



# THE CHALLENGES OF RECOVERING FORGOTTEN HISTORICAL DESTINIES: THE TRAGEDY OF CRIMEAN TATARS IN THE ‘BLUE REGIMENT’, AT THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR<sup>1</sup>

## EDUCATION, MEDIA, AND CULTURE AS SOFT POWER TOOLS

Author: asst.prof. Bianca-Maria ROMAN<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The global scale of the tragedy of the Second World War inevitably, albeit unintentionally, cast a shadow over several episodes associated with the conflict. Among these is the tragic experience of a number of Crimean Tatars who formed the so-called Mavi Alay, ‘Blue Regiment’, a temporary ally of Nazi Germany—a cooperation that should not be understood as an ideological choice, but rather as a strategy of survival and an attempt to escape the harsh grip of the Soviet Union, which weighed heavily upon them. The end of the war would, in turn, reserve for them a fate comparable in cruelty to deportation, from which, unlike their compatriots, they had managed to escape. The decision to collaborate with the Nazis must be understood within the broader historical experience of a community shaped by migration, assimilation, and persecution under various political regimes.

Drawing on a limited range of available sources, this article seeks to reconstruct the historical circumstances that led to the formation of the ‘Blue Regiment’ and to analyze its place within the broader experience of minorities during wartime, caught between the competing interests of different political powers. The fate of the ‘Blue Regiment’ may serve as a telling example of the precarious position of ethnic communities without a state or strong political representation, which are often left with little choice but to follow decisions imposed by more powerful political actors, while also bearing the tragic consequences of events over which they had no control.

**Keywords:** ‘Blue Regiment’, Crimean Tatars, WW2, minorities, memory.

#### Article info

Received: February, 17, 2026; Revised: February, 23, 2026; Accepted: May, 30, 2026; Available online: June 30, 2026

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of the author’s research efforts undertaken in the process of completing the doctoral thesis defended on April 7, 2026 at the University of Bucharest, within the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures.

<sup>2</sup> The author is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest, email: bianca-maria.roman@lils.unibuc.ro.

## Introduction

Within the course of history, including recent history, there are countless events that have been subjected to *damnatio memoriae*. Some have been deliberately silenced, others distorted, while their memory has been attenuated or completely forgotten naturally. The great tragedy of the twentieth century, the Second World War, encompasses numerous tragic episodes which, although significant in themselves, were marginalized in collective memory as they were absorbed into the vast scale of the global catastrophe. Following a methodology based on historical and documentary analysis, this study aims to examine one such event, both in order to contribute to a more complete historical picture of the conflict and to highlight the fate of minorities caught between larger powers, as well as for didactic reasons intended to support civic awareness, since, regardless of the magnitude of historical tragedies, they offer essential lessons whose absence risks allowing the present to repeat the mistakes of the past—and indeed we can see that it does so. From the outset, one of the limitations of this research must be emphasized, namely that archival documents capable of confirming the exact outcome are, according to historians, almost irretrievable. The historical episode under investigation concerns the tragedy of approximately 8,000 Crimean Tatars who formed the so-called Mavi Alay, ‘Blue Regiment’, fighting during the war, according to circulating accounts, under the encouragement of Turkey, alongside Nazi Germany, in order to escape Soviet rule. The regiment appears to have ultimately faced an implacable fate, still, in part, shrouded in mystery.

## Crimean Tatars: between migration, assimilation, and persecution

The fate of the Crimean Tatars has long been shaped by their status as a frontier population. Although their stability within a clearly defined territory no longer exists, their identity has been constructed around a common language, a shared homeland, and a distinct cultural and psychological framework, and there still is „a strong surviving community of culture” (McCagg & Silver, 2010, p. 177). The identity of the Crimean Tatar diaspora has also survived due to powerful symbols derived from Crimean Tatar culture and history, which have fostered a collective memory and enabled the community to identify itself

as a distinct nation and culture (Eren, 1998, p. 338). Different practices of collective remembrance sustained the desire for repatriation, contributing to the formation of an emotional bond that made Crimean Tatars aware of their connection both to one another and to their ancestral lands (Uehling, 2004, p. 8). Changes in identity markers cannot be separated from the historical experience of the Crimean Tatars, which has been shaped by major political developments.

