

Sasse, G. (2007). *The Crimea Question: Identity, Transition, and Conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Scholars failed to predict many key developments in late Soviet and post-Soviet politics, including the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Still worse, having failed to predict the dissolution, many observers professionalized in doomsday predictions, often premised on state collapse owing to ethnic strife. Crimea is a region of Ukraine that was considered prone to ethnic conflict and incorporation into Russia. Such prediction did not come true, and this absence of conflict is what *The Crimean Question* tries to explain.

Four factors underlie the potential for instability in the Crimea: geography, multiethnicity, institutional legacies, and external actors. “The argument developed in this book is that the political *process* of negotiation of central and regional elite bargaining, rather than the institutional *outcome* per se was the critically important factor for conflict prevention” (p. 8). Four key background conditions created a good environment for a constitutional, nonviolent resolution of Crimea’s problems: Multiethnicity prevented a bipolar politicization of clear-cut ethnic cleavages, whereas ethnic Russian mobilization (the one that had the potential of separating Crimea from Ukraine and annexing it to Russia) failed because of a blurred Soviet–Russian identity and the ethnic Russian movement’s inability to provide a solution for the region’s economic woes. In addition, regional elites focused on cultural and linguistic autonomy instead of radical ethnic separatist demands, and neither Russia nor Turkey actively supported ethnic mobilization of their kin—the ethnic Russians and Crimean Tatars, respectively. The first five chapters provide the conceptual and historical framework for the examination of the post-Soviet period, which is undertaken in the last five chapters.

The first chapter is a literature review of nationalism studies with reference to the post-Soviet region, from which two overarching themes are derived: First, Sasse is in favor of “bringing the region back in” (p. 26) to the study of state building. Second, ethnic diversity does not automatically translate into conflict, despite many arguments by mainstream scholarship in this direction. In arguing the latter point, Sasse claims that “studies of Ukraine tended to reinforce the perception of clear-cut ethnolinguistic cleavages in the country and assume that they made for an inherent conflict potential” (p. 30). While making such a claim about studies of Ukraine in general, she does not provide a list of works representative of the orientation that she criticizes. To avoid attacking a straw man, she would need to provide a list of works whose authors see inherent conflict potential in Ukraine’s ethnolinguistic divisions.

Noting that “conflicts tend to be framed by rival claims to historically evolved identities rooted in territory, ethnicity, and experience” (p. 36), Sasse reviews the

representations of Crimea in artistic and literary works and so classifies these works into four categories according to the political claims with which they are associated: Russian, Soviet, Crimean Tatar, and Ukrainian. Ukrainian representations are by far the least numerous, indicating the relatively recent connection between Ukraine and the Crimea, as compared to the centuries-old claims of Crimean Tatars and Russians. The Crimean landscape is rendered exotic and sanctified in these representations, especially by the Crimean Tatars who imbued many features of Crimean geography with religious and mythical significance. Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet historiography downplayed the role of Tatars in the Crimean history to legitimize Slavic claims to the territory.

“The Institutional Legacies of Territory and Ethnicity” (chapter 4) center on two key periods: The first period comprised the founding of the Crimean Tatar Republic following the October Revolution, first under authentic Crimean Tatar leadership, later revived under the brief German occupation in 1918 (led by Lithuanian-Tatar general Suleiman Sulkiewicz), and finally as an autonomous republic within the Soviet Union. However, this autonomy was abolished in 1944, accompanied by the genocidal deportation of all Crimean Tatars to Central Asia. The second key period involves the declaration of a Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in 1991, as a reaction by the overwhelmingly ethnic Russian population and political leadership of Crimea against the imminent independence of Ukraine. These two periods of autonomy created historical precedents and present-day institutions, which were used as reference points by the Crimean authorities in their negotiations with the Ukrainian center in the post-Soviet period.

The chapter reassessing the 1954 transfer of Crimea from Russia to Ukraine is one of the finest and most detailed chapters in the book, yet Sasse does not subscribe to what I consider to be the natural conclusion from the evidence she amasses—namely, that the transfer can be best explained as Khrushchev’s successful maneuver to get Ukrainian support in his bid to succeed Stalin in the power struggle that ensued after Stalin’s death. Instead, her main claim is that the transfer should not be considered as a personal gesture of Khrushchev.

