

HYPERREALITY IN THE BLACK SEA

Fictions of Crimea in novels by Lev Tolstoy and Vasily Aksyonov

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ABSTRACT: During and immediately after the crisis that resulted in Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, a number of commentators in the US media referenced Lev Tolstoy's *Sebastopol Sketches* and Vasily Aksyonov's *The Island of Crimea* as works of literary fiction that helped to explain or even predicted present-day events. Although there is some superficial truth to such statements, both works are actually far more interested in exposing and undermining processes that distorted the reality of Crimea – historical in Tolstoy's case, speculative in Aksyonov's – in the service of Russian nationalism. The 2014 crisis was just one of many instances in the past three centuries that involved the use of a "hyperreal" rhetoric of kinship that ostensibly binds the fates of Crimea and Russia together. Rather than simply offering a particularised political commentary on past, present, and future Crimean-Russian relations, both Tolstoy and Aksyonov used Crimea as a fictionalised setting for their critique of the folly of such cynically "imagined geographies" in general.

KEYWORDS: Crimea, Lev Tolstoy, Vasily Aksyonov, hyperreality, nationalism

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As the crisis that ultimately led to the Russian annexation-by-referendum of the Crimean Peninsula intensified early in 2014, a number of "think pieces" appeared in the US media that produced an unexpected surge of interest in a pair of relatively obscure Russian literary works. Michael Idov, who at the time was the editor of *GQ Russia*, published a commentary in the online edition of the *New Yorker* on 3rd March 2014 the headline of which calls Vasily Aksyonov's Cold War-era satire *Ostrov krym* (1981, translated into English as *The Island of Crimea*) 'The Novel that Predicts Russia's Invasion of Crimea.' Journalist Michael Weiss offers an extended discussion of the novel's prognostications two months later on the *Daily Beast* website under a similar headline ('This 1979 Novel Predicted Putin's Invasion of Crimea'). An editorial by Peter Eltsov and Klaus Larres published on 1st March 2014 on the website for the journal *Foreign Policy* also begins with a reference to Aksyonov's novel and ends by exhorting Vladimir Putin to reread Lev Tolstoy's 'Sebastopol in August 1855,' the final instalment of the three *Sevastopol'skiye rasskazy* (1855, translated into English as *Sebastopol Sketches*) that Tolstoy wrote during and immediately after the Crimean War. On the 21st March 2014 episode of his radio show 'Open Source,' Christopher Lydon of WBUR

¹ Although the current English spelling of the city's name is generally consistent with the Russian in using a 'v' rather than a 'b' as the third letter, the title of Tolstoy's work has consistently retained the older spelling in English translation. Therefore, I will use 'Sevastopol' to refer to the actual city and 'Sebastopol' to refer to its depiction in Tolstoy's book.

radio asked a pair of prominent Slavist scholars “what would Tolstoy say about Russia and Ukraine?” and both relied copiously on the *Sebastopol Sketches* in answering.

Each of these sources presumes – with good reason – that their primarily US audiences lack a deep and nuanced historical understanding with which to interpret the unfolding events in Crimea. Each also proposes – implicitly or explicitly – that there is some sort of direct historical and or political message to and/or about Putin waiting to be uncovered in these two works of fiction. As a scholar and teacher of literature, I have no desire to discourage the practice of reading fiction as a means of understanding the real world but both of these authors’ conceptions of Crimea as contested terrain are far more complicated than such analogical claims of being “uncannily accurate down to the finest details” (Weiss, 2014: online) suggest.² Despite the literary-historical commentary in Lydon’s interview by Maxim Shrayer and Svetlana Boym, the overarching purpose of all these pieces is not literary criticism, but rather a sort of historiographic political explication of current events that Lydon hopes will “fill in the back story of Russian annexation of Crimea” for his listeners. Such a method is certainly not without *some* utility, especially for those whose meaningful awareness of Crimea’s existence and/or its role in Russian history first dawned in the spring of 2014. However, it bears repeating that neither of the two works of fiction referenced in the aforementioned articles was upon its initial publication primarily oriented towards Western audiences,³ nor was either one suggesting a future for Crimea that only Putin’s actions in 2014 finally made concrete. I contend that Tolstoy and Aksyonov – despite their vastly different worldviews and stylistics – were both primarily using fictional depictions of Crimea to counteract a longstanding Russian political practice of invoking of the kinds of “imagined geographies” that Edith Clowes articulated in *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (2011). Putin’s annexation of Crimea is merely one of the most recent – and perhaps one of the most likely – examples of such cynical rhetoric being employed to bolster nationalistic policy.

Fusing aspects of Edward Said’s concept of “imaginative geographies” with Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities”,⁴ Clowes writes that “imagined geographies [are] the process of creating fictional spaces of self and other as part of traditional thinking about group identity” (2011: 4) and examines them specifically in the context of literature written since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, her impetus for doing so was “the Putin administration[’s]... rekindl[ing of] age-old Russian xenophobia” (ibid: 162), particularly during Putin’s second term (2004-2008) as President of the Russian Federation. The dissident author Andrei Sinyavsky claimed that such xenophobia was intrinsic to Russian culture and contended that it is enacted through a dichotomy that is woven into the “psychology and the official language” (1990: 261) of the Russian state, whether Tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet. Although he allows that the “nuances tied to a specific historical period” (ibid: 260) vary slightly, Sinyavsky wryly diagnoses this trait as a division of

² Itov similarly takes an admittedly delicious situational irony and runs with it: “it’s hard to see the newly minted Crimean prime minister’s last name as anything other than life completely curdling into metafiction. It’s Aksyonov” (2014: online).

