

CRIMEA IN PUTIN'S WAR: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



E. Wayne Merry



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Editorial Staff

Author

E. Wayne Merry
Senior Fellow for Europe and
Eurasia, AFPC

Graphic Design

Rehna Sheth
Research Fellow and Program
Officer, AFPC

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SUMMARY

Any political effort to resolve Russia's war against Ukraine must reckon with the special circumstances of Crimea. The Black Sea peninsula may play a secondary role in the active fighting, but the status of Crimea is absolutely central to this war and to the underlying conflict between Ukraine and Russia. It was in fact the Russian forceable annexation of Crimea in early 2014 which initiated the current war. Moscow still denies that even its massive invasion of mainland Ukraine in 2022 constitutes a war, while stressing its own long history in Crimea before it became part of Ukraine in 1954. What Moscow ignores is that its actions of 2014 in Crimea and the Donbas have created new history because they violated the 1999 basic "friendship" treaty of Russia with Ukraine, a range of other bilateral and multilateral agreements, and its fundamental obligations under the United Nations Charter.¹

Many recent Western commentaries on the war treat Crimea as secondary to the fighting on battlefields further north or even want to consider the peninsula as a bargaining chip for a future settlement. However, ignoring the fate



of Crimea or pushing the issue to the side of the negotiating table would be counterproductive to any broader peacemaking effort. A basic knowledge of the historical background is essential to any serious attempt at conflict resolution. This study does not attempt to propose the outlines of a diplomatic resolution, but seeks to provide historical context for anyone engaged in such an effort or even in producing commentary on the war. The basic message here is that Crimea is significantly different than the other issues in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and hence presents special challenges for policy and for diplomacy.

CRIMEA

Crimea is located to the south of Ukraine, adjoining the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The narrow Kerch Strait connects Crimea to Russia on its east. Crimea's capital city is Simferopol.

The Black Sea

The Black Sea is located between Eastern Europe and Western Asia, and is surrounded by Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia.



THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Crimea enjoys a millennial history, actually much longer than do either Russia or Ukraine in their own national territories. The Russian and Ukrainian periods in the history of Crimea are both comparatively recent, and both Slavic nations came to the peninsula as outsiders. Crimea had many centuries of Classical and Byzantine history, but these have relatively little to do with Crimea's identity today, other than by adding to its allure for tourists who are attracted by its great natural beauty and benign climate. The later centuries, especially those of Ottoman rule, were different and left deep legacies. The ethnogenesis of modern Crimea is based on the coming there of the Turkic people now called Crimean Tatars. The migration of Turks out of Central Asia into the Caucasus and Black Sea region transformed many lands, including Crimea. The people we call the Crimean Tatars took on their special identity gradually as they absorbed several older populations on the peninsula — including Greeks, Armenians, Romans, Scythians and others — but the very name of the Crimean Tatars indicates the fundamental role they have played in shaping the human development and identity of Crimea as a Black Sea and Caucasian culture. That special identity later made them a target for discrimination and oppression, especially by Moscow.

Only with the coming of the Russian Empire under Catherine the Great in 1783, however, did Crimea enter into the geo-political dynamics of modern Europe, largely in terms of the imperial rivalry of Romanov Russia and Ottoman Turkey for dominance in the Black Sea and its littoral areas. The historical memory of these 240 years remains very relevant for the conflict today, especially for Russia. For example, the eleven-month siege of the Russian naval base at Sevastopol by Turkey's allies, the British and French, during the Crimean War of 1854 (one of a dozen wars between Turkey and Russia) enjoys an extraordinary historical resonance in Russian popular culture, comparable to that of the Alamo in Texas or Verdun in France. Leo Tolstoy served in the garrison, and communicated the horror and heroism of the siege to Russian



Current map of the Black Sea, Crimea, and neighboring states

readers. The defense of Sevastopol was perhaps the sole aspect of the Crimean War in which Russians could feel much pride, and it was raised to epic status in Russian historical mythology. This status was reinforced and expanded less than a century later by the horrendous eight-month siege of the city and naval base by the Germans in 1941-42, for which Sevastopol was later enshrined by Moscow as one of the dozen “Hero Cities” of the “Great Patriotic War.”

