
The Establishment of Bolshevik Power in the Crimea and the Construction of a Multinational Soviet State: Organisation, Justification, Uncertainties

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Abstract

The autonomous Soviet republic of the Crimea was established in October 1921 as part of the Russian Federative Republic. A few months later came the announcement that the new republic was to be 'tatarised', in accordance with a policy which was already being implemented in other territories but which was not systematised, in the form of 'indigenisation', until 1923. This article examines how the Bolsheviks imposed their authority in the Crimea. It analyses the dealings and negotiations among the principal actors in both Moscow and the Crimea, and traces the establishment of rules and agreements. It also examines the uncertainties and anxieties that troubled the Crimean Communist Party when the enthusiasm of some Crimean communists for indigenisation rapidly led to suspicions of nationalism. This article, written from the periphery, throws light on the construction of a multinational Soviet state by focusing on the actors and their actions.

This article sets out to describe how the Bolsheviks established their authority in the Crimea in the early 1920s. The Crimean peninsula in southern Russia was forcibly incorporated into the Russian empire at the end of the eighteenth century, after the submission of the Giray Khanate.¹ A quarter of the population was Tatar at the time.

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¹ Alan W. Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). At this time the Tatars comprised about a quarter of the population (186,000). More than half the population of the Crimea consisted of Russians and Ukrainians (371,000); slightly less than a quarter (138,245) was made up of Jews, Germans, Greeks, Armenians and Bulgars. *Statistiko-ekonomicheskii atlas Kryma*, vol. 1 (Simferopol: Izdanie krymstatupravleniia i krymizadata, 1922), pp. 5–7.

During the civil war the peninsula was conquered twice by the Red Army: first in January 1918, when the Reds swept aside the inadequate forces of the new-born Tatar republic, and then in April 1918, when the Red Army expelled from the peninsula the German troops who had previously forced them into retreat. Although the famous Nationalities Decree, issued shortly after the Revolution, had acknowledged the equality of all Russia's peoples, both Bolshevik governments more or less ignored the demands of non-Russian activists – even when they refrained from using violence against them.

In the autumn of 1919 the Crimea was overrun by White troops under Anton Denikin, and the Bolsheviks made a pact with the *Milli Firka* ('National Party' in Tatar) which had been founded in July to promote Crimean Tatar sovereignty. Several founder members, including Veli Ibrahimov, subsequently joined the Bolsheviks. After the definitive conquest of the peninsula by the Red Army in the autumn of 1920, they successfully demanded the proclamation of an autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the Crimea and were soon appointed to leading positions in the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) and the Central Executive Committee (TsIK). The Crimean Tatars' demands were met because they were supported by the Muslim members of the People's Commissariat of Nationalities (Narkomnats), who were among the most influential representatives of the Volga Tatars. There was a long history of political understanding between the Crimean and Volga Tatars: it had been particularly important during the 1905 revolution, when they had contemplated setting up a Muslim party.²

Soviet power in the Crimea, as in other peripheral areas, could not be established without the support of local advocates, especially Tatars, who in return demanded recognition of the importance of the 'national question' and more particularly the 'Tatar question'.³ But how did they fit into the structure of Bolshevik institutions? How far did their demands reach the ears of the party leaders in Moscow, and how did the latter respond? What follows will focus on the principal actors, their dealings and negotiations, and the ensuing rules and agreements.⁴ However, the arrangements that were made, and their various justifications, aroused a degree of anxiety that led to a first wave of reprisals against 'national' communists. In other words, action taken to ensure stability actually generated indiscipline, or what party officials interpreted as indiscipline, which could only be corrected by repression.

² On relations among Russian Muslims see I. D. Kuznetsov, ed., *Natsional'nye dvizheniia v period revoliutsii v Rossii (Sbornik dokumentov iz arkhiva byv. Departmanta politicii)* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe gosizdat, 1935); Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemerrier-Quellejey, *L'Islam en Union soviétique* (Paris: Payot, 1968), pp. 39–57; R. M. Sharipova, 'Tatarskie reformatory mezhdru dvumia revoliutsiiami (1905–1917)', in G. Sevost'ianov, ed., *Tragediia velikoi derzhavy: Natsional'nyi vopros i raspad Sovetskogo Soiuzna* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Sotsial'no-politicheskaiia mysl'", 2005), pp. 68–77.

³ *Krasnyi Krym*, 7 Nov. 1921.

⁴ My approach is largely that of 'pragmatic' sociology. For a short account of this see Thomas Bénatouïl, 'Critique et pragmatique en sociologie: Quelques principes de lecture', *Annales HSS*, 2 (1999), pp. 281–317. On negotiation see also Anselm Strauss: 'Négociations: Introduction à la question', in Isabelle Baszanger, ed., *La Trame de la négociation: Sociologie qualitative et interactionnisme* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), pp. 245–68.

By studying these developments from a socio-historic perspective we may be able to follow, from the margin, the construction of the Soviet state and its mechanisms of domination: partly by focusing on specific situations or moments in time, partly by avoiding an over-emphasised and thus reductive opposition between centre and periphery. In other words, this is a case study in the spirit of recent historical writings that have challenged the basic assumption that Moscow was a 'nation breaker'.⁵ Since the demise of the Soviet Union, when its archives were opened to researchers, the focus of interest has shifted towards Bolshevik 'ethnophilia' and the question of how interaction with local interlocutors influenced the (re)definition of certain Bolshevik policies.⁶ There has not, however, been much inclination to challenge the idea that this collaboration was based on a misunderstanding that had severe long-term consequences for the elites who espoused it.⁷ This article will argue that the 'national compromise' did in fact meet the needs of both sides. Its subsequent reworkings were due less to an initial misunderstanding than to subsequent uncertainties and Bolshevik reactions to them.