Popular mobilization for regional autonomy that culminated in the establishment of Crimean ASSR sets the stage for the second half of the book, which documents in great detail the post-Soviet power struggle between Kyiv and Simferopol, the capital of Crimea. Along with ethnic Russian mobilization, the return of the Crimean Tatars from Central Asia constitutes an enduring feature of post-Soviet Crimean politics. Although the Russian movement quickly rose to prominence and declined even faster in the face of its inability to provide solutions to the region’s economic problems, the Crimean Tatars who survived the deportation and exile emerged as a cohesive, disciplined voting bloc with unified political organizations, Kurultay and the Mejlis, and thus secured a representation in the Crimean Supreme Soviet (between 8% and 14%) that is somewhat commensurate with their demographic weight. Although “both ethnic Russians and Ukrainians in Crimea supported autonomy and secession, a move which highlights the regional rather than

ethnic nature of Crimean separatism" (p. 172), the Crimean Tatars opposed any move that would bring Crimea closer to Russia, in effect becoming the staunchest supporters of Ukrainian state building in the region.

Crimea's integration into the Ukrainian state, however, took place through elite pacts forged in the process of negotiations between Kyiv and Simferopol over regional autonomy (chapter 8). Every round of confrontation and negotiation resulted in a further articulation of regional autonomy and an elaboration of its legal and institutional structures, thereby legitimizing the new Ukrainian national and Crimean regional authorities in the process. Chapters 8 and 9 constitute the empirical core of the book's argument about elite pacts forged in the process of negotiation.

The influence of external actors (chapter 10) is more stabilizing than destabilizing. Yeltsin consistently opposed the Russian radicals who supported Crimean separatism and reincorporation into Russia, whereas the European Council simultaneously emphasized Ukraine's territorial integrity and the need for Crimean autonomy. It is unclear why Turkey is considered an actor: The country has had minimal influence in Crimea, apart from some donations by private organizations and the fact that 400,000 Crimean Tatars migrated to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century.

One wonders if the Crimean puzzle could be better explained in the context of Ukrainian identity politics at the national level. The immediate post-Soviet prediction about Ukraine was that its economic potential would turn it into an industrial and agricultural powerhouse, whereas its ethnolinguistic divisions would lead to the overall division of the country—namely, between a Ukrainian West and a Russian East. History unfolded in the opposite direction: Ukrainian economy collapsed (it was even worse than the Russian economy), and the disintegration of the country did not take place. Bearing in mind this national context, it is noteworthy that the Russian movement and separatist sentiment rose during the reign of Kravchuk, whereas it declined in the reign of Kuchma. Based on this trajectory, is it not possible to suggest that once the presidency passed in 1994 from Kravchuk (who supported Ukrainian nationalists and pro-Western groups) to Kuchma (who relied heavily on Russified eastern provinces for political support), Crimea would easily be integrated into the new Ukrainian state? After all, Ukraine under Kuchma had good relations with Russia and was ruled by a Russophilic and Russophonic leadership. It would be more meaningful then to observe the sharpening of Crimean Tatar–Russian rivalry with the pro-Western Orange Revolution and the victory of Yushchenko, whom Tatars supported and whom Russians in the Crimea opposed.

Sasse's contention about the importance of regional, as opposed to ethnic, identities in studying postcommunist Eurasia is an apt corrective to the mainstream tendency. Most "ethnic" autonomies in Russia, such as the Udmurt and Sakha/Yakut autonomous republics, have ethnic Russian majorities; yet, ethnic Russians, too, often support autonomous status. In the authoritarian climate of post-Soviet Eurasia, being autonomous from the center (be it Moscow or Kyiv) might have an inherent

appeal, in and of itself. Regional identity is a topic of interest beyond the postcommunist region, and it does not seem to be a function of country size. Consider that Austria has entrenched and resilient regional identities, whereas Turkey, with a much bigger population and territory, does not seem to have as strong regional identities.

Comparisons can be drawn between the variable success of political movements for retribution among the Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, and the Meshketian Turks as the three deported peoples who were not amnestied after Stalin's death. More important, comparisons can be drawn between (a) the role of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis and Kurultay in the party politics and postcommunist democratization of Ukraine and Crimea and (b) the pivotal role that the Movement of Rights and Freedoms Party of Bulgaria's Turkish Muslims played in the country's democratization.

Sasse's book provides an empirically rich and theoretically informed examination of one region, albeit a key one, within the larger Ukrainian puzzle. *The Crimea Question* is a good resource for graduate seminars on ethnicity and nationalism, peace and conflict studies, and post-Soviet affairs.

Sener Akturk
University of California, Berkeley