

# Book Review / Kitap Tahlili

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## **THIS BLESSED LAND: CRIMEA AND THE CRIMEAN TATARS**

## **BU KUTSANMIŞ TOPRAK: KIRIM VE KIRIM TATARLARI**

**Author:** Paul Robert Magocsi

**Title:** This Blessed Land: Crimea and Crimean Tatars

**Publisher:** University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing  
Division,

**Year of publication:** 2014

**Place of publication:** Toronto

**Language:** English

**Number of pages:** 152

**ISBN:** 9780772751102

*This Blessed Land: Crimea and the Crimean Tatars* is the latest book by Paul Robert Magocsi, a professor of history and political science at the University of Toronto and one of the renowned specialists in the history of Ukraine. Magocsi defines *This Blessed Land: Crimea and the Crimean Tatars* as a story of peoples and the civilizations that belong to Crimea. He aims at tracing the vast history of Crimea from pre-historic times up to the time when Crimea became a part of independent Ukraine, paying special attention to the Crimean Tatars whose ethnogenesis is

connected to the peninsula. Prof. Magocsi's book is a significant contribution to the limited list of the English-language sources about the history of Crimea and its people.

In his previous studies, among which the most comprehensive one is *A History of Ukraine: the Land and its People* (2010, 2012), the approach of Magocsi is to examine the history of a country with respect to the history of all the lands that are included within the current borders of the state. Therefore, *A History of Ukraine*, for example, incorporates ancient civilizations in Crimea, the conditions of the Crimean Tatars under different historical circumstances, and in the latest edition of this book,<sup>1</sup> author introduces also a new chapter devoted to the Crimean Khanate. In *This Blessed Land*, Magocsi combines information about Crimea that was presented in his previous books with additional chapters about historical events in Crimea that were not covered before. He makes an attempt to write a history of the peninsula, which in fact was never an independent state itself.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the way how information is presented in this book does not contradict the historical approach adopted by the author in his previous works. Magocsi explicitly evaluates the history of Crimea in terms of being a part of the history of Ukraine.

Unlike *A History of Ukraine*, which is a detailed historical research, *This Blessed Land* provides a reader with the generic account of the history of the Crimean peninsula. It is not overloaded with facts, dates, references or archival documents. Instead, Magocsi enriches his book with an elaborately selected list of maps, illustrations, and photographs that fill almost every page in the book. The language of the book is unambiguous and lucid that renders the book more reader-friendly particularly for the non-specialized reader. *This Blessed Land* is a balanced combination of the milestones of the history of Crimea with the description of the amenities of the Crimean nature and the cultural heritage left from different peoples who belong to the peninsula. For this reason, Magocsi's book can be an excellent introduction and guideline for the wider English-speaking audience to get acquainted with the region.

In *This Blessed Land*, Magocsi asks "to whom does this land belong?"

1 Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: the Land and its people*, 2nd ed. (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2013)

2 The Crimean Khanate included not only the territory of Crimea but also some steppe regions to the North of the peninsula.

His answer is that “Crimea is a common patrimony of all people past and present who have ever lived on its territory”. This statement and the way how Magocsi presents historical events speaks in favor of the objectivity of the book. One can conclude that the author managed to succeed in his aim to explain the emotional connection to Crimea among all people who have lived there. In other words, the book gives the reader an understanding of why different states and people have been claiming their ownership over this piece of land and devoting special place for it in their national memories.

The book consists of ten chapters. It also contains several essays by different authors and a list of selected English-language bibliography about Crimea and Crimean Tatars. Magocsi starts the book with the geographical description of Crimea. The second chapter is devoted to the earliest civilizations focusing on Cimmerians, Taurians, Greeks, Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, Goths, Huns, Khazars, as well as the influences of the Byzantine Empire and Kievan Rus on different parts of Crimea. The third chapter deals with the medieval period of Crimean history, when Kipchaks, Mongols, Tatars, Seljuk Turks, Armenians and Genoese arrived in Crimea, and Crimea became a part of the Golden Horde. Importantly, as to the origins of the Crimean Tatars, Magocsi says that they are “an amalgam of ethnic groups, many of whom have lived in Crimea since immemorial”.<sup>3</sup> He devotes a chapter to the history of the Crimean Khanate, from its succession from the Golden Horde, following Ottoman vassalage and till the Russian annexation in 1783. The next five chapters cover the history of Crimea under the Russian rule, from imperial to Soviet one. Magocsi shows how the Crimean Tatars first became a minority as a result of Russian policies that caused mass migration of the Crimean Tatars to the Ottoman Empire and later lost their homeland following the brutal deportation in 1944 by Soviet regime. At the same time, Magocsi addresses how the Russians became the majority in the peninsula and tried to eliminate all the traces of the power of the Crimean Tatars in Crimea. Magocsi also pays special attention to the process of incorporation of Crimea into the cultural space of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union, focusing mainly on the role of Crimea in the life of numerous painters, poets, and writers. Even though this approach resembles closely Russian historiographical tradition, it helps to understand the way myths about Crimea have been constructed in the Russian historical memory. The

