

**Vladimír Krivoř's *Letters from Crimea*.
Travel Accounts on Crimean Tatars in the Service of
Slovak National Revival**

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Abstract: Vladimír Krivoř widely known as Vladimir Ivanovich Krivosh-Nemanich (1865-1942) was a famous Slovak Orientalist in Russian services who managed to learn about forty languages including Turkish, Persian and Arabic. He worked as the head of the Russian parliamentary office of stenographers, interpreter and translator for the Russian Army and, more importantly, as director of the Imperial Library located in the Tsar's Winter Palace in St. Petersburg (but it should be stressed again that he was a very talented spy, too).

After Krivoř's trip to Russian Crimea in 1890 his diary has been published under the title *Letters from Crimea* on the pages of the Slovak newspaper *Národné Noviny* (the National Journal) that was part of his activities as an active propounder of the Slovak national revival in Austro-Hungarian Empire. These *Letters* contain interesting insights into the life of Crimean Tatars. The present contribution, after reviewing some basic data concerning Krivoř's life, provides valuable information on his stay among the Crimean Tatars, especially his observations dealing with their folk culture. My focus will be on Krivoř's ideas, attitudes and bias with regard to the daily life of Tatars, his attempt to (mis)use these writings to strengthen the Slovak national consciousness, but the paper explores some specific issues relating to travel accounts in general as well.

Keywords: Vladimír Krivoř, Crimean Tatars, Slovak nationalism, *Letters from Crimea*, bias, Russians, Pan Slavism

Özet: Yaygın olarak Vladimir Ivanovich Krivosh-Nemanich olarak tanınan Vladimír Krivoř, Türkçe, Farsça ve Arapça da dâhil yaklaşık 40 dili öğrenmeyi başarmış Rusya'nın hizmetinde çalışan ünlü bir Slovak doğu bilimcidir. Krivoř Rus meclisinde kâtiplerin ve çevirmenlerin bulunduğu birimin müdürüdür; daha da önemlisi St. Petersburg'daki Çar'a ait Kış Sarayında yer alan İmparatorluk

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Kütüphanesinde yönetici olarak çalışmıştır. (Burada Krivoš'un aynı zamanda yetenekli bir casus olduğunu da vurgulamak gerekir.)

Krivoš'un 1890 yılında Kırım'a yaptığı ziyaretin ardından, günlükleri Kırım'dan Mektuplar başlığı altında, Krivoš'un Avusturya-Macaristan İmparatorluğu'nda aktif bir Slovak milli uyanışı savunucusu olarak gerçekleştirdiği faaliyetlerin bir parçası olan Slovak gazetesi *Národní Noviny*'de (Ulusal Gazete) yayımlanmıştır. Bu mektuplar Kırım Tatarlarının hayatlarına dair ilginç izlenimler içermektedir. Mektuplar, Krivoš'un hayatına ilişkin bazı bilgiler de göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, Kırım Tatarları ile kaldığı sırada Tatar halk kültürü üzerine yaptığı gözlemler başta olmak üzere, oldukça kıymetli bilgiler sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma esas olarak Krivoš'un Kırım Tatarlarının günlük yaşantıları üzerine düşünceleri, yaklaşımları ve önyargıları ile onun yazılarını Slovak ulusal bilincini desteklemek için nasıl (kötüye) kullandığını ele almakla birlikte Krivoš'un gezi hesapları ile ilgili bazı bilgiler de verecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Kırım Tatarları, halk kültürü, Slovak ulusal uyanışı

Vladimír Krivoš also known as Vladimír Ivanovich Krivosh-Nemanich (1865-1942) was a famous Russian polyglot of Slovak origin (or as others say, Slovak polyglot in Russian services) who managed to learn about forty languages including Turkish, Persian and Arabic. He defined himself also as an Orientalist, although his scholarly activities in the field were rather modest. He worked as the head of the Russian parliamentary office of stenographers, interpreter and translator for the Russian Army and director of the Imperial Library located in the Tsar's Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. Also, it should be stressed time and again that he was also a very talented secret services agent.

