THEME SECTION

Black Sea Currents

Edited by

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Introduction

The Black Sea as region and horizon

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Abstract: The introduction first outlines different perspectives on the Black Sea: in history, as a site of imperial conflicts and a buffer zone; in area studies, as a “region”; and in anthropology, as a sea crisscrossed by migration, cultural influences, alternative visions, and often a mutual turning of backs. We then discuss the Black Sea in the context of maritime ethnography and the study of ports, “hero cities”, pipelines, and political crises. The following sections consider Smith’s notion of the “territorialization of memory” in relation to histories of exile and the more recent interactions brought about by migration and trade. In the concluding section we discuss how the Black Sea has appeared as a “horizon” and imaginary of the beyond for the peoples living around its shores.

Keywords: maritime ethnography, regional study, Russia, trade, Turkey, Ukraine

The Black Sea has long been described as a place of mixed cultures and allegiances.¹ For centuries a playground and a battlefield of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, as well as a buffer zone between their successor states, it was a crucible for cosmopolitan practices (Ascherson 2007; King 2011; Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012). A good example is the continuing presence in Istanbul of the leadership of the Greek Orthodox Church—the ecumenical or “Roman” patriarchate of Constantinople. Yet the Black Sea has at times hampered instead of facilitated the movement of people, goods, ideas, and imaginaries. Like Braudel’s (1986) Mediterranean, the Black Sea in the *longue durée* could be seen not as a single sea but a “complex of seas”, where Christian and Muslim civilizations, later socialist and nonsocialist regimes, and currently NATO and

non-NATO member states were key adversaries but sometimes also temporary allies.²

There is no single geopolitical definition of the Black Sea region. It ranges from a core comprising the six coastal states (Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Georgia, Bulgaria, and Romania) to the so-called wider Black Sea region, which also includes some of their neighbors—Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro. The region is also envisioned differently by the differently positioned political powers. Thus, whereas for Turkey it is the zone that connects the Caspian, the Aegean, and the Mediterranean Seas, for the United States it is the area “stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea” (Baran 2008: 87).

The recognition of “subjective” visions in delineating regions has become commonplace in

scholarly literature. King (2008), for instance, writes that the key means of conceptualizing a “genuine” region is not a set of objective traits, but the region’s self-conscious attempts to be(come) one. These attempts are usually manifest in a number of projects aiming at co-operation and region building. “In the end,” as King puts it, “regions exist where politicians and strategists say they exist” (*ibid.*: 3)—they are “imagined” by elites, in much the same way as Benedict Anderson’s nations (2006). Since the end of the Cold War (and the Soviet Union in 1991), there has indeed been no shortage of international initiatives to achieve regionalism and greater integration—from the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) forum to the project of the Black Sea Ring Highway.³ Yet, if we consider the academic construction of “geographies of knowing and geographies of ignorance,” the Black Sea region can be seen as one of those that did not make it as a world area, because it lacked its own single center of state formation and was politically ambiguous (Schendel 2002: 647).

This section aims to start to redress this situation by studying anthropologically the idea of the Black Sea as a common region. It is an attempt to reflect both evolving geopolitical realities in the redrawing of regional boundaries and conceptual areas of research within our discipline. The articles raise questions of how the Black Sea should be seen today—which themes and ethnographic emphases should be foregrounded in regional study—looking not so much at grand geopolitical visions but rather trying to understand the interactions, movements, and imaginaries of the people living around it, while keeping a watchful eye on inter-linking local histories. Does geographical proximity to the Black Sea and the partial removal of former political divides generate certain similarities, or must these peoples be understood as engaging with one another mainly through a mutual turning of backs, difference, complementarity, or even enmity?

