



Kelly O'Neill. *Claiming Crimea: A History of Catherine the Great's Southern Empire.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. 384 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-21829-9.

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In 2016, I had the opportunity to visit Nev'iansk, a small town roughly a two hours' drive north of Ekaterinburg. I had no particular aim in mind beyond visiting the so-called Leaning Tower of Nev'iansk, the last standing remnants of what had once been a sprawling eighteenth-century ironworks belonging to the internationally famous Demidov family: it does indeed lean, offering quite a striking panorama when taken together with the city lake and the Orthodox cathedral beside it. I had two surprises upon arriving in the town. Firstly, the Nev'iansk city museum proved absolutely excellent, housing its exhibits in an indoor recreation of a late imperial provincial center. The second was a large billboard on the main square that prominently displayed a picture of President Vladimir Putin speaking at a military event: just above the image was the slogan *Krim v moem serdtse!* (Crimea is in my heart!). Even here, in a largely forgotten corner of the Urals many, many miles from the center of events, one was not allowed to forget that Russia is once again in the process of incorporating the Crimea into its multinational state, mirroring the events that took place over two centuries ago following the final collapse of the Crimean khanate in 1783.

Kelly O'Neill's new book is therefore extraordinarily timely. At the most fundamental level, her aim is to examine the nuts and bolts of the

Crimea's incorporation into the Russian Empire in the century between its initial annexation and the Crimean War. Thus, we find that each of her five chapters is dedicated to a different mechanism of integration: the mapping of the Crimea, the inclusion (and exclusion) of Muslim Tatar elites into the noble estate, the inclusion (and exclusion) of Crimean Tatars into the imperial Russian army, the efforts to survey local landholdings, and the attempts to fuse Crimean trade into the empire's commercial networks. Her principal approach to these various topics is spatial, examining both the material reality of the Crimea as a province and the various mental constructs of the Crimea created and imposed by different actors. Equally, she seeks to unearth the ever-shifting connections that linked the Crimea with the imperial center, other parts of the empire, and the different states populating the Black Sea world.

Such is a highly pertinent approach to Crimean history. A multiethnic and multiconfessional region that contained Tatars, Russians, Cossacks, Ukrainians, Greeks, Bulgarians, and diverse others, it was also the site of multiple legacies, each layered uneasily on top of the other: a distant outpost of the classical world; a Byzantine watchtower looking out onto the steppe; an Italian trading emporium; a khanate bearing the Mongol heritage of Genghis; an Ottoman protec-

torate; and, finally, a Russian province projecting power southwards. Different actors configured these legacies in unique ways to produce a variety of mental Crimeas: for instance, the one frequently composed by Russian imperial statesmen emphasized the classical and (Orthodox) Byzantine legacies while sidelining the (Muslim) Crimean and Ottoman pasts, in effect creating a province that almost seemed to "naturally" belong within the Russian sphere. Finally, one must also recall that the Crimea's geography, a peninsular protruding into the azure depths of the Black Sea, meant that it was the hub to a web of economic, cultural, social, and political connections stretching into the Balkans, the Caucasus, Asia Minor, the Mediterranean, and the Eurasian steppe. The actors who gave the strands of these webs physical form could be local Tatar notables fleeing back and forth between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the hope of achieving better conditions, smugglers dodging the (lax) customs administration, or cavalymen being sent to serve the tsar on the battlefields of Europe.

O'Neill's approaches identify her work as a contribution to several recent trends in the historiography. First, this is an exemplary case study of what Nancy Shields Kollmann recently called Russia's "empire of difference."^[1] As O'Neill shows, the incorporation of the Crimea and Crimean Tatars into the Russian Empire sought initially to maintain local traditions and practices, or at least approach them with a degree of flexibility. As in other areas of the empire, the point of this was to try and maintain the loyalty of the local elites, who were essential for governing an area where Russian bureaucrats were very thin on the ground. Equally, there was a geopolitical dimension: the former suzerain of the Crimean khanate, the Ottoman sultan, was nearly perpetually at war with the Russian Empire in this period, which stoked Russian fears about rebellion. However, over the course of time, attempts were made to erode the "difference" of the Crimea, provoking evasion and resistance. Equally, Tatar conceptions

of land ownership or elite status could not be easily assimilated either by the empire's existing social and legal structures or by the mind-sets of imperial governors sent to make sense of the province. The second trend to which the book contributes is that of regional history, often seen as the domain of amateurish *kraevedenie* (regional studies). Today, however, the "region" as a category both of imperial governance and an imagined community is once again attracting more serious conceptual approaches. O'Neill adeptly dodges one of the criticisms that has been fielded of this trend, namely that the region is used only insofar as it reflects the tendencies of the rest of the polity; equally, she avoids isolating the region from the rest of Russia and the Black Sea by constantly returning to the linkages and connections that both materially and ideologically constituted the Crimean space.

Furthermore, one can say this work not only contributes to growing research fields and offers an interesting conceptual approach, but it also does so with a great deal of consummate skill. The analysis is sound and logical; the source base is wide, with a considerable amount of local archival material used; the prose is clear and evocative, painting wonderful pictures of vineyards, villas, and villages nestled in the Crimean coast. The narrative is rarely dry despite the amount of information imparted, analyzed, and conceptualized: entertaining but illuminating anecdotes are not in short supply. However, I would suggest that there are two caesuras that should have warranted more attention in a work of this kind. The first relates to religion: for the most part, this theme remains on the outskirts of O'Neill's narrative, occasionally intruding but never taking center stage. However, religion was one of the key areas in which the "empire of difference" and its inherent tensions manifested themselves: the Russians guaranteed the free practice of Islam in the Crimea, but, as an officially Orthodox state, it was under considerable pressure from the church and other actors to increase the

Christian presence in the region. It is possible that the author felt that Mara Kozelsky's recent book, *Christianizing the Crimea: Shaping Sacred Space in the Russian Empire and Beyond* (2009), has accomplished enough on this front: nonetheless, the religious question should have featured more prominently, even if the author did not feel it merited a chapter-length discussion given other works in the field. Secondly, the work has a decided focus on the relations between the Russians and the Tatars: the Crimea's other national communities, small though they were, do not garner much discussion at all, leaving a noticeable absence in the otherwise comprehensive outlook of the work.

In summation, this book is an invaluable examination of the mechanisms by which Crimea was claimed by the Russian Empire: through innovative conceptualization taken from both the spatial and material turns, it offers real insight into the nitty-gritty of empire-building in a geopolitically volatile region. Given its highly readable prose and analytical thoroughness, it can be recommended to varied audiences, ranging from academic specialists to undergraduate students to members of the general public.

Note

[1]. Nancy Shields Kollmann, *The Russian Empire, 1450-1801* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

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