The Crimean Party, the national departments and the Tatars

As the Red Army re-entered the Crimea for the third time, the Party Central Committee (CC) enacted one of its first pro-minority measures by setting up Armenian, Jewish and Muslim departments under the aegis of the Crimean Party's regional committee (Obkom). This was not a new initiative: the party had created

⁵ The idea that the Soviet Union was anti-national was advanced by Richard Pipes in his groundbreaking study *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954). It was taken up by numerous students of Soviet history up to the end of the 1980s. See esp. Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Le Grand défi: Bolcheviks et nations, 1917–1930* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987); Bogdan Nahaylo and Viktor Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion: A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990); Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy Toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

⁶ Yuri Slezkine, 'The USSR as a Communal Apartment or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', *Slavic Review*, 53 (1994), pp. 414–52; Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–1923* (New York: Palgrave, 1999); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001); Adrienne L. Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (London: Cornell University Press, 2005); Juliette Cadiot, *Le Laboratoire impérial: Russie-URSS, 1870–1940* (Paris: CNRS Édition, 2007); Juliette Cadiot, Dominique Arel and Larissa Zakharova, *Cacophonies d'empire: Le gouvernement des langues dans l'Empire russe et en Union soviétique* (Paris: CNRS Édition, 2010).

⁷ The idea that there was a misunderstanding with the Muslim elites was advanced by, among others, Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *L'Islam en Union soviétique*, pp. 39–57. Recent work on alliances between various minorities and the Bolsheviks have focused on the civil war. See, e.g., Adeb Khalid, 'Nationalizing the Revolution in Central Asia: The Transformation of Jadidism, 1917–1920', in Ronald G. Suny and Terry Martin, eds, *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 145–62; Daniel E. Schafer, 'Local Politics and the Birth of the Republic of Bashkortostan, 1919–1920', in *ibid.*, pp. 165–90.

a Muslim department in the spring of 1919.⁸ The creation of national sections reflected a practice imposed by Lenin, who, responding to a suggestion by Semen Dimanshtein of the Nationalities Commissariat, had set up a Jewish section within the Russian Communist Party.⁹ These sections were intended to attract local elites and induct 'national' Bolsheviks. The establishment of national departments in the Crimean peninsula was viewed with envious eyes by other minorities, who demanded departments of their own. Germans got their section in December 1920 and Estonians in August 1921, but requests from Turks and Greeks were turned down because there were too few of them.¹⁰ In other words, the granting of departments was prefaced by negotiations whose results depended as much on demography as on symbolism or power relations; they might create new entry points for political representation, but at the same time they could shape and re-define it.

Before long it was the Muslim department that had the largest staff, numbering about twenty, with varied backgrounds. The only one to hold an additional office in the party was Osman Deren-Aierly of the Obkom, who had joined the party in 1918 and had previous experience in the role of editor. Several others were members of the revolutionary committee, either as leaders or as local representatives. All but six had previously held office, either in the Crimea or in Moscow.¹¹ In fact, the department constituted the mobile nodes in a network intended to encompass the entire population. They were held together more by their experience and legitimacy in the national context than by political training, which was necessary for those who hoped to gain an important office, but by no means obligatory. Like many revolutionaries, they had acquired their leadership and administrative skills as members of underground movements under the Tsars, and subsequently through long years of warfare. In the first days of 1921, the Muslim department was re-named the 'Tatar department' (Tatbiuro). Its then leader was Ismail Kerimovitch, alias Firdevs, who was one of the first Crimean Tatars to embrace Bolshevism, having joined the party in 1917.

The national departments spread their tentacles throughout the Crimea via the district committees.¹² Indeed, the entire party apparatus, at local level, was structured along national lines. Sections were provided even for ethnic groups that had been refused a bureau at Obkom level. This could take some time, however, as in Alupka, which was still without a Tatar section in early July 1921.¹³ To co-ordinate action across the sections, a sub-department for national minorities was set up, including representatives of leading party and state authorities. The Obkom, eager to win over local populations, considered that it was only because of 'ignorance of national

⁸ V. M. Broshevan and A. A. Formantchuk, *Krymskaia respublika: god 1921-i* (Simferopol: Tavriia, 1992), pp. 38, 65.

⁹ Carrère d'Encausse, *Le Grand Défi*, pp. 189–93.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

¹¹ Russian State Archives for Political and Social History (RGASPI), 17/12/275/9; State Archives of the Autonomous Republic of the Crimea (GAARK), 1/1/43/28.

¹² RGASPI, 17/13/502/169; Broshevan and Formantchuk, *Krymskaia respublika*, p. 41.