In posing questions in this way, we draw on what Lambek calls “the hermeneutic spiral” in

our conceptualization of regions: “[W]e can only recognize the region through understanding the specific localities and movements between them, and we understand the localities and movements better as components of a regional system” (2007: xiv). We also implicitly acknowledge the legacy of regional analyses in anthropology (influenced by Skinner’s [1964–1965] work) that focus on the ways in which regions are created through processes of social interaction rather than on a priori criteria and existing political units. Thus, the Black Sea region is a field of research where habitual disciplinary boundaries that separate the post-Soviet, the Middle Eastern, and Eastern European societies are blurred and overlap.

At present, the anthropological literature on the Black Sea is relatively sparse and confined mainly to individual countries (e.g., Pelkmans 2006; Ghodsee 2005). By contrast, the rich history of the anthropology of the Mediterranean exemplifies a great range of approaches and highlights controversies surrounding the idea of Mediterranean distinctiveness and unity (see Gilmore 1982), which might fruitfully inform the study of the Black Sea region. What comes to the fore is scholarly recognition that the “unity” of the Mediterranean does not stem from a list of shared traits or identical cultural patterns (be it the “honor and shame complex,” the evil eye, or peripheral positioning). Instead, as Gilmore argues (*ibid.*: 200), a similar, sometimes contradictory, dynamic “fit” among such traits in the lives of actual communities may indicate regional distinctiveness.

The Black Sea has played different roles for the surrounding communities, and it has sometimes illuminated the “incommensurability” of their ideologies and cultures. A recent such scenario can be identified with the Cold War, which established the Black Sea as a barrier between different cultural/imperial/political traditions. It became a frontier of the Cold War, and its ports and ships became repositories of the “territorialization” of national memories. Although the Cold War is now over, lingering barriers and resistance to cultural or political

integration remain to be investigated (discussed further below), as well as the emergence of dynamic processes of regional mixing and new economic interdependencies. Taken as a whole, the contributions to this special section, written before the annexation of Crimea by Russia and civil unrest in Ukraine, scrutinize cross-Black Sea mediations that can broadly be designated as flows of people (labor migrants, small-scale traders and sex workers, transnational entrepreneurs and sailors, repatriates and refugees) or, among less mobile actors, as imaginaries of a better life, or alien lifestyles and authoritarian, oppressive regimes.

Maritime ethnography

Maritime and terrestrial histories have always been entangled. Whether the sea works as a border or a bridge between different cultures and locales depends on particular historical circumstances, but it is never “a neutral blank environment, an empty space or a liminal period” (Phelan 2007: 5). Yet, in anthropologies of Black Sea locales we only rarely find analyses of lives oriented toward the sea (Knudsen 2006) or experiences of the sea and seaborne sociality. We suggest that maritime ethnography or the ethnography of seafaring should have a place in the study of the Black Sea region. Let us briefly illustrate what kind of themes can be pursued in maritime ethnography.

In the Soviet Union, Sevastopol was perhaps the most poignant of all “hero cities”, since it both became the main naval base in the Black Sea and commemorated the brave fight of Russians—and ultimately their defeat—against the British and French in the Crimean War in 1854–1855. The city became the site of the immensely popular story of Admiral Pavel Nakhimov, one of its defenders in the Crimean War and hero of a battle against the Turks, who was said to have behaved with humanism to his sailors, and hence became suitable for later transformation into a Soviet-style “friend of the people” (Plokhly 2000: 376). A succession of ships was

to bear the name of the admiral and the ideas he represented. The first ship named after him was an armored cruiser built in 1883, serving both in the Baltic and in the Far East. After World War II, a German passenger liner turned hospital ship, the *Berlin*, having been mined and beached, was taken over by the Soviets, refitted, and renamed *Admiral Nakhimov*. This ship was to be the pride of the Black Sea passenger fleet, serving the Odessa–Batumi line from the 1950s onward. But later, disaster struck. In August 1986, with 1,234 people on board, a freighter rammed her two miles off Novorossiisk, and well over 400 people lost their lives.⁴ In all, there have been six ships named *Admiral Nakhimov*, some of them concurrently, of which one is still active with the Russian Northern Fleet. Thus, some ships become mobile vessels for the presence of a “myth”; such ships are active joggers of memories in their ceaseless comings and goings, and in principle are containers of moral qualities.

