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# Catherine the Great's Foreign Policy Reconsidered

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## Abstract

Catherine II's foreign policy has been traditionally considered very successful. She won three wars and incorporated large territories into the Russian Empire making her country one of Europe's great powers. But arguments for this kind of evaluation miss Catherine's own perspective. The article argues that the empress failed to reach any of the initial goals she had put forward. Her foreign policy lacked a considered long-term strategy and from the very start was characterized by a series of mistakes. Catherine did turn Russia into a great power but with quite a different reputation from what she initially had planned.

## Keywords

Historiography – Catherine the Great – Russian foreign policy – Russia as great power – Russian-Turkish wars; partitions of Poland – Prussia; Austria – armed neutrality – Catherine II's "Greek project" – Grigorii Aleksandrovich Potemkin

Catherine the Great's foreign policies traditionally have been considered the most glorious and successful part of her reign.<sup>1</sup> Russian historians usually follow eighteenth-century official propaganda and Catherine's contemporaries in praising her military victories over the Turks and Swedes and in celebrating the incorporation of Right-Bank Ukraine, Belorussia, Lithuania and the Crimea into the Russian Empire. These historians enjoy citing the Empress's vice-chancellor, Aleksandr Andreevich Bezborodko, who insisted that, under Catherine, no cannon in Europe could be fired without permission from

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1 See for instance Vasilii Osipovich Kliuchevskii's lecture LXXVI in his *Lecture Course on Russian history*.

St. Petersburg. They therefore emphasize Russia's position as a "great power" at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Most Western historians describe Catherine's foreign policies as aggressive and expansionist, but also regard them as great successes. But what are the criteria for making these judgments?

Russia won all three wars that took place under Catherine, and it became one of the five great powers that dominated Europe in the late eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Catherine's acquisition of new territories struck many observers as a positive development almost by definition, yet, as Hamish Marshall Scott argues, the criteria of measuring success in foreign policy gradually changed in the eighteenth century. He notes: "Success within the early modern system had been measured primarily in terms of military victories and the conquest of new territories to which these led," but "during the eighteenth century a more modern notion of power came to be developed, particularly in central Europe." The new notion of power was "a function of one state's strength in relation to that of its competitors," based on the statistical measurement "of the available economic, demographic and even geographical resources."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in the eighteenth century there appeared new rules of international conduct that had to be obeyed if a polity wanted to be considered a civilized member of the international community. These rules limited the legitimate ways of gaining new territories, and they forced rulers to take into account how new emergent public opinion might react to official policies. The public weighed whether or not a given policy was consistent with international laws and agreements and whether the policy comported with the morals shared by those who considered themselves civilized and enlightened. Russia had gradually become part of the European realm since the reign of Peter the Great, so it was especially important for Catherine the Great to be considered civilized and to be praised by European public opinion. It should, therefore, be no surprise that in the Catherinian period the first doubts appeared about whether or not the Russian Empire really needed new lands.<sup>5</sup>

2 Compare nineteenth-century historian Alexander Brückner [Aleksandr Brikner], *Istoriia Ekateriny Vtoroi* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia A.S. Suvorina, 1885), 261–262 and a contemporary historian Vladlen Nikolaevich Vinogradov, "Diplomatiiia Ekateriny Velikoi," *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia* 3 (2001): 131–150.

3 Hamish Marshall Scott, *The Emergence of the Eastern Powers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

4 Scott, *The Emergence of the Eastern Powers*, 8.

5 Catherine's young son and the future Emperor Paul I (ruled 1796–1801) argued this way in 1774. Prior to that, Zakhar Grigor'evich Chernyshev in 1763 started his plan for the acquisition of some Polish territories by asserting that Russia had no need for any new lands. See "Politicheskaiia perezpiska Imperatritsy Ekateriny II, part 2 (1764–1766)," published by F.A.

The German historian Claus Scharf has shown in his 1995 book, *Catherine II, Germany and the Germans*, that the results of Catherine's foreign policies were not as glorious as one might think. By the end of her reign, Russia was rapidly losing her authority as a guarantor of peace and stability in Central Europe. European public opinion became disappointed with Russian policies. The Göttingen historians criticized the Empress for abolishing the Polish republic, with its constitution of May 1791.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1990s, I tried to draw attention to another aspect of the same problem – namely that Catherine's foreign policies produced many serious problems that had not been fully resolved even by the end of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, one may evaluate Catherine's foreign policies based on what her subjects and foreigners thought of them, or based on the actual consequences of these policies. Another possible way of judging these policies is to gauge Catherine's foreign policies from her own point of view. To what extent did the results of her policies correspond her goals? Was she satisfied with them?

