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EXCURSION ON THE EUXINE

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Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), ix, 306 pp. \$23.00.

The Black Sea, known as *Pontus Euxinus* or hospitable sea in ancient times, connects Europe to Asia and laps the shoreline of seven countries, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Georgia, and Abkhazia. Settlers and traders from east, west, north, and south have been drawn to the Black Sea region throughout history for its wealth of fish, grain, timber, fur, slaves, gold, and silver. Fed by six rivers, the Kuban, Don, Dnieper, Southern Bug, Dniester, and Danube, the Black Sea today comprises the world's largest body of lifeless sea water, the result of both natural and man-made causes, and extends "some 630 miles across from east to west and 330 miles from north to south—except at its 'waist', where the projecting peninsula of Crimea reduces the north-south distance between the Crimean shore and Turkey to only 144 miles" (3). The Black Sea, together with the vast southern plains of Russia and Ukraine, constitutes a truly international highway, traversed by diverse peoples, cultures, and civilizations through the ages. The author calls this spacious horizon of constant movement and change the Pontic Steppe, "a level expanse of prairie stretching for almost 800 miles from the Volga River to the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains in the west, a band of open country some 200 miles deep between the sea-coast and the forest country to the north" (6).

Neal Ascherson, a British writer, journalist, and Poland specialist, has performed an admirable task—and done it well—reminding us of the Black Sea's centrality in the destiny of ancient Greeks, Scythians, Sarmatians, Goths, Khazars, Tatars, Slavs, Turks, and a host of other peoples who swept across the Pontic Steppe. In a work that combines travel writing, journalism, scholarly discourse, intellectual probing, and personal pilgrimage, Ascherson evokes places and peoples, discusses contemporary issues and problems, investigates history, culture, and archaeology, and explores the intrinsically difficult matter of sorting out national identities in multi-ethnic societies. Above all, this richly textured work illumines the Black Sea not simply as a place but as a distinct pattern of synergistic relationships among various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups, a melange that "could not have been the same in any other place, and this is why Black Sea history is first of all the history of the Black Sea" (11). In thirteen chapters (untitled except for the "Introduction" and "Epilogue"), Ascherson shares observations and impressions from a visit to Black Sea sites in Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, and Abkhazia in the early 1990s. While omitting scholarly notes and text references, he acknowledges his intellectual debt to previous scholars of Black Sea history, such as Mikhail Rostovtzeff, Alan Fisher, Patricia Herlihy, and Anthony Bryer.

Ascherson begins his journey in the microcosm and crossroads of the Black Sea amalgam, the Crimea, which historically "belongs to everybody and to nobody" (24) despite Russia's annexation of the peninsula in 1783 and Khrushchev's transfer of the region to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1954.

The interplay of coast, inland plateau, and mountain provides the setting for interaction and convergence of Hellenic, Scythian, Sarmatian, Byzantine, Italian, Tatar, Turkic, and Slavic influences. Ascherson imparts a human face to several marginalized peoples who resided in the Crimea and endured a particularly harsh fate in the twentieth century. The Karaim, a Jewish sect that migrated from Palestine and Egypt in the twelfth century and settled in the remote mountain enclave near Mangup, maintained their religious and cultural traditions until the Nazi occupation of the Crimea in World War II. Hitler's Final Solution against European Jewry exterminated the Karaim, along with the gypsies and the rest of the peninsula's Jewish communities. The Crimean Tatars, inhabiting the region since the fourteenth century, fell victim to Stalin's charge of collaboration and were deported en masse to Central Asia after World War II (22-32). Also deported for collaborating were the Chechens and the Ingush from the northern Caucasus and the Volga Germans.