The maritime world encompasses not only ships, but also shores, ports, and naval bases (see Humphrey, this issue). A key example is Sevastopol, whose significance as a naval base has been a constant amid the dramatic changes in the political status of Crimea. It seemed to matter little when Khrushchev, a Ukrainian, transferred Crimea to the Ukrainian Republic within the USSR. But when Ukraine became an independent country in 1991, the naval base at Sevastopol remained the headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and immediately became a subject of controversy. In March 2014, it was the mayor of Sevastopol who, in reaction to the overturning of the Ukrainian government, was in the forefront in declaring unilaterally a wish to join the Russian Federation; the Russian population was supportive of this, and within a few days Crimea was annexed by means of a referendum. In these events Admiral Nakhimov acquired even more charisma than before: according to some recent blogs he was sent by God and is the “soul” of Sevastopol;⁵ the city’s main square, avenue, and greatest monument—all named after Nakhimov—were the sites cho-

sen for demonstrations of allegiance to Russia. Although the articles in this section were written before these events, we note here how the popular history of a maritime hero—Admiral Nakhimov, who was so devoted to life at sea that he did not even marry—can become a weather vane of political opinion. The great admiral switched from being an actor in common imperial and class struggles (“victor against the Turks”, “friend of working seamen”) and hence a unifying figure for the all the various populations of the Soviet coast to become a symbol of Russia’s right to Crimea, which implicitly precludes him appearing as a Ukrainian, Jewish, or Tatar hero (it seems he was of Jewish origin, although this is now disputed; see note 5).

If the reverberations of maritime histories are felt on land, the reverse is also true. Russia’s new de facto sovereignty in Crimea, although it is not currently recognized as legitimate by any of the other Black Sea countries, will change the balance of naval firepower vis-à-vis Turkey (Socor 2014) and seems certain to place the existing maritime demarcation lines, continental shelf rights, and economic zones in the Black Sea in question (see Humphrey, this issue, for a discussion of the earlier situation). This in turn may affect the fate of Gazprom’s South Stream gas pipeline, which is due to be built deep in the seabed, traversing Ukraine’s exclusive economic zone for much of its length (Socor 2008); the project is intended to tie many European economies to Russian supplies, but changing maritime jurisdictions may be a factor in the disputes arising in 2014 between Russia and the European Union (EU). As Andrew Barry (2013) has documented for pipelines in the Caucasus, political disputes concern not material objects in isolation but the complexes of laws, information, origins, impact, and social connections in which they are entangled. In this respect, the Black Sea is not just a space to be crossed but also a complicated entanglement in its own right.

On the sea itself, tracing the routes and following the fate of ships as if they were “persons” endowed with individual biographies—to be

gifted, captured, bought and sold, or decommissioned—can tell us about ongoing changes in regional links, local economies, and power struggles. The decline of the once numerous fishing and passenger fleets with bases in Russia and Ukraine is a case in point. In the 1990s and 2000s, the port of Odessa, for instance, had a regular ferry connection with Istanbul transporting “suitcase traders”, working girls, small entrepreneurs, migrant workers, and tourists. The veteran ferry working the Odessa–Istanbul line was the *Caledonia*. Built in France in 1973, in the 1990s the *Caledonia* also worked the Odessa–Haifa route, transporting Jewish emigrants from Odessa. This route ended when the flow of emigrants decreased and they were no longer interested in taking their entire household’s belongings with them. On the Istanbul–Odessa route, until approximately 2006, the ship was also used by Turkish authorities to transport deported illegal migrants from all over the former USSR (mainly women) back to Odessa. This practice ended when, as a member of the crew told us, Turkey had to behave in a “civilized manner” in order to improve its chances of EU membership.