After his trip to Russian Crimea in 1890 Krivoš published seven articles under the title *Letters from Crimea* (in Slovak *Listy z Krymu*) on the pages of the leading Slovak newspaper *Národní Noviny* (the National Journal) that was part of his activities as a propounder of the Slovak national revival in Austro-Hungarian Empire. In addition to other issues that attracted his notice *Letters* contain interesting insights into the life of Crimean Tatars. The present contribution, after reviewing some basic data concerning Krivoš's life, provides information on his stay among the Crimean Tatars, especially his observations dealing with their daily life and folk culture. However, my focus will be on Krivoš's ideas, attitudes

and bias with regard to the life and identity of Crimean Tatars, his attempt to (mis)use his own writings to strengthen the Slovak national consciousness under the aegis of Russian Pan-Slavic ideology. Thus, this small case-study throws some light on the more discrete Orientalism that has been produced by the representative of a small non-recognized Slovak nation without its own national state or even clearly defined contemporary nationhood at the end of the 19th century.

Vladimír Krivoš (1865–1942) was born in Liptovský Mikuláš in northern Slovakia, Austrian Empire at that time, to a well-off family in 1865.¹ He first studied at the Oriental Academy in Vienna (*Kaiserliche und Königliche Orientalische Akademie*) between 1885–1886 and later he continued as law and Oriental languages student in St. Petersburg and probably in Paris at the Sorbonne.² Nevertheless, in spite of his great talent he never completed his university studies. Krivoš accepted Russian citizenship in 1893 and began his service in the Russian “black cabinet,” the department of the secret police on perustration of correspondence.³

¹ Later in his life Krivoš added to his name the second surname Nemanich. This should, according to his interpretation, indicate that his predecessors came from the well-known Serbian Nemanjić family. Some commentators, however, argue that this surname when pronounced in Slovak means ‘the one who has nothing’ and Krivoš in fact wanted to express that after the confiscation of his belongings he remained virtually without property.

² On the biography of Krivoš see *Encyklopedický ústav Slovenskej akadémie vied, Encyklopédia Slovenska III. Zväzok K–M*, (Bratislava: Encyklopedický ústav Slovenskej akadémie vied 1979); Tatiana Ivantyšinová, “Vladimír Krivoš a ‘slovanský’ Petrohrad koncom 19. storočia” [Vladimír Krivoš and ‘Slavonic’ Petersburg at the End of the 19th Century]. *Slovanské historické studie* 32 (2007): pp. 225–236.; Vladimír Krivoš, *Memories*, (Moscow: 1929); Matica slovenská, *Slovenský biografický slovník (od roku 833 do roku 1990) III. Zväzok K–L*, (Martin: Matica slovenská 1989), pp. 260–261; Augustín Maťovčík and Peter Cabadaj and Pavol Parenička, *Slovník slovenských spisovateľov 20. storočia* (Bratislava: Literárne informačné centrum – Slovenská národná knižnica 2008), pp. 265; Rudolf Tibenský, *V palácoch a vo vyhnanstvách: životné osudy Vladimíra Krivoša (1865–1942)* (Bratislava: Mladé letá, 1991).

³ Based on archival materials a relatively new book *Sorok let na sekretnoj službe: zhizn i priklyuchenia Vladimira Krivosha* [Forty years on a secret service: life and adventures of Vladimír Krivoš] published in Moscow in 2007 gives a contrasting picture of Krivoš. The monograph characterizes Krivoš as a pathologically

Later he laid foundations of the Russian cryptography. In Russia he also converted to orthodox Christianity from his native Protestantism.

One of the founders of Russian theoretical and practical stenography, Krivoš was in fact a hyper-polyglot who managed to learn twenty-six languages actively and fourteen more passively. When he died he mastered more languages than the famous Italian cardinal Mezzofanti. People around him used to say instead of “you are human being as many times as many languages you know,” rather “you are human being as many times you are Krivoš.”⁴ Between 1906–1913 he was the head of the parliamentary office of stenographers and then director of the Imperial Library located in the Tsar’s Winter Palace. He was backed by general Nikolay Pavlovich Ignatyev, Russian ambassador to the Otoman Empire (1864–1877), the father of San Stefano Treaty that was concluded in 1878, and later Minister of Interior. Krivoš wrote and published not only scientific books and translations from various languages including Chinese, but also theatrical performances.⁵ Krivoš himself was many times awarded with high Russian prizes and generous sums of cash.

