

Ukraine and Crimea

Some paradoxes

*Zhores Medvedev
and
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The Medvedev twins were born in Tbilisi in 1925. In 1975, Spokesman published National Frontiers and International Scientific Co-operation by Zhores Medvedev. In 1976, this was followed by Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism by Roy Medvedev. Their many books cast a clear light on diverse aspects of Soviet and Russian history. This high standard is maintained in their Reminiscences, which continue to appear in Russian journals.

Birth of Ukraine

On 7 December 1991, Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevich, the leader of Belarus, met secretly in the Belovezhkaya Forest, supposedly to 'hunt bison'. Leonid Kravchuk, elected a few days earlier as the first president of Ukraine, was the key conspirator. He was not formally obliged to co-ordinate his initiatives with Mikhail Gorbachev, then president of the USSR. The Belovezhkaya meeting was the direct result of a referendum held in Ukraine on 1 December with a single question – 'Do you support the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine?' The 'Act', hastily promulgated on 24 August 1991 by the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine, immediately after the failure of the plot in Moscow to remove Gorbachev from power, on 20 August, would result in Ukraine leaving the USSR. Such 'Acts' had also been passed by Supreme Soviets in other republics, including the Russian Federation, but these were not accompanied by their exit from the USSR and did not give rise to referendums.

At the time, the Soviet Union was experiencing a severe economic and financial crisis but, of all its republics, Ukraine, with a population of 52 million in 1990, was less affected and had the highest standard of living. The continued high performance of its economy, with many natural resources, modern industry, a well developed agricultural sector, maximum levels of energy supply and active foreign trade were the main arguments put forward by those promoting Ukrainian independence. All large enterprises, which were operated by the central government of the USSR, including

the legendary Dnepro-Hydroelectric station, the largest in Europe, the Donbass coal mines, the Antonov transport planes plant, the Kharkov military tank factory, aircraft carriers and tanker shipbuilding, the intercontinental missiles plant ‘Yuzhmash’, and all the nuclear power plants, producing 40% of Ukrainian electricity, were now declared property of the new state. Economic indicators per inhabitant of Ukraine were 20% higher than in Russia, 30% higher than in Belarus and Kazakhstan, and five times higher than Uzbekistan. They were higher than in Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, which were still reeling from the effects of ‘shock therapy’.

Contrary to all expectations and forecasts, Ukraine’s independence led not to prosperity, but to the decline of its economy. By the end of 2013, according to the latest data from the International Monetary Fund, GDP per capita in Russia was \$14,973 a year, in Kazakhstan \$13,118, in Belarus \$7,414, and in Ukraine \$3,862, making Ukraine 111th in the world, alongside Mongolia, Georgia and the Republic of Congo. Such an extraordinary decline in living standards in a very short time in a fertile European country with an educated population, skilled working class and industrious farmers with modern infrastructure was historically unprecedented and difficult to explain. The population of Ukraine declined to 45 million.

Unable to cope with the financial and economic reforms of the ‘market economy’, especially in engineering, metallurgy, agricultural sectors and financial services, Ukraine, as early as 1992, began to sink into debt. In 1994, inflation exceeded 1000%. By the end of 1995, the exchange rate to one US dollar amounted to 200,000 *karbovanets*, the temporary currency printed in Kiev. This necessitated a new financial reform. The *hryvna*, a new currency, entered circulation. It had been printed already in Canada. Whole industries were privatised by an opaque and corrupt administrative system, creating a new class of ‘oligarchs’, who converted the profits into dollars, which then often were deposited in private offshore accounts. Collective and state farms were liquidated. Farmland, the best in Europe (*chernozem* – black soil) was divided into small plots and given to villagers free of charge, including teachers, nurses and retired people. The sale of land was forbidden by the Constitution; only renting was allowed.

Ukraine’s budget turned negative, especially sharply after the ‘Orange Revolution’ in 2004 (by 2008 revenue was 229 billion *hryvna*, while expenditure was 490 billion) and there was a negative foreign trade balance (exports were \$67 billion, mainly to Confederation of Independent States countries, while imports were \$85 billion). By 2013, with the new government, budget expenditures still exceeded revenues by 49 billion, while the trade deficit had fallen to \$9 billion. The imbalance, as before,

covered by borrowing and the printing press, created new inflation (the dollar against the *hryvna*, 1 = 2 in 1997, reached 1 = 9 in 2013, and 1=12 in February 2014). By December 2012, Ukraine's huge foreign debt led to the threat of default. It is against this backdrop that the 'Maidan' protests in Kiev began to develop. By November 2013, Ukraine urgently needed not only new loan guarantees, but also billions in cash.

Ukraine's crisis had many sources, including the authorities' incompetence and corruption. One of the main reasons is that, having acquired independence, the government did not engage in solving the economic, industrial or agricultural tasks, requiring co-operation and trade with Russia and other members of the CIS, but focused mainly on conflicting political, ethnic, linguistic and historical problems. Multi-ethnic Ukraine was unable to unite and develop as a rich country. Many people started to recall old grudges dating from the times of Lenin, Stalin and even of the Tsars. There was a rush to reject values shared with Russia and Belarus, and even the Russian language. The main programme of the second President of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma, was his book *Ukraine is not Russia*, asserting the superiority of Ukrainians to Russians in all respects. Ukrainian nationalism spread. 'The West will help us' became the mantra.