In the 1990s and 2000s the Odessa–Istanbul route was in demand and used to “import” goods in both directions (often undeclared) until its last days, but the *Caledonia* was grounded in 2010, shortly after the presidential elections in Ukraine. The official explanation for the ship’s abrupt decommissioning, published on the website of the owner (the Ukrferry company), is that the *Caledonia* was no longer fully booked.⁶ There were also, however, stories in circulation in Odessa telling that the *Caledonia* was left to rust in a dry dock because of the company’s disputes over its control with new politicians in power in Ukraine. The Ukrferry company, with its Turkish and Georgian contacts and interests, was too “international” to have its ship simply expropriated, but not strong enough to prevent it from being “grounded”. In 2014, there is still no ferry connection between Odessa and Istanbul.

Just as the passenger fleet has been greatly reduced for Black Sea destinations, so the fishing

fleets of Ukraine and Russia have experienced similar decline and shrinkage. Not only has the mobility of fishermen been constrained by new national borders, but also the lack of investment in new technology, shadowy privatization practices, and the subsequent sale of the Soviet fleet have been detrimental to the development of seafaring in the Black Sea. Knudsen and Toje (2008: 20) estimate that the Black Sea fishing fleets of Russia and Ukraine fell from about 230 vessels in the 1980s to about 110 in 2004.

The post-Soviet economic decline of fishing and passenger fleets means that the majority of Ukrainian and Russian sailors who live on the Black Sea shores (Odessa and Sevastopol still have numerous colleges and academies that train future sailors) are now being employed by foreign companies and do not work in the Black Sea. These new employment opportunities, offered by various crewing agencies, are not without risk. In some situations, Ukrainian and Russian fishermen and seafarers have been identified by international agencies (for example, the International Organization for Migration, or IOM) as “trafficked people”, that is, people trafficked for forced labor in breach of their contracts. “Slave ships” not only navigate in distant seas under exotic flags, but may also be Russian or Turkish (Surtees 2012), reflecting new maritime practices and common abuses in the industry.

Humhrey’s contribution, the only one in this special section to deal specifically with the sea, examines the practices and subjectivities of Black Sea sailors of the merchant fleet during the Cold War. It discusses how seamen developed their own “ocean geographies” and attributed different values to diverse seas and the ports at their edge. The article thus illustrates how an “open expanse” (the sea) could become striated by the invisible, but real, boundaries of Cold War fronts. At the same time, seas (as well as parts of seas, coasts, straits, and ports) were subject to the “territorialization of memory”, when they were identified with historical events, and more recent narratives of betrayal, exile, and migration.

Exile and the “territorialization of memory”

Anthony Smith has written about the “territorialization of memory” (1996: 453), especially national and ethnic memory. This is a process that one can clearly see at work around the Black Sea coast. It is present in the biographies of ships, the monuments erected at harbors, the legends associated with ports, and so forth, as well as in the histories of coastal groups. In other words, while the Black Sea has alternately brought the populations of the region into close contact and kept them apart, it has always formed a kind of framework for imagination and a repository of ethnic and national memory. And perhaps nothing can convey more clearly the precarious nature of regional coexistence and the imagination of “otherness” than the narratives and experiences of uprooted people, exiled and persecuted minorities.

Imperial Russia and the USSR, not unlike the Ottoman Empire and republican Turkey, have a long history of moving people around. Voutira’s article in this issue discusses the repercussions of Soviet resettlement policies in Crimea, where whole ethnic groups—the Greeks and the Tatars—were classified as “enemies of the people” and exiled to other parts of the USSR. For both groups, the Black Sea shores are laden with memories and mark their ancestral territories; both groups have returned to Crimea to find their “homes” occupied by new inhabitants. As Voutira points out, it is the religious affiliation of the returnees, rather than their past “political sins”, that has influenced the responses of the local, predominantly Slav and Christian population. Thus, the Orthodox Greeks have enjoyed a “smoother” return to Crimea than the Muslim Tatars. Although returnee Tatars find new “friends” across the Black Sea in Turkey as well as among Turkish migrants in Ukraine (see Skvirskaja, this issue), in Crimea their return has mainly provoked sharp new divides and antagonism, exacerbated by the annexation of the peninsula by Russia in 2014.

