

Enemy Shores? The Dilemmas of Writing Cold War Histories of the Black Sea

by Etienne Forestier-Peyrat

In his contribution, Forestier-Peyrat revisits the history of the Black Sea during Cold War, a period normally neglected by scholars of the region. Specifically, he attempts to synthesize two trends in modern Black-Sea historiography: an earlier genre of scholarship that emphasized geopolitical rivalries, and a more recent trend that has highlighted cultural and economic exchange. He argues for the existence of a permanent equilibrium between the two facets of realpolitik and culture. In the Black Sea region, conflicts, forced migrations and military tensions were simultaneously parts of a geopolitical horizon and elements of daily life for local populations. Official attempts to redefine the political geography of the region, through the promotion of tourism or the cutting off of trade, for example, were necessarily implemented in conversation with local memories of mobility or rivalry. In a conclusion, Forestier-Peyrat argues that the tension between local and geopolitical during the Cold War has not reached a clear resolution.

Key words: historiography, geopolitics, Cold War, borders, tourism

“Consigning the twentieth century to history,” Charles S. Maier famously argued, involves understanding its connections to “the emergence, ascendancy, and subsequent crisis of what is best labeled ‘territoriality.’”¹ While the observation may be made in general discussions of the past century, it is adjustable to a wide scope of regional settings, for which the 1990s meant a swift change of the dominating forms of territoriality, understood as the “geographical expression of social power.”² Writing a few years before Maier’s assessment, Y. Eyüp Özveren considered the twentieth century to be a “short century” for the Black Sea, a *mare clausum* dominated by the Soviet hegemon, and hypothesized that the twenty-first century would see the renewal of a polycentric commercial system connected to the global economy.³

While Özveren made this claim as an economic historian, Stefan Troebst approached the same transformation from the point of view of political and cultural identities in Central Europe, when he discussed the possible return of the Black Sea as an element of Polish national identity in the continuity of the *Intermarium* (pl. *Międzymorze*) concept developed in the 1920s-30s.⁴ While regional historiography has well-established traditions for studying the ancient, medieval or early modern history of the Black Sea,⁵ the Cold War, by contrast, appeared as a time of abrupt decline, for which historians of the Black Sea seemed to have little more to say

beyond discussions of rivalries for the Straits or military antagonism.

In recent years, however, new directions have been explored in Black Sea histories, with insights from historians and scholars of different geographical, linguistic, and disciplinary backgrounds. The most noticeable trend is probably the rise of cultural approaches to developments around the Black Sea space from the 1930s to the 1980s. A special issue recently devoted to Black Sea history put forward a “broadly epicurean theme, exploring the rich histories of wine, food, travel and leisure” and notably emphasized the growing historiography on tourism and leisure in the socialist Bloc in the 1950s and ’60s.⁶ New approaches to Turkish history during the Cold War—notably economic change and cultural mobilization—have also contributed to this reevaluation.⁷

What remains to be seen, though, is whether this new cultural approach to the Black Sea space during the Cold War can be reconciled with more traditional interpretations that emphasized great-power rivalry and military confrontation. The aim of this paper is to suggest the way these two historiographical generations could be combined to make sense of Black Sea history after the Second World War. Most importantly, I suggest paying more attention to events and spaces that highlight the permanent equilibrium between the two facets of *realpolitik* and culture.⁸ In this border region, conflicts, forced migrations and military tensions were simultaneously parts of a geopolitical horizon and elements of daily life for local populations. In particular, I emphasize the importance of collective memory—and forgetting—in the way populations made sense of their recent history and quickly reorganized mental maps of friendship and confrontation over just a few decades.