Failed states

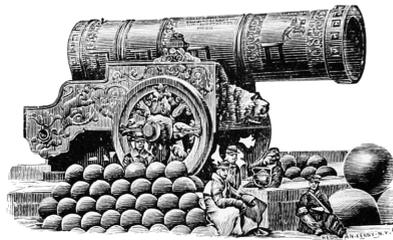
After the First World War, the winners, France, Britain and the United States, began to redraw the map of the world, mostly, of course, to their own advantage, while ignoring ethnic, historical and religious factors. On the maps of Europe and the Middle East there appeared several new states and protectorates, territories taken from the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires. Several African and Asian colonies changed their masters. Later still, after the Second World War, the inevitability of which, according to many historians, is to be found in the injustices of the Versailles Treaty, the winners again redrew the map of Europe. Having given part of its territory (now the unrecognised independent republic of Transdnistria) to newly created Moldavia, Ukraine expanded to the west at the expense of provinces of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania, which were home to ethnic Ukrainian minorities, regardless of their preferences.

Not all the new states of Europe were stable. Cyprus was the first to split into two parts, Greek and Turkish. The Czech Republic separated from Slovakia, without conflict, although the two are closely related in language and culture. The disintegration of Yugoslavia into seven independent states was long and painful, involving military intervention by NATO. Divisions

occurred in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova. Ukraine had on its territory four religions (Orthodox and Catholic Christian, Islam and Judaism), five languages with regional dialects, and several areas with different historic roots which had been trapped in the Ukrainian Soviet Republic at different times, mostly after the revolutions of 1917 and the Civil War that followed, and some after 1939 and 1945. Its stability could only be cemented by economic prosperity and federalisation. The example of the United States forming one nation not so much on the basis of language, religion or race, but on economy and democratic independent states, could be useful for Ukraine.

Russian Crimea, the ‘Pearl of the Soviet Union’, which was unexpectedly given to Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954, unjustly depriving the Russian Federation and Russians as a nation of its main pride going back deep into history, only complicated the problem. Liberation of Russia from the Mongol-Tatar yoke took centuries, and ended only with the liquidation of the aggressive Crimean Khanate, part of the Ottoman Empire, whose army in one of its annual raids on Russia, Poland and other Slav lands burned Moscow and took tens of thousands of Russian men and women into slavery. The famous Kremlin ‘Tsar Cannon’, weighing 39 tons, was cast in 1586, during the reign of Fyodor Ivanovich, primarily to protect Moscow against the attacks of the Crimean Tatars.

Many people believe that Khrushchev’s ‘Crimean gift’ within the Soviet Union was an administrative formality and did not affect the fate of the Crimea. In fact, that was far from the case.



Tsar Cannon

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Crimean Memoirs *Zhores Medvedev*

We decided to highlight this section separately, as Roy has not visited Crimea and has no personal memories of the place. My memories of Crimea start in February 1943, when a military training unit was formed near Kutaisi in Georgia from the remnants of three Soviet armies that

fought with the German divisions of Manstein and Paulus on the Kerch Peninsula in the Crimea in January to May 1942. Despite the defeat, the months of fighting in the Kerch helped with the heroic defence of Sevastopol and held up the whole German offensive towards the Caucasus (Baku oil was their main purpose) and Stalingrad for almost three months in the summer of 1942.

In autumn 1942, at a military camp near Kutaisi, the First Reserve Infantry Regiment was created. After short military training, it was sent to the Taman front in April 1943. Three Soviet armies on this most southerly front were due to break through the German 'Blue Line', liberate Novorossiysk, and land in the Crimea. But I did not fight for long. More than half my Regiment perished in the battle of the Kuban villages of Kievskaya and Krymskaya. I was wounded and later demobilized after a stay in hospital. I was then 17 years old.

Five years later, in 1948, as a student of the Timiryazev Agricultural Academy, I came to the Nikitsky Botanical Garden near Yalta. On the road from Simferopol to Yalta, I noticed that all the forests on the slopes of the Crimean mountains were burnt. Among black charred stumps spots of new growth had just started appearing. In 1942-43, the German occupiers destroyed the forests as part of their fight against the Russian guerrillas. Without forest cover, the guerrillas became more vulnerable. Dozens of villages located near the forests were also destroyed. In 1942, more than 60,000 Jews and Krymchaks, many of whose families had lived in the area since ancient times, were shot by the German occupiers.

