

# Homeward

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The Crimean Tatars, a people expelled from their homeland, nonetheless remain at the heart of modern Ukraine's struggles – and its cinema. Gradually forged over several centuries into a linguistic and cultural unit out of the multicultural melange of the Black Sea's Tatars, Greeks, Armenians, and others, Crimean Tatars represented the overwhelming majority of the peninsula's population until the late 19th century, when the predations and great power conflicts of the Russian Empire began to take an irreversible toll. Famines, deportations, and mass emigrations further decimated the peninsula's Tatar population in the first 15 years of Soviet rule. But the Crimean Tatar's great trauma was yet to come.

Crimea was occupied by Nazi forces from 1941 until its liberation in May of 1944. Immediately upon recapturing the peninsula, the Soviets' State Defence Committee ordered the deportation of all Crimean Tatars, mostly to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, on the fabricated charge that the population as a whole were guilty of collaboration with their Nazi occupiers. Estimates vary significantly, but between 18 and 46 percent of the entire Crimean Tatar population perished; some died on the arduous journey, some were murdered by the NKVD secret police force, and many fell victim to the harsh conditions that awaited them in Central Asia. The Sürgünlik, or "exile", as the Tatars themselves call it, has never truly ended: although small numbers were allowed to return to Crimea in 1967 and again after 1989, they received no assistance to do so from either Moscow or Kyiv, and they remain an absolute minority on the peninsula. And then, in 2014, a government ensconced in Moscow once again made their homeland into the heart of a brutal project of dispossession by illegally annexing Crimea as part of the conflict with Ukraine that has now erupted into full-scale invasion.

Crimea, and the historical traumas of its population, are thus central to understanding the state of Ukraine today – but the Tatars and the Sürgünlik are too often absent from Western reckonings. Nariman Aliev's debut feature *Homeward* ("Evge" in the Crimean Tatar language) clearly and with great compassion ties together the various histories of the

deportation, the annexation, and the war in the Donbas into a portrait of a country straining, sometimes against itself, to retain a multicultural identity.

Akhtem Seitablaev and Remzi Bilyalov are remarkable as father and son Mustafa and Alim. Elder son/brother Nazim has been killed fighting Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas, leaving behind a Ukrainian fiancée in Kyiv, Olesya (Daria Barihashvili). Mustafa insists on returning the body to Crimea in order to perform the traditional Tatar Muslim funeral rites. So, father and son take wordlessly to the road, a corpse in the trunk of their car, and head south-east from Kyiv. As obstacles mount, Mustafa's health worsens, and his resolve shades into a kind of brutality – not least when he forcibly prevents Olesya (an Orthodox Christian) from joining them on their journey.

Aliev is careful to capture these complexities of character, even as his approach remains on the whole minimal and austere. The film is laden with the sense of the cost of attempting to maintain one's identity and traditions in a world that has cut them off from you at every turn. Alim, a student in Kyiv getting to grips with the Ukrainian language, cannot truly understand his father's violent urges. The film opens in a morgue and charts the journey towards a burial ground; Tatar culture is depicted as shrouded in death, a fragile and increasingly distant thing. "Crimea is our Jerusalem," Mustafa tells Alim at one point, and it is telling that the narrative unfolds entirely outside of the peninsula itself. The homeland is always just out of reach.

The film's immersion in Ukrainian and Tatar history may present something of a stumbling block for anglophone audiences – the symbolically potent switches in the dialogue between the Turkic Tatar and Slavic Ukrainian languages, for instance, may well go unnoticed – but the sheer power of Aliev's quietly profound imagery more than makes up for any potential misapprehensions. *Homeward* was already painfully timely before recent events made its story of the pain and violence that rushes in when one's identity is denied truly vital.