Here we must identify Catherine's initial goals after her ascent to the Russian throne in June 1762. We must, of course, keep in mind that these goals changed over time in response to actual circumstances and events. In 1762, she was a newcomer to the international arena, lacking in practical experience but possessing great ambitions, qualities that were certainly insufficient for working out a long-term strategy. Russian historian Evgenii Viktorovich Tarle mentioned decades ago that the morals guiding Catherine's foreign policies were "standard morals, no worse, no better."<sup>8</sup> Still, one may presume that, being a true disciple of the enlighteners, the Russian Empress would have been mostly idealistic at the beginning of her reign and much more cynical at the end.

The Ottoman Empire and the Polish Commonwealth were at the center of Catherine's foreign policies throughout the thirty-four years of her reign. The Ottoman Empire had been Russia's rival since at least the middle of the seventeenth century when the left-bank Ukraine became part of Muscovy.<sup>9</sup> Poland became a problem somewhat unexpectedly and only with the change of

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Biuler, *Sbornik imperatorskogo rossiiskogo istoricheskogo obshchestva* [SIRIO], vol. 51 (St. Petersburg: Tipografia M.A. Aleksandrova, 1886): 9–10.

6 Claus Scharf, *Katharina II., Deutschland und die deutschen* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1995), 447–48.

7 Aleksandr Borisovich Kamenskii, "Pod seniū Ekateriny". *Vtoraia polovina XVIII veka* (St. Petersburg: Lenizdat, 1992), 341–348.

8 Evgenii Viktorovich Tarle, *Ekaterina II i ee diplomatiia* (Moscow: s.n. Stenogramma lektssii, chitannoi 7 maia 1945 g.), 5.

9 For reasons of Russian strategic interest in the basin of the Black Sea, see John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700–1917. The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 89–90.

power in St. Petersburg in 1762. Several decades before, in 1726, Andrei Ivanovich Ostermann, then vice-chancellor of the Russian Empire, wrote a lengthy treatise on the main problems and goals of Russian foreign policy. The treatise consisted of several chapters, each devoted to relations with one of the European powers. Poland was not among them. Ostermann mentioned it only in connection with Courland and Prussia.<sup>10</sup> Ostermann was in fact the architect of Russian foreign policy for the next several decades, the initiator of a treaty of alliance with the Habsburg Empire that was signed in the same year. Empress Elizabeth (ruled 1741–61) sent him into exile in January 1742, but her foreign policy remained consistent with Ostermann's until her death in December 1761.

The Russian historian Maksim Iur'evich Anisimov, who has recently published two monographs on Russian foreign policy in the middle of the eighteenth century and during the Seven Years' War, has observed that, throughout this period, the Russian government paid little attention to Poland, choosing rather to focus more on other European countries.<sup>11</sup> He argues that Russia "considered international law and the interests of other powers, and did not want to be equated with the European derelict Frederick II of Prussia,"<sup>12</sup> who was violating international law. According to Anisimov, "the problem of establishing Russian domination in Poland became the main concern of Catherinian diplomacy. Meanwhile, the reasons for the role of Polish affairs in Russian foreign policy at the beginning of the reign of Catherine II are still in the shadow."<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Catherine was very ambitious in advancing her political goals. She saw the main goal of her reign as reforming Russia according to the principles she had borrowed from the enlighteners. She believed that domestic reforms would make the Russian people flourish, and would transform the Russian Empire into a leading European power and into an example for other nations. To secure these objectives, Catherine needed not only to introduce new laws inside the country but also to be an active player at the international arena. Catherine's most serious problem in 1762 was her lack of political legitimacy, for her seizure of power was illegal. She was an usurper. To keep the

10 Andrei Ivanovich Ostermann, "General'noe sostoianie del i interesov vserossiiskikh so vsemi sosednimi stranami i drugimi inostrannymi gosudarstvami v 1726 godu," *Severnyi arkhiv* 1–2 (1828): 3–61.

11 Maksim Iur'evich Anisimov, *Rossiiskaia diplomatia v Evrope v seredine XVIII veka* (Moscow: Tovarichestvo nauchnykh izdaniĭ KMK, 2012), 277.

