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The Trojan War in Crimea

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It has been nearly a decade since Russia's annexation of Crimea. In early 2024, Zelenskyy announced that in the coming year the peninsula will become a major focus of Kyiv's military efforts, with the goal of achieving "more successful steps on the Black Sea," warning cryptically but firmly, "I can't tell you the details, but we will do it." Ukraine's 2023 successes against Russia's Black Sea Fleet, which withdrew from the Black Sea in October, are testament to his words. As Kyiv continues its attacks on the Kerch Strait Bridge, a strategically critical, 19-kilometer artery that connects eastern Crimea with Russia, the Kremlin's military operations in the region are in serious jeopardy. Swiftly constructed in 2016 and carrying both military and civilian supplies to the region, the bridge is more than a logistical asset of Russia's war effort. Like the Black Sea Fleet itself, the Kerch Bridge is a powerful symbol of the Kremlin's control of Crimea. Russia's quest for dominance in the peninsula is not a new phenomenon and has deep historical, cultural, and psychological roots. Digging up and examining those roots can help us understand what Crimea means to Russia, and how far the Kremlin is willing to go to keep it.

This article situates the occupation within the broader frame of how the centuries-long mythologization of Crimea in Russia's imperial and geographical imagination draws on Byzantine and Greco-Roman material to legitimize both the occupation and the war in Ukraine. I will also look at how the occupation has impacted the archaeological site of Chersonesus in the Sevastopol' region and describe the state-sponsored theatrical performances that take place in the ancient ruins to show how the Kremlin's historical narratives refigure Greco-Roman and Byzantine history to advance its expansionist nation-building efforts.

In the wake of the 2014 annexation, then German chancellor Angela Merkel had remarked to Barack Obama that the Russian president had lost touch with reality, inhabiting "another world." Merkel told reporters at the time: "We are in the 21st century. We don't solve conflicts militarily." Then US Secretary of State John Kerry had echoed Merkel: "You just don't in the 21st century behave in 19th century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped-up pretext." The astonishment of Western leaders at Russia's seemingly anachronistic land grab was a testament to how profoundly they misunderstood Putin's aims. Eight years later, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Zelenskyy said that Putin's "life goal" is "the restoration of the Soviet Union," an argument reiterated by Mykhailo Podolyak, advisor to the head of the Office of the President of Ukraine: "Putin's plan is simple. He wants to restore the Soviet Union in one form or another."

Merkel and Kerry were nearer the mark when they invoked the nineteenth century to explain Putin's motivations in Crimea, which can also help explain—indeed, might have prophesied—the 2022 invasion. It's not the Soviet Empire that Putin longs for, but the tsarist one. While Putin has cast himself as Peter the Great, the Kremlin's policy in Crimea borrows directly from the playbook of another "the Great:" Catherine II, whose foreign policy goals found inspiration in far earlier conquerors and settlers, both Byzantine and ancient Greek.

In 2014, Putin addressed the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation immediately after the annexation of Crimea. His first reason justifying the annexation was that Crimea is the site of the ancient city of Chersonesus located in the ancient Tauric Chersonese region, one of the most significant Black Sea archaeological sites, established by Dorian Greeks in the 5th century BCE and subsequently occupied by the Roman and Byzantine Empires. The UNESCO World Heritage Site contains exceptionally well-preserved urban remains of the Greek *chora* that provide unique insight into Greek colonial settlements along the Black Sea coast (see Carter et al. 2000).

Chersonesus, which is the ancient Greek term for peninsula, saw its first excavations in 1827, leading to the 1892 founding of an archaeological museum to house findings. While research has been ongoing for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was only in the post-Soviet era that the site saw international academic collaboration, joint excavations, and sharing of information and technology, not least because Sevastopol' was a closed military city until 1995. A 1992 conference was the first in the history of the Museum to include Western participants. By 2013, Chersonesus was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

With Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, academic collaboration came to an end. In 2015, the new governor of Sevastopol, Sergei Menyailo, with alleged support from the Russian Culture Ministry and the Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill, appointed a Russian Orthodox archpriest to oversee the historical site, who appeared at the museum in full clerical regalia to take up his post. The appointment ignited fierce opposition from the museum staff, which included archaeologists, historians, and preservationists; in response to the uproar, the preserve was transferred to federal ownership. What this has meant in practice, however, was the preserve is now overseen by the state-supported My History foundation, associated with Metropolitan Tikhon, a Russian Orthodox bishop speculated to be Putin's "personal confessor."

