

Crimean Water Wars

by **Ridvan Bari Urcosta** - January 25, 2021

Water supplies in Crimea are critically low. Larger cities are tightly rationing their use, and stricter restrictions may soon be in the offing. Ecologically, this is a dire situation for the peninsula. Geopolitically, it's bad news for Russia, since the collapse of Crimean agriculture and industry would create an untenable situation for Russia's hold over a critical asset in the Black Sea, a key region of strategic, military and sacral importance. Moscow understands as much and is prepared to do whatever it takes to remedy the situation.

The Value of Crimea

Because of its location on the north coast of the Black Sea, Crimea has been a geopolitical prize for centuries. The Greeks, Romans and Ottomans all laid claim to it at some point or another, with Russia taking control in 1783. (Ukraine had held it for only a brief period, from 1991 to 2014.) It immediately became one of Russia's windows to the world's oceans and to the Middle East. Even now, Sevastopol, the peninsula's largest city, is home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, without which Moscow would not be able to, for example, conduct its current military campaign in Syria. Along with Kaliningrad, the Russian exclave on the southern portion of the Baltic Sea, Crimea is one of Russia's first lines of defense and an important tool in its anti-access/area-denial strategy. Unsurprisingly, Crimea is one of the most militarized regions of the Black Sea, posing an immediate danger to Ukraine, Georgia and NATO members such as Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania.



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Its strategic value cannot be overstated. The annexation of Crimea in 1783 made Russia a Black Sea power, with ambitions of conquering the areas that were under Ottoman control. It's no coincidence that the decline of the Ottoman Empire began when Russia started to block the empire's access to its allies in Eastern Europe. (To this day, Crimea is still a check on Turkish influence.) Every belligerent in the revolutions of 1917 vied for control of the peninsula, for they knew that without it, it was impossible to establish full and permanent control over southern Russia and Eastern Europe. Crimea has thus been a target and a haven in nearly every modern war Russia has been a part of, including World War II and, of course, the Crimean War. (Not for nothing, the peninsula has sacral importance for Orthodox Slavs, especially the Chersonesus people. There, the kings of old Kievan Rus were converted to Orthodox Christianity. In a broader sense for eastern Slavic people, it was a portal to the rest of Europe.)

Having lost Crimea at the end of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union collapsed, modern Russia knew it wanted it back. It was simply too vulnerable to Western threats without it. So back it went to Russia in 2014, when President Vladimir Putin ordered its annexation.

Guns vs. Butter

But annexation meant that Moscow would have to govern, and in that regard it faced some unique challenges. For one, it had to keep Crimea independent of Ukrainian utilities and provide the peninsula, with which it is not connected by land, with its own. It achieved as much shortly thereafter, laying cables in the Sea of Azov to provide Crimea with communications and energy. But it was never able to provide it with water, a problem that culminated in 2020. Ukraine had been meeting about 85 percent of Crimea's water needs through the North Crimean Canal, which runs from the Dnieper River, but abruptly stopped to induce Russia to end the occupation. Climate change compounded the problem. Over the past few years, low rainfall in the Black Sea region has affected just about every area, but none more so than Crimea. 2020 was consequently the driest year in Crimean history (or at least since records began 150 years ago).

Meanwhile, the population is increasing in Crimea. Before 2014, roughly 2 million people lived there. That figure dipped slightly as pro-Ukraine Crimeans left for the mainland, but Russian migrants quickly offset the difference and then some. Now, there are as many as 4 million people living on the peninsula, according to Russian statistics. Ukraine has its own figures, which naturally conflict with Russia's, and the area is rife with tourists. So while the exact population is a matter of debate, it's clear that the numbers are going up, with a military and industrial presence to boot.

It's no wonder that Crimea's water deficit has long since been a problem. In 2013, the total volume of water withdrawn was roughly 1.6 billion cubic meters. By 2017, it was only 301 million cubic meters. Just a few months ago, it had less than 20 percent of its water reserves left in its reservoirs. Snowy and rainy winters usually bring these levels up, but 2020 was too dry to do so.

Russia's plan, then, is to provide water to Crimea by developing a sophisticated system that would diversify its sources away from Ukraine. The deadline for this strategy is 2024. Between now and then, Moscow intends to do any combination of the following:

- drill new wells that can reach underground waters (notably, if Russia exhausts this resource, it will eventually destroy the Crimean agricultural sector)
- build dams and hydrostations on Crimean rivers

- renovate the water supply system
- exploit the underground waters beneath the Sea of Azov
- construct desalination plants (Russia has allocated \$106 million for these projects)
- transfer water through pipelines from the Don and Kuban rivers
- artificially increase the amount of precipitation (rainfall and snowfall) in Crimea through the use of airplanes

While the total bill for this plan is unclear, Russia has earmarked some \$653 million for it already. In lieu of this plan, and perhaps in addition to it, there is also a looming military option.

Russia would need additional territories in southern Ukraine to establish full control over the North Crimean Canal to help offset the water shortages. Hypothetically, Russia would have to occupy the entire zone of the canal that is still under Ukrainian control – about 100 kilometers (62 miles) of it. But this is easier said than done. Ukraine and its allies are developing a sophisticated system of defenses and bases for preventing just such a scenario. The Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service several times warned leaders in Kyiv and the West about the dangers of a Russian water takeover, and that Russia is already training for it. Moreover, the former commander of U.S Forces in Europe said that Ukraine must continue the water blockade of Crimea and avoid any concessions to Russia on this issue.

Alternatively, Russia could destroy the dam on the Dnieper River, using the humanitarian crisis in Crimea as pretext. Either way, Ukrainian intelligence believes the worse Washington's domestic problems get, the higher the possibility that either of these scenarios will be realized. In December 2020, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned Russia that it would be grounds for war. Even so, the military option should be seen as a last resort, one that will be exercised only if, after all others are exhausted, Russia stands to lose its control over this hugely important area. Water security is a regional issue, and one that this part of the world will continue to struggle with for years to come.

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