Before Crimea Was an Ethnic Russian Stronghold, It Was a Potential Jewish Homeland

Jews have lived in the area since ancient times, and leaders from Catherine the Great to Stalin encouraged their settlement there

BY JEFFREY VEIDLINGER

MARCH 04, 2014

"ON THE WAY TO SEVASTOPOL, NOT TOO FAR FROM SIMFEROPOL," begins what is probably the most famous Yiddish song from the Soviet Union, "Hey Dzhankoye." The song, named after a collective farm near the Crimean town of Dzhankoy, celebrates the alleged victories of the Soviet collectivization drive of the 1920s and 1930s, which, according to the song, magically transformed Jewish merchants into farmers. "Who says that Jews can only trade?" asks the final verse of the song, "Just take a look at Dzhan."

Now, as the new government in Kiev struggles to find its footing after the ouster of Ukraine's pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych, Russian troops are occupying the Crimea in the name of protecting ethnic Russians and, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov suggested at the United Nations, combating anti-Semitic ultra-nationalists—an ironic twist, less than a century after the Kremlin contemplated the peninsula as the site of a potential Jewish homeland.

Jews have been living in the peninsula since ancient times, largely divided into two communities: the Krymchaks, who followed rabbinical Judaism, and the

Karaites, who rejected the Oral Torah. Soon after Catherine the Great conquered the region from the Ottoman Empire in 1783, she opened it up to Jewish settlement, hoping that the Jews would serve as a bulwark against the Turks. Although Jews were later barred from living in the major cities, the peninsula promised open spaces and freedom to adventurous Jews seeking new frontiers and willing to take up a spade.

Tens of thousands of mostly young Jews settled in this part of "New Russia" over the next century. The Crimea became so identified with Russia's Jewish history, in fact, that Jewish activists in St. Petersburg pointed to the long legacy of Crimean Jews as an argument for Jewish emancipation in the empire—after all, they claimed, Jews had been living there longer than Russians. (The 19th-century Karaite historian Avraam Firkovich even tried to argue that Karaites were living in the Crimea before the time of Jesus Christ, and he fabricated tombstone inscriptions to prove it.)

Jewish residents of the Crimea were also deeply engaged in the critical Jewish question of the time—Zionism—and by the late 19th century the area had become a training ground for future Zionist pioneers, who practiced agricultural techniques there before relocating to Palestine. Joseph Trumpeldor —who famously gave his life defending the northern Galilee settlement of Tel Hai with the motto "It is good to die for our country"—once trained potential migrants in the Crimea. (One Crimean settlement was named Tel Hai in his honor.)

In the early 1920s, the new Soviet government once again turned its attention to the peninsula. Concerned that the Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, and Germans who mostly populated the region were anti-Communist, officials in Moscow were eager to buy the loyalty of new recruits with land grants and promises of autonomy in the agriculturally rich peninsula. When the American agronomist and communal activist Joseph A. Rosen suggested providing financial support through the Joint Distribution Committee to resettle Jewish victims of the pogroms in the region, the Kremlin jumped at the opportunity. In 1923, the Politburo accepted a proposal for establishing a Jewish Autonomous Region in the Crimea, before reversing itself a few months later.

Nevertheless, from 1924 until 1938, the Joint Distribution Committee, through its subsidiary American Jewish Joint Agricultural Corporation and with the financial support of American Jewish philanthropists like Julius Rosenwald, supported Jewish agricultural settlements in Soviet Crimea. Numerous Jewish collective farms and even whole Jewish districts sprouted over the next few years. The dream of building a Jewish republic in the Crimea remained alive until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Most of the Jewish colonists in the Crimea fled east to seek safety far from the front; entire collective farms fled together, traveling in convoys eastward, just ahead of the German troops, all the way to Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan.

There they reestablished their collective farms, and many joined the Red Army to fight the Nazis. As the war dragged on, Stalin dispatched two representatives of the newly established Soviet Jewish Antifascist Committee—Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels and Yiddish poet Itsik Fefer—to the United States and other Allied countries to raise support among Western Jews for the Soviet war effort. In New York, Mikhoels and Fefer met with representatives of the Joint Distribution Committee, who spoke of renewing their support for Jewish colonies in the Crimea once the peninsula was liberated from Nazi control.

In 1944, the Red Army routed the Germans out of the Crimea. Stalin ordered the deportation of about 180,000 Crimean Tatars in retaliation for their alleged collaboration with the enemy. Soviet troops ordered Tatar families to pack up their allotted 80 kilograms of belongings and board trains out of the region; soon thereafter, tens of thousands of Jews returned to the Crimea from the east to resettle the colonies they had been forced to abandon.

It was in the context of this chaos that Mikhoels and Fefer met with the Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and discussed the idea of establishing a Jewish homeland in the Crimea. Molotov seemed like a sympathetic ally. Stalin had appointed him in May 1939 to replace Maxim Litvinov, whose Jewish roots made him an awkward choice to lead the coming negotiations with Nazi Germany; three months later, Molotov signed the nonaggression pact that would allow Germany to invade Poland, beginning WWII. Yet Molotov was not unfriendly toward Jews; his wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, was from a Jewish

family in southern Ukraine and had a sister who had emigrated to Palestine. Mikhoels and Fefer left the meeting convinced that Molotov would support the plan and followed through by sending a memorandum outlining the proposal to Stalin.

