

KIRIM TATAR TÜRKÇESİNİN SOSYAL STATÜSÜNÜN TARİHSEL GERİLEYİŞİ (1783–2026)

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Özet

Bu çalışma, Kırım Tatar Türkçesinin 1783 yılında Kırım Hanlığı'nın Rusya İmparatorluğu tarafından ilhak edilmesinden 2026 yılına kadar geçen süreçte yaşadığı sosyal statü kaybını incelemektedir. Makalede, dilin resmi hayattan dışlanması, zorunlu göçler, sürgünler, demografik değişimler, eğitim politikaları ve asimilasyon süreçlerinin Kırım Tatar dilinin kullanım alanı üzerindeki etkileri ele alınmaktadır.

Araştırma, Çarlık Rusya'sı, Sovyetler Birliği, Ukrayna ve Rusya Federasyonu dönemlerinde Kırım Tatar dilinin hukuki statüsü ile gerçek kullanım koşulları arasındaki farkı karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz etmektedir. Özellikle eğitim sistemi, devlet kurumları ve toplumsal yaşam içerisindeki dil kullanımına dair veriler değerlendirilmiştir.

Çalışmanın sonucunda, Kırım Tatar dilinin günümüzde büyük ölçüde aile içi ve sınırlı kültürel alanlara sıkıştığı, mevcut politikaların ise dilin tam anlamıyla korunması ve yeniden canlandırılması için yeterli olmadığı sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kırım Tatar Türkçesi, Kırım Tatarca, Kırım Tatarları, Kırım Türkleri, Dil Politikası, Dil Asimilasyonu, Sürgün, Kırım, Eğitim Dili, Azınlık Dilleri, Dil Hakları, Ruslaştırma, İnsan Hakları, Soykırım, Kırım, Ukrayna, Rusya, Sömürge.

THE HISTORICAL DECLINE OF THE SOCIAL STATUS OF THE CRIMEAN TATAR LANGUAGE: 1783–2026

Abstract

This study examines the loss of the social status of the Crimean Tatar language from the annexation of the Crimean Khanate by the Russian Empire in 1783 until 2026. The article analyzes the effects of exclusion from official life, forced migrations, deportations, demographic changes, educational policies, and assimilation processes on the functional use of the Crimean Tatar language.

The research comparatively evaluates the discrepancy between the legal status of the Crimean Tatar language and its actual conditions of use during the periods of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation. Special attention is given to language use in education, state institutions, and social life.

The study concludes that the Crimean Tatar language has largely been confined to family and limited cultural spheres, while existing policies remain insufficient for its full preservation and revitalization.

Keywords: Crimean Tatar Language, Crimean Tatars, Language Policy, Language Assimilation, Deportation, Discrimination, Crimea, Human Rights, Language Education, Minority Languages, Language Rights, Russification.



Following the annexation of the Crimean Khanate by the Russian Empire in 1783, the Crimean Tatar language experienced a continuous decline in its developmental capacity, its adaptability to evolving social conditions, its functional domains, and its overall sociolinguistic status.

Virtually immediately following the annexation, the language was excised from official public life, as all imperial documentation within and concerning Crimea was drafted and issued exclusively in Russian. Concurrently, Crimean Tatar vanished from artistic and scholarly literature - a consequence of the broader cessation of such literary production - and became confined strictly to the spheres of religious practice and vernacular communication. It is critical to note, however, that until the Revolution of 1917, the Crimean Tatar population maintained high levels of traditional literacy. This was facilitated by primary education in religious schools (*mektebs*), where instruction in the Arabic script for Quranic recitation inherently enabled individuals to read and write in Crimean Tatar, which utilized the same orthography at the time. Concurrently, within a span of twenty to thirty years, a significant majority of the Khanate's population was either decimated or forced to flee to the Ottoman Empire, including regions such as Dobruja (present-day Romania and Bulgaria), where the Northern (Steppe) dialect of historical Crimean Tatar persists to this day. While the segment of the diaspora that resettled near Istanbul and in Anatolia preserved its local vernaculars and vernacular language use for approximately two centuries, it eventually underwent a gradual linguistic assimilation, shifting first to Ottoman Turkish and subsequently to modern Turkish. It should be noted that, despite profound similarities and close genetic proximity, modern Turkish remains a distinct language, readily distinguishable from Crimean Tatar phonetically, grammatically, and, to a certain extent, lexically. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the Crimean Tatar population remaining on the peninsula had experienced a multi-fold decline due to systematic elimination and forced displacement.

Concurrently, Crimean Tatar populations situated outside the peninsula - specifically in the Kuban region and the southern Black Sea steppes—were similarly decimated or compelled to flee to the Caucasus (the Nogai population) and the Ottoman Empire. By the early nineteenth century, virtually no Crimean Tatar population remained outside the Crimean Peninsula. The mainland territories of the Crimean Khanate prior to the 1783 annexation - encompassing the contemporary Donbas, the Krasnodar and Stavropol Krajs, the Rostov Oblast of the Russian Federation, and the entire coastal strip extending to the Danube and Moldova - were rapidly repopulated, predominantly by ethnic Russians and Ukrainians.

In the 1760s, the population of the Crimean Peninsula alone reached approximately 450,000 individuals, with Crimean Tatars constituting 98% of the total (roughly 440,000). By the 1790s, the peninsula's population had plummeted to 150,000, indicating that two-thirds of the indigenous Crimean Tatar population had either perished or been forced into emigration.

Subsequently, population growth was driven by two countervailing factors: a high natural birth rate among the remaining Crimean Tatars (averaging 7 to 12 children per family) and a deliberate resettlement policy enacted by the Tsarist government. This state-sponsored colonization introduced various non-indigenous ethnic groups to Crimea, including Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Germans, Poles, Czechs, Estonians, Bulgarians, and Armenians. Consequently, a demographic competition emerged between the natural reproduction of the native Crimean Tatar population and the continuous influx of settlers from Ukraine and Russia. Around this same period, Ashkenazi Jewish populations also began migrating to the peninsula from the recently annexed territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.