A visit to the classical site of Olbia, about two hundred kilometers east of the ancient Greek colony Odessos (today's Odessa, the Black Sea emporium of Ukraine), inspires Ascherson to reflect on the intellectual significance of the encounter between Hellenes and Scythians, an Iranian-speaking nomadic people who settled in the Pontic Steppe prior to the arrival of Ionian Greek colonists from Asia Minor. With the creation of Greek trading posts along the northern shores of the Black Sea in the eighth century B.C, the Greek-Scythian exchange produced "a pair of Siamese twins called 'civilization' and 'barbarism' . . . twins gestated and born in the Greek but above all in the Athenian imagination" of the Periclean Age (49). According to Ascherson, Athenian writers and intellectuals of the first half of the fifth century B.C. invented the confrontation between "our civilization" and "their barbarism." The historian Herodotus, who visited Olbia, and the tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides, who never did, used the Scythians as a mirror to scrutinize Greek virtues and vices. The resulting Greek-Scythian dichotomy featured polar opposites: city-state versus nomadic society, permanent settlement versus mobile encampment, male-dominated armies and governments versus armies and governments in which female warriors not only participated but were highly skilled. Most importantly, Athenians portrayed Scythians as "other" and "different," concepts synonymous with "inferior" and "primitive" and the result of Athenian determination "to prove that barbarians were not just different but evil and degraded" (51). Ascherson observes that the Hellenes' image of "self" and "other" shaped European attitudes toward non-European peoples until the twentieth century, thereby forging "a ruthless mental dynasty which still holds invisible power over the Western mind." Thus was born Europe's sense of cultural mission and imperialism, "the idea of 'Europe' with all its arrogance, all its implications of superiority, all its assumptions of priority and antiquity, all its pretensions to a natural right to dominate" (49-50).

In elaborating his main theme that multi-national societies have cooperated and lived in harmony in the Black Sea region, Ascherson contends that Athenian perceptions did not accurately reflect the reality of Greek-Scythian interchange. Archaeological evidence from Olbia, Chersonesus, and other sites indicates symbiosis, with Greeks and steppe peoples engaged in a mutually beneficial nexus of commerce and defense and adapting to one another in dress, customs, art, and language. Ascherson describes another exemplar of synergy between Hellenic and Pontic Steppe worlds, the Bosporan Kingdom centered in the Crimea's northeast corner where the Kerch Straits bind the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. Greeks, Scythians, and Sarmatians intermarried and cooperated in trade and military defense. Greek and Greek-trained goldsmiths, silversmiths,

and jewelers worked in the capital Panticapaeum (near modern-day Kerch), using a recognizably Greek style to depict human and animal figures from the steppe peoples' daily life, rituals, and festivals. This cross-fertilizing of cultures foreshadowed the Hellenistic blend of east and west.

Along with Olbia and Panticapaeum, the fortified towns of Tanais and Tana on the Don delta occupy an important place in the history of Black Sea trade and civilization. Destroyed by the Huns after seven hundred years of serving as a commercial artery, Tanais regained prominence as part of the eighth- and ninth-century state set up by the Khazars, a steppe people who converted to Judaism. Tana (Azov today) was founded in the thirteenth century by Genoese and Venetian traders, and relied on Mongol-Tatar protection for its status as a flourishing center of transcontinental trade. The quest for silk, slaves, and spices tied the maritime merchant republics of Genoa and Venice to the markets of Eurasia, Persia, Central Asia, and China. The Crimean Tatar Khanate, tsarist New Russia, and cosmopolitan Odessa, with its population of Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Greeks, and others, are all examples of multi-ethnic societies which the author might have discussed in greater detail as case-studies of Black Sea diversity and pluralism in the modern period.

Archaeology obviously plays a crucial part in Ascherson's emphasis on Black Sea symbiosis. Thanks to the Imperial Odessa Society of History and Antiquity, which still awaits a scholarly monograph on its multi-faceted Black Sea historical research, and to the efforts of archaeologists, classicists, and Byzantinists, we know that nomadic peoples of the steppe had complex, stable, and highly organized societies which, although different from Athens, Sparta, or Venice, were hardly inferior or primitive. Wandering around *kurgans* (Scythian burial mounds), Ascherson evokes the expansiveness and seamlessness of the steppe frontier. Not only were *kurgans* robbed and vandalized over the centuries but they were used to bury subsequent generations from cultures, religions, and languages different from the steppe peoples'. *Kurgans* and ancient sites were also explored, studied, and excavated, and their findings have been preserved in archaeological museums of the Soviet Union.