Since then, the Foundation has been carrying out excavation and construction projects in Chersonesus, removing artifacts, and transforming the site into an "archaeological park" to be included in a network of similar such permanent multimedia "history parks" recently erected in multiple Russian cities (lauded by Russia's Ministry of Education and Sciences as a useful pedagogical tool). As Ivan Kurilla and others have observed, the historical narratives of the large-scale exhibitions tend to be anti-Western and anti-liberal, often featuring factual errors and fake quotations from historical personages. The illiberal "ethnic turn" evident in Russia's memory politics since Putin's third term and its associated emphasis on Greco-Roman material is not unprecedented. Scholars have pointed out that the Kremlin's Crimea policy bears strong similarities to Catherine II's "Greek Project," a lofty foreign policy aim that sought nothing less than a new Greek empire in Constantinople following the defeat of the Ottomans, and in which the 1783 annexation of Crimea played a major part.

Antiquity arrived late in Russia, amalgamating Greco-Roman culture, Western Europe's imprint on that culture, and Christianity. After the Slavs' conversion to Christianity in the tenth century, the introduction into Russia of Byzantine ideology by the Southern Slavs, and the development of the Eastern Orthodox religion, early Tsarist Moscow forged strong cultural, historical, and religious links to Constantinople as a unique Roman-Christian empire that had successfully integrated both Christianity and imperial Rome. When the 1453 collapse of the Byzantine Empire, the duchy of Moscow, which had just shaken off the Mongols, experienced the first stirrings of national consciousness. Moscow now saw itself as the sole supporter of Orthodox Christianity in the world. Ivan III, the Grand Prince of Moscow, named himself a "tsar" presumably due to his succession to Constantine XI, a position supported by his marriage to Sophia Palaiologina, niece of the last Byzantine emperor. Thanks to the Byzantine empire's links to both ancient Greece and Rome, Russia's own historical and religious connection to Byzantium suggested a relationship between Russia and classical antiquity that had originated in ancient Greece and continued through Rome and Byzantium to culminate in the Russian empire.

As early as the 16th century, Russia laid claim to being the inheritor of Greco-Roman antiquity, designating Moscow as the "Third Rome." What came to be known as the "Third Rome doctrine" was originally developed by Philotheus, a monk in Pskov, in 1523: "[A]ll Christian empires have come to an end and are gathered together in the singular empire of our sovereign in accordance with the books of prophecy, and this is the Russian empire: because two Romes have fallen, and a third stands, and a fourth there shall not be." In the 1700s, this Byzantine link supplied evidence for Russia's connection to ancient Greece, as well, with Catherine proclaiming the Byzantine Empire the heir to ancient Greek culture. Russian poetry glorified the relation between Russia and ancient Greece, helping to validate the first Turkish War, fought between 1768 and 1774, on the grounds that the Russian empire had a moral duty to defend its ancestral country from Ottoman rule. The war concluded with the Küçük Kaynarca treaty which, among other provisions, named the victorious Russia as the protector of Orthodox Christians living in the Ottoman Empire, permitting Russian intervention in Ottoman territory.

The 1783 annexation of Crimea from the Turks—famously achieved without a single shot being fired—invoked the

same Greece-Russia association as Catherine reestablished Greek place names throughout Crimea, replacing Russian or Turkic names with those used in antiquity, with Crimea itself being renamed as "Tauris." Andrei Zorin has written about the potent symbolism of Crimea for Russia's burgeoning literary scene: 18th century Russian poets rushed to praise the mysticism and antiquity of "Tauris" and 19th century writers—Tolstoy and Pushkin among them—set their scenes in Crimea. Since then, Crimea has represented Russia's cultural, historical, and spiritual continuity with both classical Greece and Christian Byzantium, legitimized via empire-building efforts like the nineteenth-century archaeological excavations of Chersonesus to materially substantiate the medieval account of the baptism of Prince Vladimir/Volodymyr in 988 in Chersonesus prior to his introduction of East Orthodox Christianity in Rus'. The legend of the prince's religious conversion led to the 1874 construction of a cathedral amid the Chersonesus ruins. Importantly, the medieval source that recounts the prince's baptism in Chersonesus following his conquest of the city is contradicted by other accounts, which place the baptism in Kyiv.

