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Compliant Subjects?

How the Crimean Tatars Resist Russian Occupation in Crimea

ABSTRACT The Crimean Tatars, a Muslim Turkic ethnic group, remain the most oppressed group in Crimea after the 2014 Russian annexation. The Ukrainian public tends to view them as obedient victims forced to accommodate Russian demands, while scholars mainly avoid the issue. My ethnographic fieldwork in Crimea, however, demonstrates that what might seem like obedient behavior from the outside is, in fact, an expression of agency. This reading is based on close-range observations and conversations with people who speak and behave in ways that initially appear as compliant acts, but which do in fact challenge Russian authorities—arguably more so than other overt forms of resistance in this context. I argue that the ability to decipher many Crimean Tatars' behavior as tactics of resistance, depends on our understanding of authorities' contrary expectations. Portrayed as religious fanatics and a security threat, Crimean Tatars are stereotyped as terrorists, likely to engage in extremist activity. In light of this, Crimean Tatars' compliant behavior, expressed through patience and etiquette, festivity and humor, proves that narrative wrong. Furthermore, other seemingly compliant behaviors—such as accepting Russian passports in order to remain in Crimea—should be interpreted as an act of resistance to the political aims of state actors. By undermining the state's aim to push out Crimean Tatars and increase the Slavic population, the decision to remain in Crimea in fact challenges state power, rather than affirms it.
KEYWORDS civil resistance, obedience, Crimean Tatars, Crimea, authoritarianism

In 2014, Russia's invasion and annexation of the Crimean region of Ukraine was widely condemned all around the world. But perhaps the most outspoken criticism came from the ethnic Turkic Sunni Muslim Crimean Tatars themselves. Representing 12% of the peninsula's population at that time, the Crimean Tatars consider themselves Crimea's indigenous people. For them, Russia was a familiar colonial foe: from 1783 on, ethnic Russians had repeatedly occupied Crimea, suppressing the Tatar culture and religion, and committing atrocities that have had an enduring effect on the collective memory of the Tatars as a people (Fisher, 1978; Magocsi, 2014). Especially pronounced is the tragedy of 1944, when Stalin accused the entire nation of Nazi collaboration and deported Crimean Tatars to Central Asia, resulting in the deaths of nearly half the population (Bazhan et al., 2016, p. 14).

At the current moment, anticipating yet another attempt to colonize the region, Crimean Tatars are once again proving to be a united front against the Russian invasion. They have boycotted the referendum, organized rallies, launched energy and trade

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blockades, and to this day abstain from voting in Russian elections.[1] This open protest, together with their repeated declarations of belonging to the Ukrainian "political nation," has resulted in targeted repressions (Ogarkova, 2019). By silencing Crimean Tatars' dissent, Russian authorities have pursued a two-prong tactic of reasserting its power and demarcating a common enemy to defend the dominant Slavic population against.

Today, almost seven years after Russia's latest annexation, Crimean Tatars remain one of the most oppressed groups in Crimea (Freedom House, 2020). Since 2014, there have been 190 Tatars imprisoned in Crimea, 51 Tatars were murdered by the police, and 18 Tatars are currently missing (Crimean Tatar Resource Center, 2021).[2] Russia has outlawed their religious activity and curtailed their personal liberties.

Fearing for the future, many Tatars have fled Crimea since 2014, ending up in Ukraine in big cities, such as Kyiv and L'viv.[3] There they came to the attention of diplomats, foreign donors, and media, who were eager to hear about their experiences and, in some cases, to publicize their concerns in the international arena. As a result, the émigré Tatars in Ukraine were able to present their case in the halls of the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), thereby enabling their sense of agency or *subiektnist'*. In the view of these émigré Tatars, the annexation, however horrific, provided an opportunity for the Crimean Tatar people to become key players in the geopolitical game of the Black Sea region (Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, 2018; Ukrinform, 2021). Their leaders have demanded that the Ukrainian government grant them indigenous status, and they argue that their claims are the leverage Ukraine needs to restore its sovereignty over the peninsula.[4]

In Crimea, on the other hand, the Tatars who have stayed behind receive little attention from the international community and Ukrainian politicians. There, they are

1. By characterizing Crimean Tatars as on the whole "united," I do not wish to gloss over the internal divisions and nuances within the community. For example, the 2014 Qurultay (national congress and supreme representative body) made internal squabbles and frayed negotiations among Crimean Tatar representatives highly visible. Some of the delegates did in fact accept Russia's proposal for cooperation. Only after Russia began violating this agreement on the ground did the Crimean Tatars' mostly unanimous front against the occupation form.

2. I use the terms "Tatars" and "Crimean Tatars" interchangeably for the sake of brevity only. It is important to acknowledge that the term "Tatar," which was integrated into the 13th-century Russian language to refer to different nomadic tribes coming to the medieval kingdom of Rus' from the East, blurs the lines between very distinct peoples. Over time, as more accuracy was added to ethnonyms, like Crimean Tatars, Kazan Tatars, Astrakhan Tatars, Bashkir Tatars, and so on, it was still convenient for Russian (later Soviet) empire to keep the "Tatar" part (Uehling, 2004, p. 28). The emphasis on the "Crimean" part of the Tatar ethnonym became even more pronounced in light of recent Russia's attempts to draw these groups under one "Tatar" category (Sohbet, 2020), which many Crimean Tatars resist.

3. Somewhere between 35,000 and 40,000 individuals had left Crimea since 2014, and about 17,000 to 20,000 of those departed are Crimean Tatars (Wilson, 2016a).

4. After decades of delay, on 20 March 2014, the Ukrainian Parliament finally issued an act "On guarantees of the rights of Crimean Tatar people in Ukrainian state." Ukraine guarantees protection and realization of its right to self-determination within its borders; recognizes Crimean Tatar political institutions Mejlis and Qurultay as official self-governing bodies; supports the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; and recognizes 18 May as the day of struggle for the rights of Crimean Tatars. In July 2021, the Ukrainian president signed a law, "On Indigenous People of Ukraine," in which Crimean Tatars are officially recognized as indigenous people.