Anyone who grew up in the Soviet Union after the War (as did Vladimir Putin) would have been exposed to a near-constant hagiography about these sieges, which played a key role in the cult of Great Russian nationalism which permeated Soviet culture at the expense of recognition of the sacrifice and heroism of other peoples including the Ukrainians. To someone who has never lived in Russia, it is difficult to convey the breadth and intensity of historical emotion generated by the memory and mythology of Sevastopol or how completely most Russians simply take for granted that Crimea is and by rights should remain part of Russia. This was demonstrated by the huge

popular support generated by Putin's illegal seizure of the peninsula in 2014, which became the bedrock for later Russian public acquiescence for his policy in the Donbas and the invasion of 2022. It is important to appreciate that this historical mentality on the Russian side is genuine and centered on Crimea. In parallel, Russian aggression in Crimea has generated a comparable sense of historical rightness and grievance on the Ukrainian side, and elevated recovery of Crimea to an almost sacred goal for Kyiv. By way of comparison, for any government in Moscow or Kyiv now to surrender even Sevastopol — let alone Crimea as a whole — would be much more politically difficult than for a government in London to surrender the Falklands (Malvinas), where Britain fought a war with no burden of historical emotion whatever.

The brutal wartime saga of Crimea was made much more so by Stalin's decision in 1944 to deport en masse to Central Asia much of the Crimean population for their purported collaboration with the German occupiers. Among the ethnic groups so punished, the largest was the Crimean Tartar population — perhaps a quarter million people. This deportation was carried out almost overnight May 17-18 with a brutality unusual even for the Stalinist system and with horrendous human suffering and the death of perhaps half of those deported. The Tatars were effectively gulag slave labor until 1967 when a Soviet decree removed their criminal status but also stripped them of their "Crimean" identity. What followed was decades of individual and collective efforts by the Crimean Tatars to recover both their homeland and their historical identity. This struggle continues.

Crimean history after the Second World War took a somewhat bizarre but critical turn in 1954 when newly-elevated Soviet Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev simply transferred Crimea within the complex Soviet confederal system from the Russian Republic to the Ukrainian Republic, supposedly to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Agreement, a landmark event in Russian-Ukrainian relations, but which had nothing directly to do with Crimea.² Khrushchev's purposes in this action are the object of con-

siderable dispute, but he may simply have been looking for a dramatic gesture worthy of his own stature as Stalin's successor in the Kremlin. This Soviet-style birthday present to Ukraine initiated a period of economic development on Crimea which significantly increased the population of the peninsula but also strained its limited resources, especially of water which now had to be imported from the mainland via a new canal. While semi-arid Crimea had historically been largely agricultural, its economy now reflected considerable investment in military facilities and in many vacation resorts for both the Soviet elite and ordinary working people.

During the remaining years of Soviet history, Crimea was part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in terms of form and administration but was ruled directly from Moscow on all key issues of Cold War security. Crimea was effectively a garrison entity projecting toward the traditional regional adversary Turkey — now the bulwark of the southern flank of NATO — and was largely Russian in population and identity. Perhaps no part of the Soviet confederal system was more intensely “Soviet” than was Crimea, which meant that when the USSR reached its end in 1991-92 Crimea would inevitably be claimed by the newly-independent Ukraine (of which it was legally a component) but also at least in part by Russia in its capacity as the internationally-recognized successor to the USSR. (Note that this succession was not and is not universally accepted. By comparison, the collapse of Yugoslavia did not automatically transfer to Serbia many of the international attributes of the disappearing Yugoslav Federation while this transfer did take place for Russia with the Soviet collapse. The United States, for example, did not favor Serbia as the sole legatee of Yugoslavia but strongly supported Russia as the single successor to the international assets and obligations of the disappearing USSR. This included its stature as one of the Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council.)

In 1990 the still-Soviet governments in Moscow and Kyiv signed a treaty affirming their existing borders, including those of Crimea. However, the future of Crimea was one of the most disputatious issues within the collapsing USSR, fed

by Ukrainian nationalists in Kyiv and by Russian nationalists, the military and the Communist Party in Moscow. In early 1991, while Gorbachev was trying to hold the Soviet system together in the face of Ukrainian and other separatism, he conducted a referendum on Crimea on “the restoration of the Crimean ASSR as a subject of the USSR and as a party to the Union Treaty.” The official (hence probably manipulated) vote tally was 93.26 percent in favor.³ During that politically tumultuous year, the parliaments of Ukraine in Kyiv and of Crimea in Simferopol (both still Soviet institutions) jostled about Crimean status, setting the stage for future conflict. (The author visited both Kyiv and Crimea in the summer of 1991 and can testify to the intense political tensions in both, but also to the dramatic sight of large tent communities of returning Crimean Tatars exercising their option as squatters to reestablish family claims on the otherwise inhospitable landscape.)