¹³ RGASPI, 17/13/508/192.

languages on the part of employees in the departments for national minorities' that it was necessary to 'set up this apparatus in order to direct agitation and propaganda in national languages'. Local committees were also asked to set up sub-departments for national minorities, and this was done in Kertsh, Sebastopol and Eupatoria.¹⁴

Obkom's national department comprised eight branches which bore witness to the scope and diversity of their functions. To keep a closer eye on local sections, the staff of the German and Armenian offices was increased to seventeen, and that of the Tatar department to forty-seven.¹⁵ The latter was reorganised in June and again in August; it included both Firdevs and Ibraimov.¹⁶ The intention was, apparently, to improve efficiency; as agit-prop declared, 'the bulk of the work for national minorities relates to Tatars and Germans . . . action among other minorities cannot be strengthened for lack of resources'.¹⁷ Thus political economy bolstered the pre-eminence of the Tatbiuro over the other departments. Moreover, its spokesmen had an excellent channel for conveying their opinions and demands to the party hierarchy, particularly as Deren-Aierly was also a member of the Obkom.

Collaboration with Tatar activists outside the party

The Bolsheviks permitted no political representation for minorities outside the Obkom's national department. None of the parties that had survived the civil war was to be allowed to continue. The leaders of *Milli Firka* tried hard to prolong their agreement with the Bolsheviks, arguing that there was no fundamental disagreement between the two movements and that *Milli Firka's* officials could be very helpful in the conduct of everyday business.¹⁸ But *Milli Firka's* request for legalisation was refused and the party was proscribed.¹⁹ Nonetheless the Tatbiuro thought it necessary to 'exploit honest brain workers as a technical force',²⁰ principally in education.²¹ Therefore Bekir Choban-Zade, an academic linguist and leading official in *Milli Firka* before it was banned, was put in charge of the Tatar section of the national education service.²² Using non-Bolshevik activists was a convenient way to offset the shortage of communist Tatars while fostering national integrity as ordered by the party leadership. It meant compromising Soviet orthodoxy in order to ensure the success of the Communist blueprint for the Crimea.

¹⁴ Broshevan and Formantchuk, *Krymskaia respublika*, pp. 41–3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 44–5.

¹⁶ RGASPI, 17/13/499/25, 59.

¹⁷ RGASPI, 17/13/504/87.

¹⁸ M. N. Guboglo and S. M. Tchervonnaia, *Krymskotatarskoe natsional'noe dvizhenie*, vol. 2 (Moscow: TsIMO, 1992), no. 4, pp. 35–6.

¹⁹ RGASPI, 17/12/275/10; *Revolutsiia i natsional'nosti*, no. 1, 1930.

²⁰ RGASPI, 17/12/275/49, 583/1/115/17v.

²¹ GAARK, 1/1/102/5.

²² State Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF), 1318/25/3/13v.

This arrangement, which was to some extent in line with *Milli Firka's* own ideas, also echoed those of Mirza Sultan-Galiev, whom Firdevs had met in Moscow.²³ Sultan-Galiev was a Volga Tatar and leading Muslim Bolshevik with a position in the Narkomnats. He believed that the situation in remoter parts of the country was not conducive to outright social and national revolution: for the time being, the priority should be to stimulate national, rather than class, consciousness. Socialism must be attained progressively and in stages. The first stage must be to encourage local cadres who were capable of leading their communities in the right direction; the second stage would not be reached until Muslim proletariats were ready to succeed the reformers. This postponement of the class struggle was legitimate because the whole of Muslim society was suffering oppression: for Sultan-Galiev, 'Muslim peoples are proletarian peoples'. Consequently, national movements in Muslim countries were, to all intents and purposes, socialist revolutions.²⁴

Sultan-Galiev was in the Crimea from 13 February to 29 March 1921. He was given a prominent position in the Tatbiuro and was elected as its representative at the party's general conference, as an individual whose views resembled the electors' own and who could act both as a link with Moscow and as a shield against the central authorities.²⁵ Thus Moscow's desire to exploit the old relations between Kazan and the Crimea mutated into a Tatar complicity based on a mutual priority: national emancipation, which the Tatbiuro had just publicly sanctioned. Its newspaper, *En'i Dun'ia* (Tatar for 'New World'), upheld the 'principle of national power' against 'the power of class', asserting that the Soviet regime 'cannot properly apply to the mass of nomad Muslims who have scarcely yet entered the age of mercantile capitalism'. Moscow's role should be to help them 'pass through the normal stages of economic development and not push them into forms of government which they can neither understand nor assimilate'.²⁶

In order to impart a national colouring to Soviet power, the Tatbiuro, now led by Zeinul Bulushev (Sultan-Galiev's lieutenant, and successor when he left the Crimea), called for 'the highest possible degree of tatarisation [*tatarizatsiia*] in the apparatus of national education, the departments of land management, health and administration, and the Presidium'.²⁷ Striving to increase the Tatar presence in government, the Tatbiuro reinforced its collaboration with non-Bolshevik activists, organising (with Moscow's approval) a conference of non-party Tatars.²⁸ It opened on 23 July 1921 at Simferopol, with a presidium of five communists, five non-party Tatars and two delegates from the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK); it elected

²³ RGASPI, 613/4/27/130.

²⁴ Bennigsen and Lemerrier-Quellejay, *L'Islam en Union soviétique*, pp. 120–8; R. G. Landa, 'Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev', *Voprosi istorii*, 8 (1999), pp. 53–70; Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, pp. 228–38.

²⁵ GAARK, 1/1/102/12.

²⁶ Quoted in A. K. Botchagov, *Milli Firka: natsional'no-burzhuaznaia kontrrevoliutsiia v Krymu* (Simferopol: Krymgosizdat, 1932), pp. 83–4.

²⁷ GAARK, 1/1/102/32.