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left silenced and outnumbered by ethnic Russians and a mainly pro-Russian population. The increased repression has put an end to their open protest, rendering them invisible to the Ukrainian and international media. As a result, the émigré Tatar discourse of *subiektnist′* no longer resonates back home.

Indeed, many outside observers assume that the Tatars still in Crimea have acquiesced in the Russian annexation of their homeland. It is fairly common to hear people in mainland Ukraine reproaching Tatars in Crimea for their alleged resignation to Russian domination. As I interacted with émigré Tatar respondents in western, central, and southern parts of Ukraine, I observed multiple instances of such attitudes: from casual taxi trips to public events dedicated to the subject of Crimea.[5]

A similar assumption also holds in the academic literature. So far, few studies have been devoted to documenting how the Tatars in Crimea have maintained their nonviolent resistance to Russian rule. Most scholars have focused either on Russian-Ukrainian relations and Russia's motivations for the occupation (Toal, 2017; Grigas, 2016; Yekelchyk, 2015; Kuzio, 2015; Bebler, 2015), or on the Crimean Tatar Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in mainland Ukraine and their relationship with ethnic Ukrainians (Charron, 2019; Zubkovych, 2019; Kratochvil, 2019; Finnin, 2019; Wilson, 2016). Those interested in the experience of Crimean Tatars in Crimea have analyzed discourses of trauma, memories, attachment to the land, and institutional changes (Kouts & Muratova, 2014; Muratova, 2019; Nikolko, 2018; Zasztowt, 2019). But those mainly interested in the conflict have focused more on Russian state-sponsored political violence against the Tatars than on Crimean Tatar resistance to that violence (Žídková & Melichar, 2015; Özcelik, 2020; Carment & Nikolko, 2016).

The paradox, however, is that despite these assumptions, and despite the authoritarian restrictions imposed by the state, the Tatars in Crimea have produced a huge number of new cultural products, which include the first televised sitcom in the Crimean Tatar language, the first Crimean Tatar fairytale movie, the first Crimean Tatar book fair, and more (Mokrushin, 2020; Turenko, 2018; Ablekerimova, 2019). Concerned with avoiding Russification and preserving their collective identity, the Tatars have initiated a cultural revival that was hardly imaginable under Ukrainian rule.

These astonishing accomplishments are viewed with suspicion by onlookers from mainland Ukraine, who tend to disparage this cultural flowering as a form of accommodation to the Russian regime. For instance, some exiled members of the self-governing Mejlis institution criticized the first Crimean Tatar book fair in Simferopil for its alleged collaboration with the authorities (Budzhurova, 2019). My ethnographic fieldwork, on the other hand, suggests that Tatars' behavior can be interpreted as an assertion of agency—and as a tactic of resistance. In this article, I aim to show how.

5. While the general attitude toward Crimean Tatar IDPs has been largely positive (Mikheieva & Sereda, 2014), the mentioned issue has not been tackled by scholars or media. Crimean Tatars, both in mainland Ukraine and in Crimea, however, are very sensitive to this discourse (*Ukrayinska Pravda*, 2021).

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OBEDIENCE AND RESISTANCE: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

Resistance has been studied by social scientists for decades, in both democratic and authoritarian contexts. Numerous studies are dedicated to anchoring the concept in various criteria, such as the effectiveness, recognition, and intent of acts (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Scholarship on tactics is also very vast, especially in high-intensity authoritarian contexts, where, apart from conventional direct forms of resistance, scholars identify everyday covert forms (Scott, 1976, 1985, 1990; Bayat, 2013; Johnston, 2005; Fu, 2018; Weitz, 2001).

Indeed, as many scholars have pointed out, in authoritarian regimes people rarely wage an open struggle against their opponents, opting for subtle strategies. Most importantly, they often do not aim at overthrowing the regime or changing the system entirely, but rather work within it to their minimum disadvantage (Scott, 1985). My research supports this thesis by showing how Crimean Tatars in an increasingly authoritarian Crimea seek to preserve their unity and collective identity rather than challenge Russian occupation through open dissent.[6] Like the poor peasants in James Scott's famous account, the Tatars in Crimea have shifted their attention to preserving their cultural integrity, rather than voicing explicit political demands (Scott, 1976, p. 4).

Where my account differs from Scott's and other accounts is in interpreting the nature of the relationships between the hegemonic power and subordinate groups, which in turn impact our interpretation of resistance behavior. In Scott's account of slavery, for example, the system of domination requires the affirmation of the existing hegemonic structure through rituals, etiquette, euphemisms, or at least concealment (Scott, 1990). This affirmation operates as obedient behavior in a public setting that coexists with expressions of rage and dreams of vengeance in private: "Without the sanctions imposed by power relations, subordinates would be tempted to return a blow with a blow, an insult with an insult" (Scott, 1990, p. 37). Thus, there is a "public transcript," whereby subordinates act in accordance with the expectations of hegemonic power, and a "hidden transcript," whereby their true attitudes are expressed.

Similarly, in Lisa Wedeen's (1999) account of a Syrian leader's cult, citizens act "as if" they revere their leader and believe in his omnipotence, whereas in reality, they do not. For Wedeen, citizens are required to act obediently and to show loyalty in a "public transcript," whereas in a "hidden transcript," they express their dissatisfaction and critique through comedies, cartoons, and films. She argues that it does not matter for the state if people believe in their national fictions or not—what matters is the state's ability to impose those national fictions and make people say and do things they otherwise would not.

6. This conceptual distinction between cultural preservation or collective identity, on the one hand, and political subversion or dissent, on the other, is *not* mutually exclusive. Rather, my claim is that Tatars in Crimea—in response to target repressions—have increasingly focused on preserving their collective identity and thereby challenged Russian stereotypes of them as violent extremists. However, Tatars' efforts at preserving their identity are also a form of *political* resistance in that Russian authorities have failed to fragment, assimilate, and/or push the community out of the region.

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The examples presented in the work of Scott and Wedeen echo Václav Havel's famous greengrocer, who displays a communist slogan in his window not because he truly believes in what it says, but because this act will shield him from political scrutiny (Havel & Keane, 1985). In all these accounts, the obedient outward behavior of people serves as symbolic offering to the state, maintaining its dramaturgy, and testifying its ability to impose its power. Hence, any resistance, whether it occurs in open protest, hidden transcript, or in the politics of disguise, would look like a direct or overt retaliation against these rules.