The level of proficiency in the vernacular tongue among Crimean Tatars remained remarkably high, as there was no state-sponsored, systematic effort to forcefully shift Crimean Tatar children to the Russian language. Furthermore, The Crimean Tatar population was concentrated in communities characterized by a high degree of endogamy, residing in villages and urban quarters where Crimean Tatar functioned as the sole language of intra-community communication.

The Tsarist government was content with the reality that its newly acquired Crimean Tatar subjects had experienced a regression in their educational attainment and had been relegated to manual, predominantly agricultural, labor. Consequently, the imperial administration made no attempt to impose Russian-medium education upon this population.

Gradually, the newly emerging administrative, technical, and intellectual professions that developed throughout the nineteenth century were filled by individuals of other ethnicities, predominantly migrants from outside Crimea.

On the eve of the Crimean War in 1850, the population of the peninsula stood at 343,500 individuals. The demographic composition was distributed as follows: Crimean Tatars constituted 77.8% (approximately 267,240 individuals), Ukrainians 7%, Russians 6.6%, Greeks 2%, Roma 1.9%, Crimean Karaites 1.3%, Armenians 1%, Germans 1%, Jews 0.9%, and Bulgarians 0.5%.

The Crimean War, which resulted in the defeat of the Russian Empire, served as a catalyst for the Tsarist administration to intensify repressive policies against the Crimean Tatar population. These measures included the systematic expropriation of land and its subsequent redistribution to settlers from both mainland Russia and Western Europe. Consequently, according to varying estimates from contemporary observers, a second wave of mass emigration to the Ottoman Empire ensued.

Estimates of those who departed Crimea range from several tens of thousands to as many as 300,000 Crimean Tatars, though precise figures remain undetermined and necessitate meticulous archival research in Crimea, Russia, and Turkey. This demographic exodus fundamentally and abruptly altered the ethnic composition of the peninsula.

In 1858, the population of Crimea stood at 331,300 individuals, with the ethnic distribution comprising 73% Crimean Tatars, 12.6% Russians, 4% Ukrainians, 2.4% Greeks, 2% Roma, 1.8% Jews, 1.5% Germans, 1.3% Armenians, 0.8% Crimean Karaites, and 0.6% Bulgarians. By 1864, the total population had decreased significantly to 198,700 individuals, of whom Crimean Tatars constituted 50.3% (approximately 241,850 individuals), combined Russians and Ukrainians 28.5%, Greeks 6.5%, Jews 5.3%, Armenians 2.9%, Germans 2.7%, Crimean Karaites 1.7%, and Bulgarians 1.6%.

This marked the final year in which the Crimean Tatars retained a demographic majority on the peninsula. By 1864, the Crimean Tatar population had fallen below 100,000 individuals (specifically numbering 99,950), demonstrating a stark trajectory when contrasted with approximately 440,000 in the 1760s and 150,000 in the 1790s. The most severe depopulation occurred within the steppe regions of Crimea, which consequently led to a significant weakening of the Kipchak element within the Crimean Tatar linguistic continuum.

Naturally, this catastrophic demographic shift precipitated the broader decline of the Crimean Tatar language as a whole, culminating in the complete eradication of its medieval literary form. Concurrently, a compelling sociolinguistic phenomenon emerged: virtually the entire immigrant population of Crimea - excluding the imperial administrative officials appointed by the central Russian government - actively acquired and utilized Crimean Tatar for daily



communication, not only with the indigenous population but also among various other ethnic groups. It is necessary to emphasize that the Crimean Tatar language functioned effectively as the primary lingua franca of the Crimean Peninsula until the mass deportation of 1944.

A heroic and largely successful attempt to revitalize the Crimean Tatar language was undertaken by Ismail Gasprinski. The innovative phonetic method of literacy instruction he developed, coupled with his comprehensive reform of the primary education system and the publication of the newspaper *Terjuman*, played a monumental role not only in the cultural renaissance of the Crimean Tatars but also in the intellectual awakening of numerous Turkic-Muslim peoples across the Russian Empire.

Under his influence, the Crimean Tatar language was re-established as a medium for journalism, artistic literature, sociopolitical thought, and public enlightenment. Several decades of intensive and virtually devoted labor by Gasprinski and his Jadid disciples provided a powerful impetus to the development of the national press, educational institutions, and linguistic culture among various Turkic nations.

At the same time, the activities and linguistic perspectives of Ismail Gasprinski subsequently became the subject of diverse scholarly interpretations. Certain researchers contend that by advancing his renowned maxim, "Unity in thought, word, and deed," he sought to align the Pan-Turkic written literary standard with the Ottoman variant of the language. However, such an assertion warrants cautious evaluation and cannot be interpreted in an overly reductionist manner.

It must be taken into account that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the majority of Turkic peoples utilized the Arabic script, an orthographic system in which vowel sounds were typically underrepresented or entirely omitted in writing. Consequently, numerous words across Ottoman, Crimean Tatar, Azerbaijani, Chagatai (Old Uzbek), and other Turkic languages appeared virtually identical visually, despite being pronounced distinctly by each respective speech community - adhering to their unique phonetics, orthoepic traditions, and linguistic norms. The reader primarily decoded the consonantal root of a given word, automatically reproducing it in the phonetic form familiar to their own vernacular.

In this sense, the linguistic practice of *Terjuman* demonstrated an attempt to establish a shared cultural and informational space for Turkic-Muslim peoples, rather than a desire to impose a uniform Ottoman pronunciation or to eradicate the distinct characteristics of individual Turkic languages. It was precisely due to the proximity of the written standard and the commonality of the root lexicon that the newspaper could be read and comprehended by representatives of various Turkic peoples, each interpreting it through the prism of their own vernacular.

Furthermore, the historical context of Gasprinski's era must be thoroughly considered. During his lifetime, Crimean Tatar remained the natural, living tongue of the absolute majority of Crimean Tatars and was not facing the threat of extinction. Consequently, the necessity of specialized language protection against displacement or assimilation - as conceptualized in modern sociolinguistics - was virtually absent from the discourse of that period. For Gasprinski, the far more pressing imperatives were public enlightenment, societal modernization, educational advancement, and providing Turkic-Muslim peoples with access to the achievements of European science, technology, and social thought.