Until its annexation by the Russian Empire in 1783, the Crimean Khanate was one of the Ottoman Empire’s most important allies on its northern frontier, while also maintaining a remarkable degree of autonomy in relation to the Sublime Porte (Fisher, 2010, p. 79). The annexation of Crimea marked the beginning of a process of migration among the Tatar population. Part of the community, particularly members of the social and political elites, sought refuge either in the heart of the Ottoman Empire - in the Anatolian regions - or in its provinces on the western shores of the Black Sea, namely Bessarabia and Dobruja (Karpat, 1985, p. 65; McCagg & Silver, 2010, p. 182). Another major wave of migration to the Ottoman Empire occurred after the Crimean War (1853 - 1856), when more than 200,000 Tatars left the peninsula during the 1860s (Karpat, 1985, p. 66). Within the Ottoman Empire, they integrated relatively quickly into local society, adopting dominant customs and cultural norms. As a result, within a single generation, awareness of belonging to a distinct group had significantly diminished (McCagg & Silver, 2010, p. 184).

During the Russian Civil War (1917-1922), a significant number of Crimean Tatars moved to the Dobruja region, where a well-established Tatar community already existed. In Romanian Dobruja, the Tatar community paradoxically benefited from a much more favorable environment for preserving its ethnic and cultural identity, despite living in a predominantly non-Turkish and non-Muslim setting. By the late 1930s, books and newspapers in the Tatar language were being published in Constanța and were specifically aimed at the Tatar community (McCagg & Silver, 2010, p. 147). Today, the Tatar community in Dobruja consists of both Nogai Tatars and Crimean Tatars, although official statistics do not clearly distinguish between the two groups; according to the 2021 census, 18,156 individuals identified themselves as Tatars (Mambet Cheamil, 2024, p. 21). The two groups share the same religion and maintain the same traditions and customs (Mambet Cheamil, 2024, p. 18). In a study dedicated to the Dobrujan Nogai variety, the author draws attention to the danger of language extinction, noting that ‘this variety is losing so much ground to Romanian, the official language, that

young people tend to abandon it’. She further argues that ‘there is no written literature, and efforts to keep it alive remain fragile’—our translation (Mambet Cheamil, 2024, p. 280). This threat also extends to the Crimean Tatar variety spoken in Dobruja.

One reason why the Ottoman Empire was not a particularly attractive destination for Crimean Tatar migrants during the Russian Civil War was that it was itself undergoing a period of profound political and social upheaval, culminating in its collapse and the subsequent emergence of the modern Turkish state. Following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the Kemalist nation-building project influenced the relationship between the Tatars and the new Turkish state. Although the latter formally recognized ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, in practice it expected all citizens to integrate into a dominant Turkish identity (McCagg & Silver, 2010, p. 188). Consequently, Tatar identity in Turkey underwent a process of cultural assimilation that reduced the visibility of its specifically Crimean characteristics.

In contrast to these two experiences, the Tatars who remained in Crimea endured severe repressive policies during the Soviet period. It should be noted that, by the 1880s, the Crimean Tatars had largely abandoned emigration as a response to Russian rule and instead began to develop a national movement, following a pattern similar to that of many European peoples. Their efforts proved successful, and by the late 1920s they enjoyed a period during which they were recognized as an indigenous population and were even granted the right to develop their own national institutions (Aydn, 2021, p. 8–9). This ‘golden age’ came to an end when Stalin consolidated his power and the persecution of the Crimean Tatars resumed, this time in a far more violent form. Within a relatively short time, the community faced collectivization and the famine associated with it, the elimination of political and cultural elites between 1928 and 1931, accusations of collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and finally deportation to far regions of the Soviet Union, in 1944 (Fisher, 1978, p. xi). These measures irreversibly affected the cultural continuity of the Crimean Tatar community. One of the most damaging aspects of Soviet policy targeted the Tatar language directly, one of the most important components of collective identity. In 1928, the alphabet was Latinized, a reform that cut younger generations off from pre-revolutionary literature written in the Arabic alphabet and allowed only the selective republication of certain literary works (Fisher, 1978, p. 142). Later, in 1938, the Latin alphabet was replaced by the Cyrillic one, which was no better suited to the linguistic characteristics of the Tatar language than the

Arabic alphabet had been. At the same time, vocabulary of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish origin was gradually replaced by Russian terms and grammatical structures, accelerating the process of cultural Russification (Fisher, 1978, p. 147).

These examples of transformations imposed by the Soviet regime marked the beginning of even more radical measures, adopted in the context of the Second World War and the German occupation of Crimea.