One of the hard realities today in Russia and Ukraine is the depletion of government funding for Black Sea scholarly research. Museum directors, archaeologists, classicists and Byzantinists are scrambling for support to continue their investigation of questions which will shed light on Black Sea society and culture, such as the Amazon legend among Scythians and Sarmatians. As difficult as the current situation may be in view of eroding state monies for scientific research, Ascherson reminds us that a more tragic lot fell to archaeologists and Byzantinists in the 1930s. Many lost their professions and lives during Stalin's purge of academics, scholars, and specialists who did not conform to the prescribed myth of autochthony, which argued that change in history came about not by migrations of peoples and influences but by evolutionary developments within settled communities. "Stalin fired his revolver in the air, and the entire past of the Black Sea steppes [Pontic Steppe], which had been a history of ceaseless migrancy and ethnic mingling, froze terrified in its tracks and turned into a history of static social development. And the shots were not only metaphorical" (44). Ascherson points out that during the purges of the 1930s, eighty-five percent of the Soviet Union's archaeologists were sent to labor camps, exiled, shot, or committed suicide when the secret police came to arrest them (44).

The Black Sea holds central importance as a gateway between the Greek and Slavic worlds. One of the most fascinating sections of the book traces the nearly three-thousand-year story of the Pontic Greeks, the Greeks who lived

along the southern shores of the Black Sea in northeastern Asia Minor, a maritime and rural region of coast, valley, and hill, hemmed by the Euxine to the north and the Pontic mountain range to the south. From ancient times to the early twentieth century, Pontic Greeks built and sustained flourishing settlements. Under the political rule of Hellenes, Romans, Byzantines, and Ottoman Turks, Greeks of Trebizond (modern-day Trabzon) and other towns, valleys, and villages along Turkey's Black Sea coast had a rich tradition of community, culture, and commerce, highlighted by the Comnenian Empire (1204-1461) and the nineteenth-century Pontic revival of learning and enlightenment. At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, attempts failed to gain international support for an independent Pontic republic or an Asia Minor Armenian state which would include Trebizond and grant internal autonomy to Pontic Greeks. Most of Anatolia's Hellenic and Byzantine legacy ended with the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922-23, when Kemalist Turks defeated the Greek army which had invaded Asia Minor and over one million of Turkey's Greeks were resettled in Greece as part of the compulsory exchange of minority populations between the two countries. Included among the Greek refugees were 164,000 Pontic Greeks who were uprooted from homes, schools, and churches and arrived in Greece, "a country alien to them physically, climatically, politically, and linguistically" (186).

A more tragic fate befell the Pontic Greeks who emigrated from Pontos to tsarist Russia throughout the nineteenth century. Russo-Turkish wars led to an outflow of Ottoman-ruled Greeks (some 180,000 Pontic Greeks from 1828 to 1918, according to Ascherson) and an inflow of Muslim refugees from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire. Pontic Greeks who settled in Ukraine, Crimea, Georgia, and Abkhasia did not escape Stalin's repression: their schools and churches were closed, farms and property seized, and entire communities stigmatized as traitors and expelled to Siberia and Central Asia. Ties of family, faith, and trade to Greek centers in the Near East and Europe, considered an asset by Catherine II who invited Ottoman Greeks to New Russia where they contributed to its rapid growth, now made Greeks in Soviet Russia suspect. Targeted as cosmopolitan and potential spies after World War II, Pontic Greeks were banished to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In a single secret police operation in June 1949, almost the entire Greek population of the Caucasus was rounded up. According to Ascherson, about 100,000 people were seized and many of them perished on sealed trains to collective cotton farms in Central Asia (188). Ascherson laments that "Black Sea life without Greeks—the local politicians and factory owners, the grocers and cafe proprietors, the journalists and bank-clerks, and the grain-dealers and ship's captains—was a thin shadow of what it had once been. Greeks had been envied by their neighbors. Now they were painfully missed" (189). Greeks struggled to maintain their cultural identity in a Central Asia populated with many other groups persecuted by Stalin: Russians, Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Chechens, and Meshketian Turks.