In this regard, the utilization of the Russian language as an instrument for introducing European culture and science did not imply a negation of the significance of the Crimean Tatar language. Rather, it represented an effort to harmonize national cultural development with the integration



of Turkic-Muslim peoples into the contemporary educational and intellectual spheres of that era.

During the consolidation of power in 1917 and the subsequent Civil War across the territories of the former Russian Empire, the Bolsheviks routinely employed mass armed violence to suppress national liberation movements. However, the protracted conflict with the well-organized and formidable anti-Bolshevik "White" forces compelled the Soviet leadership to exploit national movements as an additional strategic resource. This shift was facilitated by the chauvinistic stance of the White movement toward non-Russian peoples, which was characterized by a complete disregard for their rights, a commitment to forced cultural homogenization, and, when necessary, the direct suppression and eradication of national identities - a continuation of the policies practiced by Tsarist Russia for centuries.

An additional critical factor precipitating the shift in policy toward nationalities, including national languages, was the search for external allies. This strategic imperative was vital both for the successful exportation of the revolution and, at a minimum, for defense against the Entente powers, which at that time constituted the most formidable military and political alternative to Bolshevik Russia.

The convergence of these factors was particularly pronounced in Crimea due to its geographical, cultural, and ethnic proximity to republican Turkey. In Turkey, the government of Mustafa Kemal Pasha was likewise keenly interested in establishing, at the very least, a military-technical alliance with Bolshevik Russia. This alignment induced the central Bolshevik government in Moscow to enact a demonstrative improvement in its policy toward the Crimean Tatars. Specifically, this strategic pivot culminated in the establishment of national autonomy for the Crimean Tatars through the creation of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Crimean ASSR) in 1921. Accompanying this institutional development was the designation of Crimean Tatar as a state language alongside Russian, followed by the implementation of the policy of indigenization (*korenizatsiya*) in the subsequent years. Indigenization, which was executed not only in Crimea but across the Soviet state, entailed the recruitment of native cadres into the Soviet state apparatus, the execution of economic reform programs favoring workers of indigenous nationalities, and state support for their education, language, and culture.

However, the positive disposition of the Bolsheviks toward Crimean Tatar culture and language should not be overestimated. Having secured complete control over Crimea and utilizing the educational system as a primary mechanism for the Sovietization of the Crimean Tatars - with the ultimate goal of transforming them into loyal citizens of the USSR - the Bolshevik leadership never genuinely recognized the Crimean Tatars as an independent nation possessing full, sovereign rights on par with any other global population.

As Soviet authority consolidated across national regions, the initial accommodation of national movements progressively mutated into policies of escalating discrimination, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Within those historical circumstances, the socio-political trajectory of the various peoples and national groups of the USSR fluctuated significantly, determined entirely by the shifting geopolitical and ideological expediency that guided Bolshevik decision-making.

During the first trial against the Crimean Tatar intelligentsia in Crimea in 1928, based on allegations of involvement in the Veli Ibrahimov-led *Milli Firqa* (National Party), sixty-three individuals were sentenced to death by firing squad or varying terms of imprisonment. This group comprised former delegates of the First Kurultai, disciples of Ismail Gasprinski, and prominent members of the Crimean Tatar cultural elite, including poets and composers. For a relatively small nation, this constituted a devastating blow. Through these repressive measures,



the Bolshevik regime effectively severed the historical continuity between the Crimean Tatars and their pre-Soviet traditions, most notably the intellectual legacy of Ismail Gasprinski.

Subsequently, in 1938, several dozen Crimean Tatar intellectuals - including journalists, writers, and educators who had received their education and professional training under the Soviet system were executed by firing squad over a span of three days in the courtyard of the Simferopol prison (the precise numbers remain unverified, though extant testimonies suggest the death toll may have exceeded one hundred individuals). Ostensibly, the Communist leadership and the Soviet administration at large grew alarmed by the markedly heightened educational and professional standards achieved by the Crimean Tatars, a development that threatened to emancipate the indigenous population from a state of passive compliance with the central government.

It is necessary to consider an additional historical development that remains largely unfamiliar to many readers. Within the framework of the Crimean ASSR, two separate reforms of the Crimean Tatar alphabet were implemented during the interwar period, yielding highly contradictory consequences.

In 1929, the Arabic script, which had been utilized for centuries in Crimea for the Crimean Tatar language - and in which the renowned newspaper *Terjuman* was published - was officially replaced by a Latin-based alphabet (known as the Uniform Turkic Alphabet or *Yañalif*). This transition did not employ a pure Latin alphabet or one fully optimized for Crimean Tatar phonetics; in fact, certain characters incorporated elements influenced by Cyrillic typography.

The motivations behind this script reform were primarily political rather than scientific or practical. During this era, the central Soviet leadership was deeply focused on exporting the socialist revolution beyond its borders. Transitioning various national alphabets to a Latin foundation was envisioned as a step toward unifying socialist culture on a global scale. This was strategic considering that the major Western colonial empires, which Soviet communists viewed as primary arenas for revolutionary expansion, predominantly used the Latin alphabet.

At the same time, the Arabic script, despite its long historical adaptation to the Crimean Tatar language, did not fully align with the structural features of Turkic languages, as its orthography largely obscured the vocalic and phonetic principles central to the tongue. Consequently, the introduction of the Latin script simplified and accelerated literacy acquisition for new generations of Crimean Tatars in schools and streamlined standard orthography. For these practical reasons, many Crimean Tatar patriots and language specialists actively supported the reform.

However, in 1939, by decree from the central Soviet authorities, the Crimean Tatar script was abruptly transitioned to a Cyrillic-based alphabet. This shift served as a definitive symptom that the regime's tactical accommodation of national movements and indigenous rights was coming to an end. Historically, this script reform stands in alignment with the mass executions of the Crimean Tatar intelligentsia in 1938; indeed, the systematic liquidation of intellectuals, particularly those specializing in the development and codification of the language, was a prerequisite for enforcing this linguistic shift.

From the standpoint of evolving Soviet ideology, the objective of an immediate global socialist revolution had been removed from the immediate agenda, replaced by the doctrine of "Socialism in One Country" within the borders of the USSR. Concurrently, this heralded an increasingly aggressive assimilationist policy aimed at forging a uniform "Soviet people" out of all constituent nationalities - regardless of their volition - predicated upon the Russian language, culture, and historical narrative.