3 Paul Robert Magocsi, *This Blessed Land: Crimea and Crimean Tatars*, (University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2014), p.52

period after the World War II and the deportation of the Crimean Tatars is described as two parallel historical fluxes. On the one hand, Magocsi examines Soviet Crimea without Crimean Tatars, where he shows how Crimea and Sevastopol had gained importance in the Soviet discourse. On the other hand, he focuses on the Crimean Tatars in exile, explaining conditions under which the Crimean Tatar national movement had appeared and the achievements it had made in the repatriation process. The last chapter is devoted to challenges that both Russians and the Crimean Tatars have to face in Crimea being a part of independent Ukraine.

Despite the competence of the book, there are few remarks to be mentioned. Similar to *A History of Ukraine*, in *This Blessed Land*, Magocsi evaluates the Crimean and Ottoman slavery by giving the particular example of Roxelana, or Hürrem Sultan, as a success story. He makes a controversial conclusion that “Crimean and Ottoman slavery was not necessary all that bad”.<sup>4</sup> Following the logic of Magocsi, however, one may, as well, argue that American slavery was not “all that bad” because the descendant of Africans was able to become the president of the United States. A minor point as regards to Roxelana/Hürrem Sultan is that Roxelana’s mausoleum is in Süleymaniye Mosque, not Blue Mosque, as Magocsi states.<sup>5</sup> Another point that shall be highlighted is that Magocsi states that after the deportation, Tatar names of villages and cities were replaced by Russian and later by awkward Ukrainian forms.<sup>6</sup> However, it should be mentioned that Ukrainian forms of toponyms had never been used in Crimea during the Soviet times. Only after the independence of Ukraine, existing Soviet names were transliterated according to the Ukrainian rules of spelling. Another minor remark refers to the statement where Magocsi argues that Turkish “government-funded General Center of Crimean Tatar Associations and the Kirim (Crimea) Foundation has provided several million dollars in aid”.<sup>7</sup> The author probably confused diaspora organization, which is not government-funded, with Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which provided the above-mentioned aid. Finally, the title of Chapter 9 in the notes refers to “Crimean Tatar Diaspora”, instead of “Exiled Crimean Tatars” which definitely carries another meaning, but probably it is just a clerical error.

4 Ibid, p.48

5 Ibid, p.48

6 Ibid, p.123

7 Ibid, p. 146

*This Blessed Land* was published simultaneously in Ukrainian and Russian, and the Turkish translation of the book is being prepared for publication. The Ukrainian and Russian versions of the book have a different title and cover design. In Ukrainian/Russian, the title is “Крим: Наша благословенна земля/ Крым: наша благословенная земля”, which means “Crimea: Our Blessed Land” without any specific reference to the Crimean Tatars unlike in the English version. It seems that the author tries to adapt the book to different discourses. Whereas, in the Western academia there is a certain interest to the Crimean Tatars, the Crimean Tatar issue had almost been excluded from the Ukrainian political discourse up until the Crimean crisis. In that context, a particular emphasis on the Crimean Tatars in the title of Ukrainian version of the book would switch the accent of the book, to a possessive pronoun as “our” was probably supposed to underscore Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea. At the same time, the Russian translation of the book with possessive pronoun “our” in the title may have an ambiguous meaning and even negative reaction in Ukraine because it resembles the propaganda campaign Russia has launched after the annexation of Crimea.<sup>8</sup>

The title says that this book is about Crimea and the Crimean Tatars, but its cover shows the Swallow’s Nest castle of neo-gothic design by a Russian architect. It was built at the beginning of the twentieth century and has become the symbol of Crimea. Therefore, this picture was probably chosen as it is easily recognizable in the world. However, it represents the times in Crimea, when the Crimean Tatars were almost erased from the peninsula’s cultural landscape. Such an inconsistency of the title and the cover can be considered as an inaccuracy but in fact, it fits the Crimean reality in the best way. The reality, where the Crimean Tatars, indigenous people of Crimea who were about to lost their homeland, are striving to be again included in the Crimean cultural landscape, which is now predominantly Russian.

The publication of Magocsi’s book coincided with the time when Russia annexed Crimea. The annexation completely changed the situation in Crimea and brought about new dramatic challenges for the Crimean Tatars. Even though the latest developments in Crimea are not included in the book, the level of attention paid to Crimea recently ensures a high relevance of it. Offering context information and historical background,

<sup>8</sup> The campaign is called “Крым наш” (#крымнаш), which means “Crimea is our” and it became a popular Internet meme and the symbol of annexation.

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*This Bless Land* may help an English-speaking audience to understand why Crimea became a bone of contention in world affairs on the one hand, and the positions of Russia, Ukraine and the Crimean Tatars in the current dispute on the other hand.