The core issue in dispute between Moscow and Kyiv was the city and naval base of Sevastopol, which was the main basing facility of the Soviet and later Russian Black Sea Fleet. (This fleet is comparatively small among the four blue-water Russian fleets, with the lion’s share of Moscow’s seapower deployed with the Northern and Pacific fleets. Only the Baltic Fleet is smaller. In contrast, key elements of Soviet naval shipbuilding were in mainland Black Sea Ukraine and so became Ukrainian after 1991.) The base and fleet were divided between Moscow and Kyiv shortly after the Soviet collapse, in an arrangement which satisfied neither side. Under the current Ukrainian constitution, Sevastopol is one of two Ukrainian cities, along with Kyiv, with “special status,” while the Putin-modified Russian constitution designates it a Russian “federal city” along with Moscow and St. Petersburg. Within their own regimes, both Kyiv and Moscow have treated Sevastopol as administratively special rather than directly subordinate to the Crimean regional capital of Simferopol. During the ensuing years of dispute between Ukraine and Russia, their arguments were often more about Sevastopol than about broader Crimea.

Ukraine opted out of the Soviet Union via a national referendum on December 1, 1991, in which the level of popular support recorded on Crimea was the lowest

of any region in the country (54 percent) while opposition was very high around military facilities and especially at Sevastopol.⁴ Much of the urban population of Crimea consisted of families of naval and other security personnel, who were predominantly non-Ukrainian and hence lacking motivation to become part of a newly-independent Ukraine. Similar issues of divided or unclear identity and loyalty were quite common across the disintegrating Soviet empire for many millions of people of all walks of life. For example, the senior official of the Russian Foreign Ministry in charge of relations with the United States — and later Russian Ambassador to Washington — was fully Ukrainian on both sides of his family. In much of Ukraine, and especially Crimea, mixed national and ethnic identities were — and often still are — common.

One identity issue of special importance during the waning years of Soviet power and afterwards was the return of exiled Crimean Tatars to their homeland. The Crimean Tatars always had a conflicted (not to say, bitter) relationship with Russian power, first during the Imperial period (when many fled to Turkey) and even more so under the Soviet Union. By the time of the Soviet collapse, something like a quarter million Crimean Tatars had returned from their Central Asia exile to Crimea, often in very tenuous living conditions but nonetheless determined to restore their ancient rights on the peninsula. Their presence proved a complicating issue and a challenge to both Ukrainian and Russian authorities, although Kyiv at times has seen the Tatars as at least partial assets in its rivalry with Moscow rather than as liabilities. It is, however, important to keep in mind that Crimean Tatars are committed to their own identity and rights, not just as Ukrainian citizens, a status which many Tatars over the years have refused to accept.

For newly-independent Ukraine and Russia, 1992 presented an even bumpier year for issues of Crimean status. In May the Crimean parliament in Simferopol declared independence for the peninsula subject to a later referendum but this was quickly declared unconstitutional by the parliament in Kyiv which authorized the new Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk to employ whatever means necessary to prevent Crimean independence. After considerable back and forth

during the ensuing months, Kyiv and Simferopol agreed to an autonomy status for Crimea within newly-constituted constitutional Ukraine.⁵ However, the intensity of Russian feeling was shown when the Russian Supreme Soviet in Moscow declared Sevastopol to be a Russian city (an action publicly disavowed by President Yeltsin and then by the United Nations Security Council with Russian support). When Yeltsin and Kravchuk met in August (at Yalta, on Crimea) they agreed on a long-term lease of Sevastopol to Russia and on division of the fleet between the two countries. Slowly, the parliaments in Kyiv and Simferopol took some steps which appeared to show progress on resolution of Crimean status.⁶

However, nothing was resolved at the popular level, in Crimea or Kyiv or in Moscow. Demonstrations on the issue were common and made diplomacy at the leadership level even more difficult. Perhaps the most prominent advocate of Russian rights in Sevastopol and in Crimea broadly at the time was the populist mayor of Moscow, Yury Lushkov, who, while a political ally of President Yeltsin on many issues, was a champion of Russian historical claims based on the legacy of the two sieges and prevailing Russian public sentiment in opposition to the 1954 transfer. Lushkov assured himself a national (and nationalist) audience well beyond his own city with this issue, which some observers believed he sought to use to pave his own succession to Yeltsin as Russia's president.

