When I began this project, the Russian annexation of Crimea was a singular occurrence in world history, and very few of my friends, family members, or casual acquaintances could do more than feign interest in this unfamiliar and seemingly insignificant fragment of Eurasia. But in late February 2014, Russian forces seized the local parliament in Simferopol. In a matter of days a new government took the reins, declared independence from Ukraine, and held a referendum. Then, on March 18, 2014, President Vladimir Putin brought an end to months of political upheaval and controversial military intervention by formalizing the annexation of Crimea, an autonomous republic of Ukraine, to the Russian Federation. The move sent shock waves across Europe, waves that continue to ripple through deliberations over the value of Ukrainian sovereignty and the shape of geostrategic policies toward a resurgent Russia. A nonbinding United Nations resolution was put in place, affirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine and rejecting the legitimacy of the Russian move, yet interest in the fate of Crimea itself vanished from the front pages and blogrolls of Western media almost as quickly as it had materialized. With the peninsula safely ensconced within the federated structure of the Russian state, Putin has a free hand to deal with those who refuse to accept Russian rule. The most vocal resistance has come from Crimean Tatars—an ethnic minority whose legi-
The Crimean Tatars have largely failed to mobilize sustained support from Western audiences. Meanwhile, Putin’s government succeeded almost immediately in rallying strong domestic support for the reclamation of the Black Sea peninsula. The Kremlin deployed a range of soft-line tactics. The Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library organized new collections celebrating “the unique historical-cultural preserve” that is the (newly established) Republic of Crimea. The Tretyakov Gallery is mounting a major exhibition of the work of Ivan Aivazovskii, the great landscape painter and native Crimean. The State Hermitage Museum has convened international conferences and poured funding into moribund dig sites from Kerch to Chersonesos. Annexing Crimea is, the state would have its people believe, a simple matter of restoring ancient legacies, reinvigorating primordial connections, and remembering, above all, that Crimea is an integral part of Russia’s sprawling political and cultural terrain.

To be fair, it wasn’t a hard sell. For as bold as Putin’s annexation maneuver might have been, it was not terribly original. Russia’s relationship with Crimea has evolved over half a millennium; the peninsula and its hinterland have figured prominently in the development of the east Slavic world for twice that long. The moment in which this long trajectory truly took shape came not in the spring of 2014 but one morning late in the autumn of 1782, as Empress Catherine II sat in her study in the Winter Palace drinking coffee. In her hand was a carefully crafted letter from Prince Grigorii Potemkin, president of the War College, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and grand admiral of the Black Sea and Caspian fleets. For some months Potemkin had been urging his sovereign to declare an end to the independence of the Crimean Khanate (an interlude that began in 1774). Catherine was reluctant. With mounting frustration, Potemkin informed her that she should act soon, else “there will come a time when everything that we might now receive for free, we shall obtain for a high price.” What, exactly, was at stake? Potemkin’s list was short but compelling: the security of the empire’s borders, the allegiance of its Russian inhabitants, and unimpeded access to the Black Sea. “Believe me,” wrote Potemkin, “with this acquisition you will achieve immortal glory such that no other Sovereign in Russia has ever had.”
Such were the contents of the handwritten note shuttled from one palace to another in the bone-chilling cold of St. Petersburg. The significance of Crimea is now, as it was then, as much about security as it is about symbolism. And it is as much about Crimea itself as it is about the projection of Russian power well beyond the peninsula. As Potemkin’s letter suggests, annexing Crimea would allow the empress, and those who succeeded her, to assert influence over even broader swaths of territory than those constituted by modern-day Ukraine. By virtue of its geography, Crimea is a portal to the world of the Black Sea. As a former vassal of the Ottoman Empire and home to some 300,000 Muslims, Crimea gave tsarist Russia entrée into the fractious politics of the Sublime Porte. And as the last remnant of the Mongol commonwealth in the west, Crimea provided grounds for Russia to reclaim the imperial mantle of the Eurasian steppe.

There are echoes of these grandiose claims in the discourse now emanating from Moscow. Putin has gestured toward the idea of Russia as a Eurasian power—a global player both apart from and, to a significant extent, opposed to the rest of Europe. In this context Crimea is a critical axis for the economic and geopolitical projection of Russian power. But Crimea is more than just a portal into other, more strategically significant terrain. It is, in the minds of government officials and private citizens alike, for a host of complex and often contradictory reasons, a significant terrain in its own right. Above all, it is a crucial site for exploring and articulating Russian identity.

As proof of this one need only consider the government’s extraordinary ideological investment. In 1783—in the wake of the first annexation of Crimea—Catherine set about renaming the towns and rivers of her southern province and thus imbuing what many perceived as an unstable and threatening Turko-Islamic landscape with classical Greek and Orthodox Christian civilization. She ordered the planting of groves of olive and citrus, and vineyards full of grapes imported from Tuscany and the Greek islands. She built Orthodox churches and sprawling villas. She spent outrageous amounts of money choreographing her 1787 tour from Petersburg through Kiev to Bahçesaray, the capital of the khanate—a tour designed for the express purpose of taking possession of Crimea through ritual and ideology. Her successors followed suit, consecrating the southern coast with palaces and botanical gardens, and crafting their own southward passages from St. Petersburg to the place
where Russia met the mountains and the sea in appealingly spectacular fashion.

