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Neal Ascherson

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Winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for History

In this study of the fateful encounters between Europe and Asia on the shores of a legendary sea, Neal Ascherson explores the disputed meaning of community, nationhood, history, and culture in a region famous for its dramatic conflicts. What makes the Black Sea cultures distinctive, Ascherson argues, is the way their component parts came together over the millennia to shape unique communities, languages, religions, and trade. As he shows with skill and persuasiveness, *Black Sea* patterns in the Caucasus, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Turkey, and Greece have linked the peoples of Europe and Asia together for centuries.

Black Sea Details

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Author : Neal Ascherson

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From Reader Review Black Sea for online ebook

Daniel says

I am flipping through this book now and wishing that I remembered even a tenth of its contents. "Black Sea" is an amalgamation of travelogue and history, and an excellent narrative about the many peoples and cultures that have lived--and, in some cases, still live--on the shores of the Black Sea. The writer, Neal Ascherson, describes personal trips to different parts of the region, and incorporates these experiences with historical background that he has amassed over the years.

There are loads of tidbits in this book like the following:

In 1864, the Russian armies finally broke tribal resistance in the north-west Caucasus. Much of the Moslem population of Abkhazia and coastal Georgia fled or was expelled into the Ottoman Empire, and many Lazi were swept along in the disaster. A small number still remains in Georgia. But their distinctiveness--like that of the Mingrelians--is resented by Georgian politicians and intellectuals who insist, inaccurately, that Georgian is their 'mother-tongue' and that Mingrelian, Lazuri and Svanetian are mere 'dialects'...(200)

While reading this, I probably knew what 'Lazi' and 'Mingrelian' referred to; sadly, I now have no idea. This is, in part, due to the fact that Ascherson crams a lot of history into this slim volume, and much of this history is spread across a diverse collection of cultures. Without some real, scholarly grounding in this subject, it is hard to keep track of everything that Ascherson tosses into the pot. This shortcoming can be absolutely maddening, too, because the subject that Ascherson delves into is so fascinating, so rich, and so connected to so many other pieces of history.

I can't fault Ascherson for overloading his book (though I can direct some of my strongest jealousy towards his knowledgeable person, grrrr), and besides, doing so would only be petty in light of the fact that he really pulls this book off with skillful structuring and good writing. "Black Sea" stands out as one of those great history books that you are so glad you've read, even if you remember so little from it. Then again, what better excuse to return to it?

Charlene Mathe says

I'm only about a quarter-way through this book, but I am rating it now because there could be no better time to read it than now, during the Olympic games in Sochi! That is because Sochi is located on the Black Sea; and if you are like me, your knowledge of the peoples and historic drama of the Black Sea region is pretty thin. I think author, Neal Ascherson, does a wonderful job of bringing to life centuries of human drama in the context of the unique Black Sea habitat. You will have a much greater appreciation of the political backdrop to the 2014 Olympic games after reading Ascherson's narrative. The effect on me in reading this history is to feel a deep concern that the world will see in these Olympics a proud showcase of the Black Sea heritage. With or without the Olympics, you will not want to put this book down until you have finished it cover to cover.

Mieczyslaw Kasprzyk says

I think this is a wonderful book about the Black Sea region. Well-written it compliments any study of Eastern Europe.

Michael Connolly says

The Black Sea has been a meeting place of East and West, and Christianity and Islam. The author describes many ethnicities that are not well known, but which have interesting histories. The Hemsinli are a Muslim people who speak Armenian. Because their ancestors converted to Islam, they were not deported or killed during the Armenian genocide of the twentieth century. Another small group is the Lazi, who live in Turkey, but speak a language related to Georgian. They speak Lazuri at home and Turkish in public. Some European do-gooders are trying to preserve their language and culture by giving them an alphabet and trying to make their Lazuri language their public language. But this is getting the Lazi in trouble with the Turkish authorities, who fear separatism. Sometimes it is best to maintain a low profile.