New intersections of trade and migration

Since antiquity, the Black Sea has been an important economic region, both in terms of local and long-distance trade, the latter linking Persia, Central Asia, Constantinople, and the West (Ascherson 2007). By the time of the collapse of the Russian and Ottoman Empires in the early twentieth century, it was a transit nexus of global east-west and north-south trade routes (Braudel 1986: 110–113; King 2008: 5–9). At present, its significance as a global transit zone is mainly maintained by the oil and gas pipelines routes (and projects) connecting Europe, Russia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, but as mentioned earlier, these links, along with the previous increasingly intensive ties of commerce and migration, are now subject to political negotiation and the attendant economic uncertainty.

Burgeoning cross-border small-scale trade in recent years has helped revitalize old commercial routes and create new ones. In the late 1980s, buses and trains moved socialist subjects across borders in pursuit of cheap consumer goods and new contacts. These early flows were often organized as tourist groups equipped with group visas and assisted by travel guides, who also functioned as intermediaries between the “tourists” and customs officials. For the whole Black Sea region, Turkey, and Istanbul in particular, became a main destination of “trader tourism” (see Hann and Hann 1992; Konstantinov 1996; Konstantinov et al. 1998). The Soviets, who had little money to invest in the cross-border trade with Turkey, created their first profits by selling Soviet ironware (nails, spades, irons, etc.) on the streets of Istanbul and other coastal towns (Katkevich 2004).

“Trader tourism” paved the way to the mass “suitcase” or “shuttle trade” that quickly established new regional hubs of different scales (e.g., Laleli district in Istanbul, the Russian market in Trabzon, the Seventh-Kilometer Market in Odessa, Ukraine), most of which are still active today. It encouraged people to overcome their ideological and racial inhibitions⁷ and set in motion processes of migration in the re-

gion. After the “trader tourism” stage, women featured prominently in the migratory flows. “When there were no more spades to sell,” Katkevich (2004), an Odessan journalist, writes humorously, “cheap labor and love were offered instead.”

The theme of female migration from the impoverished postsocialist states features prominently in academic writings and in the mass media. The topic was also discussed in Focaal’s 2004 special section “Sexual Encounters, Migration and Desire in Post-socialist Context(s),” edited by Judy Whitehead and Hülya Demirdirek. Focusing on the migration of post-Soviet women to Turkey, it challenged victim images of post-Soviet female migrants and sex workers, pointing to the complex nature of the “transnational social spaces” in which female migrants operate as well as the “messiness” and “fuzziness of the category of prostitution” (2004: 8). In Turkey, it is argued, many women migrants combine sex work (or monetized relations with men) with other occupations, are emotionally engaged with their sponsors, or are simultaneously building their own small businesses. The category “sex work” itself is too narrow to “understand the complexity of ... young women’s lives” (ibid.: 9) and “the fuzzy boundaries between gift and commodity, desire and economic calculation” (ibid.) that are present in female migrants’ narratives.

While there are now several ethnographies of post-Soviet female migration that add valuable insights to the body of interdisciplinary literature on the subject of “Natashas” (as “Russian” or former Soviet women migrants are collectively known) and their movement across the Black Sea,⁸ it is remarkable that men embarking on somewhat similar practices (or at least entertaining the idea) and the flows of male Turkish migrants in the opposite direction have not been properly incorporated into the regional picture. In this respect, this special section attempts to rectify a “female bias”. Frederiksen’s article discusses young unemployed Georgian men in the seaport of Batumi who hope to be able to migrate and improve their economic op-

portunities through romantic relationships with Russian women whom they seek online. Georgian men had a reputation for sexual prowess and entrepreneurial spirit in Soviet times, and some young men today are, apparently, successfully capitalizing on this image using the medium of Internet chat rooms.