During the months and years ahead, these disputes continued, during a period when none of the participants had any money, although Russia did supply Ukraine with oil and gas for which it received positive consideration of its interests in Crimea, such as with the base lease at Sevastopol. The population of Crimea shared in the difficulties of these threadbare years, when the ships in both countries' Black Sea fleets developed rust on their anchor chains due to lack of fuel for operations. However, an indication of underlying popular preferences among the inhabitants of Crimea was a March 1994 referendum in which 84 percent supported the option of dual Russian-Ukrainian citizenship (which they did not receive) and 78.4 percent wanted greater autonomy from Kyiv.⁷

Finally, in May 1997 Russia and Ukraine signed a basic bilateral treaty (“on friendship, cooperation and partnership”) which guaranteed their borders, territorial integrity and sovereignty.⁸ As the first legally-binding accord between the two countries in which Moscow acknowledged Ukrainian independence, this is the key agreement between the two countries in the post-Soviet era. It is perhaps noteworthy that it took five years from the signing of their first bilateral agreement as independent states in June 1992 to achievement of mutual acknowledgement of that independence. The status of Crimea as part of Ukraine is not explicitly cited in the treaty text, but the “territorial integrity” and “inviolability of borders” are declared by both countries in Articles 2 and 3 (which also contain commitments to “peaceful settlement of disputes and non-use of force”).⁹ The treaty came into force after mutual ratification on April 1, 1999, and is an essential reference document for any future effort to resolve Russia’s war. The treaty was agreed to last for ten years after its coming into force with automatic ten year extensions if neither party took steps to end it. On September 21, 2018, Ukraine notified Russia that it would not prolong the treaty at the expiration of its second ten-year term.¹⁰ Sadly, almost all of the 41 operative articles in the treaty had already been violated by Putin’s 2014 occupation of Crimea and proxy war in the Donbas.

TO REMAKE REALITY WITH FRAUD

While the complex saga of relations between Ukraine and Russia in this period is beyond the scope of this booklet, it is beyond question that the Russian occupation of Crimea on February 28, 2014 was an unambiguous use of force and a violation of their bilateral treaty, of the UN Charter and of a variety of other international obligations.¹¹ One of these was the so-called Budapest Memorandum of December 5, 1994 among Ukraine, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States.¹² This undertaking had been an incentive by Washington for Ukraine to adhere to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and to eliminate all nuclear weapons from its territory. In return, Kyiv obtained “security assurances” from the other three signatory states. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, the United States (supported by its NATO allies) had as its top priority that Russia should become the single custodian of the Soviet Union’s massive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. This goal required that Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine give up their inherited Soviet nuclear and related weapons, in return for considerable US financial aid. Kyiv, however, wanted more, and what it received (after considerable dickering) was the Budapest Memorandum.¹³ A review of the Memo will reveal that Ukraine did not receive much of substance, and certainly nothing which obligates the United States to take action if Russia were to violate Ukraine’s sovereignty or territory beyond merely to “consult” and to “seek” the UN Security Council “to provide assistance to Ukraine.” Given that (1) Russia has veto power in the Security Council, and (2) in international diplomatic parlance an “assurance” falls well short of a “guarantee,” and (3) a diplomatic “memorandum” falls very far short of a “treaty,” then it is little surprise that Ukraine received no effective support in 2014 in connection with the Budapest Memorandum. If Russia were to employ nuclear weapons against Ukraine, then the text of the Budapest Memorandum would be more relevant, but only in the severity of the Russian violation and not in any explicit obligation on either the United States or United Kingdom. In truth, both Washington and London (and Moscow) knew exactly what they were signing in 1994, as probably did the Ukrainian leadership at the time. Still, the Budapest Memorandum is often

cited by Ukrainians as an American obligation to support their country against Russia. A five-minute reading will demonstrate that American diplomacy gave away nothing of the sort. In recent years US support for Ukraine has been critical and massive, but not because of the Budapest Memorandum.

Immediately after the occupation of Crimea by Russia's so-called "little green men" in early 2014, Moscow moved swiftly to create the appearance of popular support through a referendum staged only eighteen days later. In addition to violating Russia's treaty obligations, this referendum entailed a basic constitutional violation as Article 73 of the Ukrainian Constitution requires that "alterations to the territory of Ukraine shall be resolved exclusively by an all-Ukraine referendum."¹⁴ Thus, even if Moscow had not staged a bogus referendum, it would lack basic legitimacy.

However, bogus it was. The referendum posed two options to voters: "unification of Crimea with Russia as part of the Russian Federation" or "restoring the 1992 constitution and the status of Crimea as part of Ukraine." The first question is pretty straightforward but the second is not. The 1992 constitution had been supplanted first by another constitution in 1995 and then amended a number of times before the Russian acknowledgement of Ukrainian sovereignty in 1997 in the bilateral treaty. In other words, the referendum was a choice between joining Russia on Putin's terms or choosing an uncertain constitutional option already rendered null and void.

