars
This tongue, in my cradle,
Raised me with its lullaby,
It pulled forward from my youth
Holding me by the hand...*

(translated by Edward Allworth with S Ahmet Kirimca)

Further reading:

Gul'nara Bekirova, *Piv stolittia oporu: kryms'ki tatar vid vyhnannia do povernennia (1941-1991 roky): narys politychnoi istorii* (Half century of resistance: Crimean Tatars from deportation to return (1941-1991)) (Kyiv, 2017). YF.2017.a.20021

Brian Glyn Williams, *The Crimean Tatars: from Soviet genocide to Putin's conquest* (London, 2015). YC.2017.a.6553

V.E.Vozgrin, *Istoriia krymskikh tatar. Ocherki etnicheskoï istorii korennoĝo naroda Kryma v chetyrekh tomakh.* (Simferopol', 2014). YF.2015.a.3442

Mehmet Maksudoglu, *Kırım Türkleri* (Istanbul, 2009)

E Allworth (ed), *The Tatars of Crimea: return to the homeland: studies and documents* (Durham N.C., 1998) 98/11840

Edward Lazzarini, ‘Crimean Tatar: the Fate of a Severed Tongue’ in: *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages: their past, present and future*, edited by Isabelle T. Kreindler. *Contributions to the Sociology of Language*; 40 (Berlin, 1985) X.0900/323(40) pp. 109-124

M. Ülküsal, 'Colonialism and the Soviet Russia' Emel İki Aylık Kültür Dergisi (EMEL JOURNAL) issue 2, Cilt 1, 1961 14498.c.20

R. H. Hanoglu "Kırım Edebiyatı" Emel İki Aylık Kültür Dergisi (EMEL JOURNAL) issue 13, İstanbul, 1962 14498.c.20

Şevki Bektorë , Tatarça sarf, nahiv: Tatar oku işleri, ilmi heyeti tarafından tasdik boldu (Sevastopol, 1923). ITA.1986.a.1063