

Crimea's Relation to Russia through History

In the context of the Ukrainian events of last winter, Russian president V. Putin rapidly annexed Crimea by treaty and was well supported in this aim by the Russian population. History can give some insights to explain why this annexation happened so quickly.

At the end of the first millennium, Crimea was a nordic part of the Byzantine empire, strategically situated on the north-south and east-west antique commercial routes. Russia, at this time, was in gestation in the Dniepr basin and converted to the Greek Orthodox Church : Byzantine Crimea played a certain role in this conversion. For Russia, the northern shores of the Black Sea (which mainly belong to Ukraine today) appear to be the original centre of its civilisation.

At the beginning of the second millennium, Byzantium started to decline and Crimea was occupied by the Golden Horde. In this process, the Crimean peninsula became soon a Tatar and Muslim Khanate which was then dominated by the Ottomans after the collapse of the Byzantine empire. The Khanate – whose territory expanded up to the actual central European Russia – regularly fought in the Volga region in the 16th and 17th centuries with the emerging Russian empire, whose goal was to have an access to the Black Sea and its warm water ports and also to get rid of the last remnants of the Mongol power. A possible reconquest of the old Greek orthodox territories – cradle of the Russian civilisation - played certainly a role as well as helping to understand this « southern oriented » quest.

Crimea finally became a **juridical part of Russia in 1783 with a victory against the Khanate and, in the 19th century, one of the favourite places of aristocratic Russia, fleeing from the humid climate of Petersburg.** Nowadays, beautiful palaces dating back from this era continue to embellish the shores of the Black Sea, for example the one of Livadia, which belonged to the Romanov family.

The strategic and emotional relation between Russia and Crimea was fortified with the Crimean war of **1853-1856.** The Ottoman empire was weakening at this time and nationalist movements were growing in orthodox dominated territories in the Balkans, for example in Romania. The Russian empire got the chance to expand to the South in this context by supporting these nationalist agitations and declaring war to the Turks. Occidental countries could not accept that (mainly England and France, wanting to maintain balance of power in the Mediterranean) and organised a military expedition to Crimea where the Russian army and fleet were stationed, above all in the port of Sebastopol. A long and fratricidal siege of this city lasted more than one year – where civil population suffered a lot from the attacks – and ended with a victory of the occidental forces. The peace treaty left Russia Crimea, but Russian collective memory was durably affected by this war. This is also as a consequence of this conflict that majority of Tatar people emigrated from Crimea: the population of the peninsula became then predominantly Russian.

After the October Revolution, Crimea was finally bolshevised in 1921, although the Ukrainians had some view on the peninsula during the confused period of the civil war. Before World War II, Stalinism fought against all possible resurgence of Tatar nationalism.

During World War II, Crimea was again invaded but by the Nazis this time. Sebastopol supported a new bloody siege which terminated with the victory of the Germans. This siege opened old wounds in the emotional relationship existing between Russia and Crimea. At the end of the conflict, Stalin deported almost the last Tatar inhabitants of the peninsula because accused of collaboration with the Nazis. It is quite symbolic that one of the Allied war conferences were organised by the Russians in Yalta, Crimea, in February 1945.

At the beginning of destalinisation in 1954, Crimea was « offered » to Ukraine by Soviet authorities as a celebration of the long lasting fraternity existing between Russians and Ukrainians. This transfer had no real importance for Moscow since the Crimean peninsula was still belonging to the USSR.

After the end of the cold war, territorial integrity of Ukraine was recognised by a **treaty in 1994** between Russia, the United Kingdom and the USA. Crimea was thus left to Ukraine agreed to lease major parts of its

military bases to the Russian Black Sea Fleet until 2017. This leasehold was renegotiated in 2010 on a new long-term basis but this situation was quite uncomfortable for Russian strategic interests. In the last twenty years, Russians living in Crimea also regularly wanted to enter in a **self-determination process** to statute on their political condition. But the so called public voting in March 2014 was not free at all.

In conclusion, history eventually tells that the Black Sea region and Crimea played a role in the birth of Russian civilisation. Crimea has also always been highly strategic for Russian military and economic interests during Modern Times until nowadays. Finally, Crimea is a place where dramatic events of Russian contemporary history took place, a situation permanently invigorating the emotional relationship between the peninsula and Russia. The opportunity to annex Crimea in March 2014 was definitely too attractive to V. Putin.

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