My research, however, suggests that in some cases such compliant behaviors should be understood as tactics of resistance. In the Crimean context, florid displays of politeness and compliance subvert the Russian regime's stereotyped picture of contemporary Tatars as terrorists. Stigmatized as violent barbarians and Muslim traitors during Soviet times (Sasse, 2007; Allworth, 1998), the Tatars in recent years have been re-stigmatized as extremists. In other words, whereas slaves were expected to show obedience to their master, thereby reaffirming their rule in Scott's account, Crimean Tatars are expected to act with violence and aggression, thereby upholding their designation as "extremists" and justifying Russian rule. By politely complying with Russian authorities, the Tatars undermine the fiction that they are religious fanatics to be dealt with harshly. Instead of migrating to Ukraine, as encouraged by the Crimean authorities and pro-Russian local population, the Tatars in Crimea stay put. Instead of defending themselves when special forces break into their houses, many greet them with courtesy and patience. These actions differ from everyday forms of resistance in that they operate in plain view of the opponent; they also do not fit the categorization of a dominant "public transcript" because they challenge the state's caricature of their alleged barbarism. Their politeness becomes a weapon to assert their power and unwillingness to conform.

Parallel to Scott and Wedeen, communist studies often portray subtle resistors as beholden to a "double consciousness" or a "split" (Hankiss, 1988). Notable examples of this trend include speech acts in Estonia (Johnston, 2005), small-scale work (*drobná práce*) in Czechoslovakia (Havel & Keane, 1985), as well as *samizdat* and "second culture" in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Skilling, 1989; Horvath, 2005; Voronkov & Wielgohs, 2005; Reddaway, 1989). In each case, actors in the late socialist period are characterized by their artificial loyalty to the state, and their secret allegiance to Radio Liberty and other so-called "enemies of the state." To be sure, framing resistance as public and private behaviors aimed at regime subversion can yield strong insights. Thanks to its application, generations of scholars have detected previously overlooked forms of collective action—including Tatars' use of underground *samizdat* publications to mobilize their return to Crimea (1955–89) (Alexeyeva, 2012; Allworth, 1998; Reddaway, 1989).

Nonetheless, the limitations to conceptualizing resistance as regime subversion, whether hidden or public, are worth stressing. Among these is the overly narrow model of agency it implies—one that reduces resistance to individual dissent. As Anna Krylova (2000) proposes, from the 1960s onward, the resisting individual has gained a "heroic status in the narrative about the Soviet Union" (p. 132). The result is an understanding of resistance, which needs a "selfless and long-struggling" liberal subject to antagonize the

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state (Krylova, 2000, p. 132). Practically speaking, this image of the liberal subject has benefited actual dissidents. Both Soviet and Western intellectuals, for instance, historically interpreted Tatars' nonviolent protests and petitions as part of the all-Soviet dissident struggle for human rights (Alexeyeva, 2012; Allworth, 1998; Guboglo & Chervonnaia, 1992). For today's Crimean Tatars, this is an inspiring legacy that legitimizes their territorial claims and offers a vast repertoire for executing under- and aboveground dissent. For the scholars of contemporary Crimea, this image, however, renders invisible other forms of resistance that defy the liberal subject frame. Thus, extending Krylova's critique, my research points out that liberal dissidents are not the only actors capable of resistance. Instead, Crimean Tatars have undermined Russian oppression in ways that are not covert, overt, or liberal.

This case study contributes to the literature on communist and post-communist studies by offering an alternate interpretive lens on resistance in authoritarian regimes. Focusing on practices directed at the preservation of collective identity rather than regime subversion, this article highlights the pitfalls of conceiving resistance through a public/private framework and images of individual dissent. Importantly, it provides a direction for future studies to consider other cases in which stigmatized minorities may seek the preservation of their lifestyle or rights via behavior not traditionally associated with resistance.

In the following sections, I support this conclusion through ethnographic evidence collected in Crimea and mainland Ukraine between August 2019 and March 2020. Although this article focuses primarily on Crimea, fieldwork carried out on the mainland provided the comparison between émigré and domestic discourses. In Ukraine, I interviewed Crimean Tatars across rural and urban settings in L'viv, Kyiv, Vinnytsia, Melitopol', Kherson, Novooleksiivka, and Heniches'k. Participant observation research was conducted while I volunteered with the Kyiv-based Crimean Tatar Resource Center and attended more than 40 cultural events, protests, conventions, educational initiatives, and private meetings. In Crimea, I interviewed 25 people in Simferopol, Bakhchisarai, Sudak, Yalta, Krasnohvardiis'k, Strohanivka, Evpatoriia, and Bilohirs'k. The respondents were selected through sample frame and contact snowball sampling. The sample frame was determined by respondent's active participation in the events of 2014; respondent's personal encounters with the Russian authorities (i.e., searches, arrests, cooperation), and respondent's engagement in cultural initiatives, local politics, and mutual aid initiatives.

THE PENINSULA OF FEAR: CONTEXT

Back in 2014, few people could anticipate the sweeping scale of Russia's occupation of Crimea, even as Russian troops were seizing government buildings. Crimean MPs had little idea of what was going to happen a week and a half before the Russian invasion (Andriivs'ka & Khalimon, 2018, p. 16). When on 19 February 2014, Mykola Kolisnichenko, Russian nationalist and member of the Crimean Parliament from the Party of Regions, declared from the parliamentary tribune that Crimea's unification with Ukraine in 1954 was a "disastrous event" because "Crimeans were separated from Russia" and

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threatened "to contemplate Crimea's return to Russia if the government in Kyiv does not restore order," many deputies and journalists were shocked by such outspoken separatism (Andriivs'ka & Khalimon, 2018, p. 16).

A week later, on 27 February, Russian troops invaded Crimea and took control of all major government buildings. Pro-Ukrainian activists poured out on the streets to rally in support of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty as Russian paramilitary self-defense units and "little green men" were infiltrating the peninsula.