While the option of joining Russia probably would have appealed to many inhabitants of Crimea, Moscow could not resist a Soviet-style public acclamation: the official outcome of the referendum was that 96.8 percent voted in favor of the first question on a participation of 83 percent. This claim confronts the reality of a complex population on the peninsula which had told a variety of public opinion surveys in preceding months that they had divided preferences about the future of Crimea. One such survey in spring 2013 (Gallup, Baltic Surveys, IRI) showed 53 percent of those polled favoring Crimean autonomy within Ukraine and 29 percent supporting secession and joining Russia. In

addition, the voting was conducted under the supervision of Russian armed guards in polling stations, without legitimate international observers and in an atmosphere of high tension resulting from the invasion. In early May President Putin's own Human Rights Council briefly posted online a report that the participation level in the Crimean referendum had in fact been only 30 percent and that only half of those (thus, about 15 percent of the electorate) had voted for incorporation into Russia. Not surprisingly, this report was quickly taken down in Moscow.

Only ten days after the referendum the United Nations General Assembly adopted a March 27 resolution which affirms the "unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders" and "underscores that the referendum held in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol on 16 March 2014, having no validity, cannot form the basis for any alteration of the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea or of the city of Sevastopol." The UNGA vote was 100 in favor, 11 opposed, 58 abstentions. The United States, the European Union and a variety of states issued separate denunciations of the purported referendum. Four years later Secretary of State Pompeo noted the precedent of the 1940 declaration of his predecessor Sumner Welles in refusing to recognize Soviet seizures of the Baltic Republics as part of the Ribbentrop-Molotov accord and affirmed US determination to exercise a similar policy in respect to Moscow's purported annexation of Crimea.

TO REMAKE REALITY WITH FORCE

After its illegal occupation of Crimea, Russia immediately began to remake the demographics of the peninsula: to encourage or compel the departure of the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar populations and to import very large numbers of ethnic Russians, both military and civilian. The residents of the peninsula were naturalized en masse as Russian citizens and those who chose to retain Ukrainian citizenship were expelled. Not surprisingly, accurate population numbers are not available, both because Russian sources are not to be believed and because many people now have a compelling motivation to lie about their identity. To keep your home on Crimea, it is necessary to assert Russian citizenship, regardless of the truth. It is worth noting that the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court designates the transfer by an Occupying Power of parts of its own population to a territory it occupies as a war crime. (Moscow, of course, denies it “occupies” Crimea which it regards as its own sovereign territory, a view rejected by most of the world.)¹⁵

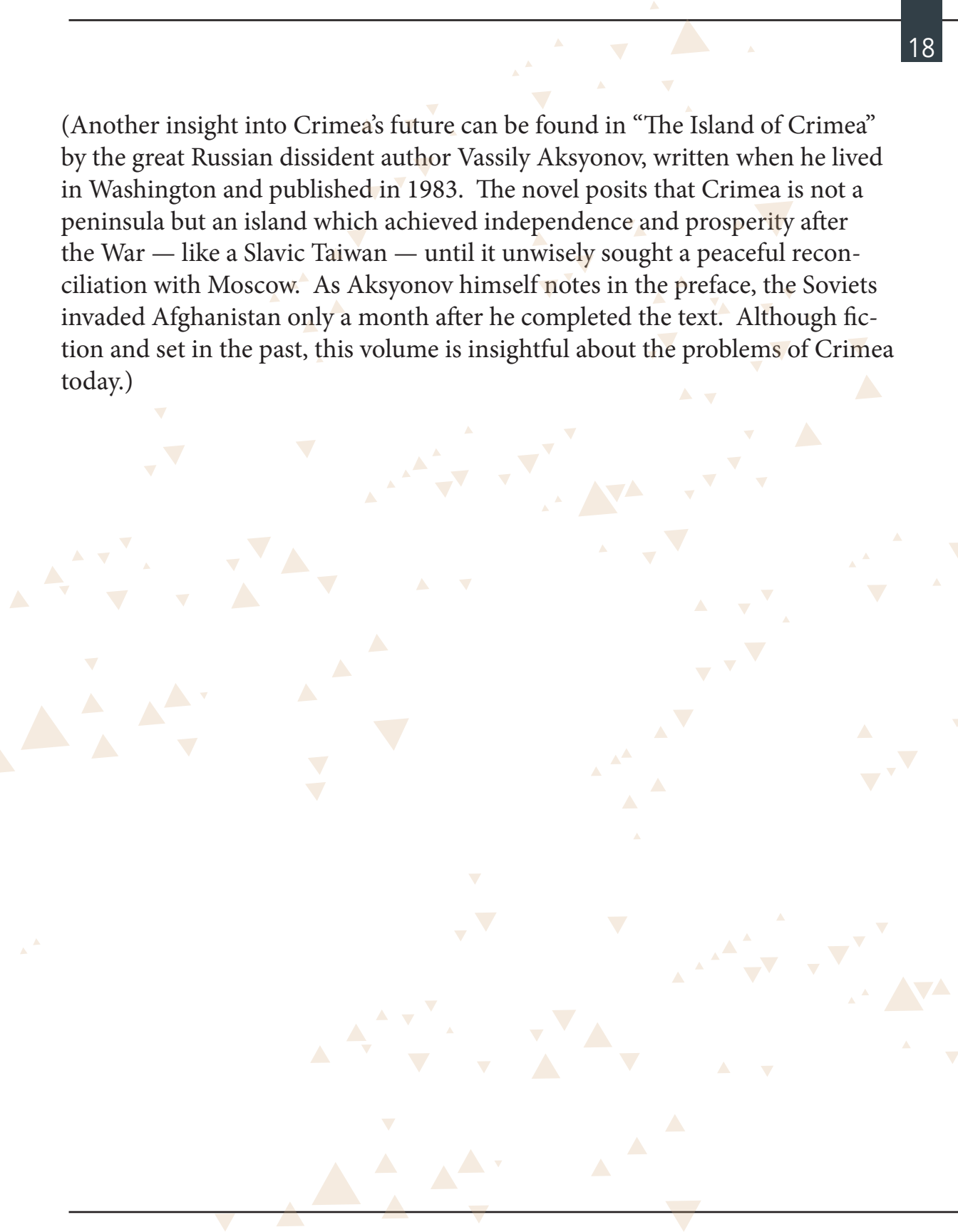
Without getting bogged down in statistics which lose value as they gain in detail, the population of Crimea before the 2014 occupation was a bit under two million, which in almost a decade has grown to something like 2.4 million despite the evisceration of the civilian economy. The change reflects the outflow of at least a million Crimean Tatars and Ukrainian citizens and the inflow of at least one and a half million Russian citizens of various ethnicities.¹⁶ With the full-scale invasion in 2022, Crimea has become a significant theater of war and has experienced a large inflow of military personnel to support the naval and air force units deployed there and to construct a massive program of fortifications to defend against a potential Ukrainian assault by land or sea. This military buildup and Ukraine’s occasional targeting of facilities on Crimea with drones have rendered much of the peninsula more or less useless as a resort location even for Russians. For most of the Soviet period and for years thereafter Crimea had been a favored vacation locale for Soviet citizens but also for many Europeans and Americans. In 2013, just before the occupation,