## Crimean Tatars between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany

On 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, invading the Soviet Union. Taken by surprise, though not entirely unprepared, the USSR suffered significant losses in the first months of the invasion, both in terms of territories occupied by German forces and the number of dead and prisoners. Among the Nazi conquests in the Soviet space was the Crimean Peninsula, occupied in November 1941. However, even before its occupation, German leaders decided that the region was to become a province of the Third Reich and to be populated by Germans, while the indigenous population, consisting of Russians, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tatars—the latter being classified by the Nazis as Untermenschen (‘subhumans’) (Aydn, 2021, p. 9)—was to be deported (Odżczan, 2005, p. 66). This decision could not, however, be implemented due to two important considerations: the weak economy of the peninsula, as well as the Crimean Tatars’ close ties with the Turks, which could have meant that a possible annexation of Crimea would strain Germany’s relations with Turkey. Conversely, a friendly attitude toward the Tatars could have encouraged them to mediate Turkey’s entry into the war on Germany’s side against the USSR (Kolutek, 2019, p. 419; Aydn, 2021, p. 9).

This cordiality was expressed through the granting of religious freedom, which had been repressively restricted under Soviet administration. This apparent freedom however tightly controlled—included permission to call to prayer in restored mosques, the celebration of Ramadan, and the organization of circumcision ceremonies. At the same time, an extensive anti-communist propaganda campaign was conducted, both through the school curriculum and the distribution of pamphlets encouraging the fight against communism (Motadel, 2015, p. 289).

In the midst of the fighting between the Nazis and the Soviets, the Red Army suffered considerable personnel losses and was forced to recruit part of the

Turkic population. Subsequently, many of these recruits became prisoners of war in German hands, and in the spring of 1942 the Germans, planning a new offensive, incorporated them into their army to strengthen their forces. At the same time, recruitment of volunteer soldiers to join the German cause had begun in Crimea. Although they were not granted independence, certain benefits of cooperation with the Nazis against the Bolsheviks were emphasized (Kolutek, 2019, p. 421). Thus, the *Türk Nefsi Müdafaa Taburları* ('Turkish Self-Defense Battalions') were established.

The exact number of Crimean Tatars who composed these self-defense battalions is not known with precision. Both the Germans and the Soviets provided inflated figures, albeit for different reasons: the Germans, to demonstrate the significant support they received from the local population, and the Soviets, to justify later repressive measures against the Tatars (Odżzcan, 2010, p. 37). Nevertheless, according to archival research conducted by Kemal Odżzcan, the battalions numbered a total of 9,225 individuals – out of a population of approximately 219,000 Crimean Tatars—including both volunteers and prisoners (Odżzcan, 2005, p. 72).

In order to increase the number of volunteers, Germany distributed propaganda posters throughout the region containing messages allegedly attributed to Tatar leaders, calling on the population to fight against Bolshevism in order to protect their nation and homeland (Odżzcan, 2010, p. 37). Most of the Tatar recruits were incorporated into the German 11th Army, with assigned tasks including maintaining public order, preventing acts of sabotage, and defending the peninsula. For the Germans, more important than their combat effectiveness was their detailed knowledge of the local geography.

The self-defense battalions formed from members of the Crimean Tatar community have been mentioned in some scholarly works under different names, such as *Kırım Mukavemet Taburları* ('Crimean Resistance Battalions') or *Kırım Tatar Lejyonu* ('Crimean Tatar Legion') (Kolutek, 2019, p. 422). However, this military formation is also referred to by the more informal name *Mavi Alay* ('Blue Regiment'), a designation identified in the work *Türklerin Uğradığı İşkence, Sürgün, Katliam ve Soykırım Sözlüğü* ('Dictionary of the Sufferings, Deportations, Massacres and Genocides Endured by Turks'), which describes it as 'an army of eight thousand Crimean Turks who fought for Germany against the USSR in the Second World War, at the urging of the Republic of Turkey'—our translation (Durukoğlu/Salik, 2015, p. 242). However, based on the available historical sources, it cannot be conclusively demonstrated that the Republic of Turkey explicitly supported the association

of the 'Blue Regiment' with Nazi Germany, particularly given that during the Second World War Turkey pursued a highly cautious policy, especially with regard to its relations with the Soviet Union (Deringil, 1989). At the same time, the absence of documents attesting to official involvement does not exclude the possibility of indirect forms of encouragement.

According to Kolutek's research, the origin of the name, *Mavi Alay*, is not entirely clear. One hypothesis links it to the dark blue uniforms worn by the soldiers, while another refers to the light blue flag of the Crimean Tatars (Kolutek, 2019, p. 422).