²⁸ RGASPI, 613/4/27/129.

two Revolutionary Committee (Revkom) representatives as honorary members.²⁹ Almost all the non-party representatives were former leaders of *Milli Firka* and were involved in the government of the Crimea, with ambitious plans for the formation of an autonomous socialist republic and the shaping of agricultural, educational and health policies.³⁰

Now that *Milli Firka* had been banned, the conference was tantamount to an open admission that the Bolsheviks were working hand in glove with non-party activists. Crimean communists saw this as a way of infiltrating the government. Moscow, however, saw the collaboration as an opportunity to exploit the Tatar elites, reported to be very influential among the people.³¹ For both, it bore witness to the fact that Soviet domination over the Crimea was still very insecure. But the fact that the conference happened at all was attributable to the activism of the Nationalities Commissariat and the Tatbiuro – and to a network of personal relationships which brought together Sultan-Galiev, Bulushev and Firdevs and increased the complexity of relations between Simferopol and Moscow. In these circumstances the Kremlin was not entirely in control of a drama being played out by bold actors who used their rank to pursue their own programme. Nonetheless the Kremlin was still the focus of decision-making; it set its seal on actions that favoured its short-term interests.

Creating a political structure for the Crimea: Disagreements and negotiations

Through the months that followed the conquest of the Crimea, the Bolsheviks strove to consolidate their authority in the peninsula. They suppressed opposition while courting the Tatar elite via the Tatbiuro. But they could not decide what political structure should be imposed on the Crimea: should it be a workers' commune like Karelia, an autonomous territory like Mari, Kalmuk or Votyak, or an autonomous republic like Bashkiria? The highest levels of the party seemed inclined to prefer an autonomous territory,³² but the Tatbiuro rejected this and on 14 April put in a request to the Nationalities Council of the VTsIK for a territorial republic where the Tatars would have the upper hand.³³ Moscow was somewhat taken aback by this. After receiving Sultan-Galiev's report on the national problem in the Crimea, which denounced the excesses of local officials, the Narkomnats Collegium decided on 25 April to grant the Crimea autonomy within the RSFSR. A few days later, however, the Politburo decreed that it should be an 'autonomous territory'.³⁴ On 12 May, the Presidium of the VTsIK called for the proclamation of the 'autonomous republic

²⁹ *Krasnyi Krym*, 28 July 1921.

³⁰ RGASPI, 17/13/499/76; V. P. Kozlov, ed., *Protokoly rukovodiashtshikh organov narodnogo komissariata po delam natsional'nostei RSFSR, 1918–1924 gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), n. 146, 240.

³¹ RGASPI, 17/13/504/92.

³² Broshevan and Formantchuk, *Krymskaia respublika*, p. 9.

³³ GAARK, 1/1/102/32.

³⁴ Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, p. 51.

of the Crimea' and for a plenipotentiary commission to resolve conflicts.³⁵ The CC further amended these resolutions on 18 May.³⁶

Hence the status of the Crimea was shaped as much by competition within the Crimean Party as by negotiations among the central authorities. The promulgation of the republic was largely symbolic, reflecting the interest being taken in national questions. The CC's resolution reached the rulers of the Crimea via a telegram from Party Secretary Vyacheslav Molotov, who invited them to 'send an authorised representative to Moscow to collaborate with the Nationalities Commissariat on draft regulations for the autonomous republic of the Crimea'. The Obkom sent three representatives to Moscow; in June the VTsIK's plenipotentiary commission arrived in the Crimea with the twofold aim of scrutinising proposed laws and the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), and investigating the condition of the Muslim peasantry.³⁷ Tatarisation was not on the commission's agenda, as it had to accommodate differences of opinion in the Obkom as to what form autonomy should take: there was 'no single opinion on this question and it [was] necessary to reconcile two differing viewpoints'.³⁸ The fault line was a national one: the most vocal opponents mostly came from outside the Crimea. They would probably work surreptitiously so as to 'delay the implementation of this decision [i.e. the CC's ruling of 18 May]'.³⁹

Lenin in Moscow was closely monitoring what seemed to him a confused sequence of events.⁴⁰ Perhaps he feared that the situation would escalate as it had in the Caucasus, where there were serious tensions between the Caucasian bureau, which was pressing for a Trans-Caucasian Federation, and the Georgian communists, who were demanding autonomy.⁴¹ Despite the friction in the Crimea, the Obkom managed to draft a constitution for the republic which was approved on 24 August. The territory was to remain under Revkom control pending the summoning of a constituent congress and the election of a Central Executive Committee. Tatar was recognised as the state language on an equal level with Russian.⁴² There was, however, no mention of the tatarisation demanded by non-party activists, the assumption being that it would happen automatically once the Crimea had become an autonomous republic and the Tatars had been acknowledged as indigenous, with a high status accorded to their language. Since measures to promote tatarisation had already been taken, there was no need to include them in the constitution, the text of which was approved by the VTsIK on 8 October (about ten days after the dissolution of the Plenipotentiary Commission for Crimean Affairs). In point of fact, indigenisation was never written into any Soviet constitution.

³⁵ GARE, 1235/96/736/5.

³⁶ Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, p. 51.

³⁷ Broshevan and Formantchuk, *Krymskaia respublika*, pp. 13–15.

³⁸ *Krasnyi Krym*, 18 June 1921.

³⁹ RGASPI, 17/13/502/139–40.

⁴⁰ Broshevan and Formantchuk, *Krymskaia respublika*, pp. 16–17.

⁴¹ Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, pp. 189–97.

⁴² *Krasnyi Krym*, 31 Aug. 1921.

