When Literary Space Parts Ways with Physical Geography: Substitutions by Aksyonov and Morchiladze for Missing Islands of the Black Sea

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Abstract:

Whereas numerous islands served as stepping stones in connecting the lands surrounding the Mediterranean, their conspicuous absence in the Black Sea became a formidable obstacle in an already notoriously inhospitable sea. The Black Sea has only very few islands, and fewer of them are inhabited by only a small number of people. Even so, this makes all the more relevant for us the important role the 'missing' islands can play albeit in a literary and not geographical space. This paper explores two path-breaking novels that deliberately contest the historical legacies of Black Sea geography by inventing and introducing islands that incite the reader's imagination for a critical reflection on the other courses history could have taken, in other words, what the historians and social scientists call 'historical alternatives' or 'alternative history'. This paper focuses on *The Island of Crimea* by Vassily Aksyonov (1981, 1983) and *Santa Esperanza* by Aka Morchiladze (2004, 2006). The former engages the reader on a counterfactual exercise with Crimea becoming an island off the coast of Soviet Russia, inspired by Communist China troubled by a maverick Taiwan at arm's length. The latter has a more nuanced formulation where a British dominion of three islands comes into being after the Crimean War and survives as safe haven for multicultural coexistence despite the fragilities imposed upon it across the sea. Fictive islands can thus occasionally play a greater role than real islands in remaking history.

Keywords: Aka Morchiladze, Black Sea, Crimea, Santa Esperanza, Vassily Aksyonov

Introduction

Among the most important factors that differentiate the fortunes of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean comes the role the islands played in history as nodes of connectivity between the networks of islands. Within the Mediterranean context, they connected islands with the landmasses, as well as lands surrounding it with one another. There are two sets of Mediterranean islands, one consisting of the larger and better connected ones such as Sardinia, Sicily, Malta, Crete, Rhodes and Cyprus, and the other, of archipelagos, of which the Aegean is the paradigmatic example. By contrast, their conspicuous absence in the Black Sea became a formidable obstacle in an already notoriously inhospitable sea. Put differently, the Black Sea is a Mediterranean minus the islands that made almost all the difference. The Black Sea has only very few and singular islands, like the Snake (Zmiinyi) Island, and the fewer of them are inhabited by only a very small number of people. In any case, the few islands of the Black Sea disappear from sight in maps because of the scale effect, as they are quite small by geographical conventions. There remains thus no puzzle to intrigue our minds, and physical geography can count them out. Be that as it may, small islands can be notoriously maverick, and force themselves on sight from time to time, as has been the case with the Serpent Island off the Danube delta during the current Russia-Ukraine war. When islands become a bone of contention for Great Powers, their visibility increases unexpectedly.

In this paper, I am concerned with the importance a 'missing' island can acquire by virtue of its potential consequences in a geography that is larger than the island itself. This paper explores two path-breaking novels that deliberately contest the historical geographies of the Black Sea by inventing islands. This is precisely what Vassily Aksyonov and Aka Morchiladze do in their high-speed fiction by creatively blending mystery, adventure, action, political intrigue and satire. They thereby refashion the Black Sea after the contrasting image of the Mediterranean. They raise the following question in their minds: What if the islands actually existed in the Black Sea? They fiddle with space and alter geography to explore how this would impact on the time axis by modifying History with a capital 'H'. To this effect, they invent and introduce islands that incite the reader's imagination for a critical reflection on the other courses history might have taken, or what the historians and social scientists describe as 'Historical Alterna-

tives'. They write Counterfactual History from within the domain of fiction literature.

This paper focuses on *The Island of Crimea* by Aksyonov (1981, 1983) and *Santa Esperanza* by Morchiladze (2004, 2006) that introduce imaginary islands to the Black Sea. The former engages the reader on a counterfactual exercise with Crimea becoming an island off the coast of Soviet Russia, inspired by Communist China troubled by a maverick Taiwan at an arm's length. The latter has a more nuanced formulation where a British dominion over three islands comes into being after the Crimean War and survives as safe haven for multicultural coexistence as long as it could, in the face of fragilities imposed across the sea. In these two fictions, islands are assigned a pivotal role to play in a greater geography.