The article by Skvirskaja analyzes, in turn, a Turkish migration to Odessa that is represented mainly by men. The largest open-air market in Ukraine—called the Seventh-Kilometer Market—started its expansion with Turkish goods, and Turkish nationals have been present as stall owners (and sellers) at the market from the very beginning. In the course of trade and migration, Turks have established various links with locals, marrying Ukrainian women and discovering commonalities with Turkic-speaking Gagauz, Meskhetian Turks, and Tatars, whom they often seek out as employees and friends. Skvirskaja uses the notion of “multiple alliances” to highlight the strategic nature of new engagements, in an economic environment characterized by opaque state regulations, that simultaneously “integrate” newcomers into localities and create distance vis-à-vis the locals (for instance, via marriages and cooperation with Turkic-speaking minorities). While the migratory aspirations of Georgian men and the movements of Turkish men to post-Soviet Black Sea locales are less “visible” and less controversial (as far as ideas of national honor are concerned) than female migration, they are equally important in extending regional ties and creating new practices.

Concluding remarks: The Black Sea as a “horizon”

This themed section envisages the Black Sea as a “horizon”, an imaginary of the beyond, entertained by the various peoples living around the sea and traveling across it. The sea thus engenders different mediations, whether it is imagined as a connecting or—on the contrary—a separating realm. Undoubtedly, these horizons have been influenced by state practices and of-

ficial discourses, as illustrated by Humphrey’s article in the case of Russian seamen during the Cold War period. But, especially these days, “sea horizons” are much more urgently created by ordinary people on their own account—in relation to their economic needs and their projected images (sometimes illusory) of a better life. Such a process is patchy, and it can result in some parts of the Black Sea coast being virtually blanked out from certain perspectives, such as Bulgaria and Romania, which are seen as “of no interest” to the young people of Batumi (see Frederiksen, this issue). Other places seem to glow with promise and excitement across the waters. Batumi itself, which not so long ago exemplified post-Soviet ruination, today aspires to the title of the Las Vegas of the Black Sea, attracting tourists and Turkish gamblers in droves (see McGuinness 2012). The “horizons” are not only mental images; they also actively draw people to start some endeavor or make a move (or, alternatively, to stay at home). Thus is the Black Sea a variable, but powerful, presence in the changing social formations around it.

Acknowledgments

The project that led to this special section was generously supported by the AHRC program Migration, Diaspora and Identity (2006–2009), designed by Professor Kim Knott, and by the Newton Trust, Trinity College, Cambridge (2009–2010).

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Notes

1. This special section developed out of the international, interdisciplinary workshop Black Sea Cities: State Practices, Co-existence and Migration organized in Cambridge on 6–7 November 2009.
2. For an overview of the shifting relations between post-Soviet Russia and Turkey, including their temporary alliance as “an axis of the excluded” in Eurasia, see, for instance, Winrow (2009).
3. Some other important initiatives are the Black Sea Border Coordination and Information Centre (BSEC, based in Burgas, Bulgaria), dealing with information sharing about illegal maritime activities, and the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Force (BLACKSEAFOR), the regional security framework also responsible for prevention of terrorism and organized crime.
4. <http://admiral-nakhimov.net.ru/> (accessed 16 June 2014).
5. Pupkova (2012); see also: <http://subscribe.ru/group/razumno-o-svoem-i-nabolevshem/5658783/>
6. <http://www.ukrferry.com/vessels/vessel-caledonia> (accessed 18 December 2013).
7. Konstantinov, Kressel, and Thuen (1998) write about Bulgarian traders who had to reconcile themselves to interacting with Roma on shopping trips and trading with Turks, their historical oppressors.
8. See also Yukseker (2004), Uygun (2004), Keough (2006), and Humphrey and Skvirskaja (2008).

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