Polish heraldry appears to have originated in the tamga signs of the Sarmatians, an Indo-Iranian people of the steppe north of the Black Sea. In years past, the Polish szlachta nobility claimed to be descendants of the Sarmatians. The horsemen wearing iron mail armor of the age of chivalry originated with the Sarmatians. The Ossetians, living north of the Black Sea in Georgia, are their descendants.

The Black Sea was explored by Greeks looking to buy fish. They eventually colonized the shores of the Black Sea. The Greeks south of the Black Sea, in Anatolia, were called the Pontic Greeks. Some of the Greek myths were set in the areas around the Black Sea. For example, the myth of Jason and the Argonauts seeking the Golden Fleece was set in Georgia, then called Colchi. Euripides set his play Medea in this same area.

Tim Pendry says

The Black Sea is a well written if, at times, a rather self indulgent book. The book is not really about the Black Sea in its entirety - great tracts of its coastline are ignored and the historical gems are chosen to meet the interests and sometimes political prejudices of its author.

Romania, Bulgaria and half the Turkish coastline are ignored. Ascherson goes hurtling off to the North West on a lengthy tour of matters Polish-Lithuanian that barely connect with the Sea. He also has a clear anti-Russian bent and the book is very much of its near-Cold War time (1995).

Having said this, the book is a good educated light read, a mixture of well researched history, anthropology and anecdote from his own regional travels (with a bit of topography) that, other than the Polish indulgence (he clearly likes Poles as much as he dislikes Soviets), entertains.

Ascherson is a Scot and a small nation man. Start with an understanding of that prejudice and you will be able to filter out his politics and his bias and better enjoy the narrative. He is also a classic metropolitan liberal which is not always a bad thing when it comes to thinking about colonialism.

Although the book is not going to give you a balanced history of a vital European region, possibly more vital as Russia fights back against its containment, many of the stories he tells will be new to many people and so worth reading.

If there is a political theme beyond his mere prejudice, it is that nationalisms are inventions (fairly standard academic stuff) and that the claims of those he does not like are pretty invalid and those that he does like are notable for being inclusive liberal nationalisms. I sense a man of 1848.

Strip all that ideology away and he is good on the Greek-Scythian relationship in the classical era and introduces us to locally important cultures scarcely known to the West such as the Sarmatians, the Bosporan Kingdom and the Empire of Trebizond.

He tells a good story about the tragic events in Abkhazia and visits Crimea after the fall of the Soviet Union (he is pro-Tatar). He offers a rather sinister tale (to me though perhaps not to him) of the recent invention of Lazi nationalism by a late Herderian German academic.

In fact, Ascherson is not a little incoherent and sentimental about nationalism. He sort of likes it if it is for the little people and dislikes it if it is for the big people. There is, in this, all the fluffy sentimentality and near-permanent outrage at oppression of the cosmopolitan liberal.

Indeed, his prejudices become not a little irritating after a while. Now that Crimea and Novorossiya are back in the news, one could almost write his paragraphs for him about current events, at least based on this book.

But, putting all that aside, he tells a good story. He is a good journalist (a journalist does not have to be a coherent 'thinker'). When his implicit ideology is allowed to rest, his judgements can be sound and humane - sometimes, you can even see the questioning side of him break through.

Not exactly a wholly coherent book but a nice piece of international affairs entertainment. A recommendation as a holiday read for someone planning to go on a holiday visit to the region (assuming it is not Bulgaria or Romania or Turkey West of Sinop).

I can't imagine too many people planning holidays today in Odessa, Novorossiya, Crimea, Georgia or North East Turkey but, if such people are out there, this would be a good book for the journey and for the hotel.

Lindsay says

I lived in Crimea for a year. This book was a useful tool to learn about the cultures that settled there in the past. Neal really does a great job of writing about history in a poetic way.

Bryn Hammond says

I skimmed much of the modern content to get at ancient, medieval and early modern. I did catch a few tirades on the scourges of nationalism, which was fine. Quite interesting too with a focus on artificiality and

the concoction of pasts that never were, to serve a contemporary agenda.

