

# CRIMEA – ALMOST AN ISLAND?

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Olga Oleinikova

University of Technology Sydney <Olga.Oleinikova@uts.edu.au>

**ABSTRACT:** Drawing on recent debates about expanded concepts of islands and of Island Studies, this article suggests that Crimea can be regarded as “almost an island” in socio-cultural, political and infra-structural terms. The article discusses Crimean historical moments and events, socio-cultural encounters and autonomies as important dimensions in the establishment of an “islandness” that extends beyond the geographical into the imaginative space. Crimean “almost-islandness” is argued to be created by a combination of the diverse marine spaces that border substantial parts of its terrain, the history of tensions and conflicts between its ethnic groups and the current historical transition from one social and political practice to another (ie the transition associated with its annexation by Russia in 2014).

**KEYWORDS:** Crimea, peninsula, islandness, socio-cultural dimension

## Introduction: Concepts and Context

Orthodox understandings of islands as geographically isolated areas of land wholly surrounded by water have been supplemented in recent years by the concept of some peninsulas being “almost islands” (Hayward, 2016; Fleury and Raoulx, 2016; Anderson, 2016). My discussion of Crimea in this context involves both geographical aspects - such as its peninsularity - and the socio/cultural/economic/political aspects that reinforce the distinct nature of the territory from its adjacent mainland. Peninsularity, in itself does not necessarily produce “almost islands” in the socio/cultural/economic/political senses of that term (for example, the Wirral Peninsula in the in North West England, which is essentially an integrated component of metropolitan Merseyside). We can however see different cases of peninsulas that have very distinct socio/cultural/economic/political distinctions from the mainland that they are connected to (see, for instance, Gold, 2016 on Gibraltar or Potiki, 2016 on New Zealand’s Otago peninsula). Another peninsula that can be regarded as “almost an island” is Crimea - located on the northern coast of the Black Sea in Eastern Europe, almost completely surrounded by the Black Sea and the smaller Sea of Azov to the northeast. Crimea is located south of the Ukrainian region of Kherson, to which it is connected by the Isthmus of Perekop, and west of the Russian region of Kuban, from which it is separated by the Strait of Kerch (which is now linked by the 18.1 kilometre long Crimean Bridge that opened in May 2018).

As Figure 1 makes apparent, Crimea cannot be called an island in the term’s traditional sense, however, from socio-cultural, political and infra-structural viewpoints it is “almost an island” in many ways. First, its status as an island-like entity with its own autonomous status within Ukraine (1991-2014) and currently within the Russian Federation (2014-) – with its own parliament and government and its own powers over its agriculture, public infrastructure and tourism. Second, it has a distinct ethnic and religious composition from

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that of the mainlands to its north and east. Different historical phases and events have also led to a changeability of status of the territory, which has been more like an island at some historical moments than others. The article is centred around the argument that “almost-islandness” has to be asserted from particular situations. In this perspective, Crimea can be said to have changed its status under pressure of historical moments and events, with the latest shift associated with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 that isolated the peninsula from Ukraine. Conversely, at various periods of history, analysed in the sections below, Crimea may be seen as less “islanded/islandish”. In the latter regard, this article recognises the role of geography and the territorial connectedness of Crimea to the mainland but approaches the concept of “territory” as a temporal and a spatial one.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1 – The Crimean peninsula (Maximilian Dörrbecker [Chumwa] - using OpenStreetMap data this file for the orientation map inset, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=31740327>)

There are three main factors presented in this article that can be seen to contribute to the formation of the “almost-islandness” of Crimea in a socio/cultural/economic/political sense:

- (1) its history of territorial transitions and its variability of status under the particular pressure of these;
- (2) its constant problem of cultural and socio-political belonging; and
- (3) its reputation as an autonomous entity with strong identity shared by all its ethnic groups (leading to economic and social struggles for autonomous status).

<sup>1</sup> For instance, “to the Vikings, a piece of land surrounded by water was not regarded as an island unless it was sufficiently distant and distinct for the sound separating it from the mainland to be navigable by a ship with its rudder in place” (Royle, 2007: 40).

These factors are discussed in the following sections, concluding with remarks on how the insights that arise can contribute to the discussions of “almost-islandness” as a phenomenon.