Crimean Tatars proved themselves the most cohesive and organized pro-Ukrainian force, organizing rallies and patrol units to protect their neighborhoods, and offering support to the Ukrainian army (BBC, 2014). One such protest was organized by Crimean Tatars' Mejlis on 26 February, near the Council of Ministers in Simferopol, which turned into a skirmish as pro-Ukrainian activists clashed with their pro-Russian opponents under the leadership of Sergei Aksionov, the head of the Russian Unity Party.[7] That day, protesters left the square naively believing they had gotten the upper hand, only to learn the next morning that the government building was seized by the Russian military and Sergei Aksenov appointed as a new prime minister of Crimea. The day of 26 February is now officially recognized as the "Day of Resistance" by the Ukrainian government.

From the outset, despite Putin's executive order "On the rehabilitation of Armenian, Bulgarian, Greek, Italian, Crimean Tatar, and German people" from 21 April 2014, and the official rhetoric of multiculturalism, the real intentions of a new administration were clear. Already in May 2014, Mustafa Dzhemilev, the Crimean Tatar leader and iconic figure, was barred from entering Crimea; two months later, the criminal case was opened against Refat Chubarov, the Mejlis chair, for alleged separatism (Skrypnyk & Pechonchyk, 2016, p. 48). At a sweeping pace, many more activists were either barred from entering Crimea or arrested; national commemorations were outlawed; and the buildings of Crimean Tatar media outlets and charities (e.g., Avdet, ATR, and Crimea Fund) were seized (OSCE, 2015). One of the harshest blows to Crimean Tatars' socio-political organization was Russia's suppression of their self-governing body, Mejlis, which was accused of alleged extremist activity and subsequently banned (European Parliament, 2016, p. 20).

In the following years, human rights groups have documented Russia's extralegal harassments against Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians. Such violations include unlawful searches, interrogations, prosecutions, and religious freedom restrictions, including the seizure of Ukrainian Orthodox Church buildings (OSCE, 2015; Skrypnyk & Pechonchyk, 2016; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019; Tyshchenko et al., 2018; Crimean Tatar Resource Center, 2021; Human

7. Russian Unity Party was a splinter party that emerged in 2010 as a result of a conflict in the Party of Regions. In the 2010 Crimean parliamentary elections, it gained only 4% of votes. The party was a Russian project that aimed to destabilize Ukraine's European integration. Sergei Aksenov, a shadowy personality with a criminal background (in the 1990s, he was a member of Salem, a famous organized crime group in Crimea), was said to be a convenient figure for Moscow to represent the party, as it was easy to blackmail him (Iankovskii, 2019).

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Rights Watch, 2017; European Parliament, 2016; Freedom House, 2020). In addition, Ukrainian broadcasting is unavailable on Crimean networks, and expressions of Ukrainian culture (e.g., the *vyshyvanka*, flag, trident, and national holidays) have been outlawed.

Given the importance of religion for Crimean Tatars, Russian authorities have strategically tried to co-opt their religious institutions with various threats and bribes. For many mosques and Islamic religious agencies, total compliance with Russian authorities was necessary to avoid closure or prosecution. As a result, the most prominent Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (SAMS) continues operations only by cooperating with Russian actors, while dissenters have had to form alternative institutions abroad (Muratova, 2019). Yet despite total compliance, Crimean Tatars' religious institutions are repeatedly charged with religious extremism and terrorism. Though the Russian Criminal Code does permit freedom of religion for individuals, the majority of cases against the Crimean Tatars fall under charges of extremism (e.g., the Hizb ut-Tahrir case, the second Bakhchisarai Hizb ut-Tahrir case, the Tablighi Jamaat case) (Crimean Tatar Resource Center, 2021). Under the pretext of an alleged terrorist activity, in 2019 alone, there were 86 raids of Crimean Tatar households, 157 detentions, 194 interrogations, 335 arrests, and 578 violations of the right to due process (Crimean Tatar Resource Center, 2021).

This portrayal is just another episode in the history of Tatar demonization that can be traced back several centuries. During the Crimean War, the Crimean Tatars were accused of collaboration with the Ottomans; during the Soviet Union, they were deported to Central Asia for its alleged collaboration with the Nazis (Kozelsky, 2008; Fisher, 1978). Ever since then, the labels of traitors and barbarian horde have been constantly reproduced in local media, on the streets, and in the walls of the Crimean Parliament even after the USSR was long gone (Pozhenian, 1993; Sokolovskaya, 1999). For example, in 2004, local newspaper *Krymskaia Pravda* published a survey that showed that only 30% of college-age respondents regarded Crimean Tatars' deportation in 1944 as unfair and/or criminal (Dzhemilev, 2004). In 2021, when a Crimean Tatar fourth-grader spoke about her great-grandfather's deportation, the teacher told the class that Crimean Tatars were traitors and deserved to be deported (Coynash, 2021).

It is important to stress that the racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia confronting Crimean Tatars' everyday life are also a key political tactic to stoke fears among the Slavic population in Crimea (Coynash, 2018b). Protection of Slavic "traditional values" against the "Tatarization" of Crimea has been a common trope in the rhetoric and actions of politicians, media, and other interest groups of all stripes (ATR, 2016). After the annexation, protecting Slavs from Tatar extremists and terrorists became a convenient excuse to introduce harsh policies of surveillance and social control that in practice target not just Tatars but the entire population as well (Coynash, 2018b; Coynash & Charron, 2019).