I liked it on the inception of the Civilization/Barbarian discourse... I say discourse because that's a word he hates even though he uses it himself. He's not too fond of new methods of history that look at how and why it's written instead of the 'contents'. But then he practices enough of this to analyse 'the invention of the barbarian'... that's the title of a book he depends on, by Edith Hall. Innovative book in its day, probably overstated in hindsight. On other questions too he seems to pick one scholarly work to give you a precis of. The upside is that he chooses interesting, if provocative and speculative, scholarly theses to do this with.

Top marks for his discussion of Scythian gender (right after one on Cossack gender, and in contrast). For 1995, I bet this was a fabulous discussion. In general he is very nicely open-minded on steppe people and steppe influence -- culture and institutions.

Skillfully written, a lovely read.

Zuberino says

This is not a travel book in the conventional sense, nor is it a mere work of history. The best description that I can think of is 'a book of ideas', overwhelmingly erudite, an extended meditation on cultural identity and nationalism. Indeed, for me, 'Black Sea' is the finest book of ideas I've read since 'The Third Chimpanzee' two years ago, and in a whole different category from previous five-starrers like 'In Siberia' or Bruce Lincoln's book on the Russian Civil War.

I learnt such an in-CRED-ible amount from this book. Just like after reading Bruce Lincoln, I feel immeasurably better informed about the region and its peoples after finishing Ascherson's opus. (And opus it is too - the ideas he developed in this book, he keeps referring back to even now in his essays, nearly two decades later). Like Jared Diamond, Ascherson has the knack of looking at any given topic from a multitude of angles, holding up the prism to the light and twisting it this way and that, over page after densely argued page, until he's extracted the last drop of meaning from it, until you are left marvelling at not just the insights attained, but the very process of thinking and reasoning that led to those insights.

What suits your fancy? An investigation into the origins of the 'civilization' vs 'barbarians' debate that still stains Western thinking half a century after decolonisation? Ascherson can trace it as far back as the Greek dramatists. The origins and eventual fate of the nomadic Scythians? The tragic history of the Crimean Tatars, kicked about all over the East like tens of thousands of footballs? The Gordian knot that is the Abkhazian question? The true nature of the link between the ancient Sarmatians and the late Polish aristocracy? The state of archaeology in post-Soviet states? A lengthy inquiry into the mysterious Lazi people of northeast Turkey? The vanished Greek heritage of Trebizond? What is overfishing doing to fishery stocks in the Black Sea? Was Herodotus speaking the truth in his 'Histories'? And just where did Jason and the Argonauts go in search of that goddamned Fleece?

Over 270-odd pages, Ascherson explores these and many other questions. He tramps all over the region, from ancient Olbia to modern-day Odessa, from the desecrated Sumela monastery to the bombed-out seafront of Sukhumi. And as he does so, he keeps setting off little explosions of insight, timed detonations of revelation that left me shaking my head in wonder, racing to Wikipedia to learn a little more. A book like

this literally expands the reader's understanding of the world, stretches one's intellectual boundaries so that you look at the world around you just a little bit differently ever afterwards. What bigger compliment can you pay a book?

My favourite section - from among many deserving candidates - has to be the one dealing with the Pontic Greeks, that hapless bunch of people who through no fault of their own fell into the vicious electric grinder of early 20th-century Turkish nationalism, and ended up being evicted from the country that they had settled for nearly 3,000 years. Imagine that - three fucking millennia. Population swaps on an epic scale - Turks from Greece, Greeks from Anatolia and the Turkish coast - forced migration by the million. Given that I was reading this book against the backdrop of targeted ethnic violence in Bangladesh and had been exploring the subject of forced population transfers during the 1947 partition only a few days ago, the resonances here were just explosive. A Pontic Greek memoir like Sano Halo's laid side by side against a book like Sunanda Sikdar's 'Doyamoyeer Kotha' - there's fodder in there for more than a PhD thesis or two! As it is, I'm already hot on the trail of more books on the topic - Giles Milton's Smyrna, Mark Mazower's Salonica, Bruce Clark, Dmetri Kakmi.. the list goes on.