Besides, Krivoš served as general and interpreter of the staff of Russian Army. After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 he started to work as officer for the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. He shortly taught languages at the Military Academy in Moscow where he was unjustly imprisoned in 1924 and sentenced to exile to famous Russian *gulag* in the White Sea (Solovetsky Island). After being set free he worked once again at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

ambitious man, arrogant, and as someone who liked to blow his own trumpet. See Александр А. Жданович and Владлен С. Измозик, *Сорок лет на секретной службе: жизнь и приключения Владимира Кривоша* (Москва: Икс-история, 2007). For its Slovak review see Lubomír Guzi, “Dešifrovaný šifrovač,” *Slovo* no. 1–2, 2008.

⁴ During the 1920’s when relations between communist Soviet union and democratic Czechoslovakia were not very friendly, Krivoš even complained about the lack of new Czechoslovak press available to him so that he acknowledges to speak better Persian (Persian was his favourite language) or Turkish than Slovak.

⁵ See for example Vladimír Krivoš, *Tolstojovec* (Bratislava: Diliza 1966).

Krivoš occasionally translated from Far-Eastern literatures, especially from Chinese to Russian and Slovak and studied hieroglyphic script in the British Museum in London. He died in 1942 in Ufa, the capital of today's Republic of Bashkortostan, where he was resettled during World War II. The name of Krivoš was later forgotten in Slovakia during the communist era or even misrepresented by the pro-regime research fellows.⁶

Krivoš's *Letters from Crimea* have been published in a series of short articles in 1890 in the Slovak newspaper *Národné Noviny* (the National Journal) and have some resemblance to travel accounts of a rather modest scale.⁷ Notwithstanding, these seven articles represent a piece of journalism published in periodical press, although they also contain elements of fiction-writing. The journal *Národné Noviny* was published between 1870–1948 as the unofficial printed medium of the Slovak National Party and appeared for the most part in Martin three times weekly on four pages. Although the Slovak language used in the journal is mostly comprehensible even today, it became meanwhile antiquated.

Krivoš traveled from the north of Russia to the south, as he described “from stomach to the toe,” coming first to Sevastopol which was still undergoing reconstruction after the Crimean War (1853–1856). He was moved when arriving to the mountainous southern Crimea from Russian “low countries” in the north of Russia proper. He was greeted, as he poetically recollects, by valleys, waterfalls, tunnels and forests that evoked back memories of his native northern Slovakia, especially the Tatra mountains and the Kriváň Peak.

Amazed by the ethnic colourfulness of the city he mentions that people here speak Russian, Tatar, Turkish, Greek and English. The Tatar barber, the Greek gondolier or the Slovak tinker complete the colourful picture of the region. After a short stop in Chersonensos (or *Sarı kermen* =

⁶ For such an example read Š. J. Kolafa, “Vladimír Krivoš ve slovensko-ruských stycích.” *Československo-sovětské vztahy*, no. 4 (1975), pp. 121–144.

⁷ Vladimír Krivoš, “Listy z Krymu.” *Národné noviny* 21, no. 49, pp. 51–56 (1890) were published in the section called Discussion (*Besednica*). Throughout this paper all translations into English from his *Letters* written in 19th century Slovak are mine.

Yellow stone in Crimean Tatar language, named after yellow sand and stones) he and his friend moved to Yalta by ship. The city itself is described by Krivoš as consisting of three parts: Sea-front Yalta (in Russian *Naberezhnaya*), Yalta as such at the foot of the hills, and finally the Old Yalta inhabited by the Tatars, Karaims and Greeks, many of them artisans.