## The tragic fate of the 'Blue Regiment'

The consulted sources converge on a general consensus regarding the fate of the battalions up to the spring of 1944, when the USSR regained control of the peninsula. On 18th of May 1944, under the pretext of collaboration with the Nazis, the Soviets decided to deport the entire Tatar population to Central Asia and Siberia. This moment represents a landmark in the recent history of the Crimean Tatars, and many of them regard these tragic events as a form of genocide aimed at the destruction of the entire ethnic group (Ayдын, 2021, p. 9). It appears that the soldiers of the 'Blue Regiment' and their families also met a tragic fate, albeit one that was delayed and ultimately fulfilled a year later.

In 2003, Turkish journalist Avni Odżzgü rel—among the first voices to address these almost forgotten events—published the article *Özgürlük Umuduyla Yıkımı* ('Destruction in the Hope of Freedom') in *Radikal* (Kolutek, 2019, pp. 422–423). The original article—which cannot be found anymore—was later cited by other sources (1), thus spreading Odżzgü rel's account of the fate of the 'Blue Regiment' in the public sphere. This version of events also served as inspiration for a well-known novel in Turkish literature, namely *Serenad* (2011) by Zülfü Livaneli, which made a significant contribution to bringing the tragic fate of the 'Blue Regiment' back into collective memory in Turkey and beyond.

According to this account, when the Germans began withdrawing from Crimea, members of the 'Blue Regiment' and their families migrated into Europe alongside them. Their first place of settlement was the Pozzulla region in northern Italy. They were later transferred to the Kärnten region in Austria, where German forces still held control. The soldiers' families improvised camps of tents and huts along the Drava

River, between the villages of Irschen and Dellach. In April 1945, they were captured by the British forces that had entered Austria, and the relatively lenient attitude of the British led them to believe they would be able to contact relatives in Turkey and that, ultimately, the Ankara government would accept them as refugees. A month later, however, following the Allied victory, the British handed the prisoners over to Soviet troops. In order to avoid the more uncertain and potentially harsher fate awaiting them in Soviet convoys, the Tatars decided to throw themselves into the turbulent waters of the Drava River, and within a week approximately four thousand people of all ages perished.

Fifteen years after these tragic events, on 28th of May 1960, the Western European Muslim Society erected a monument in the village of Irschen in memory of the victims (2), where annual commemorative ceremonies are held, the most recent taking place in April 2025 (3).

The remaining approximately four thousand individuals were transported further towards Russia. However, due to the destruction of railway infrastructure in Eastern Europe during the war, it was decided that the transport would pass through Turkey, which raised hopes of salvation among the survivors, who believed that Ankara would undertake diplomatic efforts to allow them to remain in Anatolia. After crossing the Turkish border, however, salvation failed to materialize and ultimately never came. By the end of the war, Turkey had aligned itself with the Allies, and the USSR's right to demand repatriation of refugees was considered legitimate (Kolutek, 2019, p. 424). As they approached the Soviet border after crossing Anatolia, the prisoners forced open the nailed-shut doors and collectively threw themselves into Lake Kızılcakçak in the present-day town of Akyaka in Kars Province. Two thousand people lost their lives, while the remaining individuals were shot by Soviet forces right after crossing the border.

The sequence of events presented by Odżzgü rel, which has circulated in a small segment of the public sphere—given that it concerns a niche and relatively little-known subject—should be treated with caution, according to Kolutek, since in the absence of archival documents confirming the exact facts, no definitive claim can be made regarding the fate of the 'Blue Regiment' after the end of the war. Other voices (4) argue that the absence of this tragic event from archival records is due to acts of concealment carried out by Turkey—considered the expected natural ally and 'elder brother' of the Tatars—either out of a sense of shame regarding its handling of the situation at the time or, more simply, due to indifference.

## Conclusion

Regardless of the degree of factual certainty regarding the outcome of this historical episode, the tragic experience of the 'Blue Regiment' represents one of the facets of the broader drama of Europe's minorities under siege in the twentieth century—ethnic groups situated within various spheres of influence, poorly or not at all represented diplomatically, and compelled to submit to decisions made by others on their behalf. The 'Blue Regiment' draws attention to the legal vulnerability of minority groups in turbulent periods marked by conflict, as they become collateral victims in the strategic games of major state actors involved in the war.