³ This is undoubtedly true of *Sebastopol Sketches*. While Aksyonov’s book was initially published in the West because of his forced emigration from the Soviet Union, it was also first published in Russian. Although both books are by no means inaccessible to Western readers, especially in their excellent late-20th Century translations, their style and subject matter in the Russian original strongly points toward the primacy of their Russian readerships.

⁴ For succinct definitions of these terms see Said (2014: 49-72) and Anderson (2006: 1-8).

humanity “into ours and not ours. And this is rooted deep in the subconscious in the form of that disjunctive question: ‘Russian or non-Russian?’” (ibid: 261)

As illustrated by the Crimean crisis of 2014, Putin and his allies in the Russian government clearly believe the peninsula to be definitively “ours” (that is, Russian) regardless of the presence there of Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, or any other non-Russian peoples. Such an impression becomes unavoidable in the wake of Putin’s comments in his ‘New Year Address to the Nation’ on 31st December 2014:

Love for one’s Motherland is one of the most powerful and enlightening feelings. It has found its reflection in our fraternal aid to the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol, after they made the firm decision to return to their native home. This event will remain a landmark in national history. (2014: online).

Despite this invocation of an indelible link to a “native home,” Crimea’s history is far more complicated. Russian dominion over the peninsula actually only dates back to the reign of Catherine the Great in the late 18th Century. In fact, for several centuries prior to that the power relations between the Russia and Crimea were wholly reversed. The Crimean Tatars – who ruled the region as a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire – actually pillaged and despoiled Russia fairly frequently. For example, a Crimean Tatar army burned Moscow almost completely to the ground in 1571 and captured roughly 100,000 Muscovite prisoners in the process. A strengthened Russian Empire made several unsuccessful attempts at acquiring Crimea during the 18th Century, finally achieving its goal only after the territory was separated from the Ottoman Empire by the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji at the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish war of 1768-1774. As Nicholas V. Riasanovsky points out, this treaty not only ceded important Black Sea territory and shipping rights to Russia, but it also gave Russia a limited right of representation over Christian subjects within the Ottoman Empire: “[t]he provisions of the treaty relating to Christians and Christian worship became the basis of many subsequent Russian claims in regard to Turkey” (Riasanovsky, 1993: 265). The formal annexation of the entire Crimean Peninsula by Russia in 1783 was just one in a series of political manoeuvres predicated on giving “fraternal aid” to coreligionists living under a hostile ‘yoke.’

The Crimean War of 1853-56 was provoked in large measure by the tensions created by decades of Russian interventions on behalf of Christians within the Ottoman Empire, and although Russia was soundly defeated in that conflict, it retained control of Crimea for the remainder of the Tsarist period. Crimea was the site of intense conflict between revolutionary factions during the Russian Civil War of 1917-1921, but ultimately it entered the Soviet Union as part of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in 1922. The Nazis occupied Crimea for nearly two years during the Second World War, giving Stalin the pretext of collaboration to justify the forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of Tatars to Central Asia and the outright expulsion of tens of thousands of other non-Russian ethnic minorities. In 1954, Stalin’s successor Nikita Khrushchev engineered a decree that transferred control of Crimea from the RSFSR to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, a highly symbolic move that was roundly decried as treachery by Russian nationalists in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991. The peninsula remained a part of an independent Ukrainian state from 1991 until the Russian annexation in 2014, meaning that Crimea has

nominally⁵ been a part of Russia – either as an independent state or a republic within the Soviet Union – for 173 of the 245 years since the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji, the first occasion on which Russia had a defensible claim on it as “ours.”

Mark Lipovetsky, who originally imported Jean Baudrillard’s concept of “hyperreality” into a late 20th Century Russian context in his *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (1999) points toward another means of interpreting Russia’s recent history in Crimea when he identifies Putin’s regime as a:

fascism of a new kind, which existing political radars fail to detect and thus overlook, which is able to mimic western discourse, while thoroughly opposing it. This fascism is armed with the ‘hyperreality of simulacra’ (instead of mere theatre) and promotes its ‘traditional values’ with an openly cynical smirk. It also effectively transforms the cynical negation of truth into a foundation for a new political paranoia. (Lipovetsky, 2018: online)

For my purposes here, the most salient part of Baudrillard’s idea (and Lipovetsky’s application of it) is his now-(in)famous delineation of the “desert of the real”:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory... that engenders the territory.... [P]resent-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation. (1994: 1-2)

As Clowes observes, Putin’s definition of Russianness is less a matter of ideological kindship than one of imagining oneself as being in one’s proper place (in Putin’s words, back in the “native home” of the “Motherland” alongside “our fraternal” kin):

in distinction to Soviet identity, which was temporally defined – linked to a vision of the Soviet state at the vanguard of history – the post-Soviet debate about Russian identity has been couched in spatial metaphors of territory and geography.... In 2005... President Vladimir Putin pronounced the fall of the Soviet Union to be the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century” because many of the “Russian people” (rossiiskii narod) suddenly found themselves “beyond the bounds of Russian federal territory” (rossiiskaia territoriiia). It is certainly not by chance that, in speaking of the “Russian people,” Putin selected the juridical term rossiiskii, implying citizenship in the Russian Federation, instead of the ethnic term for Russian (russkii). In choosing this word, Putin was again constructing nation/people in such a way as to tie Russianness to the state and its authority.... The geographical metaphors dominant in current discourse about identity convey the sense that who a Russian is depends on how one defines where Russia is. Overarching values attach to that place, however it is defined. (2011: xi-xii).