During their stay in Yalta that lasted for seven weeks he and his friend visited certain Abdulaziz, a thirty-eight years old son of the local *molla*, in a nearby village of Dereköy, today integral part of the city. Abdulaziz himself has been undergoing studies in Bahchesaray medrese in order to become a *molla* similar to his father. Krivoš visited him repeatedly and he was always welcomed with “a traditional Muslim hospitality.” Krivoš was striving to improve his knowledge of the (Crimean) Tatar language, because as he mentions, “the Tatar language of Crimean dialect has – for us Orientalists – very interesting features that relate to archaisms and specific pronunciation that are not seen in other Asian Tatar dialects.”⁸ Also, he discussed with the old *molla* certain Qur’anic passages (*suras*). Unlike in Nizhnyj Novgorod where he was driven out of the mosque, this time he visited the local mosque with old *molla* and was very pleased. On the other side, local dignitaries were pleased when Krivoš used Persian and Arabic terminology as a sign of high learning in his speech.

The value of his *Letters* lies also in the description of Tatar household so little known to even educated Slovaks at the end of the 19th century. Tatar houses in the village were situated on the hills and usually had two floors with long balconies and without courtyards. The typical Tatar household has been divided into *selamlik* and *haremlik* (men’s and women’s part) and Krivoš who was fluent in Tatar has been taken also to the women’s part. Moreover, he was allowed to speak with women who put down their veils after they were allowed to do so by their husbands or men. Men’s part of the house is referred by Krivoš to be not only a room, but also as a workshop which indicates the host’s business. On the walls

⁸ Krivoš, “*Listy z Krymu*.” no. 54 (1890). By Tatar dialects Krivoš means probably all Turkic languages, sometimes called also Turko-Tatar languages.

are portraits of Muhammad without face, Ali and first khalifa Abu Bakr and scenes from the prophet's life, texts taken from the Holy Qur'an and even pictures of tsar and members of the ruling dynasty, as well as some other Russian personalities. Local Tatars are not typical farmers, mentions Krivoš, they cultivate, however, tobacco and grapes.⁹

Women's part – very clean and tidy – is according to him more smart, covered with soft carpets. This is the place where men usually go to take rest. The rooms do not lack in copper pots and pans, *nargile*, tobacco purse or sugar bowl. They could see women – mothers with daughters together – knitting, embroidering and spinning, in fact supporting often the whole family. Men are usually engaged in transport and selling of the products made by women in the city center. Krivoš admires the beautiness of Tatar girls with strands of hair interwoven into braids. Furthermore, he also describes the Tatar wedding and local cuisine, *pilav*, *baklava* and some other products. During the weddings, as Krivoš reminds us, Tatar people are drinking wine.

The Tatar village of Gurzuf with its spas comes up in the final account and is pointed out as the nicest place on earth. The nearby waterfall of *Uchan-su* (Flying Water) is described as Crimean Alhambra or Andalusia. Krivoš poetically accounts of the nice fauna and flora, for example when he says: “come here oh those of you who do not know what is happiness. What are all Nizzas, Karlsbads, Baden-Badens or Abazzias” in comparison with this “cinder.”¹⁰

It would be naive, however, to think that Krivoš was just observing the situation among the Tatars in his *Letters*. His writings also serve his agenda in the process of national emancipation of Slovaks in Austro-Hungarian Empire. Krivoš who was an active propounder of the Slovak national revival had extensive activities in St. Petersburg's Slavonic benevolent society, good relations with Czechs and Russians and, naturally, also with Slovaks back in his homeland, especially with Svetozár Hurban-Vajanský (1847–1916), an outstanding poet, novelist, journalist and politician. In the second half of the 19th century Vajanský

⁹ Krivoš, “*Listy z Krymu.*” no. 54 (1890).

¹⁰ Krivoš, “*Listy z Krymu.*” no. 56 (1890).