On 18 October the Crimea was proclaimed as an autonomous republic within the RSFSR. The proclamation was intended to 'give the fullest possible sanction to the exercise of autonomous rights and initiatives conducive to the economic and cultural renewal of the indigenous masses'.⁴³ The republic was modelled on Bashkiria as restructured by the VTsIK in May 1920, which had become the blueprint for other autonomous republics.⁴⁴ The constituent assembly adopted the constitution and elected fifty representatives to the TsIK, of whom eighteen were Tatars. *Krasnyi Krym* commented approvingly that the elections

gave rise to no disputes. All the delegates, to the last man, voted for the list [put to them by the Communist group]. There was no argument – indeed, at this juncture there could be no argument – about the number of Tatars and Russians in the governing body of the Crimean Republic.

The Congress had simply 'expressed the will of the proletarian masses of all nationalities living in the Crimea'.⁴⁵ At the first sitting of the TsIK, Yuri Gaven, a Lithuanian, was elected president. Sahib-Garei Said-Galiev, a Volga Tatar brought in from Tatarstan, was appointed head of the Sovnarkom. Tatars headed three government commissariats: Agriculture, Health, and the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (RKI) whose task was to deal with hitches in the administration of the republic.⁴⁶

It appears, then, that the Tatars occupied an equivocal position in one of the four territorial republics of the RSFSR (Crimea, Turkestan, Dagestan and the Mountain Republic). Tatars were excluded from almost all decision-making posts, but they headed a number of ministries and their language was recognised. This ambiguity betrayed a mistrust arising from the very historical antecedents which had supposedly been rejected. In August, for example, the Obkom had set up a committee to monitor the recognition of Tatar as a state language.⁴⁷ Now the TsIK ordered the constitution of a college to tatarise Crimean republican institutions. On 24 November it had four members, including Firdevs and Gaven.⁴⁸ A preliminary set of measures was tabled on 11 December, revised, converted to a decree on 10 February 1922 and published a few days later in the party's official journal.⁴⁹ This journal required all administrative documents, laws and supporting information to be in Tatar. To ensure this, translators and trainees (*praktikanty*) were to be introduced at every level in the state, and the administrative authorities were to be suitably equipped.⁵⁰ This order overturned the Tsarist social hierarchy and elevated the Tatars above the other Crimean minorities;

⁴³ *Zhizn' Natsional'nostei*, 25 Oct. 1921.

⁴⁴ Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, p. 51.

⁴⁵ *Krasnyi Krym*, 15 Nov. 1921. On the composition of the TsIK in autumn 1922 see RGASPI, 17/14/391/53.

⁴⁶ GAARK, 652/1/5/1; GARF, 1318/13/1/3.

⁴⁷ RGASPI, 17/11/59/153.

⁴⁸ GARF, 1318/13/13/9.

⁴⁹ RGASPI, 17/14/391/60; GAARK, 663/1/11/1; GARF, 1318/13/13/18.

⁵⁰ *Krasnyi Krym*, 14 Feb. 1921; V. N. Durdenevski, *Ravnopravníe iazykov v sovetskom stroe* (Moscow: 1927), pp. 186–7. The choice of language was never actually discussed or debated. Gaspirali's version of Tatar won general acceptance and was adopted by default.

it went some way towards satisfying the demands of Tatar spokesmen. Its impact was functional as well as moral.

Criticism and legitimisation

The institution and subsequent tatarisation of the Crimean Republic was a response to Tatar complaints that their community had been excluded from Crimean politics. It was, they believed, because of this exclusion that actions and decisions in the Crimea had ‘always been systematically inimical to the interests of the local population’.⁵¹ The October 1921 proclamation and the February 1922 decree did not just happen; they were the fruit of discussion and negotiation. These decisions were inspired by a perceived need to correct history in the interests of the principle of justice. That principle could subsequently be invoked to justify fresh demands, or to denounce anything which did not fit, or had ceased to fit, with the agreements already made.

The demands were based on four principal ideas. First, the ‘rootedness’ or ‘indigeneness’ (*korennost’*) and uniqueness of the Crimean Tatars, seen as a population with their own way of life (*byt*), and with a glorious past in the form of the Khanate, which was presented as the symbol of the Tatar nation and of its antiquity. Second, the harassment and expulsions inflicted on the Tatars by the Tsarist regime: after the fall of the Khanate they had been ‘trapped between warring nations’. The Tatars were not the only people in the Crimea, but they had suffered more than any others before the Revolution. This justified the proclamation of a republic, because it was ‘the best form of government for the Crimea’.⁵² Under a republic, social peace could be established and the Tatars could be brought into a relationship with Soviet power which embodied the ‘distinction between Soviet policies and the colonial attitude of the Tsars’.⁵³ This invocation of past oppression underscored Bolshevik claims (affirmed in the ‘declaration of the peoples of Russia’ and in appeals to ‘all workers in Russia and the East’) to be the guarantors of equality and sovereignty for national minorities.

It was because of this oppression that the Tatars were ‘the most backward [of people], uncivilised and incapable of understanding the new way of life, which requires a degree of economic and cultural sophistication’. Hence the third idea was that the Tatars, like other backward peoples, were failing to advance as fast as the Russians: ‘Freed from the chains of capitalism and left to themselves, they will always lag behind and will never make a new life for themselves.’ The Soviets had fully realised that ‘if oppressed peoples are to be delivered from capitalism, they must be given the right of self-determination, their language must be made official in the state, they must be freed from economic servitude and their land must be restored to them’.⁵⁴ This could be used to justify any or all prerogatives granted to the Crimean

⁵¹ GARE, 7523/101/640/16–19.