A Biographical Note with an Emphasis on the Stylistic Attributes of the Two Writers

It should be noted that the two writers are a generation apart. It is not so much the length of time that separates them as the historic importance of events that occurred such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismemberment of the Soviet Union with inevitable impacts upon their fiction. Even so, they have much more in common in literary style than Aksyonov has, for example, with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008), more contemporaneous yet stylistically very different.

Vassily Aksyonov (1932-2009) was born in Kazan and died in Moscow. His father was a Party official, mother (Eugenia Ginzburg) a historian-turned famous memoir writer, both with extensive prison experience. He was educated to become a doctor in 1956. He published his novels as of 1960. He was recognized "as the leading Soviet writer of his generation" and "the representative of a new, Western-oriented, questioning generation of Soviet youth." He was a convinced anti-totalitarian, and was resented for his "open pro-Americanism". He was forced to migrate in 1980 to USA. His citizenship was restored in 1990. He lived in Biarritz, France after 2004, as well as in Moscow where he died in 2009.

Aka Morchiladze (1966-present) is a Georgian writer of novels and short stories, and a literary historian. He studied History and graduated in 1988. He is a prolific writer and possibly has become the better known of the new generation of prose writers coming out in the 2000s. His work has

played a pivotal role in reorienting Georgian literature towards postmodernism as a worldwide fashionable trend. He authored a series of quasi-fantastic novels (Flight over Madatov Island, 1998; Disappearance on Madatov Island, 2001; A Whale on Madatov Island, 2004) about an imaginary archipelago populated by Georgians.

Aksyonov was stylistically an innovative *avant-garde* writer, and a lifelong admirer of jazz. He was attentive to popular (counter) culture, slang and jargon of the youthful rebels and social misfits, but also self-consciously intertextual in the global spirit of the 60s and the Thaw. His work is characterized by fast-moving narration mixed with monologues and dialogues, elliptic jumps and 'crosscuttings', flashbacks and flashforwards, and periodic interferences of the author as narrator with omniscience and commentary. His fiction bears the mark of live reporting via TV channels and/or the feel of a 'reality show', a 'cinema happening', but with a blend of fantasy, satire, and parody. His *The Island of Crimea* is a mater-of-factly narrated fast action and adventure novel, interspersed with moments of powerful lyrical expression. Quite original for the time when it was conceived, in the 1970s, during the Stagnation after Leonid Brezhnev took power (1964) completed before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), and first published abroad (1981) after the author was deprived of his Soviet citizenship and went to exile, it retains its freshness and contemporaneity in style.

Morchiladze self-reflexively perceives his work as anti-novel much in the spirit of postmodernism. He adopts a flexibly formulaic fiction with a mix-and-match narrative construction that defies summarization, and permits ambiguities, contradictions, and open-endedness, thanks to his palimpsest-like writing. He deliberately mimics prose types and seeks to maintain stylistic diversity among his chapters that can be read in various orders. Action and adventure genres bridge him with Aksyonov whereas the more present-day internet-writing practices also penetrate into his blend of narration. As a consequence, he does not only belongs to the age of cinema as did Aksyonov, but also to the internet world and cyberspace. Whereas Aksyonov did not expect much from his reader but respectful compliance in the face of a patience demanding reading exercise, Morchiladze invites his reader to 'game playing' by active participation in expanding the work, and thereby promotes the postmodern character of his fiction not unlike meccano or lego sets.

