



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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When the Romanov dynasty collapsed in 1917, its empire persisted. The Austrian, German, and Ottoman Empires broke apart after the First World War. Foundations of the French and British Empires began to crumble. Shaken and somewhat shrunk by the horrific violence of 1914-17, the Russian Empire went on to survive the catastrophic Civil War (1918-21), in which sixteen million people lost their lives. Reconstituted as the Soviet Union, the empire weathered the Second World War with a death toll cited as high as twenty-seven million, only to snap back into its former space. Although states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia declared independence in the wake of Soviet collapse, a substantial portion of the empire built by the Romanovs still hangs together, as does the *idea* of the Russian Empire. With greater access to Russian archives since the 1990s, historians have reevaluated continuities between the Romanov and post-Soviet space. They have questioned how the Russian Empire differed from its European counterparts, including how the Russian Empire survived the terrible wars and regime changes of the twentieth century. Kelly O'Neill's *Claiming Crimea: A History of Catherine the Great's Southern Empire* can be considered a leader in the second generation of this reevaluation: it seamlessly builds upon scholarship produced in the post-Soviet era while ap-

plying new digital methods to meticulously harvested archival data.

Claiming Crimea traces the integration of Crimea into the Russian Empire from annexation in 1783 to the eve of the Crimean War in 1853. O'Neill begins with the now conventional understanding that the Russian Empire succeeded because it adapted its own institutions to local conditions. Taking empire's flexible framework as a starting point, O'Neill pushes her interpretation to a new level by focusing on the dense networks that operated as the foundation of empire. Because Russian officials crafted new laws suited to the social structures of peoples it conquered, the Romanov empire has the appearance of "reinventing the wheel" (p. 84) in each new territory it acquired. However, as O'Neill's careful investigation shows, the complex connective tissue remained the same. Although fibers occasionally snapped or unraveled, the empire developed a steady set of ligaments that could integrate each new territory on unique terms.

In place of a core/periphery analysis, therefore, O'Neill encourages thinking about empire as existing in a series of networks that connected subjects cognitively as well as geographically (p. 4). Sections and chapters of the book telescope the tissues or layers that enabled domestic and foreign travelers to feel themselves moving through

the lands of the tsar, whether they crossed Poland, Kazakhstan, Crimea, or Siberia. *Claiming Crimea* resembles a GIS map, a tool that O'Neill used for her analysis. Interested readers can learn more by visiting her companion website, Imperia: Mapping the Russian Empire (<http://dighist.fas.harvard.edu/projects/imperii/>), in which multiple overlays can be added or stripped away to reveal the complex imperial dynamic.

Imperial infrastructure is important to her analysis, the roads and postal stations, canals and bridges that connected distant provinces to each other. Other parts of the book unpack the architecture that redesigned imperial landscapes. Several sections show how civil, religious, and military positions integrated local elites into the Russian exercise of power. Departments of forestry, or water, or agriculture, each of which followed their own geographic logic, also linked diverse imperial spaces. When imperial networks functioned properly, subjects in distant reaches of the empire, even if they had very different legal traditions or social customs, felt on equal footing with people living in Moscow and vice versa. Of course, empire did not always function smoothly. In Crimea, O'Neill pinpoints ruptures as occurring during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-55).

O'Neill emphasizes she is not writing a local history of Crimea, but a broad history of empire through the microlens of a single place. Understanding empire in the microlandscape is important because, as she writes, "at any moment in time empire building occurred in innumerable locations and on every scale imaginable" (p. 16). Nevertheless, readers might find the heart of the book in the relationship between the Russian state and the indigenous population of the peninsula, the Crimean Tatars. O'Neill portrays Tatars (often cast by the literature in monolithic terms) as active individuals who responded to change in various ways. Likewise, agents of empire are cast as neither good nor evil, but as real people. O'Neill shows that many Tatars molded Russian

institutions to their own aspirations and notes that the first half of the nineteenth century is not a straight story of dispossession. Some Tatar elites used imperial structures to consolidate their own vast estates. Chapter 3, "Military Service and Social Mobility," might be of particular interest to readers of H-War.

Claiming Crimea provides an excellent history of the first seventy years of Russian rule over Crimea and offers an innovative contribution to the study of the Russian Empire. The application of digital methods to interpreting traditional archival research has produced a novel way to think about empire in a work that is sure to be a touchstone in the field for years to come.

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