

The Crimea: Russia's Ukrainian peninsula

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Introduction

The fall of the Soviet Union has left an array of disputed territories and confused boundaries, but few pose as many problems as the Crimean peninsula in the south of Ukraine, an area 26,500 square kilometres in size between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. For a start, the Crimea has historically been associated with Russia and is largely populated by "Russians" rather than "Ukrainians", in other words, those speaking Russian rather than the admittedly close Ukrainian tongue, professing the Russian Orthodox faith and looking to Moscow rather than Kiev. As a result, it has become symbolic of the often fraught relationship developing between Russia and Ukraine, as the former struggles to re-establish regional ascendancy in post-Soviet Eurasia. The Crimea is also a prize in itself, carrying with it rights over the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet and the extensive array of military installations and equipment associated with it.

The Crimea as a Russian enclave

With a total head count as of the last reliable census of 2,596,000, the Crimea accounts for just under 5% of Ukraine's population, yet while the country is predominantly (73%) populated by those culturally recognized as "Ukrainians", the 11,400,000 "Russians" are especially concentrated in the east of the country and in the Crimea. In the peninsula, the Russians represent over two thirds of the population. Most are post-World War Two immigrants into the region, who replaced the indigenous Tatar population which Stalin brutally resettled in 1944 for alleged collaboration. During the night of 17-18 May, practically the entire Crimean Tatar nation was rounded up by the NKVD secret police and transported to Central Asia by cattle truck and train car, a journey which was to cost the lives of perhaps half those 430,000 Tatars making it (Lazzerini in Smith 1990). Even those Ukrainians and Belarusians living in the region have been exposed to pervasive Russification: over a third use Russian as their first language, reflecting the fact that there is not a single Ukrainian-language school on the peninsula, while Ukrainian-language television and

radio broadcasts are limited to ten and twenty minutes a week respectively.

Until 1954, the Crimea was part of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. In that year, Khrushchev "gave" it to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in recognition of political favours and to symbolize Russo-Ukrainian brotherhood. Nevertheless, Russophile sentiment ran deep, and when the Ukrainian republican government sanctioned a local referendum on Crimean autonomy in January 1991, the notion was supported by 93% of voters. As a result the *"Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic"* was recognized, dominated by the existing local Party elite and yet granted considerable latitude by Kiev so long as it held back from demanding outright independence. The fragile status quo broke after the August Coup: as the Ukraine snapped the remaining central ties and declared full sovereignty, the Crimean authorities increasingly began demanding ever greater freedom, with *de facto* (if not *de jure*) independence their clear goal. In this, they are supported by a majority of the population, anything from 51% to 68% according to various credible surveys.

The Crimea as a military prize

They have also been supported by a variety of different groups and interests in Moscow. In the past, their backers included Vice President Rutskoi and the military lobby; although Rutskoi was arrested following President Yeltsin's armed dissolution of parliament in October 1993, the Defence Ministry acquired ever more influence, and in part demanded and received official support for its uncompromising stand on the Crimea. After all, control of the Crimea carries with it the ex-Soviet Black Sea Fleet and Russia's last outlet into the Mediterranean.

The Black Sea Fleet is headquartered at Sevastopol, and even if a lack of qualified sailors and funds for maintenance has meant a severe deterioration in its combat readiness, it has an establishment of 350 ships, ranging from two ageing missile-aviation cruisers (the *Moskva* and *Leningrad*) to several units of Naval Infantry (marines). As of the most recent count, it comprised 35 principal surface combatants,

21 submarines, 60 patrol vessels, 30 minesweepers/layers, another 135 support vessels (such as landing craft and tankers), around 330 Naval Aviation aircraft, a Naval Infantry Regiment at Sevastopol and a Coastal Artillery Brigade (IISS, 1993).

One of the first statements issued by the Ukrainian Defence Minister, Konstantin Morozov, was that the fleet was rightfully Kiev's, to which Boris Yeltsin replied that *"the Black Sea Fleet has been, is still, and will remain Russian"*. Eventually a short-term compromise was found, whereby the fleet would come under the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth of Independent States, but with the collapse of this structure, the question of the fleet's colours once again became an issue. In June 1993, Ukraine's President Kravchuk and Russia's President Yeltsin agreed to divide the fleet between them. Russia would further pay to retain basing rights in the region. This proved to be a fudged solution, unacceptable to a number of groups. The Russian parliament passed a resolution the following month claiming to retain authority over Sevastopol, which led to Ukraine's representative at the UN calling for a Security Council ruling on the matter. The Russian Defence Ministry, while making no formal statement, let its views be known that it felt the Black Sea Fleet to be both indivisible and indispensable to Russia's security interests.