12 Anisimov, *Semiletniaia voina i rossiiskaia diplomatia v 1756–1763 gg.* (Moscow: KMK, 2014), 409.

13 Anisimov, *Semiletniaia voina*, 433.

throne, she needed to gain authority among her subjects, starting with those who had assisted her in the coup d'état of 28 June 1762 and who doubted that she could rule by herself. One of the ways to do so, was to prove that she was a wise and independent politician who could work out and conduct policies of her own. The situation for this was most favorable.

Catherine's husband and predecessor, Emperor Peter III, had discarded Ostermann's pro-Austrian system of Russian foreign policy by signing a peace treaty and an agreement of alliance with Prussia. Peter's sympathy for Prussia was not popular with the Russian public and was one of the reasons for his overthrow. Nevertheless, thanks to Peter III's blunder, Catherine had a chance to work out policies of her own. This required time, and at first, she neither renewed the war with Prussia nor ratified the agreement of alliance. She was looking for a strong, new, and effective action. It was in this context that Poland became the center of the agenda.

The idea of using the Polish issue probably first came to Catherine in September 1762, when the bishop of Belorussia, Georgii (Konisskii) spoke of the need to protect Polish Orthodox believers at her coronation ceremony in Moscow. Russia always had tried to protect Orthodoxy wherever possible, Poland included, but this had never been a diplomatic priority. There is no evidence that Catherine cared more for the Orthodox subjects of the Polish kingdom than had her predecessors, and she must have known that the improvement in the legal rights of Orthodox Poles might prove dangerous, as it could encourage Russian serfs to flee to Poland from their landowners. Still, protecting Orthodoxy in Poland might help Catherine gain popularity with her own subjects. Besides, this policy had the advantage of being her own. Therefore, Catherine's decision to put Poland at the center of her foreign policy was not the result of profound thinking about international relations in general or about Russia's place in the international system, nor was it part of a carefully designed long-term strategy that perceived "an infinity of possible variations in the degree of hostility or alliance as well as the possibility of limited alliance with one's enemy or of limited hostility with one's ally." Nor did the new policy take in "at a glance the entire diplomatic chessboard in all its complexity."<sup>14</sup> Still less was the policy based on forecasting of future developments. It was merely a decision demanded by the needs of the moment.

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14 "The quality of greatness" by Andrew Lossky is cited in Scott, *Emergence*, 18. According to John LeDonne, "[T]here was little originality in Catherine's foreign police. Like that of ancient Rome, its chief features were "secular tenacity and feeble creativity." LeDonne, *Russian Empire*, 352.

To broaden the civil rights of Polish Orthodox Christians seemed to be an easy task. Catherine believed that the only thing needed was a new Polish king who would be obedient and fully dependent on Russia. Some historians argue that this idea originated with her former lover Stanislas Poniatowski, but it seems doubtful that he could have discussed the fate of the Polish Orthodox with the empress. What he certainly did discuss with her was the fate of his own family, and it was of course by his inspiration that Catherine decided to make him the Polish king after the death of Augustus III in October 1763. Some historians argue that, by making Stanislas the King of Poland, Catherine prevented him from coming to St. Petersburg and interfering in relations with her new lover, Grigorii Grigor'evich Orlov. This is quite probable, though there certainly were many other ways of keeping Stanislas away from Russia.

Support for the candidacy of Stanislas Poniatowski constituted a radical turn in Russia's policy toward Poland. Previously, Russia always had opposed the idea of a native Pole on the Polish throne, and it had supported the Saxon dynasty instead. Empress Elizabeth believed that, given the lack of exceptionally wealthy individuals or families among Polish nobles, any native Pole who became king would be fully dependent on whoever paid him more. Catherine's decision also entailed a final rupture in the alliance with Austria: Russia alone could not make Stanislas the king but would need support from Prussia, Austria's main rival. Once the Polish problem became a priority, the choice was made: Prussia became Russia's principal ally, which was a radical turn as well.