National Geographic magazine ranked Crimea in its Top Twenty Travel Destinations worldwide. This substantial money-making capacity has been lost due to the war and to Western sanctions against Russia — thus eliminating what was once a significant source of hard currency earnings.

The Russian policy to expel Crimean Tatars and other minorities has been conducted as pure ethnic cleansing and includes such tactics as the conscription of young Crimean Tatar males into the Russian military and their deployment to distant parts of Russia.¹⁷ Key figures of the Crimean Tatar community have been arrested on political charges. Not only are they often denied competent legal representation, but their lawyers are also subject to arrest. While the tactics of ethnic cleansing employed by Stalin were doubtless more brutal, Putin's program may be comparably thorough in its objective of rendering Crimea "cleansed" of its native population. In addition there are credible reports of the removal or destruction of cultural artifacts, including those of Crimean Tatar heritage and of earlier archaeological treasures.¹⁸

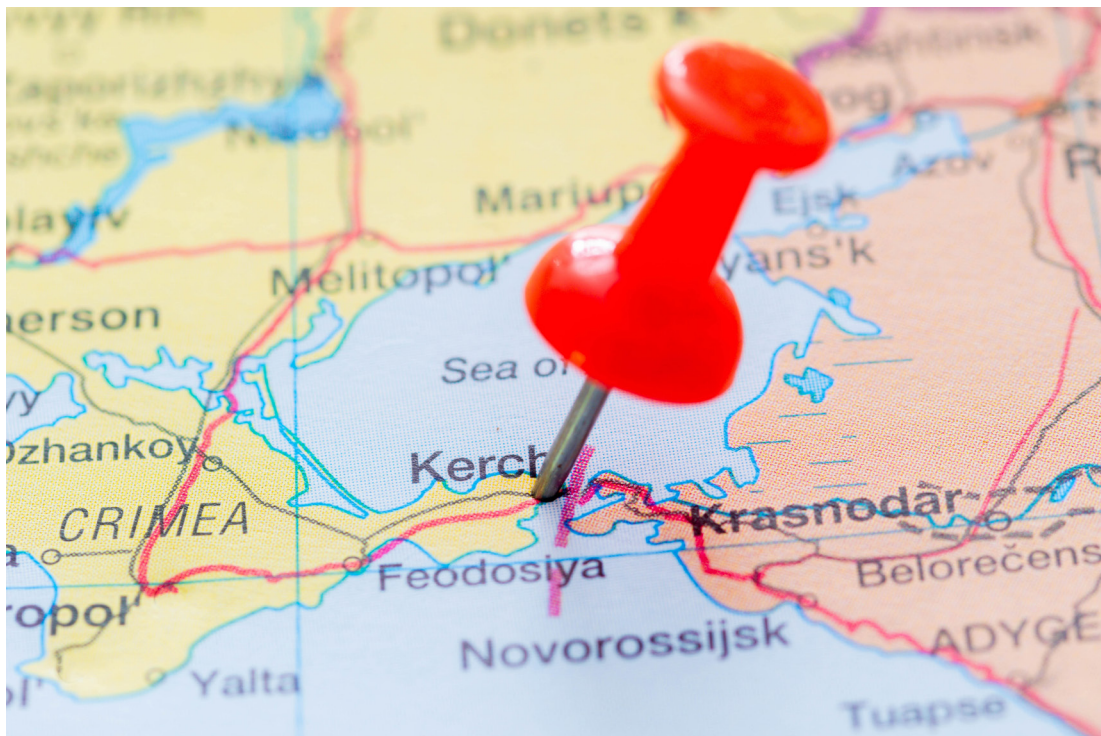
In March 2021 Putin issued a degree adding Crimea to the Russian territories prohibited to foreigners and to foreign entities for purposes of land ownership.¹⁹ This effectively nationalizes property owned by Ukrainians and Western companies, and also transforms Crimea from one of the most open and visited entities in the former Soviet Union into a territory comparable to a Soviet-era weapons testing zone. To anyone with long memories of Crimea, that transformation is bleak. Even in some of the harshest periods of Soviet rule, the Black Sea territories beckoned for their climate and natural beauty but also for personal and even political relaxation. (To illustrate, check out online the social satire movie "SportLoto 82," one of the biggest box office hits of the Brezhnev era.) The beaches and historical locales of Crimea, including the Livadia Palace at Yalta (site of the 1945 summit meeting of Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt), were effectively fantasy destinations for Soviet citizens, many of whom were familiar with the region from the writings of Chekhov, Tolstoy and others. So, when now may either a Russian or Ukrainian fan of the short stories of Anton Chekhov again be able to visit the sites so famous in the literature of Crimea?

(Another insight into Crimea's future can be found in "The Island of Crimea" by the great Russian dissident author Vassily Aksyonov, written when he lived in Washington and published in 1983. The novel posits that Crimea is not a peninsula but an island which achieved independence and prosperity after the War — like a Slavic Taiwan — until it unwisely sought a peaceful reconciliation with Moscow. As Aksyonov himself notes in the preface, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan only a month after he completed the text. Although fiction and set in the past, this volume is insightful about the problems of Crimea today.)