Putin’s construction of a *rossiiskii narod* tragically estranged from its *rossiiskaia territoriiia* relies on an imagined “map that precedes the territory” and is designed to counteract the

⁵ Its legal status as a part of Russia during that time is, of course, a different matter altogether.

undesirable political realities that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, one of which was the continuation of a newly independent and increasingly Western-oriented Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea. As Serhii Plokhy observes:

The 'sacred space' of the empire, the cultural and historical map created by the Russian imperial nationalists of the nineteenth century and Russian proletarian internationalists of the Soviet era was torn apart by the events of 1991.... When the independent Ukraine left the USSR, it effectively took a number of the major imperial 'sacred places' prominently present on the Russian cultural map. They included traditional 'all-Russian' places of religious worship and pilgrimage, such as the Caves Monastery and St Sophia Cathedral in Kiev, and places associated with the history of the Russian empire during its 'golden age' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like Poltava and Sevastopol. (2000: 370-71)

Putin and his fellow Russian nationalists would surely deny that their conception of Russia is either “imagined” or “simulated”, but both Tolstoy and Aksyonov embed satirical critiques of such nationalist identity-making processes into their fictive Crimeas, thereby creating “hyperreal” simulacra of identity along the lines that Clowes posits. In doing so, they invalidate the kinds of absolutist quasi-historical claims regarding Crimea's unquestionable Russianness that were not only used to justify the peninsula's annexation in 2014, but which also date back to at least the 18th Century.⁶

Although *The Island of Crimea* is less ambiguous than *The Sebastopol Sketches* in its humanistic rejection of nationalistic us-vs.-them binaries (a fact that can be at least partly explained by the fact that such binaries were being defended with tens of thousands of nuclear warheads in Aksyonov's day), Tolstoy's writing even at this early stage in his career criticises the dehumanising imposture, hollow patriotism, and narcissism of the Russian aristocracy into which he was born and whose behaviour he witnessed first-hand while serving in the Russian army during the Siege of Sevastopol during the Crimean War in 1854 and 1855. Both Tolstoy and Aksyonov present Crimean milieus that offer few, if any, authentic means of existence to the people that inhabit them; instead, the worlds of both books are dominated by a violent amalgam of vulgar self-interest, shallow sentimentality, and either blatant distortion or wilful ignorance of reality. Both authors reveal the brutal truths behind the Potemkin villages of their fictive Crimeas, thereby satirically deflating the constructions of Russian identity that governed the actual Russian societies out of which their books arose. By analogy, their warnings can be extended in time and space to any society in which such identity-making processes are at work, a definition that certainly includes Putin's Russia without being particular to it.⁷

⁶ “For many Russian politicians the history of the Russian presence in the Crimea is closely connected to the history of the fleet and hence to the history of its main base in the Crimea, Sevastopol. The former commander of the fleet, Admiral Igor Kasatonov (recalled from Sevastopol to Moscow in December 1992), stressed in an interview with the Russian newspaper *Literaturnaia Rossiia* that Russia in any form cannot be imagined without its glorious Black Sea fleet. To deprive Russia of the Black Sea fleet and its naval bases in the Crimea and Black Sea region would mean setting it back three centuries to the times before Peter I” (Plokhy, 2000: 372).

⁷ “Since 1992, the issue of the Crimea, Sevastopol and the Black Sea fleet has constantly remained at the centre of Russian-Ukrainian relations. The issue was raised anew every time the political struggle in the Kremlin intensified. From Rutskoi to Lebed, every ‘strong man’ in the Kremlin would exploit the issue of Sevastopol, thereby appealing to the nationalistically-oriented electorate” (Plokhy, 2000: 371-72).

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Tolstoy's three *Sebastopol Sketches* are quintessentially Tolstoyan in that they express a multitude of seemingly irreconcilable authorial opinions. As a result, many critics have chosen to read the three stories very selectively in order to smooth out these idiosyncrasies, a practice that misses what I consider an essential change in Tolstoy's views over the course of the months during which he wrote and serially published them in the notable journal *Sovremennik* ("The Contemporary") between June 1855 and January 1856. The nationalists among Tolstoy's contemporary readers (including Tsar Alexander II himself) were smitten with what Olga Maiorova calls the "unbreakable union of humility and heroism" of the ordinary Russian soldiers who populate the first story, 'Sebastopol in December' (2010: 36). She states that although Tolstoy's depictions of "southern landscapes [are] markedly exotic, he nonetheless asserts that the fearlessness of Sevastopol's inhabitants gives the town a thoroughly Russian character" (ibid: 36-37). Alternately, as David McDuff notes in his translator's introduction to the Penguin English-language edition of the book, "Soviet critics... made much of the 'satirical' elements in the second and third sketches, anxious to portray [even the early] Tolstoy as an antimilitarist and a pacifist" (1986: 38). Yes, Tolstoy addresses the reader directly in 'Sebastopol in December,' and suggests that seeing the "defenders of Sebastopol" (1986: 44) will cause "you [to] defer to [their] taciturn and unselfconscious nobility and steadfastness of spirit, [their] diffidence in the face of [their] own personal merit" (ibid: 46). However, he also suggests that such deference will not last long:

What do the death and suffering of an insignificant worm such as myself signify, when placed alongside so many deaths and so many sufferings?" you will ask yourself. But the sight of the cloudless sky, the brilliant sun, the beautiful town, the open church and the military personnel moving in all directions will soon restore your mind to its normal condition of frivolity, petty concern and exclusive preoccupation with the present. (ibid: 48)

This "normal" state of wilful ignorance that Tolstoy attributes to his generalised reader links the apparently unironic coda of the first story – "Long will Russia bear the imposing traces of this epic of Sebastopol, the hero of which was the Russian people" (ibid: 57) – with the much more satirical tone of the second, 'Sebastopol in May,' in which the setting is initially described more in line with the swanky resort-town of Yalta from Chekhov's short story 'Dama s sobachkoy' ('Lady with a Lapdog'):

a regimental band was playing next to the pavilion on the Boulevard, and crowds of military men accompanied by women were moving gaily along the paths in holiday mood. A bright spring sun had ascended the morning sky above the English positions, had moved over to the bastions, then to the town and the Nicholas Barracks and, shining with equal joy on all, was now descending towards the far-off, dark blue sea whose even swell gleamed with a silvery sheen. (Tolstoy, 1986: 61)

'Sebastopol in May' begins and ends in this seemingly idyllic milieu, transporting some of the officers on which it focuses to the battlefield (and, in one case, to death) during the middle third of story. Whether strolling the boulevards or under intense artillery-fire from the enemy, Tolstoy shows these characters as being thoroughly immersed in the petty

concerns of the aristocracy, whose very reality the narrator subtly questions:

The word aristocrats... has for some time now enjoyed considerable popularity among us here in Russia, where one might have supposed it ought not really to exist at all, and has found its way into every region of the country and every social stratum where vanity has managed to penetrate (and into what areas of occasion and circumstance does this vile peccadillo not reach?). (ibid: 65)

As he would later do in *Voina i mir* (1865-67, translated into English as *War and Peace*) and *Smert' Ivana Ilyicha* (1886, translated into English as *The Death of Ivan Ilych*), Tolstoy does not simply decry vanity as an aristocratic foible, but calls it “the distinguishing characteristic and special malady of our age,” claiming that it afflicts even those “men who are ready to die for the sake of a lofty conviction” (ibid: 66). The falsity and superficiality engendered by this vanity disgusts Tolstoy, who even goes so far as to call it a “vice” comparable to “smallpox and cholera” (ibid: 66).

At roughly the same time he was writing his thinly fictionalised account of the fighting in Sevastopol, the twenty-six-year-old junior officer/count also produced – with the self-assured moralism that came to be a hallmark of his writing – a blunt critique of the “main vices” (1989: 30) of the Russian military. Writing that he is compelled by “a sense of duty to [his] oath and still more from a sense of humanity,” he calls the state of the Russian military during the war an “evil which is openly perpetrated before me and obviously entails the destruction of millions of people – the loss of the strength, dignity, and honour of the fatherland” (ibid: 27). Sevastopol was not, then, a defeat of the innately “str[ong], digni[fied], and honour[able...] fatherland”, but rather a conscious (hence “openly perpetrated”) moral failing on the part of the Russian ruling class – that is, the same “aristocrats” against whom he rails in ‘Sebastopol in May’ – that is equivalent to treason. Echoing the three stories in *The Sebastopol Sketches*, this piece illustrates that Tolstoy’s attitude toward the war was largely in concord with the view of the “Russian public at large [which] viewed the siege of Sevastopol as a symbol of the heroism of the Russian people, which had saved Russia from foreign invasion, despite the inefficiency and corruption of the tsarist administration” (Plokhy, 2000: 375). As Charles King succinctly puts it, “Tolstoy had arrived in Crimea as a casual patriot; he was now a committed skeptic” (2014: online).

Maierova is absolutely correct in asserting that Tolstoy “symbolically anoints the Crimean peninsula with Russianness” through “the fearlessness of Sevastopol’s inhabitants” (2010: 36-37) in the first story, but this anointing is largely undone in the following two stories by the ignorance and contempt directed at this nobility and heroism by those in charge of Sevastopol and the country as a whole. Like the recently deceased Ivan Ilych’s friends, who “could not help thinking that... they would have to fulfil the very tiresome demands of propriety” (Tolstoy 2008: 84) in attending his funeral and who have little to no idea how to mourn him once they arrive, the Russian officers in Sevastopol lack any sympathetic reaction to death and simply perform grief rather than feeling it:

Their facial expressions and tone of voice were serious, almost melancholy, as though yesterday’s losses had affected each one of them deeply and personally. The truth was, however, that since none of them had lost anyone to whom he was particularly close... this air of melancholy had something of an official nature about it—it was an air they considered it their obligation to display. (1986: 102)

Moreover, the penultimate chapter of 'Sebastopol in May' echoes the story's opening, with everyone from the beginning – save those who died in the previous night's fighting and who therefore have been reduced to "a godawful stink!" – once again out promenading:

All of them [were] driven by the same unaltering stimuli of falsehood, vanity, and sheer plain silliness. Only Praskukhin and Neferdov were missing – along with one or two others whom hardly anyone here ever gave a thought to or remembered now, even though their corpses had not been washed, laid out and buried yet, and whose fathers, mothers, wives and children, if they had any, would also forget about them within a month or two, had they not already done so. (ibid: 105)

Reverence that is at worst, artificial, and at best, fleeting, does not square with the lionising depictions of Russian self-sacrifice that Tolstoy offers in the first and last stories, thereby contradicting the simple conclusion that Crimea has become a sanctified place of "ours" by virtue having had Russian blood sacrificially spilled upon its soil. If those of "us" who rule the country cannot even acknowledge this sacrifice, then its ritual invocation in political contexts becomes hypocritical at best, vampiric at worst.

The corpse-and-shrapnel-covered Crimean battlefield on which ordinary French and Russian soldiers interact humanely, if also brusquely, with one another during a brief cease-fire in the final chapter of 'Sebastopol in May' might as well be on a different planet than the salon-like urban quarters permeated by what the dandyish Prince Galtsin calls (in untranslated French) "*cette belle bravoure de gentilhomme*" (ibid: 74). The palaver that suffuses the officers' quarters within the besieged city reads like that found in the salons of Petersburg, a culture filled with affectations that Tolstoy mocked throughout his career. He juxtaposes a scene in which the largely sympathetic lieutenant named Mikhailov is fretting about the prospects of his "thirteenth time on the bastion" (ibid: 70) with a superficial conversation between aristocratic officers who face no physical danger from the fighting that rages at the city's edges. Mikhailov's ordinary origins – compared to men like Galtsin – makes his foreboding understandable, since he would presumably be more attuned to the folkloric superstitions surrounding the *chertova diuzhina* ("devil's dozen"). No corresponding sense of fate, evil, or danger is found in the prattle of the senior officers:

"I say, you never finished telling me about Vaska Mendel," said Kalugin, who had taken off his greatcoat and was sitting in a soft, comfortable armchair by the window, unbuttoning the collar of his clean, starched linen shirt. "How did he get married?"

"My dear fellow, you'd simply die laughing! Je vous dis, il y avait un temps où on ne parlait de ça à Peterbourg," said Prince Galtsin, laughing and jumping up from the piano at which he had been sitting. He resettled himself on the window seat, next to Kalugin. "You'd die laughing! I know the whole story." and he quickly launched, with much wit and humour, into an account of a love affair which we shall omit as it is of no interest to us. (ibid: 73)

The narrator's recognition of the banality of this interaction serves not only as a counterpoint to Mikhailov's brooding on the very real possibility of his own imminent demise but also marks Galtsin's speech as incongruous with the serious setting. No one in Sebastopol was dying of laughter, but plenty were dying from artillery fire and general deprivation. Furthermore, although Galtsin's near-constant use of French was common

among the Russian aristocracy, it seems especially out of place in this context, given that it is the French who are shelling the city and decimating Galtsin's countrymen. This dissonance is not overlooked by the narrator in stating that he will omit Galtsin's tale in favour of returning to the legitimate (in Tolstoy's view) pathos of Mikhailov's imminent death. If the *Sebastopol Sketches* are to affirm of the innate superiority of ordinary Russians' values in the Crimea, one must also acknowledge Tolstoy's repeated assertion that Russia's elite dismissed the significance that superiority – which, it seems, “you” the reader will also do – and that it did so while speaking the language of its ostensible enemy. Any sense of Crimea being a locus of “our” national pride is difficult to sustain in the face of such dissonance, whether in Evgeny Tarle's hagiographically Russophile Soviet-era history *Gorod russkoi slavy* (1954, *The City of Russian Glory*) or in the 21st Century public statements of Vladimir Putin.⁸

Aksyonov's novel is not set in the historical past, but rather in a near-future (from the vantage-point of its 1981 publication) based on an alternate historical and geographical timeline. Aksyonov's fictionalising razor geographically sunders Crimea from the mainland by obliterating the Isthmus of Perekop and historically separates it from the Soviet Union through the alternate-historical conceit that the “White” army under the command of Baron Wrangel actually defeated the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War, rather than being crushed by them in 1920, and created a Taiwan-like independent island state. In doing so, Aksyonov makes (fictionally) real, the conditions of “micronationality” that Hayward identified as a form of metaphorical islandness:

the mere representation of a location as a micronation causes complex patterns of representation and interaction with various legal and legislative systems that can be represented in the media and ‘played out’ in various scenarios, including military ones.... It is also pertinent to identify that continental micronations, which almost always comprise landlocked enclaves within established nation states, are effectively ‘land islands’. Indeed this condition is also one that pertains to aspects of shattered and/or contested ethnic aggregations within nation states more broadly. In such contexts, micronationality might best be understood as a protracted form of performance and its performance on islands might similarly be perceived to perform these spaces – i.e., to create islandness” (2016: 3).