In practice, this arrangement proved to be a mousetrap. An alliance with Russia had long been Frederick the Great's dream. He had done everything possible, including issuing false threats of a possible alliance with the Ottoman Empire, to make Russia sign a treaty with Prussia. Now not he, but the Russian empress needed such a treaty. Meanwhile, Prussia had interests of its own in Poland, so to put Stanislas on the Polish throne, Catherine had to take these interests into consideration. Russia, now dependent on Prussia, had to protect not only Polish Orthodox but also Polish Protestants. Scott argues: "Alliance with Prussia was, as Frederick had always intended, the price of Russian success in Poland... It would be several years before the high cost of Russia's triumph, the acceptance of the Prussian King's almost equal influence in Poland, would become evident."<sup>15</sup> Russia's dependence on Prussia was a crucial factor in foreign policy through the whole of Catherine's reign – a fact that sharply contradicts the assertion of many historians that the Empress succeeded in conducting her foreign policies independently, without any guidance from the

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15 Scott, *Emergence*, 115–116.

outside. Therefore, the Polish policy undercut Catherine's initial goal inspired by Nikita Ivanovich Panin.

Stanislas became king in 1764, but what he had probably never told Catherine, and what it seems she did not realize, was that no matter how obedient the Polish king had been, he could do nothing by himself without changing his country's political system. However, that was something that did not suit St. Petersburg. Officially, Russia positioned itself as a guarantor of "the Polish republican construction," as they used to call it in the eighteenth century. In practice, Russia wanted Poland to serve as a safety cushion, a buffer state between it and Western Europe. It was assumed that a politically weak Poland would play this role better. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, one may speculate as to whether it is better to have a weak neighbor that is obedient and may be manipulated, but that also constantly needs assistance, or a strong ally that must be respected, but that can provide assistance if needed. Eighteenth-century politicians were probably not familiar with speculations of this kind. Still it is obvious that here was another trap. According to Scott, Catherine and Panin overplayed "their hand in Poland, where Russian policy quickly became dictatorial and also unrealistic. The problems which Catherine II and Panin faced were complex, but their new-found confidence and even arrogance led them to mishandle these and especially their religious dimension."<sup>16</sup> For the next thirty years Russia was involved in everything that happened in Poland, wasting a lot of energy and money to reach its goals there, while Prussia's involvement was more in the sphere of diplomacy.

Catherine certainly did not foresee the scale of Russia's future involvement in Poland. She did not plan to make the Polish issue the center of her foreign policy. She needed a quick and spectacular victory but got instead a permanent problem. From this point of view, insisting on the election of Stanislas, making the defense of Polish Orthodox a priority, and coming into alliance with Prussia all constituted serious mistakes.

The situation was even more serious in light of Russia's relations with the Ottoman Empire. The conflict between the two empires was surely inevitable, because of their rivalry in the Black Sea and Russia's need for unhindered passage through the Straits. But the immediate cause of the war that started at the end of 1768 was Russia's actions in Poland, which greatly alarmed the Ottomans. Russia's natural ally in war with Turkey should have been Austria, except that an alliance with Austria ruled out the alliance with Prussia.

All these difficulties became more than evident during the Russian-Turkish war of 1768–1774. In 1768 Russia managed to force the Polish diet (*sejm*) to

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16 Scott, *Emergence*, 187.

adopt laws improving the situation of non-Catholics. The answer of the Polish nobility to this Russian initiative was the emergence of the Bar confederation, which declared war on Russia and started mass killings of Polish Orthodox. Orthodox population responded in turn with an uprising of peasants and Cossacks in Western Ukraine (the so called *Koliivshina*). The rebels (*gaidamaki*) also engaged in mass killings, this time of Catholics, Jews, and even of their Orthodox co-believers. The rebels sought to become subjects of the Russian empress, a step Catherine could not countenance at the time. Instead, she helped the Polish king suppress the rebels.<sup>17</sup> A century later Ukrainian national thinkers accused Catherine of betrayal.

The 1768–1774 war with Turkey was in certain respects a victory for Russia, but it also costly, and its actual results quite modest. The war interrupted the process of reform that Catherine was planning inside the country, and during this war the Empire was shaken by the large-scale political crisis originating in the Pugachev revolt.<sup>18</sup> A Russian advance into the Balkans was impossible without Austria's support, which was lacking. In fact, Austria did everything it could to prevent Turkey from signing a peace treaty with Russia. A solution came from the government in Berlin, which suggested the partition of Poland between Prussia, Russia and Austria. This was the price paid to Austria in return for its assistance in the peace talks between Russia and Turkey and for stopping the war.