Dereköy



represented *de facto* the living “patriarch of the Slovaks.” Measuring his influence it has to be reminded that ethnic oppression in Slovakia intensified during the last decades of the 19th century after the German Austrians and Hungarians have become equal partners within the dualist Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1867 onwards. In 1874 three remaining Slovak grammar schools have been closed down and in 1875 the same fate struck the iconic *Matica slovenská*, the most important educational and cultural organization of Slovaks in Hungary. Furthermore, in 1879 the law introduced Hungarian as a compulsory subject in all primary schools in Slovakia. During this period, the very existence of the Slovak nation was in danger and the centre of the Slovak national movement moved into a small north-Slovakian town Martin, where the Slovak National Party had its seat. The Slovak representatives in Martin have been convinced that only the Russian Empire could save the Slovak nation from being Magyarized. Svetozár Hurban-Vajanský, the leader of the party, has taken pro-Russian stance in all important national questions and beyond. Vajanský’s pro-Russian attitude was in fact so extreme that he was unable even to make a realistic assessment of imperial policy between the European powers when he said, for example, that whereas Britain acquired

foreign territories in order to steal, Russia subdued them to deliver native peoples a better life.¹¹

Therefore, given Krivoš's convictions, his writings should not be viewed uniquely as a single attempt to diffuse useful knowledge, because his *Letters* served also as a manipulated pedagogical device with deeply personal comments. One of the most important messages of his writings from Crimea to the Slovak public, or more precisely to literate upper and middle class Slovaks, has more to do with nationalism, oppression and emancipation in Austro-Hungarian Empire than with the Crimean Tatars themselves.

Krivoš is convinced, that Tatars will be Russified because they accept Russian culture and civilization with joy. He says that "Russian Tatars are very nice people and they are better off under the tsars than they have been under the khans."¹² He supports this idea by stressing that several generals of the Russian Army are Tatars and/or Muslims. "They master the Russian language and Tatar interests as expressed in *Tercüman* newspaper are identical with Russian ones. Also, the conversions to Orthodoxy among Tatars became recently more common." In his own words:

"Recently, cases of voluntary baptism of Tatars are more frequent (conversion to Orthodoxy). In the territories formerly ruled by Tatar khans where Russians settled down the fanaticism of Tatars is decreasing, Tatars accept Russian culture and civilization and Russify almost completely. Indeed, Russification is a silent historical process which advances without persecution, without coercion or torture – without

¹¹ His pro-Russian stance later acquired visible features when he started to wear the Russian *rubashka* (folk shirt), Orthodox beard, and also introduced Russian syntax into his Slovak novels and Russian borrowings on pages of Slovak print medias. Moreover, since 1881 the National Journal, of which he was the editor-in-chief, has got regular annual subsidy of 5,000 rubles from Russia. This support even increased after Vajanský's personal visit in St. Petersburg in 1885. Russia has funded the newspaper through its embassy in Vienna until the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

¹² Krivoš, "Listy z Krymu." no. 55 (1890).

*Hungarian-German approaches – there is something smooth and devotional in it.”*¹³

This “idyllic” silent Russification of the Tatars is contrasted with what Krivoš understood as “brutal” Hungarian and German methods of forced Germanization, Magyarization and persecution back home in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Krivoš’s nationalism was sincere and radical, strongly anti-Hungarian and anti-Jewish, but it is in fact unclear why should the Tatars be better off under the Russian rule, whereas Slovaks, on the contrary, are supposed to be better off without foreign domination.¹⁴ Moreover, given what we know today about the fate of Crimean Tatars during the twentieth century, anyone reading Krivoš’s reflections on Russo-Tatar relations must apprehend with a degree of suspicion his overtly idyllic and peaceful depiction of Russian minority politics as well as Tatars readiness to give up their own traditions, beliefs or national character.

Besides, religious and ethnic biases are clearly noticeable in his writings on Crimean Tatars who are in some aspects regarded as uncivilised and wild settlers of the land of ancient Greek civilization. It is evident that Russians are the civilizing force for Krivoš because, as he understands it, they continue the work of Greeks and Byzantines on the peninsula. It seems that what matters to Krivoš are Russian and Slav traits in the ancient history of the (southern part of) peninsula much more than the history of Turkic-speaking Crimean Tatar populations living there.¹⁵ Visiting Chersonesos Krivoš, for instance, accounts about the remains of the former church of Saint Vladimir in which prince Vladimir the Great, ruler of the Kievan Rus, adopted Christianity when marrying Anna, the Byzantine princess, in 988. It is in this very place, continues Krivoš, where the Russian Orthodox nation received its baptism.¹⁶

¹³ Krivoš, “*Listy z Krymu.*” no. 55 (1890).