Although the actual Crimean Peninsula is not geographically landlocked, recent events have demonstrated that the claim exerted upon it by the Russian historical-political imagination can be every bit as encircling as the waters of the Black Sea.⁹ Aksyonov is largely uninterested in the biogeographical consequences of making Crimea into a literal island. Instead he focuses on the metaphorical isolation inherent in what Sinyavsky called “the contradictory peculiarity... of the Russian soul: the insularity, the satisfaction [derived] from

⁸ Tarle's book is as notable for its publication in the same year that Khrushchev transferred control of Crimea from Russia to Ukraine as for producing historical insights concerning the Crimean War. As Plokhy notes “Tarle wrote about Russian glory and Russian heroism in a context in which ‘Russian’ was viewed exclusively as Great Russian [ie not Ukrainian]. There was no attempt to interpret ‘Russian’ in a broader manner” (2000: 380).

⁹ Russia's powerful influence over the region was compellingly demonstrated by its ability to completely close the Kerch Strait in November 2018 simply by parking a tanker ship between the pilings of the long-planned Crimean Bridge, the construction of which began – not coincidentally – soon after the 2014 annexation of the peninsula.

the fact of being Russian (and thus good) [and] conversely the suspiciousness of other peoples, the intolerance, even xenophobia,” that explains how and why “[n]otions such as *svoy* (one’s own) and *chuzhoy* (alien)... are profoundly ingrained in the Russian psychology” (Sinyavsky, 1990, 260).

As is the case in Tolstoy’s latter two sketches, Aksyonov’s Crimea is populated primarily by characters who retreat to an imagined geography when their idealism fails to match their lived reality. The novel’s protagonist, Andrei Luchnikov, is a globetrotting playboy and the editor of a respected newspaper in an independent Crimea. A wide variety of forces exert influence on Crimean politics and society, including Slavophile Russian monarchists, Soviet-aligned communists, Tatar separatists, and youths seeking a hybrid cultural identity that they call “Yaki”¹⁰ that would unify all of Crimea’s various ethnic groups. All of these groups are vying at the novel’s outset to be the definitive political voice of the island, despite its decades-long history of multiculturalism and political diversity. With a fervent belief in enlightened communism that harkens back to their Revolutionary ancestors, Luchnikov and his associates in the *Soiuz obshchei sud’by*¹¹ (“the Common Fate League”) naively believe that the Soviets will not only bring order to the island’s tempestuous political climate, but that they will also willingly incorporate certain of the more progressive aspects of the economically thriving Crimean society.¹² In an editorial for his newspaper, Luchnikov expresses his fervent belief that what Putin would call Crimeans’ “return to their native home” would inoculate the Soviet Union against the remnants of Stalinism:

A harmonious society needs both a majority and a minority... Can a new, strong group [ie Crimeans] keep from dissolving in the gruel of ‘mature socialism’ and become the ferment of new, life-giving anti-Stalinist processes?” (Aksyonov, 1983: 243).

The novel depicts the complicated fragmentation of the island nation’s socially hedonistic, culturally pluralistic, and economically thriving society prior to being forcibly absorbed into precisely such a homogenised “gruel” by its ostensible Russian brethren in the Soviet Union.

Clowes notes that Luchnikov’s desire to reunite the Crimea with the Soviet Union is based on his “nostalgic, semi-Slavophile attachment to an ideal of mythical national unity” (1993: 178). His perspective echoes the notion employed both by Soviet historians and by post-Soviet politicians as “the cornerstone of all Russian claims to the Crimea...a myth of Sevastopol as an exclusively Russian city, the ‘city of Russian glory’, the symbol of the Russian fleet and Russia’s glorious past” (Plokhy, 2000: 372). The various supporters of the

¹⁰ Although this name has no literal meaning in Russian or English, it nevertheless contains other echoes of meaning that are consistent with the island’s creolised culture and linguistics. Weiss contends, for example, that it “combines the Russian initials for the Island – Ostrov Krym, or OK – with the Turkish word *yahsi*, meaning ‘good’” (2014: online). Additionally, “*ya qui*” is a Russian/French portmanteau that roughly conveys the meaning of the question “who am I?” Similarly, the Spanish phrase “*ya que?*” (“what now?”) might even be a cheeky allusion to Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s revolutionary 19th Century text *Chto delat’* (“What Is to Be Done?”).

¹¹ The group’s Russian acronym – S.O.S. – carries a double-meaning because its members believe themselves to be saving Crimea from peril while Aksyonov makes it clear that it is their “political naiveté and complacency that make [them] easy prey for Soviet conquest” (Booker, 1994: 129).

¹² Rather than predicting the developments of 2014 in Crimea, Aksyonov’s novel seems in this regard to have been as much drawing on the discourse speculating about the fate of Hong Kong after its restoration to communist China in 1997 – still sixteen years in the future at the time of the novel’s publication – at the end of the New Territories lease to Great Britain.