In the Crimea, itself, the popular mood proved overwhelmingly against any renunciation of links with Russia. While many there still harbour doubts as to the viability of outright secession from Ukraine, the hardening of Kiev's position had played into the hands of the militants. In place of Kravchuk's previous - and perhaps understandably discredited - policy of accommodation, the main response was left to the Ukrainian Interior Ministry in Kiev: warnings against mass rallies which resorted to using a Soviet-era decree to sanction strict controls upon any public protests. Meanwhile, reported troop movements gave weight to Kravchuk's promises to defend the integrity of the Ukrainian state. Ukraine's 32nd Army Corps, based at Simferopol, was brought to combat readiness, along with the *Berkut* special forces unit. To many, the situation seemed on the verge of explosion. Thus, in September 1993, the Russian and Ukrainian Presidents met again, at Massandra on the peninsula. Following this summit, Russian sources spoke in triumphalist tones of a Ukrainian climb-down, which promptly led to furious Ukrainian denials, seemingly negating any possible potential gains from the meeting. This political impasse has served only to highlight the military dimension. It has to be

said that in practice Black Sea Fleet commander Admiral Baltin has continued to report only to the Russian Defence Ministry, from whence have come no signs of a willingness to reach a compromise.

The Crimea as a pawn of domestic politics

The irony is that neither Kravchuk nor Yeltsin want to see the Crimea become a bone of contention. Neither, for that matter, is especially interested in the fleet, which is largely obsolete, rusting or built for the needs of an ambitious global superpower, not a couple of impoverished and realistic successor states. Yet both are required to play their parts to domestic political audiences. Where once Andrei Sakharov could describe the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, where a local dispute in due course led to full-scale war between the newly-liberated states of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as a "touchstone of perestroika", so the fate of the Crimean peninsula has become seen as a touchstone of post-perestroika politics. Not only will it show whether Ukraine and Russia to manage their relations in civilized manner, it has become part of domestic political disputes.

The Russian parliament's Resolution 5359-1 on Sevastopol reflected not just an assertion of that chamber's essentially nationalist approach, it also stemmed from a belief that there were votes and thus legitimacy from such posturing. While this parliament may be no more, there is no lack of nationalist and populist politicians eager to use the same rhetoric for cheap publicity. Moreover, this is no longer a purely bilateral dispute. Increasingly convinced that Russia intends to build itself a new sphere of influence within the bounds of the former USSR, for example, the Georgians in autumn 1993 were quick to declare for Ukraine, seeing in the Russian parliament's bid to reassert sovereignty over Sevastopol a frightening precedent in the light of disputes over Georgia's border with Russia. Although the Georgian government was then forced to adopt a more conciliatory line towards Russia, following the successes of the Moscow-backed Abkhazian separatists, suspicions remain that whether under Yeltsin or another leader, Russia will not be prepared to abandon her imperial pretensions. That this is not an empty fear is visible in the new Russian military doctrine, in which the Defence Ministry arrogates to itself the right and duty of protecting both Russian expatriates and Russian national interests in the nations of the former Soviet Union.

The Crimea's future

A recent study on Crimean politics underlined the extent to which centrist parties have been squeezed by the Communist Party of Crimea, pro-Russian nationalist parties and the powerful Party for the Economic Renaissance of the Crimea, which represents the local business elite. (Wilson, 1993) Extremist Russophile parties are even involved in the shadowy "Russian expatriate" network which links ethnic Russians in the Baltic states, northern Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine, most recently given form when armed Don Cossacks from the rebellious Dneistr enclave in Moldova tried to infiltrate into the Crimea. Ultimately, though, integration of these disparate political and social forces depends on the economic revival of the region.

There are some grounds for hope. The Party for the Economic Renaissance of the Crimea claims that the region will benefit from its "Four T" position, as a "Transit, Trading, Transport Territory", and while in part this reflects campaign rhetoric rather than sober political analysis, there are aspects of the Crimean economy which could provide the basis for economic regeneration. Predominantly urban (70%), the peninsula has two main cities, Simferopol (population 344,000) and Sevastopol (population 356,000) which have enjoyed steady growth and which are dependent not only upon the usual and by now wholly inappropriate Soviet-pattern defence-related industries, but also a range of smaller, workshop-based enterprises producing a variety of light and consumer goods. Of course, there are also the set piece industrial developments, notably in Sevastopol and Kerch, which boasts vanadium and iron ore extraction plants as well as a fishing port/processing centre, while there are tobacco and food processing plants at Simferopol. With its fine beaches and spa towns, the peninsula also has an established role as a tourist resort. In its heyday, three million Soviet and other visitors came every year, and the Yalta region is one which has already come to enjoy significant levels of foreign involvement. On the other hand, the region is competing with many others desperate for support and investment and is especially hampered by the continuing uncertainty about its future.

This future is also complicated by the position of the Crimean Tatars, who have increasingly been returning to their ancestral lands, despite the miserly and hostile reception awaiting them. They now represent some 10% of the total population, with particular concentrations in the cities of Simferopol, Belogorsk and Bakhchisarai. While the slavs of the

Crimea are only slowly and grudgingly incorporating the Tatars into the political system, Tatar politics are becoming increasingly polarized. It is hardly surprising if radicals are winning new support, given that Tatar unemployment rates have reached 70% and more than half still living in temporary accommodation or shanty towns.

Prized by dispossessed Tatars, Russian and Ukrainian governments and generals and its inhabitants and neighbours alike, the Crimean peninsula is likely to remain a bone of contention for the foreseeable future. The question remains the extent to which such disputes can be mediated in civilised manner, or whether they will lead to war (as between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh), secession (as by Transdnestria in Moldova) or running border disputes and friction (as between the Baltic States and Russia).

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