### A Brief History: The Pressure of Historical Moments and Events

In order to understand contemporary Crimea, we need look back to its complicated history. Since ancient times the peninsula has been the junction of transit routes connecting various states, tribes and peoples. The famous Silk Road trade route between China and Europe, connecting the Roman and Chinese empires ran to its immediate north, along the north side of the Sea of Azov and the peninsula later served as a connector to the uluses of the Mongol empire.

Crimea’s modern name has only been widely used since the 18th Century and the first recorded references to the peninsula identify it as “Tauris” or “Taurica” (derived from the Greek Ταυρική, after the peninsula's inhabitants, the Tauri, who inhabited the southern part of the peninsula). “Krym” was the name of the first city on the coast of Black Sea that was conquered by the Turco-Mongol Golden Horde. The port city came to serve as a royal residence and, over time, its name was extended to the entire peninsula. From the 15th Century onwards, the peninsula began to be called “Tavria” and, after its accession in 1783 to Russia, “Tavrida” (with the latter term also referring to the northern coast of the Black and Azov seas and the adjacent steppe territories).<sup>2</sup> During the 1800s, the Italianate term “Crimea” returned to popular usage and was the name by which the area was best known during the Crimean War, which began in 1853 and involved three years of bloody fighting between Russia and an alliance of the Ottoman Empire, France, Britain and Sardinia. While Russia eventually lost the war, and Crimea suffered significant damage, it remained part of Russia.

The peninsula experienced complex events in the 20th Century. Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was created within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in the USSR. When the republic was dissolved in 1945, Crimea first became an *oblast* (a minor administrative division) within the Russian SSR (1945–1954) but its administrative autonomy was downgraded after its entire indigenous population, the Crimean Tatars, were deported to Central Asia (an act subsequently recognised as genocide - Pohl, 2000). The mass deportation of Tatars after World War II marked a turning point in the history of Crimea. Stalin accused the Tatars of collaborating with the German occupiers and deported many of them to Central Asia and Siberia in 1944 and many did not survive the forced deportation (Uehling, 2014). In 1954, Crimea was transferred to the Ukrainian SSR (1954–1991).

Only when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s were Tatars allowed to return. By the time over a quarter of a million did so in the early 1990s, it was to an independent Ukraine where they faced very high unemployment and extremely poor housing conditions (Babenko, 2007). There were persistent tensions and protests over land rights and the allocation of land to Crimean Tatars was a contentious issue (*ibid*).

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<sup>2</sup> Allsworth (1998) contends that this name may be derived from the peninsula's strategically rugged landscape and may have meant "fortress" or "stronghold." If that is accurate, it is apt that Crimea is best known in the West for the Crimean War.

From 1991, the Crimean peninsula was administered as the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol City within an independent Ukraine. When Ukraine held a referendum on independence in December 1991, 54% of Crimean voters favoured independence from Russia. It was a majority but the lowest one found in Ukraine. Following a brief tussle with the newly independent Ukrainian government, Crimea agreed to remain part of Ukraine, but with significant autonomy (including its own constitution and legislature and – briefly – its own president). The 1996 Ukrainian constitution stipulated that Crimea would have autonomous republic status but insisted that Crimean legislation must be in keeping with that of Ukraine. However, during the 2014 Crimean crisis, the peninsula was taken over by Russia and a referendum on whether to re-join Russia was held in Crimea. Shortly after the result in favour of joining Russia was announced, Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation as two federal subjects: the Republic of Crimea and the federal city of Sevastopol, and was fully integrated into Russia in July 2015. Despite these legislative actions, Ukraine and the majority of international governments continue to regard Crimea as an integral part of Ukraine. Crimea now has its own parliament and government with powers over agriculture, public infrastructure and tourism. The Crimean Tatars also have their own unofficial parliament, the Mejlis, which states its purpose as being to promote the rights and interests of the Crimean Tatars.

As evidenced by this short historical overview, through its history Crimea has been isolated, difficult to understand and difficult to keep the control of for long (Babenko, 2007). As a result of various historical moments and events, Crimea has been part of different empires and countries that have shaped its multi-ethnic composition, religious and cultural diversity – one that is very distinct and different to adjacent mainlands. Such ongoing transitions and the changeability of Crimean status has shaped its “almost-islandness” in socio/cultural/economic/political senses.

