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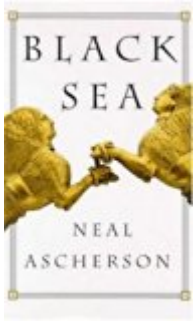
Neal Ascherson. *Black Sea.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1995. ix + 306 pp. $23.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-3043-9.



Reviewed by Norman Youngblood

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In his 1995 work *Black Sea*, Neal Ascherson presents a captivating view of the region's diverse cultural history using his personal travels in the area as a backdrop. Over the course of eleven chapters the author takes the reader from the shores of the Crimean to the shores of Turkey and Georgia, covering some 3,000 years of history in the process. In addition to his own observations, the author cites liberally from the works of prominent historians, archaeologists, and other writers. Ascherson touches on a range of subjects including current politics, the ancient world, and the status of minorities. Despite its wide-ranging nature, the work is not comprehensive, nor did the author intend it to be. Ascherson focuses primarily on Russia and Ukraine while, in his own words, "Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania all get less attention than they deserve" (p. 10).

Ascherson begins and ends with a discussion of the Black Sea and its ecology, past and present. This is as it should be for, as the author so aptly states, "Black Sea history is first of all a history of the Black Sea" (p. 11). Of particular interest is the story of Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli's 1680 experiment proving not one, but two, currents exist in the Bosporus Narrows. The flow of the first is obvious, taking water from the Black Sea south to the Dardanelles and into the Mediterranean. The second current lies under the surface and runs in the opposite direction. This story provides a model for the history that follows of the competing forces in the region, the two most prominent of which are the struggle between barbarians and civilization and between cultural identity and assimilation.

Chapter 1 finds Ascherson in the Crimean during the August 1991 coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev. Though many analysts later declared the coup never had a chance of success, Ascherson says that, while it was happening, the coup's failure seemed far less certain. From the Crimea, the author went to Moscow, where he witnessed the coup's end first hand. The story is made all the more compelling by the author's inclusion of his father's adventures with the Royal Navy during the evacuation of the remnants of Denikin's White Army from Novorossisk in 1920, heralding the Soviets' consolidation of power.

The author interweaves the history of the Crimea throughout the chapter, from the establishment of Ionian Greek settlements in the eighth century BCE to the return of the Crimean Tatars from their Stalinist-era exile following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. As so much of Crimean history is tied to migration, it is a propos that the author also includes a discussion of the gradual reemergence of migration theory. The theory was banned during the Stalinist years and its major proponents executed or exiled. During these years, the historical populations of the Crimea were forced into a stationary proto-Slav mold. In recent years the ancient peoples of the Crimea have begun to move once again through the pages of history.

Ascherson devotes most of chapter 2 to a discussion of the interaction between settled and mobile populations, or as the Athenian Greeks would have it, between the civilized world and the barbarian world. He is also concerned with those who were able to live in both worlds. The term barbari originally referred to a foreigner's unintelligible language, which made a "ber-ber" sound to the Greek ear. While Athenian Greeks came to view the foreigners as the antithesis of Greek virtue, later groups reversed this paradigm, crediting the barbarians with all the virtues the civilized world lacked. Ascherson also takes the reader to Olbia, the birthplace of Russian archaeology, and recounts the evils visited upon the archaeological profession by Joseph Stalin.

In chapter 3, Ascherson shifts from Olbia to the ancient city of Tanais and its successors Tana and Azov on the Don River Delta. Built around 250 BCE, Tanais was designed to protect traffic on the Silk Roads, and was obliterated around 350 AD by the Huns. Today the archaeological site, like all those in Russia, suffers from a severe lack of funding, and the director has resorted to providing winter pasture for animals from a circus company in order to raise funds.

The author's characterization of Tana and the growth of the slave trade caused by the Black Plague is non-controversial, but his discussion of the Cossacks who later inhabited the region may raise some eyebrows. Ascherson describes the Cossacks as an "'outpost people': faithful defenders of some tradition whose center is far away and which, often, is already decaying into oblivion" (p. 100). He places them in the same category as the Protestants of Northern Ireland, the Bosnian Serbs, and the Afrikaners. According to Ascherson, these groups share two common traits. First, "a false consciousness: a skewed and paranoid awareness of the exterior world" (p. 101) Generally, this manifests itself in the form of conspiracy theories. Second, a need to dominate "the others," a group, often numerically superior, whom they have labeled as inferiors based on race or religion. Examples are the Moslems in Bosnia, the Blacks in South Africa, and the Jews of Russia. The author is particularly worried about the resurgence of Cossack power and the potential for reactionary forces in Russia to harness it. He sums up these fears in his characterization of the modern Cossacks: "Force, race and madness are seldom the values of a stable and traditional society, but rather of bandits" (p. 110).