But instead, Stalin used the Crimean proposal as a pretext for a major assault on Soviet Jewry. The United Nations vote in support of the establishment of the State of Israel in November 1947 had rendered a Jewish homeland in the Crimea superfluous and reinforced Stalin's suspicions of Jewish national aspirations. On the night of Jan. 12, 1948, Stalin had Mikhoels murdered, signifying the beginning of Stalin's campaign against the Jews. Over the next 13 months, Fefer, Zhemchuzhina, and numerous other members of the Jewish Antifascist Committee were arrested. Zhemchuzhina was exiled to Kazakhstan. Fifteen others were tried in secret on the charge of conspiring with the United States to establish a Jewish republic in the Crimea.

On Aug. 12, 1952, in what came to be known as the Night of the Murdered Poets, 13 of the defendants, including Fefer and well-known Yiddish writers Dovid Bergelson, Dovid Hofshteyn, Leyb Kvitko, Peretz Markish, and Yiddish actor Benjamin Zuskin, were executed in Moscow's Lubyanka Prison. Two years later, the Kremlin settled the fate of the Crimea when it transferred the peninsula to the administrative authority of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

***

Between 2002 and 2010, I traveled on numerous occasions through the small towns of Ukraine as part of a team conducting Yiddish-language oral history and linguistic interviews with elderly Jews. Some of those we spoke with spent their youth in nominally autonomous Jewish districts in the Crimea. They all knew the lyric "On the way to Sevastopol."

In one verse of the song, Abrasha rides his tractor like a train, Auntie Leye is at the mower, and Beyle is at the thresher, all symbols of progress in the revolutionary era. Nowhere does the song mention the 25,000 Red Army soldiers and factory workers who forced villagers into the collective farms,

shooting or arresting those who resisted. As many as 15,000 families were sent to "special settlements" in the Soviet east, while thousands were shot on the spot.

Those we interviewed preferred to remember the Crimea the way the song described it, as a Jewish utopia. They spoke fondly of attending the Yiddish language schools, where they studied mathematics, history, Marxism-Leninism, and farming techniques in Yiddish, and they remember evenings out at the Crimean Yiddish State Theaters. Others emphasized how Jews lived alongside Russians, Ukrainians, Muslim Tatars, and Germans.

When we interviewed Tatiana Marinina in 2002, for example, she told us about how her family had moved to the Lunacharskii Collective Farm, named after the first Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment, in 1931. She fondly remembered the cows, the horses, the sheep, and the vineyards. She described how her mother, who was a "shock worker"—the Soviet term for a worker who over-fulfills her quota—would work the cotton fields. She recounted friendly relations between the Jews on the farm and the ethnic Germans, who lived in the nearby villages, and between the various religious sectarians who made the peninsula their home. The Yiddish school was closed by the time her younger sister, Sofia Palatnikova, started her schooling; Palatnikova told us she went instead to a Russian language school in a nearby Tatar village.

Many people we spoke with remembered the tractors and farm equipment that American Jewish philanthropic organizations sent to the Jewish settlements. Zorekh Kurliandchik, whom we interviewed in 2003, told us of the collective farm he lived on for three years in the early 1930s. "The first combine was on the Jewish collective farm," he boasted, "the Tatars would come and stare at it."

The names of the agricultural settlements established during this decade reflect the optimism of the times and the multilingual nature of their communities: Fraylebn (Yiddish: *Free Life*); Fraydorf (Yiddish: *Free Village*); Yidendorf (Yiddish: *Jewish Village*); Ahdut (Hebrew: *Unity*); Yetsirah (Hebrew: *Creation*); Herut (Hebrew: *Freedom*); and Pobeda (Russian: *Victory*), to name but a few.

Today there are some 17,000 Jews still living in the peninsula. One of the few remaining synagogues, in Simferopol, was <u>vandalized</u> last week, when the slogan "Death to Jews" and swastikas were painted on its door. Now it's Russian tanks on the road to Sevastopol, not too far from Simferopol, and the Jewish tractors that once filled the road are just a fading memory.

***

Like this article? Sign up for our <u>Daily Digest</u> to get Tablet Magazine's new content in your inbox each morning.

<u>*Jeffrey Veidlinger*</u> *is Joseph Brodsky Collegiate Professor of History and Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan. He is the author, most recently, of* In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine.

<div style="border:1px solid #d6542a; padding:1em; color:#d6542a;">

Jeffrey Veidlinger is Joseph Brodsky Collegiate Professor of History and Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan. He is the author, most recently, of *In the Midst of Civilized Europe: The Pogroms of 1918-1921 and the Onset of the Holocaust.*

</div>

#BIROBIDZHAN   #CRIMEA   #JOSEF STALIN   #JOSEPH TRUMPELDOR   #MAIDAN #PALESTINE   #SOVIET JEWS   #UKRAINE   #VLADIMIR PUTIN   #ZIONISM