Unlike the prior transition to the Latin script, the imposition of the Cyrillic alphabet yielded no positive socio-linguistic outcomes. As a direct consequence of these two rapid orthographic shifts - and most destructively, the final shift to Cyrillic - the capacity for written communication across multiple generations of Crimean Tatars was severed. This double disruption fractured the community's continuity with its accumulated literary and scientific heritage, effectively dismantling the cultural renaissance that had begun with the work of Ismail Gasprinski, the Jadid modernizers, and the first two decades of Soviet institutional development in Crimea.

This specific reform affected nearly every nationality across the Soviet Union, but in Crimea, it manifested in the most destructive manner possible. Unlike the orthographic adaptations granted to the Volga Tatars, Bashkirs, Azerbaijanis, and many other Turkic-speaking peoples - whose newly assigned Cyrillic alphabets included specialized, modified characters or diacritics designed to accurately convey specific native phonemes - the Cyrillic alphabet for the Crimean Tatar language was imposed in an absolutely unaltered state.

It was pure, unmodified Russian Cyrillic. This decision drastically compromised the phonetic principle of the script, forcing the unique sound system of the Crimean Tatar language into a graphic framework that systematically distorted its pronunciation toward Russian phonetics. Furthermore, this heavy-handed approach introduced highly counterintuitive, unscientific complications into standard grammar and orthography. Consequently, an immense corpus of newly published educational, scientific, and artistic literature was rendered obsolete virtually overnight, compounding the cultural isolation of the community.

At present, reconstructing the historical realities of Crimean Tatar life prior to 1944 remains an exceptionally arduous task. Following the mass deportation, the Soviet government systematically and deliberately destroyed a vast wealth of archival documents, written records, and cultural artifacts to erase the historical footprint of the indigenous population. For decades afterward, official statistics regarding the Crimean Tatars were intentionally suppressed or unrecorded. Even in the post-Soviet era, census initiatives and demographic studies conducted under both independent Ukraine and modern Russia frequently omitted or avoided collecting specific qualitative indicators crucial for a comprehensive scientific assessment of the community's socio-linguistic situation.

Nevertheless, based on surviving archival fragments that have gradually become accessible to researchers, the scale of the pre-deportation Crimean Tatar educational infrastructure is striking:

In 1936: Crimea possessed **386 secondary schools** alongside **475 incomplete secondary and primary schools** operating entirely with Crimean Tatar as the language of instruction.

In 1941: Approximately **40,000 Crimean Tatar students** were enrolled across **371 native-language schools**.

The catastrophic turning point arrived in 1944. Immediately following the forced deportation of the population, the Soviet authorities liquidated this entire educational and cultural network. In one sweeping campaign of cultural erasure, the state shuttered: All **371 Crimean Tatar schools**, **2 pedagogical technical colleges** dedicated to training native educators, **The Institute of Crimean Tatar Language and Literature**.

Simultaneously, numerous national libraries were closed, and their collections - comprising thousands of books, rare manuscripts, and school textbooks - were systematically confiscated and burned. This total destruction of the institutional framework severed the last remaining avenues for the formalized transmission of the Crimean Tatar language and heritage within its historical homeland.



Consequently, the entire material infrastructure required for the preservation and development of the Crimean Tatar language in Crimea was systematically annihilated, and it remains un-restored to this day.

In their places of exile, until the second half of the 1950s, the Crimean Tatars were confined to "special settlements" (*spetsposeleniya*) - essentially a modified variant of concentration camps. They were dispersed in small groups ranging from a few dozens to several hundred individuals, intentionally surrounded by non-native and foreign-speaking populations. Leaving the boundaries of these special settlements without authorization was a severe offense punishable by 25 years of forced labor (*katorga*).

The overwhelming majority of the Crimean Tatar population was subjected to grueling manual labor, completely irrespective of their prior professional training, education, or qualifications. Members of the intelligentsia, like everyone else, were forced to work in cotton fields, logging camps, mines, and industrial construction sites. This deliberate policy deprived them of any opportunity to maintain their professional standards and knowledge, let alone transmit them to the broader community. These conditions were intentionally engineered by the Soviet regime to achieve the total annihilation of Crimean Tatar culture and language.

Even after their release from the special settlements in 1956, the official existence of the Crimean Tatar language, as well as the Crimean Tatar nation itself, continued to be systematically denied by the state. In a highly cynical maneuver designed to provoke animosity between two distinct Turkic peoples - the Crimean Tatars and the Volga Tatars - the Soviet state apparatus and scientific institutions officially classified the Crimean Tatars as "Volga Tatars" in both demographic statistics and administrative practice. This deliberate conflation effectively barred the collection of accurate data regarding the actual socio-economic status, geographical distribution, problems, and needs of the Crimean Tatars, while simultaneously preventing the establishment of any institutional support for the preservation of their culture and language.

For propaganda purposes, and in response to mounting pressure from the Crimean Tatar diaspora and international human rights advocates outside the USSR, the Soviet authorities permitted a few highly controlled concessions in 1957. In the Uzbek SSR, the state authorized the creation of the *Haytarma* State Song and Dance Ensemble, as well as the publication of a Cyrillic-script newspaper in the Crimean Tatar language with the characteristically ideological title *Lenin Bayrağı* (The Banner of Lenin). Crucially, however, the language employed by these cultural outlets was officially designated merely as "Tatar." Similarly, a department of "Tatar" language and literature was established at the Nizami Pedagogical Institute in Tashkent, which officially graduated a limited number of "Tatar" language teachers to serve a handful of schools in Uzbekistan.

Beyond these performative measures, the Crimean Tatar language enjoyed no official status or administrative utility within the regions of deportation. The number of schools offering native-language instruction remained negligible, and the available educational materials and textbooks were rudimentary, rarely exceeding the proficiency level of a fourth or fifth-grade elementary curriculum. Rather than a genuine effort toward cultural preservation, this was a calculated propaganda campaign designed to permanently anchor the Crimean Tatars within the Central Asian republics designated for their perpetual exile, aiming ultimately at their assimilation and long-term ethnocide.