The Black Sea after 1945: Geopolitics and Rivalry

The revivalist interpretation of the Black Sea in the 1990s essentially relies upon the geopolitical divide in the region created by Turkey’s alignment with the United States and the Atlantic Alliance in the late 1940s. A few years earlier, Turkey had been a major hotspot of the early Cold War, due to Soviet dissatisfaction with Ankara’s highly ambiguous attitude during the World War.⁹ In February 1945, Stalin demanded at Yalta a transformation of the Straits regime established at the Montreux Conference (1936). This came as a shock to the Turks, who reminded Soviet leaders they had hailed the Straits regime as a sign of the friendship existing between “two energetic countries full of hope for the future.”¹⁰ Even before the question could be properly discussed, Foreign Commissar Molotov notified the Turkish ambassador, Sarper, of his government’s decision to denounce the Turkish-Soviet friendship treaty of December 1925.¹¹ With concern growing in Ankara, a mysterious explosion damaged the only border bridge that existed between Eastern Anatolia and the Armenian Soviet Republic, in Margara, on 30 May 1945: while probably an accident, this explosion testified to Ankara’s nervousness as

it was the direct result of the Turks secretly mining part of the bridge since the Second World War in order to prevent attacks against the Kars region.¹²

In June 1945, Molotov further suggested that the Soviet Union would like to build military bases along the Straits and implied that any general settlement with Turkey should include territorial adjustments—i.e., Turkish concessions of territory near the Soviet border. While this added another layer to the crisis in the Eastern Black Sea, Molotov's statement was followed in December by a letter published in *Pravda* and in the Georgian-language *Komunisti* by two Georgian historians, Simon Djanashia and Niko Berdzenishvili, who claimed for the Georgian SSR large tracts of land in Eastern Anatolia. Historical claims were made about the belonging of the Lazistan, Trabzon and Ardahan regions on the basis of travel accounts as well as ethnographic and archeological knowledge.¹³ Simultaneously, the Armenian diaspora mobilized to support Armenian claims to several Eastern Anatolian districts.¹⁴

This general narrative of geopolitical confrontation between the two predominant Black-Sea states may be followed well into the early 1950s. Turkish participation in the Korean War, a major event for public opinion, quickly led to Turkish integration in NATO (1952) and the Baghdad Pact (1955, soon to become CENTO).¹⁵ Turkey's heavy investment in security and intelligence cooperation to secure its northern and eastern borders was widely criticized in Soviet newspapers and radio propaganda.¹⁶ NATO integration for Turkey meant the establishment of U.S. military infrastructure in the country. While the major base was located in İncirlik near the Mediterranean, a network of observation stations in Samsun, Trabzon, Sinop, and Karamürsel focused on the Black Sea.¹⁷ Turkey was involved in the U.S.-sponsored launch of observation balloons (GOPHER Project) over the Soviet Union, leading to official representations by Soviet diplomacy in 1956, while the shooting down of a U2 spy plane based in Turkey sparked bilateral tensions.¹⁸

Local Dimensions of the Early Cold War

In order to reconnect this geopolitical history of the early Cold War on the Black Sea with cultural approaches to the 1950s-1960s, we need to examine the local consequences of this period. The Black Sea region often made headlines as a place where East-West borders—more aptly described in the regional context as a North-South divide—provided opportunities for incidents. Geopolitical rivalry translated into very local manifestations, as expressed by the Turkish government's decision in August 1945 to hand over to the USSR prisoners of war on the Anatolian border in an effort to court Soviet leaders. After the exchange resulted in a mass execution of prisoners, this "Bortalan tragedy" came back to haunt Kemalist politicians in the 1950s.¹⁹

Borders in the Western Balkans also involved numerous personal tragedies and conflicts, as relations between Bulgaria and its southern neighbors soured.

In October 1950, the Bulgarian Politburo had to examine simultaneously a border incident with Greece around disputed islands and a trade conflict with Turkish authorities, which had blocked 131 freight cars.²⁰ The Soviet-Bulgarian and Soviet-Turkish borders were increasingly mined and closed to any kind of traffic. Simultaneously, circulation along the Danube was severely restricted in comparison to what it had been a few years earlier, creating strong limits to regional trade. In Trabzon, British Consul Vorley Harris noted in June 1951 that transit trade between Iran and Central Europe had all but disappeared.²¹ Seafaring stagnated and the completion of a seaside road from Hopa to Samsun in the early 1950s put a stop to the “once prosperous *kayıık* trade” that had drawn state suspicion for the illicit circulations that it had made possible.