Emigration to Greece, allowed by the Soviet government beginning in the 1950s, accelerated with the breakup of the Soviet Union, and today many of Russia's Pontic Greeks are faced with the same dilemma their ethnic kin from Anatolia experienced seventy years ago. They regard themselves as strangers in a country where the language and culture is Greek but not Pontic Greek and where housing and jobs are often hard to find. "Greece opened to them its door but not always its heart. Less than a third of these immigrants spoke any kind of Greek which their neighbors could understand, while their Soviet qualifications and educational certificates were meaningless" (194). These difficulties of adjustment have been compounded by the fact that in a country which regards

ethnic uniformity as the emblem of Greekness, Pontic Greeks have insisted on maintaining their own cultural identity in dance, song, dress, and theater. Ascherson claims that many Greek citizens are puzzled by what they perceive as a contradiction in Pontic attitudes: "On the one hand, they have opted for Greece as 'home', but then—as soon as they have disembarked in the promised land—they begin to weave together a wonderful exotic bower of special tradition and private destiny which suggests that their home is, after all, entirely elsewhere. Their emblem is the Pontic eagle or the Byzantine peacock" (195).

Before their expulsion from Asia Minor, Pontic Greeks lived adjacent to the Lazi, a small people of nearly 250,000 farmers and fishermen who reside in Turkey's northeast corner, between Trebizond and the Georgia border. Originally from the Caucasus and converted to Islam in the fifteenth century, Lazi speak both Turkish and their native Lazuri, a non-Indo-European tongue in the Kartvelian language family of the Caucasus which includes Georgian and Mingrelian. Geographically remote from mainstream Turkish society and politically secure from persecution of larger minority groups (Kurds and Armenians) because of Lazi loyalty to the Turkish state, the Lazi today face possible extinction as a distinct cultural community. Lazuri is a spoken not a written language, fewer Lazi know or speak it now than before, and growing assimilation to Turkish society and culture threatens to erase Lazi identity. The challenge to save Lazuri and thus to shore up the Lazis' sense of where they came from and who they are has inspired the German scholar Wolfgang Feurstein to create a written Lazi alphabet and to compile textbooks, a dictionary, and folk-tales and poetry from Lazi oral tradition.

Ascherson conveys his excitement upon coming across Feurstein's linguistic achievement and describes its potential impact on Lazi culture:

To bring an alphabet to a people who have never written down their speech . . . that is something given to few human beings. In myth, it is gods who bring letters from heaven. When I held in my hand Feurstein's Lazuri alphabet, done in Turkish Latin script for clarity, with Georgian characters opposite, I felt a sense of awe, as if I were holding something like a seed but also like a bomb. With an alphabet, a people—even a tiny one—sets out upon a journey. Ahead lie printed novels and poems, newspapers and concert programmes, handwritten family letters and love letters, angry polemics and posters, the proceedings of assemblies, the scripts of Shakespeare translations for a theatre and of soap-operas for television, the timetables of ferries, the announcements of births and deaths. Perhaps, one day, laws. But perhaps, too, leaflets with a last speech from the condemned cell. This is a long journey, and it may be a dangerous one (204-5).

Ascherson rightly calls Feurstein "the last Herderian" for his drive to forge a modern nation out of a folk-culture in line with the romantic nationalism of Johann Herder, whose ideas on culture and identity inspired the political program of nationalist revolutions in Europe since 1815. Feurstein has supplied Lazi enthusiasts with the vital tools to perpetuate collective memory, shape Lazi consciousness, and galvanize a potential separatist movement. That the Turkish government is well aware of the political implications of the Lazuri seed is seen both in the state ban on Feurstein's research and travel in Turkey and in the publication of a Lazuri-Turkish journal in Istanbul in 1994 which protested Lazi passive assimilation to Turkish culture.

Ascherson's visit to Sukhum, the ancient Greek colony of Dioscurias and the Black Sea capital of Abkhazia, allows him to experience firsthand the precariousness of multi-ethnic landscapes in an age of renewed nationalism. With

the collapse of communism and the breakdown of Moscow's hegemony over the frontier, old hatreds have rekindled in a myriad of sectarian, ethnic, and territorial conflicts, particularly in the embattled Caucasus. Ascherson comments that "nationalism, when it breaks out around the Black Sea, is usually a plague which has arrived from somewhere else, and against that plague there is no serum" (245). Such was the fate of Abkhazia, a small area of coast and mountain sandwiched between the Russian border at Sochi and Georgia's northern frontier. An autonomous republic of Georgia, Abkhazia is a "mingled Black Sea society" where Muslim Abkhazians have resided with Georgians, Mingrelians, Pontic Greeks, Armenians, and Russians.