Currently, Crimea is going through another historical shift and “another transit from one political and cultural practice to another” (Khalii, 2016: 979) associated with its annexation by the Russian Federation in 2014 and its “integration” into it in 2015. The latest transition did not include any radical economic transformations (ie moves toward different market relations) in comparison with the shift from socialism to capitalism that happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Still, the recent transition brought to life social and cultural shifts and an associated “cultural trauma” (Shtompka, 2004) recognised and analysed in the first decade of the post-Soviet transition (Oleinikova, 2013).

In line with the argument that the variable historical conditions create pressures on society and its cultural, political and economic aspects and activities, recent events have served to isolate the population of the peninsula from the life practices and regulation regimes of the mainland. Such isolation creates the “islandness” of social, economic and political practices conducted on the peninsula, forcing a search for alternative and internal ways to survive through the ongoing historical turbulence. Such current struggles, associated with ongoing tensions between Ukraine and Russia over its territory, have contributed to the ongoing problem of belonging and identification of Crimea.

The isolation that contributed to “islandness” of modern Crimea arose from an earlier (and far bigger) historical event - the collapse of the USSR, as a result of which Crimea became part of independent Ukraine, despite having a majority ethnic Russian population with a strong pro-Russian sentiment and with the Russian Black Sea Fleet stationed at Sevastapol (Sasse, 2014). During the 1990s, the issue of changing the status of the peninsula was raised by both the Crimean authorities and Russian legislative bodies but this did not lead to a change in Crimea’s national status. The continuing presence of the Russian fleet in Sevastopol was a significant cause of tension between Russia and the newly independent Ukraine. In 2008, Ukraine - then under the pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko - demanded that Moscow not use the Black Sea Fleet during its conflict with Georgia. Both countries had agreed to allow the Russian fleet to stay until 2017 but after the election of Yanukovich as Ukrainian president in 2010, Ukraine agreed to extend the lease by an



Figure 2 - Crimean Tatar Culture Day (2015)  
(Photograph by Evgenia Kozlovska - Flickr)

additional 25 years in return for cheaper Russian gas. Under Russian and Ukrainian governance, Crimea did not experience any substantial development in this period and neither the Kiev nor Moscow leadership made much-needed investments either in the Crimean Autonomous Republic or in meeting the needs of the Crimean Tatars. During this period the Crimean Tatars did not gain anything except security in the sphere of language and cultural rights (Figure 2).

Under such volatile historical conditions and associated economic, cultural and political pressures, the mixed ethnic population of Crimea struggled to find points of shared identification with either Russia or Ukraine and instead laid the basis for development of its own identity. These events and the struggle for belonging can be seen to have shaped the Crimean identity described as “islandish” in this article, meaning isolated from ones imposed from changing governing states on the mainland. Crimea is still in its early days in building a unique contemporary identity but the fact of its difference from mainland ones positions Crimean society as in the process of undergoing a new historic transition – the signs of formation of its unique Crimean “islandish” identity are there but yet to become fully established.

## Socio-Cultural Encounters within Crimea

The oldest known occupants of Crimean land appeared about a 100,000 years ago (Cordova, 2015) and, since then, the peninsula has a long history of being conquered and colonised that shaped its socio-cultural “almost-islandness”. The history of turbulent events and moments, described above, has resulted in the Crimean interior being ethnically diverse throughout its recorded history, changing hands numerous times, with its south coast being held continuously (for most of the last two millennia) by various states. At various times different ethnic groups populated Crimea - Taurus and Cimmerians, Scythians and Greeks, Sarmatians and Romans, Goths, Huns, Avars, Bulgarians, Khazars, Slavs, Pechenegs, Polovtsy, Mongols and Crimean Tatars, Italians and Turks - and the descendants of these peoples now live on the peninsula (King, 2005). The history of the Crimea is their lives and identities, struggles and achievements.

As outlined above, the peninsula’s internal composition was determined by a succession of conquests. Its south coast was once home to Greek speaking colonies (in the 7th-6th centuries BCE and in following years) (King, 2005). In 1475, the peninsula was conquered by the Ottoman Turks, who established a vassal state there that persisted until 1774 (although during the late Middle Ages a few coastal ports were colonised by the Italian city states of Venice and, later, Genoa). The Crimean Tatars emerged as a Turkic-speaking ethnic group within Crimea during Crimean Khanate and at the time of the peninsula’s annexation by the Russian Empire in 1783, the Tartars formed the clear majority of Crimean population, a status that continued until the mass deportations of 1944. The ethnic and religious composition of modern Crimea is significantly different from surrounding areas and determines the contemporary socio-cultural dynamics of the peninsula.