⁵² RGASPI, 17/12/277/120; *Krasnyi Krym*, 29 April 1921.

⁵³ *Krasnyi Krym*, 29 April 1921.

⁵⁴ *Krasnyi Krym*, 24 July 1921.

Tatars: they were backward, and the Bolsheviks had enshrined this backwardness at the heart of their nationality policy.⁵⁵ At the Tenth Party Congress, which launched the NEP, Stalin announced that the party was committed to helping peoples on the periphery to attach themselves securely to Russia by giving them the necessary structures of autonomy and 'statehood'.⁵⁶ With reference to the Crimea, where up to 40% of the rural population was Tatar, Lenin and Mikhail Kalinin declared that the republic's first priority ought to be to improve the lot of the peasants and settle the agricultural question.⁵⁷ That was the best way to ensure loyalty to the Soviet state and to socialism.

The fourth, broader idea was that recognising the Crimea as a republic and respecting its national rights would assist the export of revolution, since 'the Crimea was a very important element in international politics as regards relations between Turkey and Russia', since the Crimea 'shares ethnographic elements with countries in the Near East and the Balkans, as well as with the peripheral Volga and eastern regions of Russia itself'.⁵⁸ The links between the Crimea and Turkey were expressed through a daily interchange of newspapers and letters which had an undeniable impact on the course of the Turkish revolution.⁵⁹ The Soviets thought they could use the Crimea to 'get closer to the revolutionary movement in the East', being encouraged in this notion by the enthusiasm aroused by Kemal's revolt, which the Russians saw as an extension of their own October revolution and interpreted as preliminary to a revolt that might sweep through the entire Muslim world.⁶⁰ In March 1921, Stalin described Turkey as the standard-bearer of the oriental revolution, pending the signature of a treaty of friendship between Moscow and Ankara.⁶¹ Soviet messianism was to prove more effective than Tsarist imperialism, offering an alternative to military conquest. It would become a strategic mechanism, of which the Crimea could become an essential component, a means of activating and exploiting cross-border relationships.

Tension and conflict in the higher echelons of the Crimean Party

Outside as well as inside the Crimea, the Bolsheviks took action to favour minorities in all the peripheral territories. At first these measures were dictated by circumstances, without a defined programme, but in 1923 they were formalised in two resolutions adopted by the Twelfth Party Congress in April and the Fourth Conference of the Central Committee on Nationality Policies in June. These resolutions embodied the

⁵⁵ Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, p. 26.

⁵⁶ *Desiatyi s'ezd RKP (b), mart 1921 goda – stenograficheskie otchet* (Moscow, 1963), p. 252.

⁵⁷ *Krasnyi Krym*, 26 October 1921.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ GARE, 7523/101/640/16–19.

⁶⁰ *Krasnyi Krym*, 29 April 1921.

⁶¹ Taline Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs du Komintern: L'Union soviétique et les minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Presses de Science Po, 1997), pp. 23–31. On Soviet policies with respect to the Islamic east from 1917 to 1921, see P. V. Gusterin, 'Politika Sovetskogo gosudarstva na musul'manskom Vostoke v 1917–1921 gg'. , *Voprosi istorii*, 1 (2010), pp. 92–100.

principle of indigenisation (*korenizatsiia*) and demanded support for the territories, languages, elites and cultures of non-Russian minorities so as to guarantee them full enjoyment of national life, so long as this did not endanger the integrity of the Soviet state.⁶² Tatar activists in the Crimea seized on 'indigenisation' as justification for demanding more social justice and access to the positions of power which still eluded them. At the Ninth Regional Party Conference ten Tatars, including Ibraimov and Deren-Aierly, tabled a letter criticising Obkom's handling of national policy.⁶³ The signatories also questioned the CC envoy, who retorted by denouncing the Tatars' attitude and their 'mean-minded' quarrels.⁶⁴ In reality, the delegates attending had little idea of the conflicts that were raging within the regional committee. Nonetheless the discussions that took place arrived at a consensus as regarded the situation within Obkom, which was expressed in the conference resolutions.⁶⁵ They marked the emergence of two groups among Tatar communists: the 'right-wingers' (including the signatories) and the 'left-wingers'.

This categorisation had first manifested itself at the Congress of Eastern Peoples in Baku in September 1920, and acquired a particular resonance the following year in Tatarstan, when the left-wing Said-Galiev was replaced as leader of the Republic by the right-wing Kashaf Mukhtarov. However, the opposition between internationalism and nationalism was not as sharp as such labels may suggest. The split became more apparent at the Twelfth Congress when Sultan-Galiev was found guilty of plotting and rightist deviation. The Muslim delegates were forced into taking a stance either for or against the accused, who was dubbed to be the *patron* of the 'rights'. The 'leftists', following Said-Galiev, made out that Sultan-Galiev was symptomatic of a more general problem within the party; the right-wingers, following Firdev, insisted that he was an isolated case.⁶⁶ The right-wingers in the Crimean Party were, for the time being, supported by the leadership, which no longer distrusted their intentions and did not wish to lose individuals who represented both the majority and 'the best part of the workers' in the Obkom.⁶⁷

⁶² Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, pp. 9–15; Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, pp. 213–28; Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 3–32.

