

Emine Ziyatdinova

CRIMEA

January 22–29, 2023

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Emine Ziyatdinova is a Crimean Tatar documentary photographer and independent consultant currently working in the non-profit and media development sphere. She was born in Uzbekistan, where her family was deported from Crimea in 1944 by the Stalin regime. Growing up as a member of the Crimean Tatar minority in Ukraine after the Soviet Union's collapse, she received a first-hand understanding of the various human rights issues that arose with ethnic minorities and with the collapse of the economic and political system in her country. The desire to advocate for people who are often silenced to voice their concerns brought her to the career paths of sociology and documentary photography. Her experience places her at the intersection of documentary photography, sociology, human rights, and journalism. She holds an MA degree in sociology from Ivan Franko National University of Lviv and an MA degree in photojournalism from Ohio University's School of Visual Communication. After having worked in documentary photography and journalism from 2012–2017 in Ukraine, she relocated to the UK, where she has been working in the non-profit sector, most recently as a media consultant with the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Her work has been supported by a Fulbright Scholarship and a Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund Fellowship and her photography projects have been exhibited in Ukraine as well as internationally.

Blinken OSA Archivum | Galeria Centralis
Arany János utca 32, 1051 Budapest, Hungary
Tuesday–Sunday: 10:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.
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**centrális
Galéria**



Opening event: **January 22, 2023, Sunday, 6:00 p.m.**

The exhibition *Crimea* is a visual sequence that reflects on the photographer's family and larger Crimean Tatar community experience, finding Home in the complicated geopolitical environment preceding and following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. For Ziyatdinova, the camera and recorder became tools to search for answers: Who am I? Where do I belong? What is Home? They allowed her to uncover the family stories of Crimea's past and present, which are absent or distorted by lingering Soviet and Russian propagandistic narratives. The great-grandfather, whom the Soviets persecuted for *de-facto* owning land and using hired labor in Crimea in 1937, before collectivization. The grandparents, who were falsely accused of Nazi collaboration, and were forcefully deported to Central Asia; and the relatives, who did not survive the arduous journey, difficult conditions, and poor treatment. The parents, who had to navigate the Soviet propaganda to regain their identity, and moved back to their homeland in 1990.

The sequence also reflects on Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Crimean Tatars as a group once again became a target of political state persecution. The photographs capture the quiet moments of daily life and landscapes in Crimea, with an almost invisible political tension growing through the sequence. The sense of Home is replaced by the feeling of instability and fear, accompanied by the state's repressive political machinery and propaganda.

The photographs for the project were taken between 2008 and 2016.
The video sequence was filmed and produced in 2015–2016.

The exhibition was organized by the Blinken OSA Archivum and the CEU Invisible University for Ukraine.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Crimean Tatars are an indigenous, Turkic-speaking Muslim ethnic group with an estimated current population of 250,000–300,000 living in Ukraine, primarily in the Crimean Peninsula. Prior to the annexation of Crimea in 1783 by the Russian Empire under the leadership of Catherine the Great, a result of the Russo-Ottoman wars, Crimean Tatars constituted the demographic majority in Crimea. At that time, they lived under a state structure called the Crimean Khanate under Ottoman Empire rule.

With the arrival of Imperial Russia and its administrative and governance structures, Crimean Tatars lost their effective self-rule. Moreover, the demographic situation in the Crimean Peninsula also evolved. First, there were several waves of emigration of Crimean Tatars, primarily to Turkey. Second, the Russian Empire implemented policies entailing Russian immigration flows to Crimea. This implied that by the early 20th century, once the Russian Empire collapsed and was superseded by the Soviet Union, Crimean Tatars were no longer a demographic majority.

In 1944, the entire Crimean Tatar population was deported from Crimea by the Stalin regime, mostly to Central Asia, justified by the false accusation against the ethnic group of collaboration with Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Within a two-year period, more than one-third of the population died.

These two events—the annexation of Crimea in 1783 by Catherine II and the deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944 by Stalin—defined the Russian and Soviet historical narratives of Crimea and the role of Crimean Tatars in it, with the underlying purpose to justify Russian dominance in the peninsula and the inhumane deportation of the entire nation. These narratives therefore de-emphasized the Crimean Tatar population in its own rights, along with its culture and institutions, which preceded Russian colonial rule. Instead, the narrative strived to establish the Russian ethnic and cultural presence in the peninsula. Additionally, many Crimean Tatar historical documents and archives were destroyed or lost, which contributed to the reinforcement of Slavic and Russian dominance in the Crimean historical narrative, and to the absence of the Crimean Tatars in it.

As depicted in various historical and media narratives of the Soviet period, Crimean Tatars became in various periods an “exotic Other,” champions of ethnic diversity, before being recast as traitors and deported by the Soviets. When Crimean Tatars were allowed to return in the 1990s, they were largely an ignored minority by the Ukrainian government and society.

With the 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, many Ukrainian citizens have embraced a new perspective on Crimean Tatars as Ukraine's vulnerable indigenous group and most important cultural and ethnic minority. Yet, despite perceiving them as allies in the war against Russia since 2014, a majority of the Ukrainian population still considered Crimean Tatars as “Others,” and would struggle to integrate their history and identity into the larger Ukrainian historical narrative and identity concept. At the same time, on the other side of the Russian/Ukrainian border Crimean Tatars are continually portrayed by the Russian state apparatus as extremist enemies of the state on the one hand, and as lucky “beneficiaries” of Russian largesse on the other.

Additionally, the historical narrative—as well as the media deliberations—around Crimean Tatars is extremely politicized. Each time the group is mentioned, the question is raised: where does Crimea belong? Is it Russian, Ukrainian, Crimean Tatar? Is it Slavic or Turkic? Does it belong to the Muslim or Christian world? In these narratives, the voices, stories, and perspectives of the very people who experience the historical events in their midst are often under- or misrepresented. Covering as a journalist the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, Emine Ziyatdinova witnessed how this politicized narrative turned into propaganda and was about to turn into violence.

The challenges to understanding the historical place and experience of Crimean Tatars in Crimea are further exacerbated by the efforts of the Russian State now controlling the territory to erase or override the “Post-Soviet Ukrainian” presence on the Peninsula. This takes place in many forms, one of which is the choreographed and ideologically-informed narrative of a Russian-Crimean unity and shared historical destiny. Measures currently undertaken by the Russian government to improve local infrastructure in some areas of rural Crimea serve the same strategic purpose, working as another reminder of how important reunification is for the Crimeans.