Modifying Geography as a Prerequisite for the Alternative History: The Case of Crimea

In his Preface dated Washington DC, 1983, Aksyonov makes his point of departure explicit:

> Every *peninsula* fancies itself an *island*. Conversely, there is no island that does dont envy a peninsula. Every Russian schoolboy knows that Crimea is connected to mainland Russia by an *isthmus*, but not even every adult knows *how flimsy an isthmus* is. When a Russian rides along it for the first time and sees it for its narrow, swampy self, he can't quite suppress a seditious "*what if*."
> *What if Crimea really were an island?* What if, as a result, the White Army had been able to defend Crimea from the Reds in 1920? *What if Crimea had developed as a Russian, yet Western, democracy alongside the totalitarian mainland?* (Aksyonov, 1983, p. ix).

As if to justify his wicked and playful approach to geography, he deems it appropriate to countervail it with that of the Soviet authorities which he describes as "firm and realistic view of geography" and then mischievously ends the Preface: "They know that the world rests on three whales and two elephants" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. ix). The ultimate effect he seeks is to reinforce the sense that this is as solid as geography can get, and we are free to pursue this mental exercise.

Aksyonov then identifies a trigger mechanism for an Alternative History that is original and at the same time extremely un-Marxist. The discovery by a character, Marlen Mikhailovich Kuzenkov, of the truth, or rather, as he puts it "one of the best-kept secrets in Soviet history" as to the question "How did the Island find its way into what was nearly the middle of the Black Sea?" On 20 January, 1920 at Chongar Straits, "a foolish acne-prone young Englishman stood up against the avalanche of the Revolution and single-handedly defeated the victorious proletarian army" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 307). We are faced here with an unintended one-man show, when "the twenty-two-year-old Lieutenant Richard Bailey Land, turret captain on the battleship" ordered his gunners aim at "the advancing columns; then he had them open fire on the columns with the gigantic sixteen-inch shells. How accurate they were was immaterial; the shells broke the ice, the vanguard

drowned in the icy water, the rear guard broke ranks, and panic took over" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 308). It is thus one men who made all the difference. Nor did he have high motives. Far from it, if he had any motive, it was mere curiosity:

> I had no intention whatsoever to defend Crimea or the Russian Empire or anyone's constitution or democracy or what have you, I swear. I was simply curious about the ice, the attack, the guns, the mutiny – I thought it would be a jolly good show to mix them altogether. I suppose I was most interested to see how the guns worked (Aksyonov, 1983, pp. 309-310).

The Representation of Crimea as a 'Fishy' Island

With or without this fictional historic event, there is nevertheless a geographical reality that divides the Crimean peninsula from the Russian landmass and makes of it a microclimatic zone in its own right even if some wish to deny it yet admit it when they say "that Russian pearl, the Island of Crimea" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 172). Aksyonov acknowledges this readily as early as in the Preface: "The southern coast of Crimea is a subtropic zone protected from the fierce Russian winter by a range of mountains. During that winter the mountains are covered with black clouds seemingly fixed in time, while down below the sun is shining." We are faced here with a Mediterranean microcosm amidst the Black Sea: Andrei Luchnikov walking through Koktebel feels the spirit of the place: "The landscape was truly unforgettable. The different facets of the mountains in sunlight and moonlight, the way they met and joined the sea, the olive tree trembling at the edge of a crag [...] it all pointed to an omnipresent soul (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 47). Back in Moscow, Tatyana asserts the contrast between two worlds apart: "She had finally come home, back to the real world, and, Luchnikov had – as so often before – drifted off into another, *not quite substantive galaxy*, the galaxy of Koktebel and Feodosia, of Crimea, of all the Western world." (Aksyonov, 1983, pp. 56-57). If Russia is her real world, the other is the Crimean metonymic tip of the nebulous and galactically large. There is certainly contiguity in this representation but also a pending fluidity of the matter and an inherent mobility. It is no coincidence that Vital Gangut says: "And the Island of Crimea is still afloat" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 61). Yet another va-