While modern Crimea is a multi-ethnic region more than 90% of its population consists of the three groups - Russians, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tatars - and the relations between these nationalities influence the socio-cultural and political situation on the peninsula as a whole. Based on the latest census, conducted in 2017, there are 175 ethnic groups in modern Crimea. Russians form the biggest ethnic group – 67.9% (62.5% in the Republic of Crimea and 81.1% in Sevastopol) (1,480,900 people) (Zorin et al, 2017: 17). The second largest ethnic group is Ukrainians, representing 15.7% of the population (344,500 people) (ibid: 19) and the third largest is Tatars (10.6%, 232,300 people). The percentage of Crimean Tatars among the population varies amongst urban and rural areas, which is unsurprising since two thirds of Tatar repatriates preferred to settle in rural areas. The 2017 census showed that in the Crimean cities ‘original’ Crimean and repatriated Tatars make up 6.1% of the population and in the rural areas 21.3%. The remaining ethnic groups in Crimea account for only 3.8% of the population. Of these, the most prominent are Belarusians, 21,700 (1%) and Armenians, 11,000 (0.5%).<sup>3</sup>

The socio-cultural boundaries between ethnic groups that currently exist in modern Crimea are determined by the presence of regions inside the peninsula that derive from and represent the resettlement and contact patterns of carriers of various cultures and civilizations, explaining the presence complementary ethnic groups and religions and the Crimean region’s differentiation from the mainland and other states (Babenko, 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that the population of Crimea declined in the post-Soviet period due to processes of demographic aging and demise and migration.

The socio-cultural uniqueness of Crimea is the result of a complex process of its various ethnoses establishing “roots” in a particular geographical landscape (Shevchuk and Shvets, 2010). Insight into understanding of the sociocultural encounters in Crimea can be gained by considering its internal ethnic boundaries. The value of these boundaries is clearly defined by Sanders: “ethnic boundaries are patterns of social interaction that give rise to, and subsequently reinforce, in-group members’ self-identification and outsiders’ confirmation of group distinctions” (2002: 327). Such factors created marked tensions between the Tatars and other ethnic groups in Crimea over land rights and the allocation of land to Tatars following their return to Crimea in 1990s, although this issue has lost much of its divisive force in recent years.

Most socio-cultural conflicts in Crimea are of two types: interethnic-and-denominational or socio-economic. Within the last 10 years two concentrations of socio-cultural conflicts formed: the central area (Simferopol, Bakhchisaray, and Belogorsk districts) where interethnic-and-denominational conflicts prevail, and the area of the southern coast (Yalta, Alushta, Sudak, and Feodosia regions) where socio-economic conflicts prevail. Over the last decade these frictions have made up over 80% of all socio-cultural conflicts in Crimea (Sasse, 2014).

Despite the persistent tensions resulting from historical events around the Crimean peninsula, several recent qualitative studies conducted with Crimeans (such as Khalii, 2016; Babenko, 2007) give a clear indication of a firmation of individuals’ unique Crimean identity and plans to build their lives in Crimea (this being a uniting point for the three biggest ethnic groups - Russians, Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars - populating the modern peninsula). A good example, is the qualitative research findings from in-depth interviews with officials and representatives of healthcare organisations, cultural and educational institutions as well as with the locals from five cities (84 in total) conducted in 2015 (Khalii, 2016). This research showed that today’s young generation, and students in particular, are confident about their “Crimean position:” they study in their region and have plans for their futures in Crimea. This, and similar findings from other studies, articulate that there a formation of a common and shared Crimea identity taking place that is different to the identity formations of Ukrainians, Russians or Tatars. These studies show that social groups of diverse ethnic background are showing agency in creating the “islandness” of their society in a manner that illuminates Crimea as a distinct culture and social community from Ukraine or Russia. Following the discussions in the above sections around the “islandness”, in the Crimean situation this term can be understood to signify a densely cultured territory (or other community that is also conceived as insular) that has its own unique identity different to those of the mainland.