A week after Putin's 2014 speech, the Russian lower house sought to restore Crimea's ancient Greek name, Tauris, as Catherine had done nearly two and half centuries earlier. Leveraging the momentous precedent that Catherine had established in 1774 to safeguard Christians in Ottoman lands, Putin urged the right to "defend" Russian speakers in Crimea and across Ukraine. At the end of 2014, during the annual Presidential Address, Putin again referred to Chersonesus, describing it as "of sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for followers of Islam and Judaism." This astonishing analogy draws, first, on Vladimir's baptism and, secondarily, it rests on Russia's centuries-long mythologization of Crimea, which began but did not end with Catherine's Greek Project. Sevastopol', where Chersonesus is located, was besieged both during the Crimean War fought between 1853 and 1856 and again during the German invasion. The city earned military glory and was titled the USSR's "Hero City", leading to a complex blend of imperial and Soviet mythmaking that was integrated into a post-Soviet nationalism, both state-oriented and ethnic, that helped to justify Russian claims to the region.

In the weeks following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, groups of children and students between seven and 15 who had been evacuated to Russia from Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasti visited Chersonesus on a tour carefully curated to consolidate a sense of national consciousness. While museum tour guides told students that ancient Greeks had lived "right here, in our city", the youthful arrivals also learned about Vladimir's baptism. As articulated by museum director Elena Morozova, Prince Vladimir "made his choice" in 988, as did the predominantly ethnic Russians of Crimea in 2014. The "choice," of course, refers to the unification of Crimea with the Russian state. This anachronistic and decontextualizing narrative, which not only presents the location of the prince's baptism as certain, but also conflates the disputed 2014 Crimean status referendum with a religious tenth-century event in the Byzantine Empire, is a deliberate confusion of Crimea's complex history.

This smoothing out of the region's past into a timeline that leaps from the ancient Greek and Roman periods to the Byzantine tenth century, and then immediately to the 2014 annexation, creates the illusion of seamless historical continuity. The construction of a shared historical, cultural, and spiritual heritage that has its roots in classical antiquity aims at bolstering Russia's expansionist nation-building policy in Crimea that appeals to both ethnic and imperial forms of nationalism. Visiting student groups are likely to conclude their tour in the ancient Greek theatre, proudly presented by museum tour guides as "the oldest in *our* country" (emphasis mine).

As part of the Antique Theatre in Chersonesus project headed by actor, author, and director Evgenii Zhuravkin, the preserve has constructed a new stage among the picturesque ruins of the ancient Greek theatre for its 2019 performance, *Griffin*, which Putin attended. It was on this same stage that, seven months before the invasion of Ukraine, in July 2021, the aptly titled play *The Trojan War—Beginning* premiered to enthusiastic audiences. In a second uncanny coincidence, four months after the invasion of Ukraine, in August 2022, the *The Trojan War Has Ended!* premiered. The plays, written and directed by Zhuravkin, are adaptations of Homer's *Iliad* (seventh century BC) and Euripides' *Hecuba* (425 BC) and *Iphiginea at Aulis* (406 BC).

Why the Trojan War? After all, Greco-Roman material, particularly Homer's warlike *Iliad*, is not a politically neutral selection. From Peter I to Tolstoy, Russian leaders and intellectuals have deployed Greco-Roman material for centuries to help articulate not only the essence of Russia's national identity but also to justify the country's imperial aims and triumphs. For instance, Russia's poets modelled their verse on the first-century BC poem, the *Aeneid*, to

support Peter's efforts to centralize imperial power, and Vasilii Zhukovskii's 1849 translation of the *Odyssey* was met with approval from the Minister of Public Education Sergei Uvarov, who sought a "national literature" for Russia. Homer's *Iliad* has enjoyed a particularly august history of being appropriated for imperialistic purposes, starting with Alexander the Great. After conquering the Persian Empire, the legendary warrior with great ceremony placed the scrolls of the *Iliad* into the treasure room of the defeated Persian King Darius to signify the unification of the Greek and Persian empires. As scholars of antiquity have long pointed out, the Trojan War has been re-interpreted for millennia to support the political goals of various leaders, communities, and movements, with each re-imagining liberally colored by contemporary interests.

Zhuravkin explained that the performances comment directly on current affairs: "Despite the fact that the events take place in an ancient era, this story is contemporary. It is about us, about our choice." He seems to intend for Chersonesus spectators to experience the continuity of Russian history with that of ancient Greece, a logic that echoes Catherine's: if spectators are the inheritors of ancient Greece, they are implicitly the inheritors of Greek settlements in Crimea. This establishment of relations between contemporary audiences and historical and mythological Greece explains why the Antique Theatre at Chersonesus adapted specifically*Hecuba* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* to Homer's *Iliad*. Both adaptations emphasize a meaningful link to the geographical region of the Tauric Chersonese, facilitating Russia's claim to cultural continuity with Crimea which legitimizes its historical claims.