riation or two on the same theme from Andrei Luchkinov: "Take our all but imaginary island, for example. A UFO if there ever was one, but a UFO with a difference – an Unidentified *Floating* Object. Our whole world is built on fantasy, on the free play of imagination" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 115), and "Crimea is my only home, my pride, my joy. The Island of Crimea *floating free* among the waves. We shall never merge with you, you law-abiding, monumental, hulking, northern, Russian swine, you! We're not Russian by ideology, we're not communist by nationality; we're Yaki Islanders, we have a fate of our own. Our fate is the carnival of freedom, and it makes us stronger" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 155). Anton Luchnikov reacts to his daddy: "You have no right to call the Island Russian. That's imperialism. Less than half the population is Russian by blood" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 275). On the other hand, from the Soviet point of view, the island appears differently: "It's been a real thorn in our side, that little Island" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 260), to which Marlene Mikhailovich Kuzenkov, the dedicated Soviet specialist on Crimea, formally the general consultant to the Institute for the Study of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, reacts by "fully [understanding] how insignificant his own little island was in comparison with the world at large and the social progress of mankind" (Aksyonov, 1983, pp. 260-261). Yet on the verge of changing sides he confesses: "I love the island; I love its memory of old Russia and the dream of a new one; I love its rich and dissolute democracy, the ports of its rocky south open to the entire world, the energy of historically doomed but eternally Russian capitalism; I love the girls of Yalta and its bohemian atmosphere; I love Sinfi's architectural turbulence; I love the well-fed flocks in the eastern pastureland and the sweeping wheat fields in the west; I love even its supple seallike contour. After all the years I have devoted to this miracle of nature and history, how can I stand by and watch as it crumbles at the whim of some Extraordinarily Unpleasant Personage?" (Aksyonov, 1983, pp. 310-311). He is only a step away from yelling at Luchnikov campaigning voluntarily for the annexation of Crimea to Soviet Russia by popular consent: "You're nothing but a pilot fish for a gigantic, sleek, and senseless shark!" (Aksyonov, 1983, p. 325). It is here that Crimea, originally the singular whale of the Black Sea, is cut down to a "pilot fish" and placed vis-a-vis Russia, "the senseless shark".

Santa Esperanza as an Archipelago of Dolphins: Representing the Impossible

Morchiladze has an introductory piece of great significance that makes the author visible by differentiating him from the tourist. Whereas the tourist Morchiladze decides to visit Santa Esperanza for the first time in 1997 for a short sojourn of only four days, staying in the historical Santa City (Saint John Castle), the author Morchiladze travels in 2003-2004 by ship (via Istanbul on his way in, and Trabzon on his way out) for a stay of six months, and collects material for his book. It has wonderful winters where one forgets the cold. The sea is stormy during this season with a slight rain off-shore. The sun comes out rarely but makes its presence pleasantly felt (Morchiladze, 2006, Introduction, pp. 10-11). During the tourist season, the sun and the sea attract the many to Santa City (The Slave Market, the Castle, the Orthodox monastery) and the Bungalows' region on the seaside, but also the living tradition of storytelling, and its hybrid architecture in the Center (Morchiladze, 2006, Weinrebe 1, pp. 4-7). By then, Santa Esperanza on the war-torn Black Sea has become even more a part of Europe, thus less accessible for the non-EU-ropeans. It is a tourist paradise like Malta, but also in a different way, Crimea, in a soon to be abortive making. The problem with it is that it does not exist but in fiction. It is an imaginary transposition of the real phenomena encountered elsewhere and in factually contestable writings to the Black Sea. In this sense, it is one more important step removed from physical geography than Crimea that existed as a peninsula in the first place.