In 1992 and 1993, fighting erupted in Abkhazia, primarily because Georgian nationalists regarded Abkhazia as an integral part of Georgia while Abkhazian activists sought real, not bogus, autonomy and sovereignty for their land. Volunteers from the north Caucasus hill peoples—Kabardians, Chechens, Dagestans—supported Abkhazians, as did groups from Turkey's Abkhazian diaspora. Russian troops covertly aided Abkhazians as a way to reassert Moscow control over the region, and in 1994 the Russian army officially reentered Abkhazia as a peace-keeping force to monitor the Georgian-Abkhazian border. The conflict was marked by massacres, expulsions, ethnic cleansing, and destruction of property by both Georgians and Abkhazians. Ascherson further notes the assault on memory: Sukhum's National Museum was plundered of coins, relics, and other historical artifacts, and the State Archives' collections were bombed. Both repositories contained precious material and written evidence of Abkhazia's past as well as recent government and administrative records. The Abkhazian Ministry of Education lost all its files on school pupils, and the rubble of the State Archives included ruined documents, books, newspapers, and other research materials on the Greek villages of Abkhazia. Ascherson quotes from a report compiled in Athens that "the history of the region became ashes" (254).

Black Sea life is threatened today by more than just revived nationalism and ethnic hatred. An ecological disaster of enormous magnitude has turned the Euxine into the biggest mass of dead water in the world, severely reducing life-giving resources that have sustained the many Pontic settlements, towns, states, kingdoms, and countries cited by Ascherson. Most of the damage stems from centuries of debris inundating the Black Sea from its various tributaries and extinguishing the oxygen supply in ninety percent of its waters, thereby producing the world's largest reservoir of deadly hydrogen sulfide. This natural disaster has been compounded by the rapid decline in quality and quantity of all fish species in the Sea's surface layers, caused by pollution, overfishing, toxic waste, oil-spills, pesticides, and radio-active contamination since Chernobyl. Rescuing Euxine marine life has become increasingly problematic for institutes of oceanography and marine biology along the Black Sea coast of Ukraine and Russia in view of the old regime's financial collapse. State-funded scientific work has been drastically reduced, and vessels from the Black Sea research fleet have been hired out to private businessmen for shopping sprees in Turkey. Efforts to save the Euxine and to coordinate marine research by the UN, World Bank, and Ministers for the Environment of neighboring countries allow Ascherson to raise hope. "It may be that the cause of the Black Sea itself, of its waters and its creatures, is at last beginning to achieve what so many millennia of human activity have failed to achieve: the union of the peoples who live around it" (270).

Ascherson is to be commended for a lucid and engaging style, but he might have organized his material in a more cohesive fashion. While the book includes a chronology and index, the text tends to ramble from topic to topic,

from place to place, from people to people, without a clear sense of chronological narrative. We journey from Scythians to Don Cossacks, from Pontic Greeks to the Bosporan Kingdom, from Sarmatians to Abkhazians. The awkward format of untitled chapters adds to the impression of drift, enjoyable perhaps for some travelers but frustrating for most readers. The two good maps on the Crimea and the Black Sea's southern, eastern, and northeastern coastlines would be greatly enhanced by a map of the entire region which encompasses adjacent countries. A sharper "Epilogue" to match his excellent "Introduction" might address why many variegated multi-national societies of the pre-modern era survived for as long as they did. Indeed, the author's examples of prolonged periods of Euxine symbiosis suggest that his statement, "latent mistrust between different cultures is immortal," (9) may not be completely accurate for Black Sea history.