The 1774 peace treaty signed was, on the one hand, very favorable. Russia obtained for her ships the right of free passage through the Straits, and the Ottoman Empire acknowledged the independence of the Crimea. Still, the lands with Orthodox populations in Greece and Moldavia that had been occupied by Russian troops during the war were to be returned to the Turks. Nor could these gains compensate for the human and financial losses. As the famous Russian historian Vasilii Osipovich Kliuchevskii put it in the early twentieth century, instead of liberating the Christians from the Muslims, Russia “liberated Muslims from Muslims, the Tartars from the Turks, which was

17 Eighteenth-century Russian diplomat Semen Romanovich Vorontsov wrote to Emperor Alexander I in 1801: “Nous troupes entrèrent en Pologne, saccagèrent tout, poursuivirent les confédérés jusque dans les provinces turques, et cette violation produisit la guerre les Turcs nous déclarèrent.” *Arkhiv Kniazia Vorontsova*, vol. 10 (Moscow: Tipografiia Gracheva i K., 1876): 399.

18 On the Pugachev revolt, see John T. Alexander. *Emperor of the Cossacks: Pugachev and the Frontier Jacquerie of 1773–1775* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1973).



not the initial plan at the beginning of the war and which no one needed, including those liberated themselves.”<sup>19</sup>

As for the partition of Poland, it made the Russian Empire 92 thousand square kilometers and 1.3 million subjects wealthier. Nevertheless, it looks as if the Polish partition did not make Catherine happy. They were no celebrations of this event, and it was never mentioned by official propaganda as the empress's achievement. Moreover, in her message to the newly appointed governors of the annexed provinces, Catherine wrote that they would learn the reasons for the acquisition from a forthcoming manifesto, but no manifesto ever appeared. Five months after the partition, the Senate finally announced that “by Her Imperial Majesty's tireless works and by her maternal care for the well-being of the Russian Empire some lands have been attached to Her state from the Polish Commonwealth,”<sup>20</sup> but no justifications for this were mentioned. In fact, the partition was the result of a series of mistakes: it did not correspond to Catherine's initial goals, and she could find no appropriate explanation either for the European public or even for her own subjects.

The eighteenth-century British politician Horace Walpole described the Polish partition as “the most impudent association of robbers that ever existed.”<sup>21</sup> A modern American historian insists that the partition was not “inevitable or even probable. Catherine and her advisers would have preferred to maintain Poland outwardly intact under Russian domination,” but, “if it was a crime, it was a commonplace one, one of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century proposals and efforts to divide up states, including major international actors.” Moreover, “it is not cynical or sarcastic to call this partition an example of system-conforming behavior, an instance of eighteenth-century international co-operation.”<sup>22</sup> Another British scholar argues that “though the eighteenth-century European states system enjoys a justified reputation for rapacity, it [the Polish partition] was the first occasion upon which major states acting together had seized large areas of territory from a country they had not earlier defeated in war,<sup>23</sup> or with whom they did not have an established dispute.

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19 Vasilii Osipovich Kliuchevskii, *Kurs russkoi istorii*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Mysl', 1989): 42–43.

20 *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, vol. 19, no. 13888 (St. Petersburg: Tipografia II Otdeleniia Sobstvennoi Kantseliarii Ego Imperatorskago Velichestva, 1830).

21 Cited in Scott, *Emergence*, 4.

22 Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 12, 17–18.

23 The fact that Poland was not defeated in war seemed to be crucial for 18th people in their condemnation of the first partition. Even several decades later, in 1827, Catherine's grandson Constantine wrote to his brother, Emperor Nicholas I, comparing the partitions to the formation of the Kingdom of Poland as part of the Russian Empire after the victory over

Nor were these substantial annexations justified by credible dynastic or legal claims... The first partition was purely a matter of cynical power politics and exemplified the new dominance of the great powers over other states.”<sup>24</sup> The interpretation of a modern Russian historian is completely different and straightforward: “According to the first partition Russia acquired the lands of Eastern Belorussia populated by people who had been relatives of the Russian people. That is why Russia’s actions do not deserve any kind of moral condemnation in this case.”<sup>25</sup> One point missing from assessments of the Polish partition is that the first partition made the following two, and the elimination of the Polish statehood, inevitable.

