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Neil Kent. *Crimea: A History*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2016. Maps. 224 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84904-463-9.

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History can be a political battleground, and it is hard to find a past more under siege than Crimea's. From its annexation in 1783 by Catherine the Great, Crimea functioned as a nationalist symbol for the Russian Empire. Its history has undergone multiple revisions, most notably by Russian nationalists in the nineteenth century, and again, following the Stalinist deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944. The post-Soviet period has seen a number of new studies in which scholars have replaced nationalist fantasies with facts and uncovered long-suppressed histories.

Unfortunately Neil Kent's *Crimea: A History* can not be called one of these. Affiliated with the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge, Kent has an impressive number of publications to his name. Most deal with Scandinavia and Nordic regions. He is neither an expert on Crimea, nor Ukraine, nor the broader Black Sea region. As a synthetic survey, his book does make use of some newer studies but rarely those authored by scholars in Ukraine and Crimea, and often relies on outdated concepts. Russian imperialist narratives (like that of Kievan Rus) portray Ukrainian and Crimean space as essentially Russian. Stalinist narratives justifying the 1944 deportations depict Crimean Tatars, who are native to the peninsula, as transient interlopers. Both strains are evident in Kent's work, as are a few meaningful factual inaccuracies. Among the most notable include errors in Crimea's recent population statistics, which increase Russian and decrease Tatar populations by several percentage points each.[1]

Kent divides his book into ten chapters. The first fifty pages (chapters 1-4) cover Crimean history from the

eight century BCE to the Russian annexation in 1783. The remaining six chapters review Crimea under Russian and Soviet rule and the post-Soviet period with Ukraine. The epilogue discusses current events.

Throughout Kent persuasively argues that Crimea's location in the Black Sea has long made it a geopolitical hotspot. Relative in size to the state of Maryland, Crimea has functioned as a gateway between Southeastern Europe and the Eurasian plain for millennia. Powerful merchant civilizations established colonies on the coast, and large empires have laid claim to the peninsula, whether the Romans or the Byzantines, Ottomans or Russians. Each people, each invasion, left traces, whether cave cities hollowed into the cliffs above Sevastopol or monuments that date to the ancient Greek colonial period (fifth century BCE). Ruins of a fifteenth-century Genoese fortress still stand in Balaklava, as do ancient synagogues and mosques throughout the peninsula. Crimea is a living museum and it is nothing short of a miracle that many monuments still survive.

As Kent explains in his third and fourth chapters, a new era of Crimea's history began when Tatars intermingled with Crimea's other population groups and converted to Islam. This new people, the Crimean Tatars, is ethnically and culturally distinct from other Tatar tribes of the northern plains and is indigenous to the peninsula. Crimean Tatars formed the only long-lasting autonomous state in Crimea, which survived from the fifteenth century until Russian annexation in 1783.

To be clear, "indigenous" is not a word used by Kent. Nor does he concede the autonomous nature of the Crimean Tatar state. Whether or not Kent's omis-

sions are deliberate, they are important. Crimean Tatars consider themselves an indigenous people, and indigenous status carries certain international legal protections. Most scholars, as well as the state of Ukraine (which granted recognition belatedly) and the EU parliament, acknowledge Crimean Tatars as indigenous. Russia does not.

The Russian period of Crimea's history occupies the second half of Kent's work. Annexation and the Crimean War (1853-56) dislocated Crimean Tatars. Ethnic Russians took their place and slowly remade the peninsula into a tourist destination.

The peninsula endured nearly six years of continuous violence from the beginning of the First World War through the tsarist army's last ill-fated stand from Sevastopol in 1920. Twenty years later, the Nazis invaded and renamed Crimea *Gotenland*, after Crimea's ancient Goths whom they believed to be a paleo-Germanic people. The Nazis exterminated people who did not fit their ideal, including all Jews (*Krymchaki*) and Romani, and tens of thousands of Crimea's other populations including Tatars. Soviet reconquest of Crimea completed the tragedy of the Second World War in Crimea after Joseph Stalin ordered populations he deemed unreliable removed from the peninsula. To justify the deportation, Soviet historians inflated cases of Tatar collaboration with Nazis and eliminated earlier ethnographies that described Crimean Tatars as natives. Scholars who have had access to the archives, or who have availed themselves of the latest research, call into question the notion of collaboration and address the problematic nature of the sources. Kent (who did not do archival research on the topic) does not. Moreover, what Kent calls ethnic cleansing, many Tatar survivors remember as genocide. He also substantially underestimates the number of Tatars who perished, noting twice that they "died in the thousands" (p. 137). Even the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) sources acknowledge a much higher death toll in the tens of thousands, while Crimean Tatar sources claim half their population died during or as a result of deportation.

When Nikita Khrushchev came to power in the 1950s, he rehabilitated Crimean Tatars but did not allow them to return home. Instead, Khrushchev and his successors poured resources into maintaining the Black Sea Fleet and developing the Crimean coast as a vacation spot. It was not until the dusk of the Soviet Empire in November 1989 that Communist leaders allowed Tatars to return

home.

In the last chapter and the epilogue, Kent offers a short review of Crimea's history from Soviet collapse through Euromaidan and its aftermath. In the 1990s, Russia and Ukraine divided the Black Sea Fleet between them and sorted out lease agreements for Sevastopol. Meanwhile, Crimean Tatars returned to the peninsula to rebuild their lives and as possible reclaim their homes, most of which had occupants with no memory of Tatars having lived in the peninsula.

Kent makes some worthwhile observations in his discussion of the war in Ukraine, pointing to competing interests in Crimea. To be sure, the situation is larger than the designs of a single person, and awareness of the many different push and pull factors in Crimea, Ukraine, and Russia is crucial for understanding the current conflict. Yet Kent's discussion is not as nuanced as it might be, and tends to be quite pro-Russian in nature.

As Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri note, scholars are still coming to terms with the causes and consequences of 2014.[2] In the best of these analyses, scholars clearly delineate multiple positions and explain their own choices. Kent, in contrast, does not consult sufficient points of view and rarely reveals his hand. In short, while a brief introduction to the history of Crimea is needed, Kent's book may be too selective in its presentation of information for a general audience.

Notes

[1]. The last published Ukrainian census counted Crimea's population as 58.1 percent Russian, 24.4 percent Ukrainian, and 12.1 percent Crimean Tatar. In contrast, Kent writes: "Approximately 63 per cent consider themselves ethnic Russians, 25 per cent Ukrainian and about 9 per cent Tatar." In the text, Kent attributes his data to "estimates of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (p. 7). Given the streamlined citation in the book, it is not clear whether Kent had access to different data than other scholars who study Ukraine and Crimea. He does offer the statistic of 12 percent Crimean Tatars at the end of the book but does not explain the reasons for the discrepancy (p. 147).

[2]. Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri, "The Causes and Consequences of Russia's Actions towards Ukraine," *E-International Relations*, June 16, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/06/16/the-causes-and-consequences-of-russias-actions-towards-ukraine/>.

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