By virtue of his precise mapping, Morchiladze (2006, Weinrebe 1, p. 4) insistently promotes Santa Esperanza as a reality of physical geography, and moreover attributes it remote origins in history. It is the successive waves of search for refuge induced by overseas events that bring about the settlement of the various elements of its population. Ottomans take Santa Esperanza then with a population of some 2000 in 1603 when the King converts symbolically and becomes the Pasha. It consists of those in the garrison, the leading cadre of the pirates, peasants of Georgian origin cultivating the land, Georgian and Greek monks, and last but not the least Genoese merchants migrating from Caffa. It becomes a center of slave trade. The Ottomans wish to enrich the place by making it a commercial and transit link between the Khanate of Crimea under their protection and the Ottoman Empire. Seen in this way, Santa Esperanza becomes a second Crimea deliberately situated in

the center of the eastern half of the Black Sea in want of islands. From this viewpoint, paraphrasing Herodotus commenting on Egypt, it is a 'Lesser' Gift of Geography. In contrast with Aksyonov's Crimea, it is not an island but an interactive archipelago, characterized by unity as well as diversity, of which more will be said below. Its physical proximity to the landmasses is negotiable with technology and sociability. In this sense a trigger event, it is flexibly accommodated and on a certain move. Historically speaking, Black Sea has been noted as short of whales and sharks but quite rich in its stock of friendly and playful dolphins that go about in herds smaller than pods. Hence the better metaphor for Santa Esperanza, and, in fact, much more, because there exists an intricate narrative network within the fiction that connects the author with the character, Luka, and the islands, ships, dolphins, and humans interchangeably within the context of the indivisible sea, the analysis of which remains beyond the scope of this paper (Morchiladze, 2006, Distel 8, pp. 10-12; Säbel 8, p. 4, pp. 21-24).

Morchiladze's fictitious archipelago is also launched on an alternative trajectory by a historic trigger event that is no single man's doing and this time real. The Crimean War, a turning-point in Black Sea history, opened the sea for international commercial navigation by imposing restrictions on future naval activities. The fiction comes into the picture by inserting a clause in the peace treaty made (1857) that enabled Britain to rent the island for 145 years from the Ottomans. Understandably, the British wished to gain a footing in the Black Sea (comparable to their holds on Gibraltar, Malta, Corfu, and Cyprus in the Mediterranean). Consequently, a governor and a local symbolic parliament were put into effect in 1901. A dominion of the British Empire, Santa Esperanza becomes a 'miniscule' façade (without the exact substance) of it on the Black Sea. Santa Esperanza is expected to become an autonomous parliamentary republic when this treaty expires in 2002 (Morchiladze, 2006, Weinrebe 1, p. 8). This begs for reflection as to what awaits it as far as neighboring Russia, Georgia and Turkey's expectations are concerned. The author makes one character, Morad Bey, anticipate that Russia would object to its NATO membership from the viewpoint of its own security (Morchiladze, 2006, Weinrebe 1, p. 17).

Modern Santa Esperanza is a multinational state with a population of 237.000 in 1997, of which 58% are Johannian (Georgians who speak a 14th-15th century dialect), 19% Turkish, %10 Italian, %8 English, and 5% other. Many come to work, but citizenship is extended only to descendants of

those who lived there before 1919. Georgians have been cut off from Georgia hence estranged for many centuries (like the autochthonous population of Taiwan!) All people are entitled to a British identity (Morchiladze, 2006, Weinrebe 1, pp. 10-11). As much as it is modern, it is also archaic, insofar as the British redefined families of 500 years or more as a local aristocracy to aspire them to consolidate the implanted constitutional monarchy. The Johannian Georgians, the Ottoman Turks, and the Genoese Catholics constitute the symbolic army. English, a Georgian dialect, Turkish and Italian are taught in schools. In short, Santa Esperanza is a multinational and multicultural country in a world of surrounding national states that could easily be destabilized from within as well as from without.