STAYING: SETTING PRIORITIES STRAIGHT

The question of whether to remain in Crimea or to move to mainland Ukraine after the Russian occupation has been hotly debated within the community. On the one hand, for

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some members, it was life-threatening to remain on the peninsula in light of arbitrary violence, disappearances, arrests, and searches. Among the most targeted groups were the outspoken pro-Ukrainian activists and members of the Hizb ut-Tahrir group, which is banned in Russia, yet not in Ukraine (Human Rights Watch, 2017). On the other hand, the older generation that spent their entire lives in a struggle to return to Crimea and build a decent life there was resolute to remain no matter how dangerous it was. According to the sociological survey conducted by local Crimean Tatar scholars, the predominant majority of Crimean Tatars, especially middle-aged and older, were categorically against leaving Crimea (KrymSOS and Krymskyi Dim u Lvovi, 2017). The younger generation was also not ready to leave Crimea unless there was a real threat to their life (KrymSOS and Krymskyi Dim u Lvovi, 2017). One of my respondents, who was subjected to direct attacks by the Federal Security Service (FSB) in 2014, told me how she kept a suitcase with food, cigarettes, candies, and underwear in the trunk of her car, ready to leave any minute. She eventually got rid of the suitcase after her mother told her: "You can run away wherever you want, but I am not abandoning my house." Six years later, when I interviewed her, she told me she could not imagine leaving Crimea and that if she had left, she would have died (Interview, respondent #87, poet/journalist, Simferopol, 5 February 2020).

Why was it imperative for many Crimean Tatars to remain in Crimea instead of immigrating or temporarily relocating to a safer place? I argue that the special attachment to Crimea that is so engrained in the Crimean Tatars' collective identity makes their survival impossible or meaningless if forced abroad. This special attachment to Crimea is hard to overestimate. Numerous works have been written on this attachment, love, and commitment to their homeland. Brian Williams (1997) describes how Crimea was constructed as *Vatan* or Homeland through the 19th-century Young Tatars nationalist discourse. Greta Uehling (2004) wrote extensively on how romanticized memories of Crimea have driven generations of Crimean Tatars in Central Asia, even those born in exile, to fight for their return to the peninsula. The historical roots and ethnic formation in Crimea are discussed at length in the literature on indigenous status claims (Babin, 2014; Belitser, 2018). These studies aptly demonstrate that Crimea in the Crimean Tatar national imagination is not merely a place of residence but also a sacralized and sanctified land, whose value and claims to ownership are permanently contested by more powerful forces.

It is, therefore, intuitive to suggest that in the context of another foreign conquest in 2014, the role Crimea played in national consciousness did not diminish, but became even more prominent. The same sociological research shows that "homeland, living on their historical homeland," is the second most important issue for Crimean Tatars, after "family" (KrymSOS and Krymskyi Dim u Lvovi, 2017). Thus, in order to detect, observe, and interpret certain practices of Crimean Tatars as resistance and not accommodation or survival techniques, it is paramount to understand their relationship to Crimea in the current context.

Almost everyone I interviewed in Crimea explained their choice to stay by the extraordinary hardships their parents underwent in their struggle to return to Crimea

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during the early 1990s. Returning from exile, they were denied the repatriation package promised by late Soviet authorities. The hostility of the local predominantly Slavic population fueled by local authorities' anti-Tatar rhetoric, aggravated ethnic discrimination in virtually every sphere, from access to housing and education to citizenship and healthcare (Shevel, 2000; Guboglo & Chervonnaia, 1995). As a result, many Crimean Tatar families found themselves in a situation, where they sold their property in Central Asia but were unable to purchase new in Crimea due to the staggering inflation and reluctance on the part of the local authorities to provide promised assistance. This left them no choice but to occupy empty land plots and build houses and vital infrastructure with the meager resources they had. Those land plots that came to be known as *samozakhvaty* (literally, self-occupied land), or what some Crimean Tatars emphatically call *samovozvraty* (self-returned land), formed entire neighborhoods and villages, connected through their own sewage system, roads, electricity, and water supply. With no help from the government, these neighborhoods were built communally by residents of all genders, ages, and professional backgrounds, under the permanent threat of police brutality and arbitrary decision-making of local politicians (Uehling, 2004). Despite being legalized in the late 1990s, many houses are still under construction, becoming a prominent aesthetic signifier illustrating the generational hardship. Permanent construction, so characteristic of Crimean Tatar lives, it became a salient feature and a visual representation of not only past tribulations but their commitment to building (literally) their future in Crimea.

This unconditional dedication to their homeland explains not only why so many Crimean Tatars stayed in Crimea but also why they interpret this decision as a resistance. Today, the Crimean Tatars' priority is not to garner the world's attention for a liberatory struggle but to minimize the real and perceived threat to their livelihoods and to preserve what they have built thus far. This not-so-ambitious goal, however, requires herculean efforts and trade-offs.

First of all, remaining in Crimea means giving up on the most basic sense of individual safety and freedom. The arbitrary state violence, harassment, and surveillance directed specifically at Crimean Tatars are interpreted by many respondents as an attempt to "squeeze them out," or what they call "hybrid deportation" alluding to the deportation in 1944 (Vagner, 2020). State practices ranging from open bans on entering Crimea to mass imprisonments go hand in hand with the relocation of ethnic Russians from mainland Russia, incentivized by lucrative official positions, economic benefits, tax cuts, and so on (Freedom House, 2020).[8] The comparisons with the Soviet experience were frequently invoked by my respondents. Some associated the almost overnight disappearance of trust between people and the increasing practice of snitching with the year of 1985 (Interview, respondent #92, lawyer/professor, Simferopol, 18 January 2020); others brought up the year of 1937 to draw comparison of the overwhelming surveillance (Interview, respondent #84, poet, Simferopol, 20 January 2020); others associated searches in the middle of the night with 1944 (Interview, respondent #93, artist,

8. About 200,000 Russians from mainland Russia have moved to Crimea since the annexation (Krym Realii, 2021).

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Simferopol, 19 January 2020).[9] As my informants put it, it is untenable in the 21st century to engineer a mass-scale ethnic cleansing campaign, like in 1944; hence, Russia is using 19th-century tactics, similar to the ones used during the Crimean War (Kozelsky, 2008), demonizing and economically discriminating against certain ethnic groups to encourage them to leave voluntarily (Interview, respondent #85, wife of political prisoner, Strohanivka, 1 February 2020). Thus, remaining in Crimea becomes an act of open defiance.