By 1775 both the war with Turkey and the Pugachev revolt were in the past, and it was in the next few years that Catherine undertook a new ambitious goal. It was first openly announced in April 1779 when Catherine’s second grandson was born. He received the name of Constantine, the last Emperor of Byzantium. A wet nurse of Greek origin was found to feed him. A special medal commemorating the event depicted the Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul. Catherine’s new goal was called the “Greek project”: it presupposed the restoration of a “Greek Empire” with its capital in Constantinople (Istanbul), and placement of the Russian prince on its throne.

Alexander Brückner (Brikner), author of the first scholarly biography of Catherine the Great, first published in German in 1883 and translated into Russian couple of years later, argued that the appearance of the “Greek project” was the logical outcome of events: “every new acquisition by Russia at the expense of the Turks or Tatars made the Russian government extend its advance further and further.”<sup>26</sup> This may be true, though we do not know if Catherine or her assistants realized it. What we do know is that several factors made the emergence of the “Greek project” possible. The first factor was

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Napoleon: “Au reste, il n’y pas de polonais, de quel parti qu’il ne soit, qui ne fut persuadé de la vérité que leur pays a été spolié et non conquis par l’impératrice Catherine durant les trois partages qui ont eu lieu et qui l’a fait durant la paix et sans déclaration de guerre et en y ayant employé ou les moyens les plus honteux, et dont chaque ame honnête aurait répugné. Le seul Royaume de Pologne est de bonne, prise et sanctionné par des traités après une guerre et à la suite de la paix, ceci est senti par tout le monde et par l’univers entier, la conquête est le fruit de la victoire lorsque la spoliation est un larcin honteux est qui tot ou tard rejaillit sur le spoliateur.” (“Perepiska imperatora Nikolaia Pavlovicha s velikim kniazem tsesarevichem Konstantinom Pavlovichem, vol. 1: 1825 – 1829,” *SIRIO*, vol. 131 (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia M.A. Aleksandrova, 1910): 205–206).

24 Scott, *Emergence*, 216.

25 Nikolai Ivanovich Pavlenko, *Ekaterina Velikaia* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2004), 139.

26 Brückner [Brikner]. *Istoriia Ekateriny Vtoroi*, 418.

the achievements of Russian diplomacy. In July 1778 Prussia started a new war with Austria (the War of the Bavarian Succession), in which Russia acted as an intermediary. According to the Treaty of Teschen signed in May 1779, Russia became the guarantor of peace in the Holy Roman Empire, which gave it the right to interfere in German affairs. After an attempt by the Turks to invade the Crimea from the sea failed in August 1778, a new convention between Russia and the Ottoman Empire confirming the independence of the Crimea and the rights of Catherine's protégé, Shagin-Girei, to the throne, was signed in March 1779. Meanwhile, Britain was preoccupied with the American War of Independence and with the war against France that started in June 1778. Russia refused to help Britain by sending troops to North America. Catherine now thought that, while the two most powerful European nations were so busy fighting with each other, she was free to act as she liked. In February 1780 Russia suggested a "Declaration of Armed Neutrality," which aimed to protect maritime trade. The declaration was joined by Sweden, Denmark, Holland and Prussia.<sup>27</sup> Most historians praise it as Catherine's success, but not everyone would agree. Semen Romanovich Vorontsov, in correspondence with his brother Aleksandr, President of the College of Commerce, argued that armed neutrality had not proven to be profitable for Russian trade. Moreover, because of it, Russia had lost Great Britain as a friend, without having gained another ally.<sup>28</sup>

The diplomatic successes made Catherine so conceited that, during the negotiations with Austria which started after the death of Empress Maria Theresa in November 1780, she tried to insist that Joseph II should give up the traditional right of the Holy Roman Emperor to sign first on both copies of the discussed treaty. As a result of her demand, negotiations came to a standstill. Instead of signing a treaty, the two monarchs exchanged personal letters with lists of obligations the two countries were making to each other. According to Isabel de Madariaga, given that the negotiations were public and the letters secret, "Catherine seems thoroughly to have enjoyed deceiving all the assembled diplomats."<sup>29</sup>

The negotiations with Austria once again manifested a radical turn in Russian foreign policy. The implementation of the "Greek Project" was not possible without Austria's assistance, but renewal of the alliance with Austria would

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27 For armed neutrality, see Isabel de Madariaga, *Britain, Russia and the Armed Neutrality of 1780. Sir James Harris's Mission to St. Petersburg during the American Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962).

28 *Arkhiv Kniazia Vorontsova*, vol. 9 (Moscow: Tipografiia Gracheva, 1876): 139, 180.