The subject remains open to further research that may clarify the details of its outcome. Until then, however, the tragedy of the Crimean Tatars associated with the 'Blue Regiment' should be framed within a balanced historical approach which, while acknowledging the limits of knowledge, still seeks to reconstruct forgotten human experiences, so as not to compound past injustices by erasing the victims' suffering from collective memory and by denying them their rightful place in history.

## REFERENCES:

- Allworth, E. A. (1998). *The Tatars of Crimea: Return to the Homeland*. Studies and Documents (second edition, revised and expanded). Duke University Press. Durham and London.
- Aydın, F. T. (2021). *Émigré, Exile, Diaspora, and Transnational Movements of the Crimean Tatars. Preserving the Eternal Flame of Crimea*. Palgrave Macmillan. Cham.
- Deringil, S. (1989). *Turkish Foreign Policy during the Second World War*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Durukoğlu, S. & Salik, S. (2015). *Türklerin Uğradığı İüşkençe, Sürgün, Katliam Ve Soykırım Sözlüğü*. AKRA Kültür Sanat Ve Edebiyat Dergisi, 3(7), 211-258.
- Eren, E. (1998). *Crimean Tatar Communities Abroad. The Tatars of Crimea: Return to the Homeland*. Studies and Documents (second edition, revised and expanded) (ed. Edward A. Allworth). Duke University Press. Durham and London.
- Fisher, A. W. (1978). *The Crimean Tatars*. Hoover Institution Press. Stanford.
- Fisher, Alan (2010). *Crimean Separatism in the Ottoman Empire. Between Russians, Ottomans, and Turks*. *Crimea and Crimean Tatars* (ed. Alan Fisher). The Isis Press. Istanbul.
- Fisher, A. (ed.) (2010). *Between Russians, Ottomans, and Turks. Crimea and Crimean Tatars*. The Isis Press. Istanbul.
- Karpat, K. H. (1985). *Ottoman Population 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics*. The University of Wisconsin Press. Madison.
- Kolutek, M. (2019). *II. Dü nya Savaşı'nda Kırım Türkleri Ve Nefsi Mü dafaa Taburları, Tarih Yolunda Bir Ömür*. Ergün Öz Akçora Armağanı (ed. Ahmet Aksın, Yavuz Haykır, Filiz Yıldırım), Hiperyayın, Istanbul.
- Livaneli, Z. (2011). *Serenad*. Doğan Kitap. Istanbul.
- Mambet Cheamil, L. (2024). *Varietatea nogai dobrogeană: fonetică, morfologie, sintaxă*. Editura Institutului pentru studierea problemelor minorităților naționale. Cluj Napoca.
- McCagg, W. O. & Silver, B. D. (2010). *The Crimean Tatars, the USSR, and Turkey. Between Russians, Ottomans, and Turks*. *Crimea and Crimean Tatars* (ed. Alan Fisher). The Isis Press. Istanbul.
- Motadel, D. (2015). *İslam Ve Naziler* (trans. Ahmet Fethi Yıldırım). ALFA Basım Yayım Dağıtım. Istanbul.
- Odzzcan, K. (2005). *II. Dü nya Savaşı Sırasında Kırım Türklerinin Almanlarla İlişkileri Meselesi Udžzerine*. *Karadeniz Araştırmaları*, 4, 65-78.
- Odzzcan, K. (2010). *Kırım Dramı: Kırım Türklerinin Varoluş Mücadelesi, Babıali Kü ltür Yayıncılığ ı*. Istanbul.
- Uehling, G. L. (2004). *Beyond Memory. The Crimean Tatars' Deportation and Return*, Palgrave MacMillan. New York.

## WEBOGRAPHY

- Kırımın Sesi Gazetesi. (n.d.). *Mavi Alayın öyküsü ve Kırım katliamı*. Kırımın Sesi Gazetesi. Retrieved from <https://kiriminsesigazetesi.com/mavi-alayin-oykusu-ve-kirim-katliami/>
- Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu. (2023, May 28). *Drau Katliamı'nda hayatını kaybedenleri saygıyla anıyoruz*. KAFFED Retrieved from <https://kaffed.org/2023/05/28/drau-katliaminda-hayatini-kaybedenleri-saygiyla-aniyoruz-2/>
- Kafkas Vakfı. (2025, April 22). *Drau Katliamı Anıtı önünden – Irschen Köyü, Avusturya* [Video]. Facebook. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/KafkasVakfii/videos/drau-katliam%C4%B1-an%C4%B1t%C4%B1-%C3%B6n%C3%BCnden-irschen-k%C3%B6y%C3%BC-avusturya-22-nisan2025/1726021344958855/>