Only rarely did maritime connections allow for diplomatic openings. When the new Soviet ambassador Lavrishchev arrived in Ankara in February 1948, the Turkish press emphasized that the Soviets had recently made a few conciliatory steps, releasing a Turkish boat and its crew they had intercepted in Soviet waters, or easing the constraints weighing upon the Turkish consulate in Batumi, Georgia, an institution under strong Soviet pressure since it had witnessed the mass expulsions of the 1930s and was suspected of being a hotspot for Turkish propaganda among Muslims living in Adjara.²² Those were, however, small measures in comparison with the general climate of closure around the Black Sea.

Fear of spies and saboteurs entailed severe control of circulation and the targeting of some populations. Muslims, especially Turkish-speaking, of Bulgaria were under particular scrutiny and more than 150.000 of them emigrated at the end of 1950 to Turkey, significantly increasing tensions on both sides of the border.²³ The tensions that existed along the Black Sea contrasted with the already more flexible approach of neighboring Yugoslavia: In search of allies, it agreed in 1953 to a “free migration” agreement with Turkey.²⁴ While the Soviet Union had included as early as the 1930s many parts of its Black Sea shores in restricted access areas, similar measures were adopted across the region, in Turkey starting from the late 1930s. Discussing the state of mind among the “seafaring people” of the Rize province, Consul Harris noted that an “atmosphere of tension and suspicion becomes more and more pronounced as one approaches the Russian frontier.”²⁵ During the first years of the Cold War, unmasking and arresting spies became part of the political game that unraveled the history of connections and diversity in the region.²⁶

Faces of the Thaw on the Black Sea

With a diplomatic note sent on 30 May 1953, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov solemnly abandoned all territorial claims against Turkey. Soviet diplomats started to diligently notify Turkey of the passage of all Soviet military ships across the Bosphorus, in a ostensible effort to repudiate former claims concerning the Straits

regime, and, one month later, the Soviet Union took part in the Izmir trade fair for the first time²⁷. All these steps testified to an attempt to reverse the place of the Black Sea in international relations. In its attempt to mend relations with Turkey, the new Soviet leadership obviously tried to reject the blame for the 1945-1946 crisis, pointing to the role played by the “Georgians” Beria and Stalin. In a private conversation with Turkish ambassador Seyfullah Esin in late 1955, Khrushchev hinted clearly at the removal of sinister Caucasian influences on Soviet foreign policy.²⁸

Simultaneously, Khrushchev and his associates accelerated the development of mass tourism and leisure institutions across the Soviet Union, particularly along the Black Sea, as part of their program of breaking with Stalin’s legacy. On 1 June 1959, a landmark decision by the Soviet Council of Ministers established a blueprint for building resorts, sanatoria, hotels and leisure facilities across the country, while other socialist countries followed suit. Bulgaria, Crimea, the Sochi area and Georgia became busy resorts and enjoyed an iconic status in the imaginary of “Red tourism” that was widely reflected in popular culture, for example in movies such as *To the Black Sea* (1957).²⁹ The zone had become a place of informal encounters between Eastern and, less frequently, Western Europeans, a situation conducive to cultural influences, but also to black market activities and unapproved forms of sexual intercourse.³⁰ Foreign tourism to and from the Soviet Union had been considerably eased in 1954–’55, but Soviet citizens still gave a premium to summer holidays on the Black Sea, with regions such as Abkhazia and Adjara, in the Georgian SSR, conveying a highly exotic appeal to tourists from the Soviet West, while the Baltic republics were appreciated as a place of tourism for their “European” look³¹. More than 230,000 Soviet tourists flocked to Adjara every year in the Brezhnev period, with increasing numbers of “wild” tourists who overwhelmed existing infrastructure.³²