29 Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 385.

mean the end of the Russian-Prussian friendship. On the one hand, Catherine was probably only too happy to be free of the relationship with Prussia. For two decades, she had been competing with Frederick the Great for recognition as an enlightened monarch. She probably despised him for involving her in the partition of Poland, and she wanted to prove once again that she had not been merely the Prussian king's puppet, but rather the independent architect of Russia's policies. It looked as if Russia did not need Prussia anymore: Catherine had already reached her goals in Poland, though it took several years to prove that the Polish considerations had been a delusion.

The second factor, which was no less important for Catherine in her idea of the "Greek project," was a mixture of ideology and politics. The eighteenth-century Russian elite shared the European passion for antiquity. Russian authors of odes addressed to Catherine called her "Minerva," "Astraea," "Pallas," and "Felicity," and they depicted Russian military leaders as Roman heroes. Columns and arcs constructed after antique models were erected in honor of Russian victories over the Turks.<sup>30</sup> The passion for antiquity was quite sincere and represented Russia as part of European civilization. Unfortunately, public opinion in Europe saw things somewhat differently. Many Western Europeans considered Russia a young and under-civilized nation.<sup>31</sup> To prove this incorrect was not an easy task. Prior to Peter the Great, Russia had almost no tradition of history writing, except for the chronicles, which were mostly sacral and not secular compositions. The first national history was written by Vasilii Nikitich Tatishchev in the 1730s and published in 1768. Even Petrine propaganda depicted Russia as a young nation, which had joined the European family due to Peter's reforms. But Catherine did not agree. She did a lot to stimulate her subjects to study Russian history, and it was not a mere coincidence that at the end of 1770s, she herself started to write her "Notes on Russian History," the first part of which was published in 1783–84. The "Notes" covered the eighth to the thirteenth centuries and sought to prove that Russia was as old as other European nations. Byzantium, whence Russian Christianity originated, was a bridge that connected Russia with ancient Greece, and thus with the origins

30 See Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy. Volume 1. From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Andrei Leonidovich Zorin, *Kormia dvuglavogo orla... Literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologiia v Rossii poslednei treti XVIII – pervoi treti XIX veka* (Moscow: NLO, 2001); Vera Iul'evna Proskurina, *Mify imperii. Literatura i vlast' v epokhu Ekateriny II* (Moscow: NLO, 2006).

31 See Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization in the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

of the European civilization. Moreover, it was now Russia's mission to play a special role in the history of Europe by liberating the continent from the Turks.

It seems probable that the idea of such a mission first came to Catherine from Voltaire, who as early as 1768, when the first war with the Ottoman Empire had not yet started, wrote to her: "*S'ils vous font la guerre, madame, il pourra bien leur arriver ce que Pierre-le-Grand avait eu quatrefois en vue, c'était de faire de Constantinople la capitale de l'empire russe. Ces barbares méritent d'être punis, par une héroïne, du peu d'attention qu'ils ont eue jusqu'ici pour les dames. <...> J'espère tout de votre génie et de votre destinée. <...> car je pense très sérieusement que si jamais les Turcs être chassés de l'Europe, ce sera par les Russes.*"<sup>32</sup> During the war Voltaire repeated his appeals again and again. Catherine was probably flattered, though it was too early to act. Besides, eighteenth-century Greeks did not resemble ancient heroes: they were neither as brave nor as eager to fight for their independence as Catherine had expected them to be. During the war Russia occupied several Greek islands and tried to establish new political regimes there, but finally failed to keep them independent from the Turks.<sup>33</sup> The time for serious consideration of Voltaire's ideas came by the end of 1770s.

The first practical step toward realization of the Greek project was the annexation of Crimea in 1783. Several generations of Russians after Catherine praised her for this deed. And indeed, by making Crimea part of the Russian Empire, Catherine not only opened the way to the Black Sea, but also eliminated the source of troubles that had existed for several centuries before. It was in 1769 that the Crimean Tartars invaded Russia for the last time. Often in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they had raided Russian territory, taking thousands of prisoners and devastating the land. Nevertheless, Catherine's annexation of the Crimea occurred not pursuant to a long-term strategy, but rather as the result of political miscalculation.