#### “Island-like” Autonomy: Beyond Geography and Status

Crimea’s distinct topography has determined much of its character. The narrowness of the eight-kilometre-wide isthmus that connects it to the northern mainland has historically prevented external raiders or invaders from entering Crimea unnoticed (Andreev, 2017). Its diverse natural environment has resulted in distinct terrestrial ecosystems, agricultural systems, multi-ethnic networks, infrastructures, diverse social structures and various socio-cultural identities (Cordova, 2015). Geography and climate plays a role in all of this. The Crimean ecosystem consists of flat-steppe, mountain-forest, southern coast and Kerch natural-climatic zones. The short, warm winter and long, sunny, summer and its rich flora

and fauna allowed the peoples who settled on its lands from ancient times to engage in hunting, fishing, cattle breeding, agriculture and bee-keeping. The presence on the peninsula of a large number of iron ore deposits also prompted mining and helped develop metallurgy and related crafts. The Yayly, the plateau-like treeless tops of three ridges of the Crimean Mountains along the southern peninsula from Sevastopol to Feodosiya (Figure 3), were convenient sites for the construction of fortified settlements, which could not be suddenly captured.



Figure 3 - Ridges of the Crimean Mountains along the southern peninsula  
by Alexandr Kotov (nd - Flickr).

The geographic composition profiled above impacts on the formation of “islandness”, as discussed in this article, in relation to the surrounding marine and land spaces from socio/cultural/economic/political point of view. The previously discussed history and socio-cultural encounters of Crimea established the case that regardless of geographic and cartographic factors, Crimea has a powerful sense of “islandness” and its autonomous status significantly contributes to it. Going beyond geographical discussions around the Crimea, another important aspect in the formation of the “islandness” in socio-cultural terms and the “islandish” Crimean identity is the struggle for maintenance of the autonomous status of Crimea shared by all ethnic groups. The “island-like” ambition for independence and autonomy that has arisen several times during Crimea’s long history has contributed to its “almost-islandness” and to its insularity in relation to mainland.

## Conclusion: An Overview of Crimean “Almost-Islandness”

Challenging the “common assumption that the smaller the territory, the more intense the experience of islandness” (McMahon, 2005: 23); the case of Crimean peninsula and its community’s search for a unique identity, autonomy and independence in socio/cultural/economic/political terms shows that the geography and particularly the size of territory is sometimes less significant than geo-cultural positioning. There are three main factors that can be identified to contribute to the “almost-islandness” of Crimea:

- (1) Its history of territorial transitions and variability of status at various historical moments and events;
- (2) Constant issues concerning its cultural and socio-political belonging; and
- (3) A sense of island-like autonomous entity shared by the various ethnic groups who have struggled for economic and social autonomy.

This article recognises the ambiguity of the concept of “almost-islandness”, partly due to the openness/closure of island boundaries (openness referring to connectedness with the wider world and closure relating to insularity). Such ambiguity is evident in tensions between islanders’ (in our case the Crimean population’s) desire for autonomy and parity with mainlanders. On the other hand, trapped in the ongoing historical shifts and transitions, Crimea’s “islandness” can be regarded as fragile and now significantly impacted by its increasing geographical accessibility (a form of greater boundary openness) through the recently developed Kerch Strait Bridge. Constructed by the Russian Federation in 2018 to span the Strait of Kerch between the Taman peninsula of Krasnodar Krai and Crimea’s Kerch peninsula, the bridge provides for both road and rail traffic access and provides Crimea with its second fixed link to the adjacent mainland (in addition to its natural link to the Ukraine). Such recent developments could potentially act disrupt socio/cultural/economic/political senses of “islandness” as they create greater economic connection to the mainland. A key issue that has to be recognised in the modern Crimean context is how to balance the apparent need for further economic development (and possible homogenisation with mainland societies) with other socio-cultural and political needs in order to build a more homogenous and integrated society inside the Crimean peninsula. With regard to these considerations, this article offers a distinct contribution to discussions of “almost-islandness” (in the pages of this journal and elsewhere) by including such factors as the variability of status under the particular pressure of historical moments and the associated problem of socio-cultural and political belonging. These factors have not been discussed before within Island Studies in relation to the concept of “almost-islandness” (cf Fleury and Raoulx, 2016; Anderson, 2016; Hayward, 2016). Providing some insights into socio/cultural/economic/political landscape of modern Crimea, the article delivers a contribution to Island Studies that aims to foster future debates around the imagination and vision of “almost-islands” as a “spatial and temporal concepts” (Suwa, 2007).

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