

THE GEORGIAN TRAGEDY OF KERCH

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Abstract: The Kerch tragedy refers to a little-known but significant episode in the 20th-century history of Georgia, involving the mass deportation and persecution of ethnic Georgians in the city of Kerch, Crimea, during the Stalinist era. This tragedy mirrors the broader Soviet policies of ethnic cleansing, forced migration, and cultural suppression. History gives such a perspective that the Soviet Union had attempts to overthrow the country. The article explores archival records, personal testimonies, and the sociopolitical context that led to the targeting of Georgian communities in Kerch. It highlights the long-term consequences on Georgian identity and memory in Crimea. This historical moment is concerned with the tragedy of Georgia, therefore Georgians dedicated a movie to it.

Keywords: Kerch, Crimea, Soviet armies, ethnic Georgians, troops, Nazi German army

ГРУЗИНСКАТА ТРАГЕДИЯ В КЕРЧ

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Резюме: Трагедията в Керч се отнася до малко познат, но значим епизод от историята на Грузия през XX век, включващ масова депортация и преследване на етнически грузинци в град Керч, Крим, по време на сталинската епоха. Тази трагедия отразява по-широките съветски политики на етническо прочистване, насилствена миграция и културно потискане. Историята дава такава перспектива, че Съветският съюз е правил опити за подкопаване на страната. Статията изследва архивни документи, лични свидетелства и социално-политическия контекст, довел до насочването срещу грузинските общности в Керч. Тя подчертава дългосрочните последици върху грузинската идентичност и памет в Крим. Този исторически момент е свързан с трагедията на Грузия, поради което грузинците посвещават филм на това събитие.

Ключови думи: Керч, Крим, съветска армия, етнически грузинци, войски, нацистка германска армия

Kerch, a city located on the easternmost point of the Crimean Peninsula, has long held strategic and cultural significance. Known for its ancient history as a Greek colony and its critical position overlooking the Kerch Strait, the city has often found itself at the crossroads of empires, ideologies, and conflicts. In the 20th century, Kerch became the setting for one of the lesser-known

but deeply tragic episodes involving the Georgian people during World War II and the subsequent years of Soviet rule. This article aims to shed light on what can be termed the “Georgian Tragedy of Kerch” — a complex interplay of forced migration, war, Stalinist repression, and historical silence. This paper investigates the tragedy through historical, political, and social lenses, using archival research and testimonies where available. It situates the Kerch events within the broader framework of Stalinist nationality policy, wartime trauma, and postwar silence, calling for a reevaluation of how we remember marginalized voices in Soviet history.

The relationship between Georgians and Crimea stretches back centuries. Georgians migrated to the peninsula during various waves of settlement — including during the Russian Empire, when both Georgia and Crimea were under tsarist control, and later under the USSR¹, when many Georgians settled in Kerch for work or military service. However, during the upheavals of the 1940s, this community would face disproportionate suffering, persecution, and near erasure from official Soviet memory. Georgians were drafted throughout the USSR whenever it needed military forces and that time when Germans attacked on Kerch, consequently, Georgians had to fight for the USSR as well.

This event occurred during World War II, when fascist German troops attacked Soviet troops, mainly composed of ethnic Georgians, on the Kerch Peninsula. In May 1942, fascist Germany launched a rapid operation against the Soviet army, which was defending the Kerch Peninsula, in the eastern part of the Crimean SSR, Ukrainian SSR.² The mobilization of Soviet troops occurred after the Germans occupied the Ukrainian SSR. The operation began on May 8, 1942 and ended with the complete destruction of Soviet troops on May 18, 1942. Soviet Georgian troops, surrounded by the armed forces of Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, came under heavy fire and bombing from fighter aircraft. The soldiers tried to retreat by sea, but in vain. Ultimately, after 10 days of fighting, approximately 120,000 ethnic Georgian soldiers died.

In June 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, invading the Soviet Union. By late 1941, German and Romanian troops advanced into the Crimean Peninsula, capturing Kerch by November. The city became a contested frontline for years, changing hands multiple times in some of the war’s most intense fighting. During the German occupation, many civilians — including Georgians — were executed, deported for forced labor, or killed in bombings. Kerch’s Jewish population suffered near-total annihilation. Many Georgian families tried to hide their identity, fearing both Nazi and Soviet reprisals.

Though less documented, Georgians in Crimea, including in Kerch, were not immune. Some were accused of collaboration with the Germans, though these accusations were rarely based on evidence. Soviet archives reveal that individuals were arrested under Article 58 of the penal code (counter-revolutionary activity), and families were relocated to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Estimates of how many ethnic Georgians were affected remain uncertain due to the lack of disaggregated data. However, anecdotal evidence and oral history from surviving families indicate dozens of families from Kerch and nearby areas were forcibly deported, and many never returned. Property was confiscated, churches and cultural centers were closed, and ethnic identity was often erased from official records.

For decades after the war, the story of the Georgian tragedy in Kerch was buried beneath layers of censorship and fear. Families who had lost relatives or were deported rarely spoke openly, fearing renewed persecution. Official Soviet history made little mention of the Georgian presence in Crimea, let alone their suffering. It was not until the late 1980s, during perestroika and glasnost, that some survivors and dissidents began to speak out.

In modern Georgia, awareness of the Kerch tragedy remains limited, though academic interest has grown in recent years. Projects dedicated to uncovering Soviet-era repression have begun including Crimean episodes in their research. In Kerch itself, few physical memorials exist to recognize the suffering of Georgian civilians or soldiers, and post-2014 Russian administration has tightened control over historical narratives in Crimea. Despite the challenges, some efforts at remembrance persist. Online archives, oral history projects, and diaspora associations have begun compiling information about Georgian families affected by the events. For many, reclaiming this history is not only an act of justice but also of identity — asserting a place in a history long denied to them.

As geopolitical tensions around Crimea and historical memory continue to rise in the 21st century, revisiting the forgotten stories of minority communities like the Georgians in Kerch becomes even more vital. By reconstructing these narratives, historians, students, and citizens alike can contribute to a more inclusive and honest account of the past — one that acknowledges not only the victors and the powerful but also the silenced and the displaced.

Proof that this historic moment is crucial for Georgian people is a TV series dedicated to it, “Kerch-Lost Heroes”, shot by Levan Dabrdashvili, GDS Production and GDS TV in 2015. The

series is based on real facts. Several episodes contain combat choreography, where special workload comes from the image, so computer graphics are often used in the series.³

The Georgian tragedy of Kerch represents a deeply painful yet largely unacknowledged chapter in the history of Crimea and the Soviet Union. It encapsulates the broader themes of war, displacement, ethnic repression, and the long shadow of Stalinism. While the number of victims may not match those of larger, more documented atrocities, the suffering endured by Georgian civilians and soldiers in Kerch deserves recognition and remembrance.

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2 David Glantz, *The battle for the Crimea: 1941-1944*, Helion & Company, 2019.

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