Second, remaining in Crimea means giving up on personal ambitions. If those who moved to mainland Ukraine (IDPs) view their value for the community in the prospect of personal development and achievement (a professional or financial success that will indirectly benefit the community), in Crimea, the commitment manifests in relinquishing one's personal ambitions and prioritizing communal interests over personal (Interviews, respondents #77, political scientist, #72, human rights activist, #97, veteran of the national movement for return, Sudak, 30 January 2020). Simply living and reproducing in Crimea, supporting one another, with little prospect for individual self-realization but a real possibility of state harassment, is a personal sacrifice people are willing to take.

Finally, and most controversially, remaining in Crimea requires obtaining Russian passports and relinquishing Ukrainian. Not too long after the annexation, Russia issued "automatic citizenship" to all who resided or were registered in Crimea at the time of occupation (Skrypnyk & Pechonchyk, 2016, p. 81). While it required all citizens of Crimea to obtain Russian passports, it also stipulated criminal responsibility for concealment of second citizenship (Article 330-2 of the RF Criminal Code). For Crimean Tatars, obtaining a Russian passport, apart from complicating their travel, international recognition, and de facto recognition of Russian authority, also meant betraying Ukraine.

So initially, some resisted the imposed citizenship by applying to retain Ukrainian citizenship (Skrypnyk & Pechonchyk, 2016, p. 83). However, after further deliberations, they came to the conclusion that getting Russian citizenship meant not so much a submission, but an insistence on remaining on their land and refusing to give up. A convincing argument to this effect was given by an activist, lawyer, and Mejlis member, who said during the last Qurultay session in 2014: "I feel obliged to let you know as a lawyer, that if we want to live in Crimea as property and landowners, we will have to take Russian passports. If we want to pack our bags and leave, let's do just that. But where and why? What would happen here? Are we just voluntarily going to leave, migrate? For what? We have returned to our homeland. We live in our own houses, on our land, we study, we work, our children go to kindergartens, schools, and colleges. We all own something: land, house, property. Do you understand what it means to be a non-

9. The reinstatement of the Soviet experience as a point of reference to the tragic fate and unbounded resistance also makes sense as Crimean urban landscape becomes profoundly Soviet. While the policy of decommunization in mainland Ukraine has outlawed many Soviet symbols, in Crimea the opposite phenomena took place—the proliferation of Soviet aesthetics in public places like the erection of monuments to Stalin, red Soviet flags, St. Georgian ribbons, inviting nostalgic sentiments among the pro-Russian Crimeans and dreadful memories among Crimean Tatars.

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resident on one's own land?" She went on to explain the legal complexities (Interview, respondent #86, Simferopol, 3 February 2020).

Eventually, prioritizing their dedication to Crimea, Crimean Tatars took Russian passports (Dorosh, 2015). Although concealing second citizenship is illegal, it does not prevent some Tatars from secretly keeping a Ukrainian passport, and showing one passport at the Russian checkpoint, and another at the Ukrainian, half a mile away. Forced to submit to the Russian authorities over seven years of occupation, Crimean Tatars nonetheless continue commuting to mainland Ukraine, where many quietly renew their Ukrainian documents, even if they carry mainly a symbolic meaning.

Now, it is understandable how their decision to remain in Crimea and accept Russian citizenship can be interpreted by onlookers from mainland Ukraine as accommodation and obedience. Here, I have attempted to demonstrate how the reading of such behavior becomes more nuanced as we get to know the nature of the relationships between the dominant power and oppressed groups, and people's interpretation of these relationships and the choices available to them. Crossing the administrative-territorial line between Russia and Ukraine, my respondent found herself reproached by a Ukrainian customs officer who spotted her two passports. Instead of feeling shame of betrayal and accommodation, as implied by the officer's stern look, she proudly confirmed her possession of two passports—for her, it was a manifestation of her strength and courage to stay true to both Ukraine and her homeland, Crimea (Interview, respondent #93, artist, Simferopol, 19 January 2020).

CULTURE IS A NEW BATTLEFIELD

As noted earlier, it would make little sense for the Crimean Tatars to express their grievances by open demonstration or violence, since this would only affirm the state's legitimacy over the use of oppression against them. In light of this, they practice behavior that appears like obedience and accommodation, but in fact works as an open form of protest in the eyes of the state, by debunking state-sponsored anti-Tatar propaganda, exposing the state's injustice and cruelty, and bewildering state officials, who expect to deal with Tatar terrorists and not law-abiding subjects. Though these activities are indeed performative, they can hardly be classified as "hidden" or "public" transcripts for no matter where they are situated, they defy the state's hegemony in virtue of acting against its expectations.

What makes me conclude that these actions should not be taken at face value is, first and foremost, my respondents' conceptualization of their collective behavior in terms of resistance and their unhappiness that their compatriots in mainland Ukraine don't understand this. Second, careful observation of Crimean authorities' omnipresence in the Crimean Tatars' everyday life testifies not only to their understanding of the obedient behavior as a resistance tactic but also to the challenges such behavior poses to the regime if left unchecked. In what follows, I address two such tactics: laughter, and patience or *sabr*.

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In Crimea, it is common to hear something like this: "We are now in between two fires: we are oppressed here and misunderstood in Kyiv. They think that we should cry, go into the forest [guerilla tactics]" (Interview, respondent #86, Mejlis member/lawyer, Simferopol, 3 February 2020). I already mentioned how onlookers from mainland Ukraine tend to interpret Crimean Tatars' decision to remain in Crimea as a weakness, accommodation, and reluctance to stand up for themselves. The lack of straightforward rhetoric denouncing the occupation from the peninsula only intensifies such attitudes. Furthermore, according to my informants and innumerable Facebook commentaries, any celebration, festivity, or humor on the peninsula becomes a source of hot debate: Is enjoying one's life in the context of occupation morally permissible? (Budzhurova, 2019). Isn't it exactly what the Russian government tries to prove at various international events—that everyone lives happily and amicably in the paradise called Crimea?