BRIDGES AND SEAS

Crimea as an island may be fiction but the reality of its topography is not far different, and this reality created major problems for Moscow after the occupation in 2014. The peninsula is mostly steppe land and very dry in summer. It was critically dependent on the mainland for water and for rail transport over a pair of narrow connecting isthmuses which after 2014 still attached Crimea to mainland Ukraine. Ukraine cut the canal supplying water to Crimea in 2014 (it was restored in 2022 after the invasion). Until Moscow could launch an offensive war to establish a “land bridge” across what it called “Novorossiya” it needed an alternative non-water route under its exclusive control. For this purpose, Russia built a massive double bridge (with separate road and rail components) over the Kerch Strait connecting Crimea with the Taman Peninsula in Russia to the east. Such a project had been under consideration



Kerch Strait, connecting Crimea to Russia's Taman Peninsula



The Crimean Bridge, spanning the Kerch Strait, is the longest bridge ever built by Russia

by Ukraine and Russia for many years, but the relatively modest scale of the Crimean economy simply did not justify the huge cost. However, once Russian prestige and the control of occupied Crimea were at stake, costs went by the board. The longest bridge ever built by Russia, the “Crimean Bridge” (Krymskiy most), was begun in early 2016. The road component was inaugurated by Putin personally in May 2018 and the rail bridge opened for passenger traffic in December 2019 and for cargo six months later.

With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and its seizure of territory along the north shore of the Sea of Azov, Russia now has ground access to Crimea both from the north via its “land bridge” and by road and rail over the Crimean Bridge. However, the war also greatly increases the volume and cost of materials Moscow needs on Crimea to support defensive operations, especially given the prestige attached to Crimea by both sides. The ability of Ukraine to strike the heavily-guarded vehicle bridge with explosives on October 8, 2022, not only interrupted both road and rail traffic for months but constituted a humiliation for Russia comparable to the earlier sinking of its Black Sea Fleet flagship the “Moskva” April 14, 2022. Both events, and oth-

er Ukrainian bombardment successes in the Black Sea and against targets in Crimea, compel Russia to deploy and maintain ever greater forces on Crimea both to defend it and to prevent further loss of face.