It was my friend Alexei Petrov, a marine biologist from Sevastopol, who showed me something of Crimea’s sedimentary nature. It was a dusty, shabby place when I first saw it in 1995, with a distinct Soviet patina. When I returned for a summer in the archives in 1999, Alexei and his wife, Marina, took it upon themselves to show me what (or perhaps where) Crimea really was. We followed grass-covered paths and climbed broken, rusty gates in order to explore the remnants of ruined churches. We bushwhacked through low-growth forests (always with an eye out for wild boar) on the way to Ai Petri, the 4,000-foot peak above Alupka. We swam in the turquoise water at Laspi (long before the construction of the impossibly high-end Bay of Dreams Hotel). We ate enormous quantities of cherries—Crimeans are fiercely proud of their fruit—and, every once in a while, drank a glass of watered wine in the way of the ancient Greeks. One afternoon, during one of our many excursions through the grounds of Chersonesos, I noticed two small ceramic fragments dislodged by heavy rain the previous night. One was green, the other blue. When I showed them to Alexei and his friend, a local historian, they shrugged. “Well you see,” explained the historian, “these are not such special things. They are, well, fifteenth century probably,” dismissing my treasures with a sweeping gesture meant to remind me of our surroundings, which included the whitewashed columns of a fourth-century basilica and piles of amphora dating back to the second century BCE.

The historian—his name was also Alexei—carried a satchel at all times, and at one point toward the end of that first summer he pulled out a set of photographs. They were images of the Cathedral of St. Vladimir at Chersonesos, a church originally conceived by an admiral of the Black Sea Fleet to celebrate the supposed site of a Kievan prince’s baptism into the Christian faith back in the late tenth century (archaeologists have long argued that St. Vladimir’s is built on a temple to Apollo rather than the baptismal basilica of the city). Tsar Alexander II attended the ceremonial foundation of the cathedral in 1861 and it functioned as a church until 1926, perched atop—and thus preventing excavation of—one of the most important areas of the ancient Greek city. The German army (or the Soviet army, depending on whom you ask) bombed St. Vladimir’s in 1942, converting the site into a hulking, shattered mass of Inkerman.
stone and Italian marble. At some point thereafter, someone took the series of black-and-white photographs that ended up in Alexei’s satchel. They are remarkable images, filled with brooding stone and sky. A few men and women pick their way through the rubble, some gazing up at the protruding ribs of the ninth-century church that had been swallowed up by cathedral walls in the nineteenth century. Contrary to what one might expect, the images speak of a relentlessly dynamic place—a ruin demanding restoration or, perhaps, reinvention.

From the very beginning, the fate of the cathedral has depended on the relationship between Russia and Crimea. When the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet announced in 1954 that the Crimean oblast’ would henceforth be part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, it added a layer of complexity to an already volatile situation. Archaeologists and advocates of the Orthodox Church had been clashing since the 1870s over whether the cathedral had any right to exist at all, located as it was on a crucial archaeological site. To the delight of the former group, Chersonesos acquired the status of “historic-archaeological preserve” in 1978, though that did not deter church officials. In the aftermath of 1991 the archbishop of Crimea and Simferopol pressed the Ukrainian government to restore the cathedral as property of the Orthodox Church. Religious services began in 1992 and, with Kiev’s decision to transfer the cathedral to the diocese of Crimea and Simferopol in 1994, restoration work got under way. The new cathedral stands, gilded and gleaming, under the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Meanwhile, in 2013 UNESCO awarded the Chersonesos Archaeological Preserve status as a World Heritage Site under the jurisdiction of Ukraine’s Ministry of Culture. UNESCO has not acknowledged Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Then again, it has not satisfied the requests of Ukraine’s Permanent Delegation, which has called for an investigation of the current state of conservation at the site—a site that, in practice, is now located in the Russian Federation. The newly launched website of the preserve, officially known as the State Historical-Archeological Preserve at Khersones-Tavricheski, displays the country code top-level domain of the Russian Federation (.ru) rather than that of Ukraine (.ua) in its URL. The preserve’s interactive map acknowledges St. Vladimir Cathedral, but does not identify it or explain the presence of this monumental attestation of Ukrainian (ecclesiastical) authority.
Crimea, I have concluded after countless sojourns, is its own deep map. It is a material world inscribed with meaning, rich with stories that are legible one minute and indecipherable the next. It is a dense web of religious and political symbols, but also an accretion of intensely physical experiences and the knowledge they produce. It changes according to scale and perspective, but remains one of the micro-terrains of the former Russian Empire in which historical memory and national identity have been worked out over the last two decades.