¹⁴ See Lubomír Guzi, “Dešifrovaný šifrovač,” *Slovo* no. 1–2, 2008.

¹⁵ We should not forget that unlike today during the 19th century Crimean Tatars lived mainly along the southern coastal shores of the Crimean peninsula.

¹⁶ Krivoš, “*Listy z Krymu.*” no. 53 (1890).

“The son of molla, Abdoul-Aziz’s reception was first very chilly. The reason for this was his alienation from the world, as a student of Bahchesaray medrese (higher spiritual school), his upbringing in pure Mohamedan spirit, as well as his own religion that teaches hatred of giaurs and prohibits not only to make friends with but also to speak to non-believers. True, these strict laws of the Qur’an can be implemented only at places where there are no believers in other faiths, but here it is impossible because Russians and Tatars have common interests and constant contact.”¹⁷

From what I have said so far it is clear that Krivoš must have known much more about Tatars than an ordinary observer. Be it as it may, we can only speculate whether his trip to Crimea was just an excursion or there has also been some hidden agenda behind the roaming around the peninsula.

Krivoš with his son in 1926 (Gulag – Solovetsky Island)



If we were to head for the post-Orientalist discourse of Edward Said and to put the main emphasis on the conspiratorial activities of Vladimír Krivoš, then we could finish with a Saidian treacherous prototype of Orientalist in the services of a big colonial power, namely the Russian empire. With regard to Krivoš’s contemptuous attitude toward Crimean Tatars and his “*positional* superiority,” this outcome is a very real one,

¹⁷ Krivoš, “*Listy z Krymu.*” no. 55 (1890).

indeed the *Letters* are but a shining example of Slovak Orientalism in pejorative sense.¹⁸ However, we still have not got enough information to pronounce the last word in this matter, and so, for the time being, we can merely state that Krivoš deliberately distorted the character of relationships between the Crimean Tatars and Russians, and what is even more serious, he interpreted very subjectively the history of Crimea and idealized the Russian national policy towards minorities in order to show the innate Russian 'goodness,' superiority of the Russian culture and Russia's right to rule Crimea. He then contrasted it with what he identified as the 'malicious' national policy of Hungarians and Germans in his native Austria-Hungary, especially in relations to Slovaks and more generally all Slavs living in the dualist monarchy. The comparison remains, however, superficial as if Russian imperialism were by definition and without questioning totally different from the Austrian or Hungarian one.

No matter what we actually think about the personality of Krivoš, whether one evaluates him positively or negatively, his phenomenal language skills, mastery of many disciplines, among others especially stenography, or life energy, can even today undoubtedly serve as inspiration to many a man. As my approach was based mostly on selection of points of controversy, I freely reproach myself for being perhaps frustratingly brief when speaking about positive sides of Krivoš's writings.

One is also tempted to draw certain parallels between Krivoš and still another contemporary native from the territory of present-day Slovakia, the famous Hungarian turcologist, linguist, traveller, diplomat and secret services confidant, professor Ármín Vámbéry (1832–1913), one of the founding fathers of scholarly turcological studies.¹⁹ Both men, one enthusiastic Slovak and Russofile and the other ardent Hungarian and notorious anti-Russian, were hyper-active in various fields, both had incredible language skills and became partly controversial figures given their activities within or with secret services of various countries. Both of them did not have necessary qualification to act as scholars, but

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 7.

¹⁹ For basic information on Vámbéry see for instance <http://www.vambery.mtak.hu>

represented rather a prototype of self-made men with incredible ambitions and adaptive skills. This is not to say that we can compare the scale of Krivoš's achievements in the field of turcology or linguistics with the one attributed to Vámbéry who became an ordinary professor at the University of Budapest and academician. The comparison we made is of hyperbolic character that usually poets or novelists are allowed to do more than scholars themselves.