While Sevastopol remains the headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, Ukrainian successes with drone attacks (using both air and water drones) have forced Moscow to redeploy some of its more valuable ships further east away from Crimea, including to the new naval base at Novorossiysk on the eastern coast of the Black Sea which had been built at considerable expense as a potential replacement for Sevastopol. Thus, the irony is that while Moscow has often argued that it has an essential need for Sevastopol for its navy and must have Crimea for Sevastopol, it now actually maintains much of its Black Sea Fleet elsewhere for the safety of the ships. This has not, yet, been a “good war” for the Russian Navy.

The island-like geography of Crimea is, however, of great value as it dominates the northern part of the Black Sea and impedes sea traffic to and from many Ukrainian ports. Whoever has legitimate possession of Crimea also has claims (under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea — UNCLOS) to a major part of the Black Sea subsurface and airspace. This fact was of considerable importance to newly-independent Ukraine and may have constituted the potential most valuable aspect of Crimea for Kyiv. Russia now claims UNCLOS rights around Crimea, but the claims are not acknowledged by any other signatory state and are disputed by all littoral states, including Turkey which, while not a signatory to UNCLOS, does abide by many of its provisions. As the waters around Crimea are now an active war zone, UNCLOS is essentially frozen there, but this part of the Black Sea remains of great potential importance in any diplomacy over the resolution of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

EXTERNAL ACTORS

While Crimea is of most direct importance for Ukraine and Russia, other countries have interests in its fate. There are literally millions of people whose very lives depend on the supplies of foodstuffs coming out of the Black Sea. The precarious nature of the temporary agreements on grain shipments from Ukraine and Russia so far during this conflict demonstrate that Crimea lies athwart global shipping routes of immense importance to distant lands and peoples. This is not just a question of what is preferred in Kyiv or Moscow or even both. Some assurance of reliable food transport is a broader humanitarian question, which cannot always depend on reaching a workable short-term solution in the Black Sea.

Turkey also has key interests concerning Crimea. Indeed, one can make a reasonable case that Turkish claims to the peninsula long predate those of either Russia or Ukraine (a view heard in Ankara and Istanbul). Crimean Tatars as the indigenous people of Crimea are themselves Turkic and are viewed by the Turkish government as fraternal people with valid claims to support. Turkey is also the largest naval power in the Black Sea and the treaty-sanctioned guardian of the straits linking the littoral area to the outside ocean. Thus far in this war, Turkey has been resolute in its support for Ukraine's position on territorial integrity, including Kyiv's claim to Crimea. While maintaining economic and diplomatic ties with Russia, Turkey is an invaluable partner for Kyiv and a reliable provider of some key weaponry in the conflict.

Ukraine was among the initial six countries invited by the European Union to join its Eastern Partnership program in 2009 (along with Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan). Kyiv faced a choice between this cooperation program with the EU and a competing relationship with Russia. This choice was at the core of the 2014 domestic political crisis in Ukraine and the ensuing violence in Kyiv and it played a key role in provoking both Moscow's occupation of Crimea and its support for separatist movements in the Donbas. With the

Russian occupation, almost none of the benefits of the Eastern Partnership for Crimea had even been initiated. Now, as far as Crimea is concerned this program might as well be on the moon. However, the Eastern Partnership demonstrates what might have been at least begun in Crimea in terms of cooperation with the EU and Crimea's eventual graduation to a fully European territory.



Crimea's (Krim's) location to the Black Sea and surrounding nations

WHY CRIMEA MATTERS

When Crimea was seized without bloodshed in 2014 and then swiftly absorbed into the Russian Federation, only the immediate victims — the inhabitants of the peninsula and those who enjoyed visiting it — paid a direct price. The collective wisdom in much of the West was that Putin's aggression was effectively a Russian *fait accompli* — “a done deal” — as nobody, even Ukrainians themselves, would go to war to recover Crimea. This would probably have been true if Putin had been content with his conquest (which was hugely popular in Russia). However, today the fate of Crimea is part of a much larger conflict which is of importance far beyond Ukraine and Russia themselves. This war is not about dividing lines between disputatious Eastern Slavs but about the future of the core of Eurasia. Crimea may not be especially large, but it is situated at the military and commercial crossing point of that core. The search for a resolution to this conflict affects the peace and well-being of two continents and indirectly of the entire globe. Therefore, everyone involved in this broader effort must do their homework about Crimea.

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