“idea” at the heart of the Common Fate League – “the only conceivable future for Crimea, reunification with the Great Motherland (Aksyonov 1983: 6) – steadfastly choose to believe in the imagined felicity of a reunion with Russia even when reality demonstrates the folly of doing so (...and even when the KGB’s own agents warn them against it!). Luchnikov’s confidante Chernok – the military commander of the “Island’s North Buffer Zone” (ibid: 87) – even goes so far as to say “I want to be Russian and I don’t care if they send us to Siberia” (ibid: 89) after reunification. These scenes demonstrate the power of the “imagined geography” of Russia and its ostensibly innate bond with Crimea.

Aksyonov exposes his satirical intentions to the reader from the earliest pages of the novel. He presents Luchnikov as a man who has difficulty breaking away from a traditional Russian mindset, even as his libertine Westernised lifestyle strikes one as a poor match for the Soviet Union’s Marxist ideology. As he drives around Crimea’s ultramodern capital of Simferopol in his Crimean-made sports car, a “Peter Turbo,” Luchnikov crosses himself “out of habit” at an intersection where an Orthodox church once stood. Luchnikov himself seems unsure of the root cause for this seemingly unconscious behaviour, while the narrator explains that it:

was the subject of great glee among his new friends in Moscow. The brightest of them, Marlen Kuzenkov, would even lecture him about it: ‘You’re almost a Marxist, Andrei, and even from a purely existential standpoint it’s ridiculous to indulge in such naïve symbols.’ Luchnikov’s standard response was a slight and slightly ironic smile, and every time he saw a golden crucifix in the sky, he continued to make a quick cross ‘as a mere formality.’ But he’d been troubled lately by the formalities, the vanities of his life style, his distance from the Church, and here he was, to his horror, crossing himself at a traffic light. (ibid: 4)

Luchnikov’s subliminal religious tic reflects his tendency to repress the contradictions – often glaring ones – in his own political philosophy. Despite living in a Crimean society that allows ideologies with disparate and even conflicting tenets, Luchnikov increasingly insists on thinking in the single-minded “ours/not-ours” fashion of his Soviet associates and their Slavophile predecessors. By incompletely but fervently adopting the logic of the Soviets, he marginalises himself from both societies and fails to comprehend the world around him.

While giving an interview to a Western journalist in Paris, Luchnikov believes himself to be suavely defending his motives for seeking reunification. In a comment that ironically anticipates Clowes’s critical vocabulary, he tells the journalist that “We Russians are known for our imagination... Our whole world is built on fantasy, on the free play of the imagination” (ibid: 115). He goes on to say that he can very much imagine a unified Russia in which his paper is still freely published; what remains unstated is that this would also be a Russia in which he retains the freedoms that allow him to live his life of wanton privilege, a prospect that seems rather remote. However, during a subsequent trip to Moscow, he spends the bulk of his time trying to elude his KGB handlers, spending his time fraternising with both dissident jazz musicians and a reprehensible group of xenophobic irredentists who are busily formulating strategies for the restoration of the unjustly lost (in their view) Crimea.

One of the interactions he does manage to have with a formal representative of the Soviet state during his visit simultaneously undercuts the sincerity of both Russian nationalism and Soviet internationalism. Luchnikov and his friend Vitaly Gangut are arrested on suspicion of “trying to undermine the electoral process” (ibid: 166) after Luchnikov

drunkenly attempts to interview a long line of pensioners waiting to vote for the Supreme Soviet. While being questioned, Luchnikov meets a KGB agent named Oleg Stepanov who begins their conversation in a way that seems calculated to play on his sympathies: "Your name is mellifluous to the Russian ear.... The Luchnikovs are an ancient Russian line and served brilliantly in many wars for the fatherland" (ibid: 168). Stepanov proceeds to take him to a brunch hosted by a group of his fellow Slavophiles, noting that the audience is keenly interested in Luchnikov: "The brunch was suddenly in honour of that Crimean celebrity Andrei Luchnikov, creator of the Idea of a Common Fate, an idea much bandied about in Moscow's neonationalist circles" (ibid: 169). Their gathering – "more a nineteenth-century merchant's feast than a top-level meeting of twentieth-century communists" (ibid: 169) – eventually moves on to a sauna, where Stepanov lays bare the convoluted reasoning behind his service in the KGB, the Soviet Union's most notorious governmental agency (the same one in which Putin served as a colonel:

Autocracy, all things being equal, is the ideal form of power, but given a number of unfortunate marriages and births, its Russian element was much diluted towards the end. Our last ruler had no more than one sixty-fourth Russian blood. So in its infinite wisdom our people combined ideology and power, faith and a strong hand, and astounded the whole world with a new form of power: the soviet! And here we have it, the Russian triad of our times: communism, Soviet power, and nationality! Only nationality remains untouched, for nationality is our blood, our spirit, our strength, our mystery. (ibid: 175)

Stepanov's comrades gleefully point at the erection that builds up in him as he gives this oration, and although Luchnikov does not seem particularly swayed by Stepanov's mixture of anti-Semitism, *partiinost'* ('party spirit'), and pre-Revolutionary Slavophilism, Aksyonov strongly implies that Luchnikov's own fervour for reunification is no less of an obsessive fetish for a perverse "Idea."