In Central Europe, Bulgaria was a myth of a sort, having established in 1948 a state tourism operator (*Balkantourist*) in order to develop socialist mass tourism and popular resorts, with a clear preference for seaside facilities. By the 1970s, it had become the seventh largest tourism company worldwide and managed an extensive network of hotels, resorts, and leisure facilities on the “Red Riviera.”³³ The promotion of socialist modes of consumption and leisure was fully part of the new forms global competition and the Black Sea space was definitely one of the most important arenas for a demonstration of the relative affluence of socialism. The junction of geopolitical and cultural aspects of the Cold War in Bulgaria was demonstrated by Khrushchev’s famous speech in the Bulgarian town of Varna on 16 May 1962. The Soviet leader called for the Black Sea to become a space of peace and criticized Turkey’s Western alliance.³⁴ But his speech also hailed the quick development of “our Black Sea coast” as a space of prosperity and leisure, as opposed to NATO’s militarism.³⁵ Indeed, while Turkey experienced a similar

tourism boom in the 1960s (168,000 foreign tourists in 1964 compared to 415,000 in 1967), it was almost exclusively concentrated on the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, leaving the Black Sea area, in tourism terms, as a backwater exposed to the Soviet threat.

While the Black Sea could be promoted as a socialist space of prosperity, it simultaneously had to be erased as a potentially contentious issue from a geopolitical point of view. Quite telling in this regard was the difference between Soviet-Turkish official visits organized in the 1930s, when Turkey and the USSR shared a joint “anti-imperialist agenda,” and the 1960s. This resumption of official delegations at government and ministry level was widely presented as a return to interwar practices of friendship, good-neighborliness and economic cooperation. Premier Kosygin’s trip to Turkey in December 1966 and President Cevdet Sunay’s visit to the Soviet Union in November 1969 could easily be compared to İnönü’s trip as Prime Minister to the Soviet Union in 1932 and Voroshilov’s stay in Turkey on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Turkish republic.³⁶

A major difference resided, however, in the erasure of the Black Sea dimension in these visits. İnönü had staged his departure in April 1932 from the Bosphorus on the *Gruzia* as a major public event.³⁷ Voroshilov had acted similarly when boarding his ship to Turkey on 25 October 1933.³⁸ Technological changes now allowed top politicians to privilege air over sea travel. However, there was a more symbolic dimension to the receding of the maritime dimension in USSR-Turkish relations. There was no more desire to put the sea itself at the center of bilateral cooperation, since it was another reminder of the world division and the tensions of the immediate postwar period. Forgetting the Black Sea could be seen as a way to improve relations between the Blocs, as demonstrated by wider transformations in the collective memory of populations throughout the region. Narratives about past events such as migrations, mass violence, or revolutions were largely submitted to pressure and silencing, surviving in the form of subaltern memories at the local level. In Northern Turkey and Balkan countries, this was particularly true as far as past relations with ethnic minorities were concerned, through efforts to tear down historical and religious buildings or turn them to new uses.³⁹

Integration(s) and Autarky Around the Sea

Détente did not significantly alter the economic division of the Black Sea space, despite a few attempts to use the Danube basin to promote cooperation in the region.⁴⁰ The Eastern Bloc amounted to 16.8 percent of Turkish imports and 18.4 percent of Turkish exports in 1957, but its share decreased to approximately 7.6 percent in both directions by 1961 as integration with Western Europe and the US grew.⁴¹ The Black Sea dimension has probably remained one of the least-studied aspects of regional integration in the East. In part, this may be related to the challenges posed by Romania since the mid-1960s, after its break with economic

integration plans of the COMECON in 1964 and the increasingly autonomous course followed by its leadership that provoked a nested Cold War within the Eastern Bloc.⁴² Tensions mounted on the border between Romania and the Soviet republics of Ukraine and Moldova, accelerating plans to achieve a canal between Danube and Black Sea in in South Romania, out of Soviet reach, and adding new spatial rifts to the map.⁴³

Simultaneously, the Turkish Black Sea coastal region (*Karadeniz*) benefited little from Turkey's integration to the European Economic Community, except as a pool for rising outward migration, a fact constantly emphasized by local elites to foreign visitors.⁴⁴ When presenting the situation of his region to British diplomat P.H. Laurence, the rector of Erzurum University complained: "This is an underdeveloped country."⁴⁵ The economic and political rise of Iran in the 1970s and the difficulty Iran still had with trade transit through the USSR⁴⁶ led some to present combined sea-land transportation through Eastern Anatolia as an alternative route to meet the needs of Iran's Northeastern provinces. But Laurence witnessed the stagnation of Black Sea Turkish ports and the lack of investment in Hopa, which remained the most important among them. Concerning road transportation, he noted: "On my journey out I passed scores of TIR trucks rumbling slowly eastwards, with rather smaller numbers coming west. The greatest number, as always, were Bulgarian, followed by Romanian and Turkish, with a scattering of Yugoslav, Greek, Iranian and Austrian."⁴⁷

