

UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA BETTER THROUGH HER HISTORY: SEVASTOPOL, AN ENDURING GEOSTRATEGIC CENTRE OF GRAVITY

Recent events in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine and Syria have brought Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy and burgeoning military power into sharp relief. Such shows of force surprised those in the West who thought that a new, pacific and friendly Russia would emerge from the former Soviet Union. That has never been Russia's way as a major world power. This monograph argues that Vladimir Putin's Russia has done no more than act in an historically consistent and largely predictable manner. Specifically, it seeks to explain why possession of Sevastopol – the home of the Black Sea Fleet for more than 200 years – provides Russia with considerable geostrategic advantage, one that is being exploited today in support of her current operations in Syria.

Sevastopol, and more particularly its ancient predecessor, the former Greek city of Chersonesos, has a highly-symbolic place in Russia's history and sense of nationhood. Here the Slavs were first converted to Christianity during the late 10th Century. That's why President Putin refers to Sevastopol's "invaluable civilisational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism"¹. From the time of Peter the Great, Russia's rulers desired to challenge Ottoman supremacy in the Black Sea region, to establish a warm water port, and to facilitate the export of grain harvested from the rich black soils of Ukraine. The modern city of Sevastopol – meaning 'august' city – was founded in 1783, the year in which Catherine the Great annexed Crimea from its Tatar rulers, and Prince Grigory Potemkin founded the Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol – one of the world's best natural harbours.

“” Possession of Sevastopol – the home of the Black Sea Fleet for more than 200 years – provides Russia with considerable geostrategic advantage – one that is being exploited today in support of her current operations in Syria

Cities' of the former Soviet Union.

The presence of the Black Sea Fleet and associated naval infantry and airpower, together with its highly-sensitive

¹Vladimir Putin, *Presidential address to the Federal Assembly on 4 December 2014*.

aerospace industries, made Sevastopol a closed city during the Cold War. Thereafter, despite being under Ukrainian jurisdiction until March 2014, it remained very much a Russian city, in which the Russian national flag always flew higher than the Ukrainian.

Furthermore, the Russian Navy continued to control the port leased from the Ukraine, including its navigation systems. Sevastopol's population, containing many military retirees and their dependants, remained fiercely loyal to Russia and never accepted Ukrainian rule – which they judged as a historical accident at best, or, at worst, a criminal betrayal².

During the Maidan 'coup' – to Russian eyes – of February 2014 in Kiev, Russian commentators feared that Sevastopol would be handed over by a nationalist Ukrainian administration to NATO and the American Sixth Fleet. Although there is scant foundation for this concern, perceptions do matter: many thousands of Sevastopol's population stood in the streets ready to defend their homeland. Seeing both the risk and the opportunity, Putin acted decisively to secure the Crimea and, most importantly, Sevastopol. It is now one of three federal cities of Russia, along with Moscow and Saint Petersburg; it is thus a completely separate entity from Crimea³.

The Russian Navy has a proud and long history, in which Sevastopol's role remains significant to Russia's sense of place in the world, and her ability to project military power as desired. It was Peter the Great who wrote that "the Navy is very significant for the state: the state possessing an army has got one hand, but possessing a navy also, has got both hands"⁴. And none other than Putin who declared in 2003: "If we want Russia to flourish and be [a] powerful, self-sufficient and influential country in the world we must play proper attention to the Navy⁵." At that time, few in the West paid attention: the Black Sea Fleet had been run down to

²*The Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet adopted a resolution authorising the move of the Crimean Oblast from Russia to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine on 19 February 1954.*

³*In terms of international law (as interpreted in the West), despite this de facto arrangement, both Crimea and Sevastopol still belong to the state of Ukraine. Russians would argue that the people of Crimea and Sevastopol voted overwhelmingly in favour for the Russian Federation.*

⁴*Peter the Great, from the Russian Marine Regulations (1720).*

⁵*Vladimir Putin, in his Preface to The Russian Navy (St. Petersburg: Maritime Publishing House, 2003).*

“” Sevastopol's population, containing many military retirees and their dependants, remained fiercely loyal to Russia and never accepted Ukrainian rule – which they judged as a historical accident at best, or, at worst, a criminal betrayal



Picture: Volodymyr Khodaryev

“A highly symbolic place in Russia’s history and sense of nationhood”: The iconic Monument to Flooded Ships at Sevastopol was built in 1905 to mark the 50th anniversary of the first defence of the city (1854-1855), during which Russia deliberately scuttled its own ships and used naval cannon as additional artillery to protect the natural harbour from French, Ottoman and British forces.

a shadow of its former, Soviet-era, self. Over the last ten years, however, it has been modernised: new warships have been laid down. Sevastopol has provided a vitally important mounting base for operations in Georgia (2008) and in Syria (2015). The Fleet’s flagship, the guided missile cruiser *Moskva*, has recently (early December 2015) been despatched ‘for drills’ in the Mediterranean.

By way of crude comparison, the naval base of Sevastopol remains as important to Russia as Portsmouth is to the United Kingdom and Norfolk, Virginia, to the United States. It was, and remains, a true hub of military power, an enduring geostrategic centre of gravity. Knowledge of Russia’s history helps us to appreciate how this state thinks and acts today: its president remains determined to restore his mother country to the centre of the world stage, as did both Catherine the Great and Nicholas I. Sevastopol has already played a major part in that journey. Speaking on 18 March 2015, Putin concluded: “Exactly one year ago, Russia... showed amazing togetherness and patriotism in supporting the aspirations of the people of Crimea and Sevastopol to return to their native shores... The issue at

stake here was the sources of our history, our spirituality and our statehood, the things that make us a single people and single united nation⁶.”

Sevastopol’s story is but one example of illustrating the role of history in understanding the policies, concerns, emotions and associated actions of a state such as the Russian Federation⁷. To comprehend Russia better, perhaps we should remember the wise words of Thucydides: “It was under the compulsion of circumstances that we were driven at first to advance our empire to its present state, influenced chiefly by fear, then by honour also, and lastly by self-interest as well⁸.”

⁶Speech at a public event held in Red Square, Moscow.

⁷Monitoring developments in Russian military strategic doctrine and in the organisation, equipment and tasks of its armed forces constituted the *raison-d’être* of the former Conflict Studies Research Centre, which grew out of the Soviet Studies Research Centre. Its disbandment in 2011 deprived the Ministry of Defence and Britain’s armed forces with an internationally recognised and highly-valued source of information and advice. Therefore the new Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research has some big shoes to fill. It needs to become an equally expert institution with the wherewithal to commission detailed research.

⁸Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I. LXXV. 3

“““

The naval base of Sevastopol remains as important to Russia as Portsmouth is to the United Kingdom and Norfolk, Virginia, to the United States. It was, and remains, a true hub of military power, an enduring geostrategic centre of gravity