Luchnikov's faith in the power of the Russian imagination most palpably manifests in his wilful self-delusion about the reality of what awaits Crimea. None of the conditions he witnesses first-hand during his trip suggest that the Soviets will be conducive to a reform on the Crimean model if the two nations merge. In a series of articles that recounts his trip through Soviet Russia, Luchnikov demonstrates the hypnotic power that Russia's imagined exerts on him. He initially decries the "poverty of contemporary Soviet life," "the massive lie of the mass media," and the "utter torpor of the leadership class" and prods his Soviet contact for even more "critical materials" because "given the historical significance of the vote facing the Island population, it had a right to know the whole truth about the country, the great power with which it would soon be called upon, as Russians, to merge" (ibid: 237). Luchnikov buys into and gives further voice to the pervasive historical interpretation that Stalin is to blame for diverting the Soviet Union from its proper course and that "Surely we are moving in the right direction [when] more and more people in Russia will come to see the separation of truth from falsehood as a simple, natural process" (ibid: 242). Of course, the "truth" of his own journey is largely that of a playboy's bacchanal, rather than a tour of the Siberian gulags near which Aksyonov himself grew up in the 1940s and 1950s. Luchnikov even acknowledges his own liminality – albeit somewhat callously – by suggesting that he "defect[ed]" home to Simferopol via Stockholm in a "tiny plane [that] barely missed crashing in some pines" (ibid: 215-16). However, his mild version of pushback against Soviet authority carries with it far fewer personal consequences than the dissidence of Dim Shebeko, the underground musician with whom Luchnikov gallivants while eluding the authorities; his "defection" does not separate him from his family and homeland, it reunites him with it.

Such a distinction surely matters intensely to Aksyonov, who was himself “invited to emigrate” and stripped of his Soviet citizenship in 1980 after publishing several books that circumvented official censorship. Any reader who does not already share Luchnikov’s predispositions has plentiful reason to be sceptical of the credibility of his “Journey Through Wonderland” (ibid: 237) and the reasons why he has “returned... full of hope” (ibid: 216) from it.

Luchnikov seemingly never doubts that Crimeans both should and will vote to merge with the Soviet Union for no other reason than what he believes to be the obvious fact that they are Russians. This certainty – which should be contradicted by the fact that his own son is a “Yaki” and that his colleagues and friends in Simferopol include Britons, Americans, French, Italians, and individuals identifying with several other non-Russian nationalities – overwhelms the litany of practical arguments against unification that he himself enumerates in this series of articles. Because of his idealistically nationalistic views – “Russia...is like a field, which shall never be barren!” (ibid: 216) – Luchnikov fails to recognise the value of Crimea’s extant, if also messy, pluralism and fatally downplays the extent to which the Soviet system *demand*s adherence to its monological ideology. Clowes sees wilful ignorance like Luchnikov’s as the chief target of Aksyonov’s satire:

historical determinism is a mask for an intellectually lazy and politically ruinous nostalgia for some Gemeinschaft, some easy social harmony and unity that never has existed and never will exist. In the case of Luchnikov, the dream is certainly more appealing than reality. (1993: 180)

Aksyonov’s cautionary tale extrapolates a grim set of consequences that can befall those who settle for the uncomplicated ideological truths of an imagined Russian nationalist geography rather than dealing with the far starker Soviet reality that is right before their eyes.

A conversation among members of the Soviet politburo – whom Aksyonov satirically names not as individuals but either as the “Most Important Personages” or as “the portraits” – uses language that anticipates Putin’s ‘New Year Address’ in revealing the wolf that the Common Fate League has invited into Crimea:

Isn’t this reunification going to be more trouble than it’s worth? Where will we put them all, anyway? Forty parties and nearly as many different nations...

The Party has amassed a good deal of experience in these matters...The multiparty system, of course, can be done away with in days. The nationality issue is more complicated, though as I see it, the Greeks belong in Greece, the Italians in Italy, the Russians in Russia, and so forth. (Aksyonov, 1983: 264)

Given that Russian nationalist leaders have claimed for centuries that Crimea is *russkaia* and/or *rossiiskaia territorii*, this latter comment is nothing less than an endorsement of ethnic cleansing and the Soviet invasion that begins in the novel’s final pages bodes ill generally, but particularly for the non-Russians in Crimea. The fate of the Crimean Tatars and other non-Russian ethnic groups in Crimea since 2014 suggests that a common playbook is being used by both the novel’s fictional invaders and the real-life proponents of the peninsula’s annexation to Russia.

Although their underlying reasons for doing so differ substantially, Tolstoy and Aksyonov both deny the argument that Crimea is absolutely a part of Russia, a position that

counteracts Putin's invocation of a "return" to "the [Russian] Motherland" by "our" Crimea. However, rather than being principally conversant with – or, predictive of – the political context of 2014 and beyond, both works provide a metahistorical commentary on how nationalist rhetoric has operated in Russia's past that can be generally instructive to observers of Russia's present and future. Whereas Tolstoy accuses the 19th Century Russian elite of being disconnected from ordinary Russians¹³ and therefore unworthy of invoking the latter's virtues as the quintessence of Russian identity, Aksyonov suggests that traditional Russianness (and perhaps any form of chauvinistic national identity) is a limited and dangerously outdated concept in an increasingly transnational world.

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¹³ Tolstoy later embodied this theme even more explicitly through the characters of Platon Karataev in *War and Peace* and the kindly peasant Gerasim in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*.

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