The *Trojan War—Beginning* adapts parts of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, in which Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia is cruelly sacrificed to the goddess Artemis in exchange for fair winds for the Achaean ships, enabling them to sail to Troy. Significantly, the work is a precursor to Euripides' play *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*. In the latter text, Euripides reveals that Iphigenia was not actually sacrificed by Agamemnon; instead, Artemis spirits the princess away to the Tauric Chersonese to serve as her priestess. The shrine where Iphigenia would have officiated became an object of pilgrimage for nineteenth-century Russian elites. When Catherine toured the region, she enthusiastically speculated on where Iphigenia's temple to Diana, the Roman variant of Artemis, might have been, writing in a letter: 'I will use the month of May to visit the region where they say Iphigenia once lived'. In an 1824 letter composed during his own tour of Crimea, Pushkin claimed to have seen the temple's ruins: "It is here that I saw the legendary ruins of Diana's shrine."

Zhuravkin's adaptation prompts audiences to read Iphigenia's sacrifice not only as facilitating the Greek military triumph, but also as the necessary precursor to the princess taking up residence in the Tauric Chersonese. Sacrificed by the Greeks, Iphigenia was eagerly adopted by the Russians, strengthening the claims of the latter to the achievements of the former. *The Trojan War Has Ended!* re-imagines Homer's Iliad and Euripides' Hecuba to focus on the final moments of the sack of Troy. Zhuravkin's adaptation includes an unexpected apparition of Iphigenia, who reiterates in ghostly tones that even in the underworld, she is acquiescent to her death. This poignant scene does not feature either in *Hecuba* or in the *Iliad* and, I suggest, Zhuravkin included the ghost to again recollect the legendary Greek occupant of Crimea.

The decontextualizing ahistoricism of performing an ancient Greek play in the ruins of Chersonesus, itself in occupied Ukrainian territory, is intensely political. The performances collapse the historical distance not only between contemporary Crimea, the classical Greece of Euripides, and the archaic Greece of Homer, but also the epistemological distance between past as myth and history, serving to obscure the wartime reality of the present. War is presented in the play as fought—and won. The relation between the Trojan War and the war in Ukraine is made explicit at the end of the performance, when the narrator addresses the audience: "O spectators, I remind you that before you are the ruins of ancient Troy." After aesthetically collapsing Crimea's timeline and conflating Homeric Greece, classical Greece, and the present day, he asks rhetorically, 'Isn't it delightful to be an ancient Greek?'. The Achaean warriors onstage raise their spears to chant in unison, "Glory! Glory! Glory!." The play concludes with the final breaking of the fourth wall as the narrator intones:

The cruelty of the Hellenes has been justified after all these years. In the intervening 3,000 years, we have grown kinder, more humane, isn't that so? On the other hand, we have the same chaos swirling, now calling us to other gods. […] Where is the theatre where we are heroes? What is our heroism made of? Where are our myths, or has our sacrifice been a senseless sacrifice? […] New gods ascend a new Olympus and we, like children, play with toys of

warriors. We are gods. We are heroes. But are we really goats singing the tragic song of, alas, a foreign history?

This alternately self-glorifying and self-deprecating rhetoric exemplifies the expansionist nation-building aims that drive the Kremlin's reception of Greco-Roman culture in Chersonesus and had once driven Catherine's annexation of Crimea. I interpret these (state-sponsored) lines as making the case that Russia's new national identity must be formed dialectically: first linking Russian statehood and ethnic Russianness with ancient Greek culture, and then transcending without abandoning this formative horizon to embrace both Orthodoxy and warlike valor. While it will have its historical roots in Greek antiquity, Russia's national identity will find full flower in the "new gods" of Orthodox religion and the "kinder, more humane" heroism of the Russian military apparatus, with Chersonesus functioning as a physical anchor point for expansionist nation-building policies.

This brings us back to Ukraine's intended 2024 offensive in Crimea. It's too easy to see Russia's occupation as a cynical land grab—which it is—but the Kremlin's Crimea policy is not only, or even primarily, about territory. It's also about history, religion, literature, myth, and imperial as well as military glory, which is a long-winded way of saying it's about identity—an existential matter. Even if Ukraine succeeds in "neutralizing" the critical Kerch bridge with the long-range missiles it obtained more than three months ago, I suspect that Russia is prepared to lose the bridge long before it lets Crimea go.

About the author:

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