A perusal at the map indicates that the archipelago consists of three islands horizontally lined up in a V-shape. The big one is the Santa Esperanza. A second, on the north is considerably smaller, and is also called the Island of Sungals, and a third, on the south, is the Island of Visramiani, half a kilometer from the main island, to which it is served by a wooden bridge (Morchiladze, 2006, Weinrebe 5, pp. 5-6). The archipelago is 117 kilometers from the Georgian coast albeit with a severed connection. The islands of the archipelago are also loosely connected among themselves. A blind man on an island states: "Der Nachteil dieser Inseln ist, dass sie einander so nahe sind, anderseits aber so weit entfernt." (Morchiladze, 2006, Säbel 7, p.18 "The problem with these islands is that they are too close to one another, and yet far too distant" in English) Morchiladze condenses Georgia's two conflicting identities via-a-vis the sea in the archipelago's microcosm so as to ignite a conflict, in fact a civil war. An unusual, only Georgian speaking Sungal states that they were peasants and bandits, and did not support the Castle commanders and the Ottomans; a Sungal means the Man of the Forest and of the King, ready to sacrifice himself for the cause, and the Sungals and Visramianis, the two Georgian factions, always got along well: "Das wahre Land sind eben die zwei kleinen Inseln. Diese Attraktionsinsel hat man künstilich geschaffen."(Morchiladze, 2006, Weinrebe 6, p. 10; "These two islands are the real country. That attractive island over there was made artificially." In English) Even so, as the underdevelopment gap between the two islands also increased under the British who cheated the Sungals (Morchiladze, 2006, Weinrebe 9, pp. 16-18), while the Visramianis benefitted from the situation to become capitalist and rose on the shoulders of Sungals serving as their de facto army (Morchiladze, 2006, Brombeere 1, pp. 1-10).

Conclusion

Whereas Aksyonov contents himself with disconnecting Crimea as an island from the Eurasian landmass, Morchiladze stamps a set of islands on the Black Sea map. Aksyonov uses the Black Sea as a backdrop for the Soviet Russian-Crimean pending conflict on the littoral, and as an escape route by sea when the disastrous hour strikes. In contrast, Morchiladze's fiction modifies the unfolding of history at large within a Black Sea context.

Aksyonov characterizes alternative Crimea as a multi-party functioning democracy outright different from a totalitarian regime, yet it falls short of democratic standards because its political class is an exclusive White Russian aristocracy and its offshoots. Moreover Crimean democracy bears responsibility for issuing a popular invitation to Soviet annexation. Moreover, his description makes of Crimea not a democracy, but a successful capitalism. Taiwan, Aksyonov's model for Crimea, was not a democracy but an authoritarian regime where the 'colonizer' mainland Chinese Kuomintang Party was firmly in control. It evolved into a democracy as of the 1980s. To Aksyonov's credit, minority Kuomintang Party is now the most pro-Chinese and pro-unification party in opposition to governing Taiwanese nationalists in conformity with his scenario for Crimea's voluntary annexation. Be that as it may, Russia knows only one way of responding mechanistically in Aksyonov's narrative, and that is invasion. He thus inscribes the fate of Crimea into a long list including Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), Afghanistan (1979) and Ukraine (2022). As a matter of fact, Aksyonov's description of Crimea highlights the vigorous capitalism rather than the democracy of Crimea, also more fitting with the perception of the image of Taiwan at the time. By contrast, the latecomer Morchiladze, an eyewitness to an overly financialized crony capitalism in the postcommunist era, addresses head on the weakness and deadlock of an imitative democracy in Santa Esperanza.

Both writers give the fictitious islands they impose upon Geography a pivotal role to play in either making of, or falling prey to, History. This discussion via literature provides strong evidence for the case that fictional islands can sometimes play a greater role in scale as well as in scope than real islands. Whether or not Morchiladze actually read Aksyonov and was inspired by it is beside the point here, though this is strongly suggested by his description of how the Soviet regime censored Santa Esperanza as enemy territory despite the maverick Valodia Nebieridze's scholarship, and Stalin

saw it as the dangerous outpost of capitalism on his doorstep (Morchiladze, 2016, Brombeere 1, p. 8). More importantly, two writers a generation apart writing in different languages and entirely different contexts, but with their converging stylistic attributes, resor-ted to the same literary device, i.e., altering geography to see what effect it would produce on the course of history unfolding in a Black Sea environment. This is more an effect of the Black Sea on their literary practice, demonstrating us their least common denominator, and a connecting thread thereof among their fiction indicating continuity, in an otherwise disrupted and transformed world.

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