

Reflections on Russia and Crimea: “Helping to Achieve Peace”

By [Daniel Kovalik](#) and [Rick Sterling](#)
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We spent nearly 20 days in Russia, including 5 days in Crimea. During our journey, we spent around 70 hours in trains riding in close quarters with Russians who we had never met before but who freely shared food and drink with us. Indeed, throughout our travels, we were treated invariably with kindness, generosity and hospitality. When people realized that we spoke English and were from the States, they tried very hard to communicate with us and to make sure that we, as visitors in their land, were comfortable and taken care of. In short, it was clear to us that while many Americans may hate Russia and even Russians themselves, this hatred is not returned in kind.

One anecdote is illustrative of such treatment. About half an hour into our 27-hour train ride from Crimea to Moscow, Rick realized that he had left his money belt, with around \$2000 in cash, back in his Moscow hotel room safe.

This hotel had a quaint name in English – the Sunflower Avenue Hotel – and is located around the corner from the biggest mosque in Europe. Rick called the hotel and informed them of what had happened, and, after some back and forth to make sure that Rick was the true owner of the money, the hotel management said they would give it to anyone we designated to retrieve it.

We got a hold of a friend in Moscow, Yulia, who went to the hotel and took possession of the money belt. And, because our plan was to travel back from Crimea directly to St. Petersburg, and not to return to Moscow, Yulia also arranged for a friend of hers to bring the belt to St. Petersburg – a city located at least 4 hours by train from Moscow. Within a few hours of our returning there a week later, this friend drove up to the hotel and handed the belt to Rick outside of our hotel. And, not a dollar was missing. Obviously, this could have turned out much differently given how many times the money belt had to change hands before getting back to Rick and given that all involved knew that if we never saw some or all of the money again there would have been little we could do about it given that we were not returning to Moscow and would soon be leaving for the United States. Our faith in humanity

remained intact from the experience.

The other place where we witnessed that the hate goes only one way is in Crimea – a peninsula on the Black Sea which has changed hands from Russia to the Soviet Union to Ukraine and back to Russia and which has three main distinct ethnic groups. These three ethnic groups are Russians which make up around 65% of the Crimean population, Ukrainians which are 16 percent of the population and Tatars who are around 13 percent. While there are these different ethnic groups, over 80 percent of the Crimeans speak Russian on a daily basis.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in December of 1991 and Ukraine's taking control of the peninsula in spite of a January, 1991 referendum in which 94% of Crimeans voted to become an autonomous Republic, Ukraine moved quickly to try to "Ukrainize" Crimea along with the Russian-speaking Donbas region of Ukraine. What this meant in practice was outlawing Russian as a national language and as a language taught in schools, and attempting to eradicate Russian culture and historical monuments. This process accelerated after the 2014 coup in Kiev which brought to power a right-wing government quite hostile to Ukraine's own Russian population. It was this open hostility which led Crimeans to hold a referendum to rejoin Russia – a referendum in which, with an 83 percent voter turnout, 97 percent of the voters cast their vote for Russian reunification.

For its part, the Ukrainian government moved to punish the Crimean people for their decision to return to Russia. Thus, Ukraine dammed a canal which fed Crimea with fresh water and cut off electricity to Crimea, resulting in Crimeans suffering from a lack of electricity for months. While Zelensky and the US are escalating their threats that Ukraine will somehow "recapture" Crimea, this type of spiteful mistreatment of Crimea, combined with the periodic drone attacks against civilian targets in Crimea, have guaranteed that Crimea will never willingly go back to Ukraine.



Image source: Суспільне Крим

Ukraine dammed the canal supplying Crimea's reservoirs with fresh water.

Despite this ill treatment, neither Russia nor the Crimean local government have treated the

Ukrainians in Crimea as Ukraine had treated their Russian population. Thus, far from outlawing the Ukrainian language, the Crimean parliament as far back as 1998 passed a law memorializing Russian, Ukrainian and Tatar as the official languages of Crimea. This was passed in response to Ukraine's 1998 law designating Ukraine only as the national language. Even after the 2014 referendum, the Crimean law respecting and protecting all three national languages continues to be the law of Crimea. In addition, while Ukraine moved to destroy Russian and Soviet monuments in Crimea, there was no retaliation to do the same to Ukrainian monuments. As just one example, Irina Alexiava pointed out to us the statue of famous Ukrainian poet, Lesya Ukrainka, which still stands in a prominent spot in Yalta, Crimea and which had fresh flowers laid at it.



Crimeans honor Ukrainian poet Lesya Ukrainka. Photo Dan Kovalik.

As for the Crimean Tatars, the Russian government moved swiftly to try to make good relations with this group after the 2014 Crimean referendum. As many may know, the Tatars had been persecuted during WWII as suspected collaborators and forcibly removed from Crimea to other Soviet Republics. However, many have moved back to Crimea, and, as noted above, make up about 13 percent of Crimea's population. One of the first things

President Putin did after Crimea returned to Russia in 2014 was to officially “rehabilitate” them from the claims of collaboration made by the Stalin government, give them land they protested for in Crimea, provide them with modest monetary reparations and build a new Mosque for them in Crimea. This Mosque, once completed, will be one of the biggest in all of Russia.

Still, readers may fairly ask about Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine, and whether this shows antipathy on the part of the Russian government and the Russian people towards Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. What we found in talking to people throughout our journey was that while nearly everyone believes that the current war, while regrettable, was necessary to defend both Russia and the Russian-speaking population within Ukraine, they nonetheless do not bear ill-will toward either Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. Rather, their issue is with the right-wing government in Kiev, the government’s neo-Nazi allies and above all NATO which they perceive as the puppet master of these forces.

The people with whom we met during our journey to St. Petersburg, Moscow and Crimea made it clear that the Ukrainians are their “brothers and sisters,” and many Russians have friends and family within Ukraine. In addition, Russia has welcomed more Ukrainian refugees (over 5 million since February of 2022) than any other country. Many refugees have resettled in Crimea.

The Russians we met spoke quite somberly about the war, regretting the huge loss of life on both sides of the conflict, and expressing frustration and concern about how long the war is lasting and how many more will die as a result. In addition, Russians are reasonably fearful that the war may expand into something greater and something more terrible – for example, a world war that might involve nuclear weapons. This fear was magnified when a drone attack, which the US government has now admitted was most likely launched by Ukraine, damaged the Kremlin during our stay.

May 9 Victory Day in Russia was subdued because of terrorist threats but on the streets, many families still remembered their family members who died in WW2. Having been invaded many times, Russians are much more fearful of war than Americans. The overwhelming sentiment we heard is they want the Ukraine conflict to end and “peace and friendship” with the US.



Families honor their relatives who died in WW2. Photo Rick Sterling.

In the end, whatever one thinks of the war which is taking place in Ukraine and which is now bleeding into Russia as well, we believe that the primary goal of those living in the US must be to do everything we can to prevail upon our government to de-escalate this situation which is at grave risk of spiraling out of control and threatening humanity itself. Instead of fueling the flames of war with more weapons and munitions to Ukraine, our government should encourage instead of opposing a negotiated solution to the conflict and the offer to help broker negotiations by countries like China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

One of the first steps in helping achieve peace is being willing to look at the world as our adversaries, including Russia, do, and being willing to make concessions to their legitimate security concerns. This is how the Cuban Missile Crisis was solved, for example, and this is how the current crisis can be solved.

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Dan Kovalik is a human rights attorney and author of seven books.

Rick Sterling is a journalist based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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[Rick Sterling](#)

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