Having exposed the Cossack myth of greatness, Ascherson moves on in chapter 4 to tackle the story of the Amazons as related by Herodotus. While Victorian-era historians dismissed the ancient Greek stories as lies, Ascherson points to more recent archaeological evidence proving that the women warriors were more fact than fantasy. The following chapter maintains the archaeological theme and examines the role of ancient tombs and treasure in peasant society.

In chapter 6, the author returns to Ukraine to examine the development of Odessa and to look at the lives of those exiled there by the Tsarist government, including Alexander Pushkin. Seemingly from nowhere, however, the history of Odessa becomes the history of Polish exiles and,

by extension, of Polish nationalism. Although the story of Polish writer Adam Mickiewicz's exile on the Black Sea is intriguing, it seems somewhat out of place. Ascherson's inclusion of Polish exiles is probably a result of his earlier works on Polish history. Mickiewicz's story does provide a good lead-in to the author's discussion of the large Polish expatriate community that formed in Adampol or Polonezkoy, Turkey, during the 1840s.

Chapter 7 is primarily concerned with the fate of the Pontic Greeks and a small ethnic group in Turkey, the Lazi. Having settled on the Black Sea coast some 3,000 years earlier, the Pontic Greeks were expelled by the Turkish government during the 1920s and exiled to Central Asia by the Soviet government. The Lazi of Turkey, in contrast, have remained relatively unmolested by the government. This may change, however, as the community begins to resist assimilation. German scholar Wolfgang Feurstein has helped in the resistance by creating a written version of Lazuri. Ascherson comes down firmly against those who argue that Feurstein is forcing the Lazi to decide between assimilation and exclusion, stating: "What Feurstein has done is not to narrow the choice but enlarge it" (p. 209).

Ascherson devotes chapters 8 and 9 to a discussion of the later history of the Scythians and Sarmatians. The author gives particular attention to the Polish nobility's idea that that they were descendants of the Sarmatians while the peasant population were merely Slavs. As part of this discussion, Ascherson looks at the spread of Sarmatians around Europe, including Britain and the Balkans. As with all the chapters, the author intersperses history with personal experiences.

Chapter 10 focuses on the emergence of the Republic of Abkhazia following its 1992 war for independence with Georgia. During the course of the civil war most of the area's Georgian population fled, and the Abkhazians are now faced with rebuilding a devastated country. Despite the war, however, the new government is working to maintain a multi-ethnic society and has not chosen the extremist path of other new nations. Ascherson is decidedly sympathetic to the Abkhazians' efforts to gain international recognition.

Ascherson returns to the subject of the Black Sea itself for his final chapter. The creatures of the Black Sea are disappearing. In large part, this is the fault of humanity. Over-fishing, pollution, and dams have all contributed to the problem. In addition, new species introduced to the area from ballast water discharge are causing problems. The most damaging of these is the ***Mnemiopsis***, a jellyfish-like creature from the east coast of the United States. With no known predators, ***Mnemiopsis*** has wreaked havoc on the sea's zooplankton and fish larvae. Nevertheless, Ascherson is hopeful for the sea's future. Recent studies indicate the economic slowdown in the Black Sea region, coupled with fishery legislation, are allowing the Black Sea to recover. In particular, he sees the 1993 meeting between the Ministers for the Environment from Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine as a sign that the people of the Black Sea may take action to protect it.

Ascherson's work is insightful. His personal accounts of the people and places of the Black Sea add immeasurably to the work's impact and to his credibility. ***Black Sea*** does, however, suffer from a few flaws. Although the author's intermingling of past and present provides a way to juxtapose issues, it sometimes leaves the reader a bit confused as to the relation between events. In addition, a more useable form of citation would have been helpful. While the author provides a bibliography, he does not provide either footnotes or endnotes to help the reader locate information. At the very least, a short bibliographic essay would have been helpful.

Despite these few problems, the work as whole is a quality product. Ascherson's writing style tends to flow well and he addresses issues that are all too often ignored.

[Readers interested in a sample of ***Black Sea*** may want to visit "Chapter One" on the ***Washington Post***'s Web Site at the following URL for a condensed version of the first chapter:

<http://206.128.187.78/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/blacksea.htm>].

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