The mass return of the Crimean Tatars to Crimea, occurring amidst the nascent collapse of the USSR when both the central Soviet government and the constituent union republics seeking secession were preoccupied with systemic crises, resulted in a population of approximately



273,000 Crimean Tatars residing in Crimea by the year 2000. By this time, the overwhelming majority spoke the Crimean Tatar language poorly, even in domestic settings. Their speech was heavily interspersed with Russian words and expressions - particularly regarding politics, science, public life, and technology. Furthermore, they frequently relied on the terminology and grammatical structures of the languages of the populations among whom they had been forcibly resettled during deportation (predominantly Uzbek, which, though also a Turkic language, is structurally distinct from Crimean Tatar, and to a lesser extent Tajik, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and others).

The older generations, who had been educated in Crimea prior to the deportation, were deprived of the opportunity to actively utilize their mother tongue outside the immediate circle of family and kin during their decades of exile. Concurrently, the younger generations born in the places of deportation received their schooling and professional training in other languages. They were compelled to adopt these foreign languages in their vocational endeavors, as well as in daily private and official life, as a prerequisite for socio-economic competitiveness within an alien linguistic and cultural environment.

Consequently, the intergenerational continuity of language transmission was severely fractured. Upon returning to Crimea, the Crimean Tatars found themselves on their own ancestral homeland but immersed in an aggressive, predominantly Russian-speaking environment, complemented in official administrative spheres by the Ukrainian language. This socio-linguistic reality stood in stark, fundamental contrast to the conditions that had prevailed prior to the 1944 deportation.

The Crimean Tatars - including the pedagogical intelligentsia, journalists, writers, and ordinary citizens alike - profoundly recognized the urgent necessity of preserving and revitalizing the Crimean Tatar language. However, by the 2000s, the Crimean Tatars constituted a demographic share of the peninsula's population that was approximately half of what it had been prior to the deportation, leaving them entirely devoid of the political authority and material resources required to implement systemic language renewal.

Furthermore, an immense amount of physical labor, health, and financial capital had to be channeled into building homes for themselves and their families; a large portion of the population remained trapped in the places of exile for years while fathers and older brothers constructed basic housing back in the homeland. This prolonged, multi-year separation of families played a fatal role in disrupting the daily domestic use of the native language and its subsequent transmission to children.

Compounding these structural challenges, the post-1944 demographic engineering of Crimea meant that by the 1990s, the peninsula was roughly 90% populated by settlers from various regions of Russia and Ukraine. These newly established populations were entirely uninvested in, and often actively indifferent or hostile to, the reinforcement of Crimean Tatar culture, language, and distinct national identity.

The Ukrainian government, which held sovereignty over Crimea, likewise perceived the mass return of the Crimean Tatars as a latent threat to its state interests. Incapable of deploying overt military or police force to suppress or eradicate the population during an era when Ukraine itself was actively seeking international legitimacy and support for its independence, the state adopted alternative counter-strategies. To mitigate the demographic and political revitalization of the Crimean Tatar nation, administrative, economic, social, and cultural barriers were systematically instituted to impede both their socio-domestic resettlement and their cultural-linguistic renaissance.



While overt racial rhetoric or discriminatory propaganda was politically unfeasible under those geopolitical circumstances, the foundational state strategy manifested as bureaucratic sabotage. This structural obstruction targeted the most fundamental needs of the returning population, ranging from multi-year moratoriums on land allocation for residential construction to the creation of administrative impasses that rendered the establishment of Crimean Tatar schools and native-language pedagogical processes virtually impossible.

As definitive evidence of this state policy - a metric never officially contested by the Ukrainian authorities - out of 299 newly established Crimean Tatar settlements across the peninsula, land was formally and legally allocated prior to construction in only a single instance. Consequently, the remaining settlements had to be built by the Crimean Tatars on their ancestral lands with their own hands and capital, entirely without administrative authorization, and frequently in direct defiance of official prohibitions. In response, local authorities organized dozens of coordinated demolitions of these newly constructed settlements, targeting specific locations up to three consecutive times. Given the sheer scale of the humanitarian and financial resources required to repeatedly rebuild their homes, it was physically and economically impossible for the returning population to independently construct the corresponding 299 schools.

A highly illustrative example of the Ukrainian authorities' systematic sabotage of Crimean Tatar interests was their stance toward the restoration of the Latin script for the Crimean Tatar language.

In 1997, the Kurultai fraction within the Verkhovna Rada (parliament) of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea - comprising a mere 14 out of 100 deputies - managed to secure an official parliamentary resolution to transition the Crimean Tatar language back to a Latin-based alphabet. This milestone was achieved only after grueling political negotiations, parliamentary protests (including a hunger strike enacted by the entire fraction), and complex inter-fractional compromises.

The specific orthography had been meticulously developed by Crimean Tatar linguists, thoroughly debated at two separate academic conferences, and formally ratified by the Kurultai of the Crimean Tatar People long before the parliamentary vote. Passed in strict compliance with all legislative procedures, this resolution became a legally binding decision for the state organs of both Crimea and Ukraine.

However, while parliament holds legislative power, it does not publish textbooks, determine school and university curricula, or manage pedagogical work. Consequently, this binding resolution was completely ignored by every executive and state body of both the Crimean autonomy and the central Ukrainian government. Neither the national budget of Ukraine nor the regional budget of Crimea allocated any funding to implement the transition.

State-owned newspapers, television networks, radio stations, and universities responsible for training schoolteachers and educators received state directives and funding exclusively to maintain the use of the Cyrillic script in their operations and educational materials. Although this historic resolution has never been formally rescinded, it was utterly hollowed out by administrative non-compliance - a policy of total executive obstruction that persisted uninterrupted throughout the entire Ukrainian period of Crimea's modern history.

Following the geopolitical shift that brought Crimea under Russian jurisdiction in 2014, the peninsula automatically became subject to Russian federal legislation concerning national languages. Specifically, this invoked a restrictive amendment to the federal law originally enacted in 1991, which mandates that the state languages of all republics within the Russian Federation must exclusively utilize alphabets based on the Cyrillic script.