The crux here, however, is that while interethnic friendship and happiness is the narrative of the Russian diplomatic missions abroad (RF Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021), at home, the local domination is imposed through intimidation, demoralization, and divide and rule practices (Human Rights Watch, 2017; European Parliament, 2016). In light of this, festive and celebratory energy among Crimean Tatars works as the subversion of these attempts, even if they are interpreted by outsiders as obedience and affirmation of Russian narrative abroad. At the same time, laughter, celebration, and festivity became a way to create their own escapist parallel reality, where there is no place for tears, fear, and pain, so typical of their daily life. As one respondent noted: "This is our land—it gives us energy. We need to breathe this air, build things here and now. . . . To survive here, it is important to create a positive vibe—travel, watch comedies, do something. . . . It is impossible to live in constant fear" (Interview, respondent #73, businesswoman, Ievpatoria, 23 January 2020).

Crimean Tatars well understand the purpose of the Russian regime's arbitrary arrests, searches, and surveillance, namely, to instill fear. To subvert the state's intentions, they choose to express a defiant kind of public happiness. After another wave of arrests, a prominent poet wrote on Facebook: "Girls – wear high heels, boys – wear your tuxedoes, we are going to have fun!," thus refusing to succumb to fear and despair. Another time, she climbed on stage after a concert and publicly declared: "Look at our people! Without legs, we will dance, and without voice, we will sing. We will dance and sign on our land because it is our homeland even if they cut our legs and take our voice" (Interview, respondent #87, poet/journalist, Simferopol, 5 February 2020).

In a truly Bakhtinian sense, Crimean Tatars use spectacle and laughter to create a parallel universe, opposite to the official, solemn, and dismal reality. As in the Middle Ages, "laughter offered a completely different, nonofficial . . . aspect of the world, of a man, of a human relation; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (Bakhtin & Iswolsky, 1984, pp. 5–6). As the same interlocutor told me: "Someday we will have to pay for this self-isolation. We live in our own world, I feel comfortable here, I do my own thing, I know that what I do is important to others. . . . But Crimea is different, it lives its own life. It only concerns me when the police come to my house with another search, or when they call and threaten me" (Interview, respondent

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#87, poet/journalist, Simferopol, 5 February 2020). In Bakhtin, it was the medieval feasts that were the "second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance"; in Crimea, Tatars celebrate this "temporal liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" through artistic forms of comedy, fairy tales, and educational projects (Bakhtin & Iswolsky, 1984, p. 9).

Indeed, over the course of seven years since the annexation, the Crimean Tatars have mastered the art of parallel reality, where they shoot comedy shows and fairy tales and organize book fairs and festivals, education projects, and talent shows. These activities are particularly significant considering the fact that post-annexation Crimea has suffered an outflow of creative institutions to mainland Ukraine. For example, the only Crimean Tatar channel, ATR, the top-ranking source of local and national news, as well as transmitter of Crimean Tatar language and culture, was forced to move its production and crew to Kyiv (Ianits'kyi, 2015). Those representatives of creative industries who stayed in Crimea, in order to continue their activity, have taken a publicly politically-neutral approach focusing on areas of culture that seemingly pose little threat to Russia's domination. Russia, on the other hand, tolerates some of these initiatives in order to showcase its benevolence abroad. As this article shows below, this tug-of-war dynamic is very delicate, with each party testing each other's boundaries and weak spots.

As I interviewed one respondent in January 2020, she and her crew were busy finishing the post-production of the very first Crimean Tatar sitcom, *Şamatali Qoranta* (Hilarious family) (Interview, respondent #87, poet/journalist, Simferopol, 5 February 2020). This TV show tells the story of an average modern Crimean Tatar family through various comical situations (Mokrushin, 2020). Consistent with the generic idea of self-preservation, the TV series aims to safeguard the Crimean Tatar language by exemplifying its usage in various household situations. The authors of the show play on cultural paradoxes of blending together traditional and modern lifestyles and on the dialectics between ethnic particularities and global trends, rendering the show funny and intelligible to many Crimean Tatar families.

Another example of Tatar cultural production is the first Crimean Tatar fairy tale, *Hidir Dede*, released in 2018 by the same production company, Qaradeniz production (Turenko, 2018). A politically-neutral picaresque saga about an 18th-century fictional national hero named Alim, the film enables its audience to experience medieval Crimea prior to its colonization by the Russian Empire. It is indeed a nostalgic impression of "authentic" Crimea that many Tatar viewers experienced (Zubkovych, 2019, p. 60).

In the realm of education, Tatar teachers launched local initiatives to counter Russian patriotic indoctrination, which includes mandatory participation in children's military parades, patriotic camps, and the memorization of colonial historical narratives (Laschenko, 2020). In response, Tatar teachers created alternative projects, such as annual essay contests, poetry recitations, fairytale compositions, art exhibitions, photo contests, language compositions, and other forms of informal education that seek to inculcate ethno-nationalist sentiments and introduce children to historical accounts

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from a Tatar point of view (Interview, informant #86, Mejlis member/lawyer, Simferopol, 3 February 2020).

One such project is the annual essay contest "*Ant Etkemen*" (I pledged) for children from 5th to 11th grade that aims to memorialize the national Tatar hero, Noman Çelebicihan, the founder of the short-lived Crimean People's Republic in 1917, the first attempt to revive the Crimean Tatar statehood after Crimean Khanate was annexed by Russian Empire in 1783.[10] As one of the organizers explained to me: "We chose this way [education] because when we organize events like this, we bring people together, children, their parents.... Through these projects we aim to convey the most important—we should preserve ourselves as a nation, in unity" (Interview, informant #86, Mejlis member/lawyer, Simferopol, 3 February 2020).

Whether these activities are really subversive can be judged by the reaction of Crimean authorities. One example is particularly telling. On 7 December 2019, the academic conference "Education in the Crimean Tatar Language: Problems and Prospects" was supposed to take place in Simferopol, with 80 scholars coming from as far away as Moscow. The day before the conference, the owner of the venue unexpectedly called off the arrangement, referring to a sudden inspection by the fire department. Rushing to find a new place to meet, the organizers called another venue, which gladly agreed to host them—only to call back 15 minutes later, to say that they were in fact already fully booked. When the organizers tried to rent a private house, the owner sent a message saying that he was warned by "very serious people" not to do it. One of the organizers, who told me this, added: "We, civil activists, are now in the situations, where we are besieged with red flags. It is very difficult... and it seems that they understand what we are doing.... They see in us a source of threat" (Interview, informant #86, Mejlis member/lawyer, Simferopol, 3 February 2020).