By 1948, the elimination of a significant part of the Crimean forests resulted in an environmental disaster. Deprived of the protection of the trees, the soil was washed away by rain into the sea, exposing rocks. Each time rain fell, the sea turned brown from the soil washed off for kilometers from the coast. Loss of forests and soil changed the peninsula, especially on the coast. Rivers, streams and numerous springs, which had fed fresh water to the coast of Crimea for centuries, dried up. The unique Nikitsky Botanical Garden, founded by Tsar Alexander the First in 1812 to introduce useful and decorative plants into southern Russia, was threatened. On the slopes of the mountains concrete cisterns were built to capture rainwater. Water for Yalta was brought in by tankers. In 1950, when I arrived at the Nikitsky Botanical Garden for a second time to work as a junior researcher, the problem of water supply became even worse. Lack of water now threatened the unique collection of different grape varieties, collected from around the world.

In February 1945, at the Yalta Conference of the Allied Powers to decide

the fate of post-war Europe, Stalin proudly treated Roosevelt and Churchill to some Crimean wines. Roosevelt praised the Crimean 'Muscat' sweet wine; the British Prime Minister preferred Crimean Brandy.

In 1948-1951, the Crimean coast was not a 'holiday resort'. In the villages of the Crimean Tatars, evicted to Kazakhstan in 1944, settled people from Belarus, Smolensk, Kursk and the Orel regions whose villages had been burned by the Nazis. The southern coast of Crimea, from Yalta to Sudak, developed as a therapeutic centre for tuberculosis, which was rampant after the war. It was thought that the sea air, dry in Crimea yet saturated with juniper and cypress vapours, was a good treatment for the lungs. In Yalta, a large tuberculosis hospital was built for survivors of the Leningrad blockade. Nearby, a former sanatorium was turned into a children's TB hospital. TB patients, often in a serious condition, came from all parts of the Soviet Union to the Crimea and settled. Half the staff of the Biochemical Laboratory, where I worked, settled in Crimea for the same reason as Anton Chekhov did in the past. The sandy beaches of Evpatoria specialised in treating children suffering from rickets, which was common during the war, mainly in the northern areas of the Urals and Siberia. The main cure for rickets is the sun's rays. Several children's sanatoriums opened in Feodosia. Here there was also a large military hospital for treating disabled war veterans. Public health in the Soviet Union, particularly for children, was always the priority of the state.

'The All Union health resort', after Khrushchev's 'gift' to his native Ukraine in 1954, quickly began to change into holiday resorts and tourism, generating income for the Ukrainian budget. A significant number of hospitals were turned into holiday homes and hotels.

In 1959, returning again to the Nikitsky Botanical Garden, I found a radical change in the immediate vicinity. Directly on the garden, cutting off part of a unique collection of roses, towering behind a fence, was a four-storey holiday villa belonging to Peter Shelest, First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party Central Committee, and a friend of Khrushchev. Nearby, also surrounded by a fence, was the villa of Catherine Furtseva, Secretary of the Central Committee for Cultural Affairs. Each villa had a private beach with concrete fences and guards. The famous 'Pushkin Trail' along the coast from Yalta to Gursuf was cordoned off by concrete fences which extended into the sea. Pushkin took a holiday in the Crimea in 1820. After 1991 and independence, the construction of élite villas on the Crimean coast accelerated. Now Ukrainian oligarchs sometimes rested there. The Nikitsky Garden lost a few more hectares of its unique plants.

A little about legality

The idea of transferring Crimea from Russia to Ukraine came to Khrushchev in September 1953 after visiting the steppes of the northern part of the peninsula. Belarusian, Smolensk and Kursk peasants, who had been relocated there against their will, staged spontaneous protests during his visit. 'Drought! Potatoes do not grow! Nothing to feed the cows, no milk!', they complained. (The details of this protest, which made Khrushchev very angry, were described by his son-in-law in 1992.) Vineyards formerly tended by the deported Crimean Tatars (nearly 250,000) had dried up; tobacco plantations needed hoeing and the leaves had to be collected manually. The post-war peasants were mostly women, children and the elderly. Khrushchev believed that Ukrainians from the southern steppes would better cope with the development of the Crimean steppes. But the Ukrainians were not excited by the prospects and were in no hurry to go to the Crimea.

At this time, Khrushchev was not the main leader of the Soviet Union. Malenkov was the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, the post held by Stalin, who had died a few months before. Beria was on trial in the Military Court. The transfer of the Crimean region to the Ukrainian SSR was adopted by the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation on 5 February 1954. However, under the then Constitution, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (only 13 of its 27 members were present) did not have the authority to change the borders of the Republic. A full session of the Supreme Soviet (about 1,000 deputies) could discuss it and to make a suggestion. A transfer of the Crimean region to another Soviet republic demanded changes in the Constitution of the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the USSR, and could legitimately be resolved only by a referendum of the population of Crimea. But the USSR was not a state which lived according to its Constitution. Decisions were made by Communist Party officials. A referendum on the status of Crimea took place only on 16 March 2014. Unlike the referendum of 1 December 1991, voters clearly understood the consequences of their answers to two alternative questions — either they remain in the Ukraine, or reunite with the Russian Federation. 96% of the 80% of eligible voters who voted in the Referendum voted for reunification with Russia.

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