⁶³ GAARK, 1/1/310/99. The signatories were Veli Ibraimov, Usein Balish, Osman Deren-Aierly, Umer Ibraimov, Bekir Umerov, Seid Umerov, Amet Ismailov, Appaz Pamuktshi, Abdul Mustafa and Shamrat Karabash.

⁶⁴ GAARK, 1/1/310/100.

⁶⁵ GAARK, 1/1/310/247.

⁶⁶ The whole business was orchestrated by Stalin, who had hitherto consistently supported Sultan-Galiev despite his sometimes heterodox views. Stalin discovered that Sultan-Galiev had made a covert approach to Trotsky in April 1923, with a view to forging an alliance, and feared that this might lead to a connivance that would further strengthen an already substantial opposition. See B. Sultanbekov, 'Vvedenie', in I. G. Gizzatullin and D. R. Sharafutdinov (eds), *Mirza Sultan-Galiev: Stat'i. Vystupleniia. Dokumenty* (Kazan, 1992), p. 14; S. Blank, *The Sorcerer as Apprentice: Stalin as Commissar of Nationalities, 1917–1924* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 183–209; P. G. Landa, 'Mirza Sultan-Galiev', *Voprosi istorii*, 8 (1999), pp. 65–7; Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, pp. 232–6.

⁶⁷ GAARK, 1/1/310/145.

In response to Tatar complaints, Deren-Aierly was appointed to the Sovnarkom in place of Said-Galiev, while Ibraimov replaced Gaven at the TsIK. These appointments were intended as a token of Moscow's concern. Replacing Said-Galiev also helped to defuse tension by freeing the Crimean Tatars from domination by those of the Volga. At the same time, however, these promotions revived the earlier antagonism between Tatar and non-Tatar communists in the Crimea. A dispute soon arose between the President of the TsIK and the chief of the political police (OGPU), Sergei Shvarts (who was of Jewish origin), over the execution of two Tatar peasants. The dispute became so serious that Stalin personally stepped in to resolve it. In January 1925 he sent a letter denying rumours that the Tatar communists, led by Ibraimov, were intriguing to get Shvarts recalled. Stalin admitted that Ibraimov had asked him to ensure that the police chief 'behaved in a less aggressive manner', and that he had intended to dismiss him until the secretary of the Crimean Party persuaded him to keep Shvarts in the peninsula.⁶⁸ Shvarts' punishment, then, was mitigated, but the signal was none the less clear, and was directed both at opponents of indigenisation and at the Tatar elite whose actions Stalin had approved.

The dispute between Ibraimov and Shvarts was part of a larger pattern which positioned opposing interest groups around the foci of power. The pattern was described in a secret letter to the CC written in October 1925 by the new secretary, Sergei Petropavlovski, which asserted that in the summer there were four factions (*gruppировки*), two Tatar and two Russian. The Russian groups had, he said, been eliminated, but unfortunately the action taken against the Tatars had been unsuccessful. The right-wingers, asserted Petropavlovski, had nationalist aims: they had tried to infiltrate the party and the organs of state in order to take over the republic. As evidence he cited the alleged horse-trading that had accompanied his own election: the right-wingers had promised to support him so long as he kept out certain of their opponents. The deal had irritated the Russians, who swore that they would vote against Petropavlovski if he went along with it. He had, he said, refused the 'right' offer.⁶⁹ Petropavlovski was careful not to cast doubt on the idea of indigenisation itself, but he was critical of some of its implications, particularly its support for the right wing.⁷⁰ To restore discipline in the republic, he thought it necessary to give more encouragement to the 'left', recall the 'right' to a sense of its responsibilities, and get Firdevs out of the Crimea.⁷¹

Petropavlovski's allegations echoed various reports to the party leadership to the effect that factional struggles were breaking out, to a greater or lesser extent, in many peripheral regions of the Soviet state. In South Ossetia there had been violent clashes among the *gruppировки*. In Kazakhstan, Karakalpakia and Dagestan there had been similar clashes, but they were less violent and had since died down. In Tatarstan the conflict was not on strictly right-versus-left lines, and the factions

⁶⁸ RGASPI, 558/II/33/24.

⁶⁹ Gatagova, L. S., L. P. Kosheleva and L. A. Rogovaia, *CK RKP (b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, vol. 1, 1918–1933 gg. (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005), no. 131, pp. 325–7.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

pursued a 'surreptitious' existence. In Kirghizia and Buriatia-Mongolia there was no antagonism, or if there was, it was not apparent. While factions in Buriatia and Khirgizia were not doctrinal, however, they did have a national basis, as in the Crimea.⁷² This was undoubtedly attributable to Stalin's strategy of appointing nationals to head republican institutions and Slavs as party secretaries. He was also determined to curb the impetuosity of national communists, considering that they were so heavily involved in indigenisation that they might overlook the dangers of nationalism. The party secretaries had to be there to keep an eye on them while unrolling national policies.⁷³

Towards punitive action

In the autumn of 1925 Petropavlovski's letter had furnished the CC with a plausible description of factional antagonism and the reasons for it. In the Crimea itself, opinions on this rivalry were much more confused, and at the Eleventh Conference the Secretary's remarks were heckled more than once.⁷⁴ However, in early 1926 some suspicious events took place in the Eupatoria district that confirmed Petropavlovski's view and temporarily strengthened his position. First, the director of the Department of Agriculture was accused of improper conduct and dismissed. A few Tatars in the party and the Communist Union of Youth (Komsomol) refused to accept this decision, appealed to the district committee, and started to canvas peasant opinion.⁷⁵ Secondly, during elections to the town Soviet the Tatar communists, who were expected to ensure the election of the party candidate, joined the non-party activists in opposing him. It appeared that the latter group had even managed to manipulate the list of potential members of the Soviet Presidium and influence the voting.⁷⁶ The Obkom attributed this breach of discipline to factionalism.⁷⁷ This indicated for him that rivalry among communist Tatars existed down to the local level, where the right-wingers had shown themselves in their true colours.