Some reviewers didn't like the extended Adam Mickiewicz section in the middle of the book, calling it a distraction, a sideshow. Heck I liked even that! Do yourself a favour, read this remarkable book.

Antigone says

British journalist Neal Ascherson has produced a terrifically informative historical travelogue of the region surrounding the Black Sea. Written several years ago, it's a timely read for me in light of the current conflict between Russia and the Ukraine - in specific, the hot property of Crimea. As Mr. Ascherson relays:

"Crimea, whose beauty provokes almost sexual yearnings of possession in all its visitors...has always been a destination, the cliffs at the end of the sea or the shore where the wagons must end their journey. Voyaging communities settled in Crimea (the Scythians lived here for nearly a thousand years) but in the end they dispersed or moved on...Only in recent times has the Crimean truth - that it belongs to everybody and to nobody - been violated. Two of these violations, which would be merely absurd if they did not imply so much blood and suffering in the past and very probably in the future, are the declarations of two autocrats. In 1783, Catherine II ("The Great") proclaimed that the Crimean peninsula was henceforth and for all time to become Russian. And in 1954 Nikita Khrushchev, a Ukrainian seeking to divert the attention of his own people from their miseries, announced that he was transferring Crimea from Russia to become for all time Ukrainian."

Everyone's got a stake, it seems, and a case to make. And while Mr. Putin appears to be busy perfecting his impression of James T. Kirk ("You're the captain's woman until he says you're not!"), it seemed a mighty fine idea to take this time to brush up on the territory.

It's doubtful one could wish for a more knowledgeable guide than Neal Ascherson (who has his own sentimental stake in the matter due to his father's military service aboard one of the British ships that evacuated the White Army from Novorossisk in 1920). He's done his research and more on the Greeks, Amazons, Byzantians, Tatars, Cossacks, Nazis and Stalin. Shore to shore, region to region; Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Poland; Ascherson straddles eras of invasion, settlement, deportation and rebellion with a clear and confident ease. Pushkin, Tolstoy, Lermontov, Richelieu, Balzac - even the Polish Mata Hari, Karolina Sobanska - all make an appearance, as do plenty of modern-day denizens met upon his travels.

If you're interested in the Black Sea region (from a standpoint more benign than Vlad's), here's a book to look into. It was a great read.

Lauren Albert says

I hated this book until I realized that I hated it because it wasn't fulfilling my expectations for it rather than because it was a bad book. I thought it would be a good general history of the Black Sea and instead it was more poetic and impressionistic. I kept getting annoyed by his language until I realized, again, that it was more due to my own expectations.

Dave says

I had a little trouble getting into this one. It's a bit of a mix of travel writing and history and I think that structure made it hard for me to really dig in. Ultimately, though, it offers some fascinating information about how people have and continue to fashion ethnicities and nationalities.

Laurie says

One of my most favorite books, Black Sea by Ascherson is difficult to classify. It's an examination of the layers upon layers of geography, civilizations, ecology and history of a parts of the Black Sea region interspersed with anecdotes of the author's travels in the area. In gorgeous prose, Ascherson, captures the essence of the Black Sea.

Wm says

Fascinating, perhaps tragic. Not for those who prefer history straight up--it's part memoir/travelogue (but not annoyingly soul), part nature writing, part history, part socio-cultural meditation.

Bob says

I really enjoyed this book. I picked it up in an Oxfam shop as background reading before going to Turkey on holiday. Ascheron tells the story of the peoples living round the Black Sea in an interesting way, mixing history with anecdotes from his many travels there. I knew nothing about the geography of the area, and even less about the peoples before I started. But now I feel I have a bit of an understanding of both.

Lyn Elliott says

When I first read this fascinating book I was most interested in Turkey. This time it has been recent events in the Ukraine that prompted me to re-read it and I realise that I had forgotten its scope; the range of Ascherson's knowledge and the acuity of his perception about the politics of identity in the regions connected with the Black Sea, from Lithuania to Abkhazia.

Although he wrote this nearly 20 years ago, his observations are completely relevant today. This is a must-read for understanding the cultures and politics of the region itself and particularly the present tensions between Russia and its former republics.