Law on the languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation

Article 6, Paragraph 6: "In the Russian Federation, the alphabets of the state language of the Russian Federation and the state languages of the republics shall be constructed on the graphic foundation of Cyrillic. Alternative graphic foundations for the alphabets of the state language of the Russian Federation and the state languages of the republics may be established [only] by federal laws." (*Paragraph 6 introduced by Federal Law No. 165-FZ of December 11, 2002*)

By integrating Crimea into this legal framework, the Russian administration effectively criminalized any official institutional attempt to implement or utilize the Latin-based script for the Crimean Tatar language. This federal statute institutionalized the legacy of the 1939 Stalinist linguistic policy, legally binding the Crimean Tatar language to the unmodified Cyrillic graphic system and extinguishing the long-standing efforts of native linguists and cultural institutions to restore their preferred orthography.

No legislative adjustments were necessary under the new administration; within the legal framework of the Russian Federation, the written form of the Crimean Tatar language exists exclusively in the pure, unmodified Cyrillic script originally imposed by the Stalinist decree of 1939.

For many decades, the Soviet-era Ukrainian authorities operated under the firm conviction that the Crimean Tatars would never be permitted to return to Crimea. This ideological certainty engendered a complete lack of administrative or scholarly interest on their part regarding the socio-political realities of pre-deportation Crimea, a detachment that persisted long after the peninsula's administrative transfer to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954.

In the post-Soviet period, this historical obfuscation directly shaped the geopolitical strategy of the independent Ukrainian government. In its official compliance reports submitted to international bodies - including the United Nations (UN), UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and various global human rights monitoring organizations - the state consistently sought to reframe its policies. By deliberately misrepresenting its administrative barriers and assimilationist practices toward the indigenous population, the government attempted to project its discriminatory stance as a constructive, human-rights-oriented, and humanitarian endeavor.

To assess and compare the actual policies of Ukraine and Russia regarding the Crimean Tatar language, it is highly instructive to analyze the following comprehensive structural comparison.

Block 1. Demographic Indicators of the Crimean Tatars

Period	The Crimean ASSR within the RSFSR (1921–1946)	The Autonomous Republic of Crimea within Ukraine (1991–2014)	The Republic of Crimea within Russia (2014–2026)
Population of Crimean Tatars.	1921: 186,900 people 1939: 219,400 people	1989: 39 000 people 2001: 245 290 people	2014: 232 340 people 2026: 205 083 people
Percentage share of the total population of Crimea	1920: 26,0% 1939: 19,4% 1944: 0% (<i>deportation</i>)	1989: 1,6% 2001: 10,22%	2014: 10,57% 2026: 8,3%



Block 2. Official and Constitutional Status of the Language

Period of the Crimean ASSR within the RSFSR (1921–1946)

The 1921 Constitution of the Crimean ASSR:

Article 2: The official languages of the Crimean SSR shall be Russian and Tatar...

Article 31: The coat of arms of the Crimean SSR shall consist of the image generally accepted in the Russian Federative Republic, with the following inscription on the enclosing wreath in both the Russian and Tatar languages: a) Crimean SSR, b) Proletarians of all countries, unite!

Article 32: The flag of the Crimean SSR shall consist of a red background with the inscription in both the Russian and Tatar languages: Crimean Socialist Soviet Republic.

The 1929 Constitution of the Crimean ASSR:

Article 6: The Crimean ASSR, while recognizing Russian and Tatar as the commonly used languages, concurrently guarantees every citizen the opportunity to use their native language in communications with state organs and public organizations, as well as to use the same at sessions of the Congress of Soviets, at any other congresses, meetings, and various presentations, including in court and public organizations. National minorities are guaranteed education in their native language at school.

Articles 107 and 108: The state coat of arms and flag contain the initials of the RSFSR and the Crimean ASSR, as well as slogans in both the Russian and Tatar languages.

The 1937 Constitution of the Crimean ASSR:

Article 24: Laws adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the Crimean ASSR shall be published in the Tatar and Russian languages.

Article 78: Judicial proceedings in the Crimean ASSR shall be conducted in the Tatar language in rural districts, urban districts, and settlements with a majority Tatar population; in the Russian language in those with a majority Russian population; in the German and Yiddish languages, respectively, in those with a majority German or Jewish population; and in both the Tatar and Russian languages in central judicial institutions...

Articles 111 and 112: The state coat of arms and flag shall include the inscriptions "RSFSR" and "Crimean ASSR" in both the Russian and Tatar languages.

Period of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea within Ukraine (1991–2014)

The 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Crimea (in 4 editions) and the 1995 Constitution:

Article 6 (Paragraph 1): The official language and the language of administration and record-keeping shall be the Russian language. The state languages in the Republic of Crimea shall be Crimean Tatar, Russian, and Ukrainian.

Article 6 (Paragraph 2): Citizens shall be guaranteed the right to use their native language or any other language, and to freely choose their language of education and upbringing.

Article 145: Judicial proceedings shall be conducted in the state languages or in the language of the majority of the population in a given locality. Persons participating in a case shall be guaranteed the right to speak in their native language through an interpreter.

The 1998 Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea:

Article 10: In the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, alongside the state (Ukrainian) language, the functioning, use, and protection of Russian, Crimean Tatar, and the languages of other



nationalities shall be ensured. The Russian language, as the language of the majority of the population, shall be used in all spheres of public life. Citizens shall be guaranteed the right to education in their native language.

Article 11: Official documents (passports, labor books, educational certificates, etc.) shall be issued in the Ukrainian and Russian languages, and, upon a citizen's request, also in the Crimean Tatar language.

Article 12: The Ukrainian language, or, upon the request of a participant, the Russian language, shall be used as the language of judicial proceedings, notarial proceedings, proceedings in cases of administrative offenses, and legal aid.

Article 13: Postal and telegraphic correspondence, as well as the public service sector, shall use the Ukrainian or Russian languages (or another language acceptable to the parties involved).

Period of the Republic of Crimea within Russia (2014–2026)

The 2014 Constitution of the Republic of Crimea:

Article 10: The state languages of the Republic of Crimea shall be the Russian, Ukrainian, and Crimean Tatar languages. The status of the state languages shall be established by the legislation of the Russian Federation and the legislation of the Republic of Crimea.