The *Karadeniz* did not enjoy in the Turkish imaginary the appeal of the Black Sea in Communist Europe, being mainly understood as a repository of conservatism and marginal ethnic identities, notably in the Laz region.⁴⁸ They shared, however, some parallel changes since the 1930s with the rise of new forms of cultivation (citrus and tea) that transformed local landscapes and societies.⁴⁹ The cultivation of tea was imported in the 1930s from Adjara to Turkish Eastern Black Sea provinces thanks to official and private efforts, and fully developed in the 1950s.⁵⁰ But, as Mathijs Pelkmans emphasizes, citrus and tea cultivation and tourism thrived in Soviet regions such as Adjara because they were "the outer limit of the Soviet world" and such crops were deliberately developed to replace regional trade.⁵¹ At the same time, Turkish tea cultivators were progressively affected by the liberalizing trends that characterized the country in the 1980s, leading to the end of the state monopoly on tea (*Çaykur*) in 1986.

Local Factors in Late Cold War Tensions

Indeed, the 1980s were a time of uncertainty in East-West relations in general, and Turkey was an obvious candidate for a surge in political and military tensions after the Iranian revolution erupted and the Soviet Army intervened in Afghanistan in late December 1979. The Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) circulated inflammatory materials against Soviet aggression and lamented the fact

that “some among the new generations who do not know about the War of ’93 [the Turco–Russian War of 1877–’78] and are unaware of the oppression Turks and Muslims are suffering in the Soviet Union prefer the Communist International anthem to the Turkish national anthem.”⁵² Overall, however, Turkish and Soviet leaders pursued a businesslike relationship throughout the early 1980s, although official propaganda in the borderlands called for increased vigilance to “defend the border.”

The rise of infrastructural and economic interdependence played a major role in the persistence of cooperation in the Black Sea basin. In June 1978, a political agreement between the two countries settled the delimitation of the continental shelf in the Black Sea and regulated the use of foreign military bases in the region.⁵³ Negotiations concerning Soviet gas supplies took off in the early 1980s, at a time when the USSR was involved in a controversy with the Euro-Siberia gas pipeline.⁵⁴ In September 1984, a protocol was signed to lay down the framework for Soviet sales of gas to Turkey through the Black Sea, in exchange for food and industrial goods. Turkish newspapers incidentally mentioned that a land pipeline connecting Eastern Turkey to that Soviet Caucasus had been requested by the Turks, but that the Soviets had declined on the grounds that the South Caucasian republics were already dependent on neighboring Iran to cover their own consumption since the early 1970s.⁵⁵

While such matter-of-fact explanations could indeed be raised by Soviet planners and economic managers, the failure of this project was not entirely unrelated to tension that existed along Caucasian borders. The most obvious among these tensions was the question of genocide and the push made in Soviet Armenia for its recognition; the effect of these tensions was expressed explicitly by Turkish ambassador Cankardeş, in May 1984, saying that “Soviet statements about wishing to have good neighbourly relations with Turkey were belied by the Soviet attitude on Armenia.”⁵⁶ The mass demonstrations that happened in Yerevan in April 1965, on the 50th anniversary of the genocide, revealed the challenge of national feelings and memories to the narrative of good-neighborliness, especially as they enjoyed support among officials in Armenia. The development of Armenian terrorism in the late 1970s and early 1980s created a highly perilous situation for Soviet leaders who perceived its disruptive power.⁵⁷ Soviet central diplomats and many members of the Politburo hesitated about the course to follow in the tension between domestic and international issues throughout the decade.⁵⁸