Several sections on Polish connections to Black Sea history and culture reveal Ascherson's Polonophile sentiment but strike this reader as peripheral to the main focus. The Russian South and the Caucasus figured more prominently in Pushkin's prose and poetry than in the work of Poland's national poet Adam Mickewicz. Both writers were exiled to Odessa, Pushkin in 1823-24 and Mickewicz in 1825, yet Ascherson says very little about how Pushkin's exposure to diverse landscapes and cultures in the Russian South broadened his literary sensibility and reinforced his Russian patriotism. The author instead discusses at great length Mickewicz's romantic involvement with Balzac's sister-in-law Karolina Sobanska, the mistress of Odessa's chief of police who used Karolina to spy on Polish exiles, whom she detested. We learn of Mickewicz's catholic sense of Polish identity, which embraced Polish and non-Polish inhabitants of the old Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom and asserted the primacy of political loyalty over language, religion, or ethnicity as the basis of national consciousness. Poland's national poet sympathized with fellow homeless nations such as Jews and Tatars, and spent time in Adampol (Polonozkoy today), a nineteenth-century colony near Istanbul for Polish veterans and soldiers who fought with Ottoman armies against tsarist Russia. An entire chapter is devoted to the mythical theory of Sarmatism, the notion that Polish nobles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries descended from Sarmatians, Iranian-speaking nomadic warriors who were pushed out of the Pontic Steppe by new waves of migrating peoples and resettled in Eastern Europe. Ascherson suggests the plausibility of Sarmatism, pointing to Sarmatian influence in the Polish nobility's dress and way of life, belief in their own cultural and social superiority, family and heraldic symbols on aristocratic gravestones, and their aggressive designs to reclaim ancestral Sarmatian realms in Ukraine, Bessarabia, Moldavia, and Russia.

Polish contacts with the Black Sea is an important and provocative story, especially for scholars of historic Poland and Polish nationalism, but more germane to Ascherson's topic is the question of how Black Sea history shaped the neighboring lands of Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Georgia. More on Turkey's Black Sea connection also seems appropriate, but the most glaring omission is historical information on Ukraine, where he visited numerous sites. Chersonesus, sacred ground for Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Christians, is where Grand Prince Vladimir (Volodymir for Ukrainians) supposedly converted to Byzantine Christianity and thereby opened Kievan Rus' to the rich impact of Byzantine culture and civilization. Ascherson, who attended a World Congress on Byzantine Studies in Moscow in 1991, touches on the revival of Russia's Orthodox faith and Byzantine heritage. How is this resurrection of religion and traditional culture playing out in Ukraine? And what of Russia's and Ukraine's competing claims for Black Sea ports, harbors, and shipyards, a rivalry exacer-

bated by Russia's loss of Sevastopol, home base for the USSR's Black Sea Fleet? Ascherson writes of a Cossack revival across the Eurasian steppe, manifested in the Don and Kuban Cossacks' defense of a Russian minority in Moldova, intervention on behalf of Abkhazians and Ossetians in the Caucasus, and support of Serb militias in Bosnia for the sake of Orthodox Slav brotherhood. But what about the Don and Kuban Cossacks' Ukrainian roots, and how does the Cossack awakening manifest itself in Ukraine? The Cossack amalgam of Russian, Ukrainian, Tatar, and Turkic strains makes the Cossacks—a collection of border guards, outlaws, mercenaries, fugitives, adventurers—perhaps the most elastic and resilient people shaped by Black Sea history in the modern era.

These are minor quibbles over emphasis in an otherwise excellent and pioneering work that deserves a wide readership among travelers, students, and scholars. Ascherson's style captures the diversity and complexity of his subject, as this passage indicates:

Human settlement around the Black Sea has a delicate, complex geology accumulated over three thousand years. But a geologist would not call this process simple sedimentation, as if each new influx of settlers neatly overlaid the previous culture. Instead, the heat of history has melted and folded peoples into one another's crevices, in unpredictable outcrops and striations. Every town and village is seamed with faultlines. Every district displays a different veining of Greek and Turkic, Slav and Iranian, Caucasian and Kartvelian, Jewish and Armenian, and Baltic and Germanic (244-45).

What Braudel did for Mediterranean history is a worthy goal for Black Sea historians, ethnographers, and archaeologists, whose starting point must include Ascherson's timely study.