And it remains a contested place. In the late eighteenth century, Catherine and Potemkin tried to shore up their claim through settlement, bringing tens of thousands of Slavic peasants as well as Bulgarian, Mennonite, and Lutheran immigrants to settle the steppe. By contrast, settlement of the peninsula proceeded slowly. Finally, with the debacle of the Crimean War in the rearview mirror, the imperial government oversaw the resettlement of two-thirds of the Crimean Tatar population (some 300,000 people) to Ottoman lands—a move that radically altered the landscape of local society and allowed Russian officials and subjects to begin reinventing Crimea. Of course, the events of the 1860s pale in comparison to the trauma of the deportation of roughly a quarter million Crimean Tatars in May 1944—an event that continues to shape political dialogue, ethnic relations, and socioeconomic institutions. But demographic change was never enough. Taking a cue from Catherine (though I doubt he thought of it that way), Stalin channeled exorbitant amounts of money to Crimea so that Sevastopol, the hero city destroyed during German occupation, could rise again, clad this time in elegant neoclassical architectural stylings. The former mayor of Moscow, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, and countless oligarchs have continued the tradition of sponsoring the construction of elite residences, improved infrastructure, and gleaming upscale maritime oases as part of the work of staking Russia’s claim to Crimea.

In a sense, it all comes down to place names. “Crimea” (Krym in Russian, Krim in Ukrainian, Qırım in Crimean Tatar) is a shorthand reference to countless cultural, ideological, and geospatial entities. It refers to a peninsula that juts southward into the Black Sea, connected to the mainland by the perilously narrow isthmus of Perekop, but also to a Tatar state that extended across the Pontic steppe, its borders moving along with the nomadic Nogay tribes that embodied the range of the khan’s authority. Imperial officials drew on that amorphous geography
when they established their new southern province in 1784. Then again, they channeled the Greek legacy of the Black Sea as well, creating toponyms—Tavrida (Tauride), Sevastopol, Feodosiia, Evpatoriia—that would reinscribe the region with an entirely different ideological meaning. Oddly enough though, mapmakers, governors, and inhabitants alike remained ambivalent about this new toponymy. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents often refer to Sevastopol, the naval port, as Aktiar, Simferopol, the provincial town, as Akmeçet, and Feodosiia, the preeminent port, as Kefe or Caffa.

It is difficult to avoid the politics of place names in a project like this. In the rare case where a standard English spelling exists, I gladly use it. For example I use St. Petersburg rather than Sanktpeterburg, and Crimea rather than any of the alternatives. I refer to members of the Tatar ruling dynasty as Giray rather than Geray (Crimean Tatar), and the architect of the first annexation as Catherine rather than Ekaterina. Because the vast majority of the archival record that I used exists in Russian, Russian names and toponyms do occur throughout this book. But for the most part I have tried to default to Turkish spellings. In so doing I follow in the footsteps of historians such as Alan Fisher and Michael Khodarkovksy: scholars on either side of the Black Sea, so to speak, but who have both done excellent work on various aspects of steppe history. Thus in this book the (former) Tatar capital appears as Bahçesaray instead of Bakhchysarai (Ukrainian), Bakhchisarai or Bakhchisaray (Russian), or Bağçasaray (Crimean Tatar). To the extent that it is possible, I identify individuals by transcribing the names they bore in their native languages (Şirin rather than Shirin, for example). But it is not always possible. It seems that either most Russian clerks had a poor ear for Turkic languages, or they did not care terribly much about consistency, let alone legibility. To my chagrin, a single man can appear in the records as Megmetsha Mirza, Megmet Mirza, and Megmedcha. And in an environment in which roughly three-quarters of the population did not have surnames, the task of piecing together identity across document collections was extraordinarily challenging. Along the way, I compiled a database of one thousand mirzas (clan leaders and members of the Crimean Tatar elite), painstakingly cross-checking landholding records, birthdates, and service records in an effort to understand the shape of both individual lives and clans. Even then, I would say I am no more than reasonably confident about the accuracy of my work. I can say with
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confidence, though, that my motivation was not to assert the legitimacy of Russian—or Tatar, or Ukrainian—claims to Crimea and its history. If anything, I advocate for embracing the rich and flexible system of names in this part of the world. I suggest that you attempt to hold Caffa, Kefe, and Feodosia in your mind and, rather than identify one as “right,” ponder the ways in which each toponym describes, evokes, possibly even creates historical space.

Truth be told, even if they had no talent for spelling Tatar names, I have a soft spot for the scribes and scriveners whose efforts produced the archives in which I have been immersed for years. I can’t help thinking of them, hunched over their tables, writing mindlessly hour after hour in the raw damp of the provincial offices, in the flickering shadow of the southern sun, making it possible, however unintentionally, for me to imagine what it meant to inhabit Crimea in the aftermath of Russian annexation.

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One final note. Many of the maps, images, and spatial arguments found here are presented in a different, and hopefully complementary way, in a digital history project I call Beautiful Spaces. The site offers additional data visualizations, source documentation, and a curation system that reveals the often surprising connections between people, places, and power. In a sense, it is a boutique “deep” gazetteer of the places mentioned in this book. You are most welcome to explore it here: http://dighist.fas.harvard.edu/projects/beautifulspaces/.