The growing international assertion of Soviet Union republics since the end of the Second World War meant republican leaders enjoyed wider leverage in the sphere of international relations.⁵⁹ The Armenian representative to the Soviet-Turkish border commission almost created a scandal during the final stage of the negotiations held in Ankara in December 1973 when he refused to sign the agreement and looked for support among the leadership of Armenia.⁶⁰ While

Soviet-Turkish cooperation lived on in the management of the dam at the border; the specifically Armenian dimension of the relationship was a source of tensions. These tensions were all the more striking since the leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, ostensibly support a Turkish-Soviet diplomatic rapprochement and his promotion to the Moscow Politburo in late 1982 enhanced his influence. He warmly welcomed Turkish statesmen coming to the Soviet Union, lobbied for closer relations in the field of trade and culture, and held particular interest in the Azeri émigré community in Turkey.⁶¹ As the 1980s moved on, domestic and international aspects of the Azerbaijani-Armenian-Turkish nexus evolved into the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis during the Perestroika⁶².

The place of regional actors in Black Sea tensions during the 1980s was part of a general trend in the evolution of the late Cold War. Bulgaria once again came to the fore of regional tensions, due to the harsh treatment inflicted upon Muslim minorities in the country. After several years of socio-political incitement to full assimilation, a mass campaign against Turkish names and manifestations of Turkishness started in South Eastern Bulgaria in the winter of 1984. By 1985, Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov famously stated that “there are no Turks in Bulgaria.”⁶³ Until the end of the Cold War, the situation of Turkish speakers and Muslims in Bulgaria remained a major source of conflict between Turkey, supported by the NATO, and its Eastern neighbors. The policies pursued by Bulgaria, considered a major ally of the Soviet Union, were perceived as involving Soviet responsibility, despite Gorbachev’s efforts to include the Black Sea in his new strategic thinking on disarmament and peaceful cooperation.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Black Sea history during the Cold War consisted of a permanent interplay between global and local trends, as well as between geopolitics and lived experiences in the region. Ten years before the end of the confrontation, a Georgian citizen petitioned Leonid Brezhnev that permanent maritime routes be established between Turkish and Soviet ports as part of a Black Sea contribution to Détente.⁶⁵ The letter, written a few days after the bloody 1980 military coup in Turkey, imagined that this initiative would open “new perspectives, maybe roadtrips to Turkey and many other important issues in the field of mutual cultural enrichment.” While in contradiction with the official tone of the moment, the letter captured the rise of structural interdependence in the region.

Beyond infrastructures, this interdependence was also based on a growing awareness of the environmental hazards that threatened the Black Sea. Water pollution and eutrophication was a scourge throughout the region and severely threatened fisheries in the late 1980s.⁶⁶ The desolate port landscape that featured in Vasili Pichul’s highly successful film *Little Vera (Malen'kaya Vera)* was in itself an emblem for the need to “save the Black Sea” as more and more people

and organizations emphasized.⁶⁷ As socialist regimes crumbled, this slogan was progressively replaced by initiatives to base a reintegration of the Black Sea space upon market and liberalism, an idea that was quickly embraced by Turgut Özal's Turkey in an attempt to gain leadership in the region through the *Black Sea Economic Cooperation* (BSEC) that embodied its values.⁶⁸

The end of the Cold War did not, however, represent a clear-cut divide for the Black Sea in the sense of returning to what this space had been half a century earlier. Empires had crumbled, peoples had been deported or exterminated, ideologies had failed across the region. This violent history, however, was not the yet the object of any consensus in the collective memory of the region and official narratives still held sway. In 1992, Turkish historian Erol Mütercimler published a detailed study of Bolshevik-Kemalist interactions during what is known as the Turkish War of Independence. The book, as made plain from its very title, *Support Coming from the Sea*, focused on the Black Sea as a space of assistance between revolutionary and anti-imperialist forces.⁶⁹ Ironically, what had been somehow conceived as a tribute to improved Turkish-Soviet relations praised cooperation between two vanishing ideologies. Post-Socialism and Post-Kemalism were now on the agenda and Kemalist ships bringing Bolshevik weapons to the Turkish shore were replaced by shuttle trade and traffic of all kinds from one end to the other of the Black Sea.⁷⁰

About the author

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