Article 19: Everyone shall have the right to use their native language, and to freely choose their language of communication, upbringing, education, and creative work.

Block 3. Practical use of the language in government institutions

The Crimean ASSR within the RSFSR (1921–1946)	The Autonomous Republic of Crimea (1991–2014)	The Republic of Crimea within Russia (2014–2026)
All documents of state bodies were issued in the Crimean Tatar language. Judicial proceedings and court documents were conducted in Crimean Tatar if Crimean Tatars participated in the trial. In registry offices (ZAGS), documents were issued in two languages: Russian and Crimean Tatar.	Acts and signage: Official acts of the ARC were issued in the Crimean Tatar language only from 1995 to 1998 (alongside Russian and Ukrainian); during this time, institution signage was also written in it and official forms were translated. The language was not used at any other level or in any other documents. Judicial proceedings: Conducted in the Russian and Ukrainian languages. An interpreter into Crimean Tatar was provided only upon a person's request. Registry offices (ZAGS): Documents were issued in the Russian language. A translation into Crimean Tatar was provided upon request, but when using it, the individual was required to provide an official copy or a translation back into Russian.	The language law issue: According to the constitution, the status of languages must be established by a law of the Republic of Crimea. From 2014 to the present day, the State Council (parliament) has rejected any attempt to draft and adopt such a law by an overwhelming majority of votes. Political minority: Crimean Tatars are completely unable to influence the parliamentary majority, which consists of Russians and Ukrainians. The number of Tatar deputies was as follows: 6 out of 103 in 2014; 3 out of 83 in 2018; 2 out of 82 in 2022; and 6 out of 75 in 2026.



The Crimean ASSR within the RSFSR (1921–1946)	The Autonomous Republic of Crimea (1991–2014)	The Republic of Crimea within Russia (2014–2026)
	Language priority: Only the Ukrainian language was understood as the "state" language. In relations with Kyiv, institutions used the Ukrainian language, while within Crimea, they used Russian (as the language of the majority of the population and a "language acceptable to the parties"). Under Ukraine, Crimea was a territory where the Russian language dominated and was used universally in education, while the complaints and protests of the Tatars were completely ignored.	Real status: The Crimean Tatar language remains a language of the private sphere of life. Russian functions everywhere as the nationwide language. Speaking in court through an interpreter or receiving a copy of documents at a registry office (ZAGS) in the Crimean Tatar language does not constitute an official status for the language; rather, it is the realization of individual human rights to information, as provided for by the Russian Constitution.

Block 4. Language use in the upbringing and education of children

Part 1. Preschool upbringing (Kindergartens)

The Ukrainian period

1991–1999: Dynamics of the number of Crimean Tatar preschool institutions under Ukraine: 12 in **1991**; 24 in **1992**; 40 in **1993**; 38 in **1994**; 25 in **1995**; and 20 in **1999**. In **1999**, they enrolled a total of only 337 children out of 25,179 Crimean Tatar children under the age of 7.

2007: The total number of preschool institutions in Crimea stood at 704 units.

2013: The total number of Crimean Tatar children under the age of 6 was approximately 17,800. How many of them had the opportunity to receive an upbringing in the Crimean Tatar language remains **unknown**.

The Russian period

2014: The number of Crimean Tatar children of preschool age was approximately 17,000. The number of those attending Crimean Tatar-language groups is **unknown**.

2025: In the preschool institutions of Crimea, approximately 1,500 children out of 12,300 Crimean Tatar children of preschool age study the Crimean Tatar language.

Part 2. School education (Chronological breakdown)

Period	Data on schools and students	Actual state of affairs and hidden nuances
1936–1941 (Crimean ASSR)	In 1936, there were 386 secondary, as well as 475 incomplete secondary and primary schools with the Crimean Tatar language of instruction in Crimea. In 1941, approximately 40,000 students were enrolled in 371 schools, which accounted for practically 100% of all school-age Crimean Tatar children .	In 1944, following the deportation, everything was closed: 371 schools, 2 pedagogical technical colleges, the Institute of Language and Literature, and all types of numerous libraries. All books and textbooks were gathered and burned.



Period	Data on schools and students	Actual state of affairs and hidden nuances
2001 (Ukraine)	For approximately 63,500 Crimean Tatar school-age children (though Ukrainian authorities understated the figure at 38,995), the following institutions were established: 7 schools with the Crimean Tatar language of instruction, 4 schools offering advanced study of the language, and 10 bilingual schools. Within these institutions, 2,374 students (6.1%) studied their native language, while 5,412 students pursued its advanced study.	According to the officially understated figures, only 13.9% of children were taught the language, while based on the actual numbers, it was only 12.2%. Eighty-eight percent of school students were deprived of the right to study their native language. In "national" schools, the instruction was conducted in Russian, and "instruction" referred to a mere 10 minutes out of a 45-minute lesson set aside for becoming familiar with terminology. In bilingual schools, 1,800 children were forced to give up the language because the lessons were conducted outside the standard curriculum or in place of other subjects (totaling just 2 hours per week).
2013 (Ukraine)	Ukraine reported 15 schools with instruction in the Crimean Tatar language, but legally there were only 6 (5,551 students, or 2.7% of all school-age children). In Russian-language schools, there were 384 classes offering minimal study of the language. In total, 18,020 children studied the language in one form or another (8.6% of all school students in Crimea, while the Tatar population share stood at 10.57%).	On paper, it was declared that 61.8% of children were studying the language, but in reality, out of 60,400 school-age children, only 29.8% were studying their native language. Seventy-two tenths percent (70.2%) of Crimean Tatar school students were unable to study their native language in schools. The concept of a "national school" was entirely absent from Ukrainian legislation; the term was used by the authorities solely for reporting to the UN and the Council of Europe.
2015 (Russia)	In Crimea, out of 586 general education schools (185,000 students), 6,000 children were enrolled in 15 so-called Crimean Tatar schools.	There were schools where 50% or even 75% of the children were Crimean Tatars, yet they were not allowed to study their native language.
2019 (Russia)	Officially, 15 schools have been declared where children study in the Crimean Tatar language (accounting for 3.1% of all school students in Crimea). Additionally, 27 schools with 126 Crimean Tatar classes have been announced.	In practice, school lessons were conducted predominantly in the Russian language. In one of the schools, the Crimean Tatar language was studied only up to the 9th grade (it was unavailable in the 10th and 11th grades). In 10 out of the 18 inspected schools, the signage was exclusively in Russian.
2020 (Russia)	According to data from the Ministry of Education of Crimea: 15 schools are functioning (comprising 237 classes and 5,000 students). On the basis of Russian-language classes, 117 Crimean Tatar classes have been opened across 22 schools (serving 1.7 thousand children). Approximately 31,000 school students study the language as a subject, an elective, or through extracurricular activities.	The data is provided by the Ministry of Education of Crimea.