While onlookers from mainland Ukraine read Crimean Tatar exuberant creative and festive expressions as a sign of resignation, the example of the abortive academic conference "Education in the Crimean Tatar Language" shows that the Tatar cultural initiatives risk being seen as a tactic of resistance by the Russian Crimean authorities, and not just the local Tatars.

EMANCIPATORY POWER OF COLLECTIVE PATIENCE

Sabr, which in the Crimean Tatar language means "patience," is another example of an obedient behavior that in some contexts can be read as a tactic of resistance, which instead of affirming the dominant power relations, undermines it. Through the years, an attitude, *sabr*, to searchers, arrests, and interrogations has been circulating verbally within the community. *Sabr* is a special word in the Crimean Tatar resistance vocabulary that was used by the elder veterans to restrain the youth from resorting to violence in

10. "Ant Etkemen" (I pledged) is a poem written by Noman Çelebicihan that became a modern anthem of Crimean Tatars. A vivid illustration of centuries of injustices, Noman Çelebicihan was executed by Bolshevik forces that invaded Crimea two months after the Republic of Crimea was proclaimed. He was imprisoned in Sevastopol and his body was thrown into the sea after the execution, making him a national hero and a martyr (Vozgrin, 2013).

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moments of tension with the local Slavic population and authorities during the tumultuous 1990s and 2000s (Interview, informant #12, journalist/editor-in-chief, Kyiv, 27 September 2019). Now it is once again being put to use as a device to de-escalate the conflict and resist the demonization.

Households that went through the ordeal of house raids elaborated their own strategies that aim to disarm the opponent with their sense of dignity. The purpose of the searches is commonly regarded as an attempt to intimidate and provoke anger, despair, retaliation, and violence (Cholakchik, 2020). The security forces do that by showing up in big numbers, heavily armed, in the early morning when everyone is asleep. Brutally turning everything upside down, they spend hours in the house ostensibly looking for a restricted religious literature or illegal weapon, waiting for its owners to break down (Vorobiov, 2016). Testing their patience, security officers anticipate retaliation that will validate their presence.

What they do not expect, however, is hospitality and courtesy with which the potential "terrorists" choose to respond. Traumatic and terrifying experience as it is, many of those who went through searches emphasize the importance of curbing the temptation to fight back and come up with tips and recommendations on how to stay calm. For some, the rationale underlying this behavior is to prove their opponents wrong in their accusations of terrorism and extremism. For others, it aims to retain their dignity and humiliate the security officers.

An informant shared with me some of the tactics that she herself has borrowed from a friend and resolved to use in her own encounters with the security forces (Interview, respondent #93, artist, Simferopol, 19 January 2020). A friend of hers, realizing in the middle of the search that her husband and children were hungry all morning, wrestled with how to feed her family, while the security officers were wreaking havoc in her apartment. Overwhelmed with anger and fear, she first wanted to feed only her family, letting the officers go hungry. But then she resolved to make coffee and sandwiches for everyone—this way, the hungry officers would be forced to take food from her house, making them feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. The appeal to humiliate the officers by showing the upper hand with hospitality has dropped the degree of fear and boosted her sense of dignity.

Another respondent, who was also subjected to illegal searches, recounted the feeling of anger and despair as his wife and children were harassed by the security officers at 4 a.m.: "The feelings at the moment . . . you just want to take something and beat them up. . . . Just imagine how it is for a Muslim, who has to defend honor and dignity of his family, imagine his feelings. . . . But if you take a stick or a knife and beat them up in response, it is guaranteed that all Crimean Tatars will be hailed as violent extremists, who want to seize power. . . . Everyone understands this; hence you won't find a single case of violence. Everyone is being patient, we won't give them an excuse to support their narrative. . . . Our grandfathers taught us that 'the bottom of patience is gold' " (Interview, respondent #47, Crimean Solidarity activist, Kyiv, 14 November 2019). Although curbing one's overwhelming feeling of injustice and anger is difficult, what makes it easier is

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collective support and encouragement. "Crimean Solidarity," a network of families of political prisoners, activists, and lawyers, responds to illegal searches by dispatching "civic journalists" to monitor, surveil, and report on the police wrongdoings (Mokrushin, 2021). As such, hardly a single illegal search remains unnoticed and undocumented, whereas people under search feel a real-time support and fortitude. Whereas "Crimean Solidarity" has a range of high-profile donation campaigns such as "Crimean Marathon" and flash mob "Muslims Are Not Terrorists," their most profound impact is on the day-to-day monitoring and active response to illegal searches (Krymskaia Solidarnost', 2021).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have attempted to revisit some taken-for-granted theoretical assumptions in the literature on resistance in authoritarian regimes, and offer an alternative interpretation of how Crimea's Tatars are currently comporting themselves.

The scholarship usually treats obedient behavior as an unequivocal expression of state's power and domination, the interpretation intensified by the similar treatment by ordinary people on the ground. My investigation of the Crimean Tatar predicament in Crimea, on the other hand, suggests that in some cases it is possible to interpret such behavior as an expression of people's agency and resistance. The ability to decipher this behavior as a tactic of resistance hinges on our understanding of the peculiar relationships between Crimean authorities and Crimean Tatars. Portrayed as religious fanatics and a security threat, they are expected and instigated to commit acts of terrorism and engage in extremist activity, thereby confirming the narrative and reaffirming state domination. In light of this, Crimean Tatars' compliant and obedient behavior, expressed through patience and etiquette, festivity, humor, and acceptance of Russian citizenship, functions as a tacit challenge to the imposed narrative and, with it, the legitimacy of Russian rule.

This case study complements the literature on communist and post-communist studies by offering an alternate interpretive lens of resistance in high-intensity authoritarian regimes that differs from prevalent liberal frameworks. Focusing on practices directed at the preservation of collective identity rather than regime subversion, this article highlights the pitfalls of conceiving resistance through a public/private framework and images of individual dissent. Importantly, it provides a direction for future studies to consider other cases in which stigmatized minorities may seek the preservation of their lifestyle or rights via behavior not traditionally associated with resistance. ■

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