As a result, on 29 January 1926 Firdevs was dismissed from his post as chairman of the Simferopol Agricultural Bank, which he had held since 1924, and exiled from the Crimea in obedience to the wishes of the Secretary as expressed in the autumn. Deren-Aierly pleaded that Firdevs should be allowed to 'remain in the Crimea owing to the shortage of Tatar workers', but the Obkom's decision was confirmed by the CC, which feared the emergence of a national opposition as in the Sultan-Galiev affair.⁷⁸ The treatment of Firdevs marked a change of regime in the Crimea: Ibraimov and the Tatar officials, once supported by Stalin, were now vulnerable to punitive action.

⁷² Gatagova, Kocheleva and Rogovaia, *CK RKP (b) i nacional'nyi vopros*, no. 142, pp. 355–9.

⁷³ Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 232–3. Armenia and Georgia were the exceptions that proved the rule.

⁷⁴ GAARK, 1/1/368/89–90.

⁷⁵ GAARK, 3/1/164/2,7.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ GAARK, 1/1/50/6.

⁷⁸ Broshevan and Formantchuk, *Krymskaia respublika*, p. 93.

This radical shift pointed to a re-drawing of boundaries whereby Communist order was opposed to a bourgeois disorder associated with nationalism. Firdev's punishment conferred a kind of materiality – albeit ill-undefined – on the boundary. To prevent the spread of factionalism, on 30 January the regional committee met and adopted punitive resolutions, chiefly aimed at Tatar communists whose mistakes could be interpreted as collusion with the class enemy or with non-party activists.⁷⁹

By the end of January 1926 the impact of these decisions on the existing tensions among Obkom members produced a battle between the two camps, championed respectively by Ibraimov and Petropavlovski. They called on the CC to intervene, whereupon the CC appointed a commission to sort things out.⁸⁰ Acting on the commission's report, on 22 February the CC issued an order with respect to the choices made by the Obkom and its secretary. The order acknowledged the problem, clarified the involvement of Firdevs, Deren-Aierly and Ibraimov, and decreed the fate of the individuals on whom the enquiry had focused. Petropavlovski came in for some criticism, but retained the confidence of the CC. Ibraimov also kept his post. Only Deren-Aierly was cast out.⁸¹ The removal of Firdevs, and after him Deren-Aierly, revealed the increasing interference of the party hierarchy in Obkom's affairs, as Obkom members bombarded the party with pleas to settle their differences. Consequently the party tightened its grip by taking punitive action against those found to have an 'inappropriate attitude'. However, none of these sanctions was intended to signal a wave of repression or the end of Tatar recruitment. There was no intention of extending Deren-Aierly's punishment to other pro-communist nationals – not yet, at any rate.

Conclusion

The construction of the Soviet state did not involve a straightforwardly asymmetric relationship between Moscow and the periphery. After the end of the civil war and the accompanying violence, it was a process of negotiation and agreement among various central institutions, between Moscow and the regions, and among actors in the regions themselves. In the Crimea there was no collaboration whatever between Bolsheviks and Tatar activists until the civil war overturned the existing order. The new rulers had no intention of sanctioning the existence of a national movement which might have rivalled or disputed their authority. Nonetheless these rulers urgently needed local executives and individuals ready to help them strengthen their hold on a population alienated by Bolshevik harassment and persecution.

Hence the Bolsheviks made use of such Tatar spokesmen as had joined their cause; if they played the Bolshevik game they could rise to high office in the state. While they were still *de facto* inferior to Slav or Balt representatives, they could at least take action within the constraints of Moscow's tentative efforts to establish an unprecedented

⁷⁹ *Idem.*

⁸⁰ Gatagova, Kocheleva and Rogovaia, *CK RKP (b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 360–1, p. 365.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, no. 145, pp. 367–8.

kind of multinational state. In this context the Tatbiuro can be seen as a powerful forum where members could voice their demands. The eventual compromise cannot be set down as a misunderstanding, insofar as the contracting parties knew all the circumstances and manipulated them in order to obtain the results they wanted. Thus the logic of power took precedence over ideological orthodoxy – but the latter could always be invoked, if necessary, to justify a decision or course of action.

In the mid-1920s, the Tatar representatives' determined support for *korenizatsiia* was seen as a potential nationalist threat which might undermine the solidarity of the 'national contract'. Punishments were handed out by way of a warning. Fears that indigenisation would be used as a weapon at the eastern edges of the country led to a strengthening of control from the centre and the interpretation of conflict as a crime. In the spring of 1928, as a wave of show trials swept over the Soviet Union, sixteen leading Tatars were put on trial in the Crimea, accused of making nationalist plots under the aegis of Ibrahimov. The ensuing purges enabled the promotion of a fresh set of national executives and the scope for criticism was reduced – though not suppressed – through terror. Thus Stalin attempted to guard against any challenge to himself even as he led the country into collectivisation, industrialisation and an intensified class struggle.