Period	Data on schools and students	Actual state of affairs and hidden nuances
2026 (Russia)	Officially, 16 schools with the Crimean Tatar language of instruction are functioning. In total, 7,200 students (3.3% of the total number of school students in the Republic of Crimea) are taught in it. Another 23,000 children study it for 45 minutes per week across 19 Russian-language schools.	The actual state of affairs at the current moment (2026): A detailed analysis of the hidden problems and legal loopholes is presented in the analytical block below

The actual state of affairs in the sphere of education as of 2026

The real number of schools: Out of the 16 officially declared schools, only 14 are actually functioning at the present moment.

Deprivation of language study rights: Out of approximately 53,300 school-age Crimean Tatar children in Crimea, 30,200 children study the language overall. Meanwhile, about 20,120 children (44%) are completely deprived of the right and opportunity to study the Crimean Tatar language in school.

Legal ploys in Russian Federation legislation: The concept of a "national school" is entirely absent from Russian legislation. Schools with a "native language of instruction" are mentioned, but the law establishes neither a mandatory list of subjects nor a minimum threshold for the use of the native language. The very definition of instruction depends entirely on the discretion of the administration and officials. No resources are allocated for this, and the schools serve merely as a "propaganda billboard."

The myth of "advanced study": No such concept exists in the law. The administration or the ministry can label the study as "advanced" entirely at their own discretion. In practice, this is understood as having just 1–2 lessons of 45 minutes per week, and these lessons are frequently declared supplementary or optional.

Pressure from school administrations: In schools where the language is taught simply as a subject, its instruction never exceeds 45 minutes per week. Administrations actively try to get rid of it entirely: they require parents to write an application to enroll, and subsequently force them to opt out under the pretext of a lack of funding or a shortage of teachers. School funds are demonstratively spent on other needs.

Refutation of the staff shortage: The administrations' claims regarding a shortage of teachers are untrue. There are two major educational institutions operating in Crimea that graduate specialists in this field: the Crimean Federal University and the Crimean Engineering and Pedagogical University. To date, they have trained and graduated several hundred professional, certified teachers of the Crimean Tatar language.

Methodological note and structural synthesis

It must be kept in mind that neither the Ukrainian nor the Russian state provided comprehensive public statistics that would allow for a full and comparable monitoring of these states' educational policies regarding the Crimean Tatar language and the schooling of Crimean Tatar children. Independent collection of such information was extremely difficult and can currently become a ground for persecution.

However, even the figures provided demonstrate that the number of schools and the Crimean Tatar students enrolled in them under the conditions of the Crimean ASSR prior to 1941 and in



Ukraine or Russia at present are simply incomparable. Furthermore, it must be taken into account that under conditions where a child receives instruction in their native language for a mere 45 minutes per week—while the Russian language is studied in various forms to the extent of 225–270 minutes, and all other subjects, including in schools with the Crimean Tatar language of instruction, are taught in Russian, which is even more critical for confident working proficiency in a language—it is completely obvious that this in no way constitutes measures for the revival, preservation, and let alone development of the Crimean Tatar language.

The collapse of the linguistic ecosystem and social environment

However, it is unacceptable to consider the language situation solely within the sphere of formal education. The entire environment—speech outside the family, signs, newspapers, television and radio broadcasting, the internet, official documents, advertising, public information, and the constant necessity to interact with a Russian-speaking population that outnumbers them tenfold whenever they leave their homes—practically eliminates a true Crimean Tatar linguistic environment where people could maintain, let alone improve, their proficiency in their native language.

Everyday Crimean Tatar speech among adults, including the elderly, now consists of a Crimean Tatar greeting and farewell, a few traditional questions and answers, and very rarely of more than a few consecutive sentences. People are unable to communicate on any topics beyond the most primitive, everyday matters. Under such circumstances, successfully teaching the native language to children or younger generations has become an insurmountable problem for the Crimean Tatars.

Historical responsibility and the future of the language

It is entirely obvious that any hopes for the language to revive on its own or as a result of the actions of any state are unrealistic. To rely on this is a dangerous delusion that will lead to the complete disappearance of the Crimean Tatar language from daily life within the coming decades, turning it into a dead language that is merely an object of interest and study for a narrow circle of scholars and specialists.

CONCLUSION

The historical and statistical tables presented show that the critical situation of the Crimean Tatar language today is neither a coincidence nor merely a tragedy left in the past. This situation is the natural result of a conscious political mechanism of elimination that has operated uninterrupted from 1783 to the present day.

In the face of this picture, a realistic strategy for the future of the language cannot rely on the emptied promises of state institutions such as "national schools" or "intensive education." Likewise, the expectation of a spontaneous revival is not realistic either.

What must be done as a matter of priority is for the Crimean Tatar community to actively expand the language's domain in daily life through its own internal dynamics. For this purpose, intergenerational language transmission within the family must be made systematic. Independent preschool and supportive language environments must be established. Furthermore, the production of digital and audiovisual content—such as age-appropriate children's content, social media, and online courses—must be prioritized.

Simultaneously, reporting pressure based on concrete and verifiable indicators before international organizations (UNESCO, OSCE, Council of Europe) must be maintained more actively. This pressure is essential to ensure that states undertake measurable obligations rather than symbolic ones.



Otherwise, in light of the data presented in this article, the Crimean Tatar language will cease to be a language of daily communication within the next few decades. The language becoming merely a subject of academic study is not a distant possibility, but a direct extension of current trends.

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