The independence of Crimea from the Turks was first established in 1771, when Catherine sent Russian troops there and when Sahib Girei was elected khan without approval from Istanbul. He signed a treaty of alliance with Russia in 1772, but neither this treaty nor the peace treaty between Russia and Turkey of 1774 stipulated the form of political regime in Crimea or any details about the new character of relations with Russia. The situation was uncertain,

32 *Documents of Catherine the Great. The Correspondence with Voltaire and the Instruction of 1767 in the English Text of 1768* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 20.

33 See Irina Mikhailovna Smilianskaia, Mikhail Bronislavovich Velizhev, Elena Borisovna Smilianskaia, *Rossiiā v Sredizemnomor'e. Arkhipelagaskaia ekspeditsiia Ekateriny Velikoi* (Moscow: Indrik, 2011); Elena Borisovna Smilianskaia, *Grecheskie ostrova Ekateriny II. Opyty imperskoi politiki Rossii v Sredizemnomor'e* (Moscow: Indrik, 2013).

and a great part of the Crimean elite favored restoring the relations with the Ottoman Empire. That is why the Ottomans supported Devlet Girei, who invaded the Crimea in 1774, forcing Sahib Girei to flee. A year later Russian troops came to the Crimea once again, and this time Catherine decided to replace Sahib Girei with her protégé, Shagin Girei.

Catherine first met Shagin Girei in 1771, “when he impressed her with his good looks and European polish, the product of several years spent in Venice as a boy.”<sup>34</sup> He promised to reform the Crimea according to the principles of Enlightenment; however, this first attempt to bring a Western type of civilization to a Muslim country proved to be a failure. Once elected khan in 1777, “like an Islamic Joseph II but without his philanthropy, Shagin set about creating an enlightened despotism,”<sup>35</sup> which immediately caused a riot. Again, he was restored to the throne only thanks to the Russians. Unfortunately, Shagin did not learn his lesson; nevertheless, he managed to stay in power for the next four years because of Russia’s military presence in the peninsula. A new riot against him took place in 1782, and Catherine sent Grigorii Aleksandrovich Potemkin to settle the problem. Potemkin returned Shagin to the throne but did not consider his mission at an end. Instead of leaving Crimea, he started to send letters to Catherine, claiming that the moment had become most favorable for the acquisition of the peninsula.

It seems Catherine was very hesitant about acquiring Crimea. She did not want to violate international law or the balance of power, and she probably was afraid of European public opinion. But Potemkin was very convincing: “[I]magine that Crimea is yours and that wart on your nose is no more.” “The state of our borders suddenly becomes excellent <...> Consider who was ever rebuked for having acquired something? France took Corsica, and the Austrians took more from the Turks in Moldavia without a war than we. There is no power in Europe that would not be willing to seize parts of Asia, Africa, and America for itself. <...> Believe me, with this acquisition you will achieve immortal glory such as no other Sovereign in Russia has ever had. This glory will pave the way to still another even greater glory: with Crimea will also come supremacy over the Black Sea. Upon you depends whether the path of the Turks is to be blocked and whether they are to survive or to perish.”<sup>36</sup>

34 *Love and Conquest. Personal Correspondence of Catherine the Great and Prince Grigorii Potemkin*, ed. and trans. Douglas Smith (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 116.

35 Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Prince of Princes. The Life of Potemkin* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 246.

36 Smith, *Love and Conquest*, 124.

Catherine was fond of both glory and flattery, but she had a rational mind, and so Potemkin had to rush to St. Petersburg in March 1783 to persuade her in person. Catherine consulted Joseph II, got his support, and accepted Potemkin's position: the decision was taken, and in April of that year, Crimea became part of the Russian Empire. No doubt the acquisition was a success, though again not the result of planned strategy. Rather, it was the fruit of the wrong-headed idea that an adjacent country could be ruled by a puppet manipulated from St. Petersburg. This was the same mistake that had been made in Poland.

Potemkin was appointed governor of the acquired provinces. He quickly established towns and developed a fleet at the newly founded port of Sebastopol. Four years later, in January 1787, Catherine, accompanied by foreign diplomats and by Joseph II, undertook her famous trip to Crimea. On the way there, she repeated again and again that Peter the Great had been wrong to establish the new capital of the empire in the north, when the climate was much more favorable in the south. Another prominent idea associated with the journey was that the way to Crimea was in fact the way to Greece. This argument was not without foundation, as there were Greek colonies in the Crimea dating back to the sixth century B.C. The foreigners who accompanied Catherine were greatly impressed by what they saw. The Turks were impressed even more. They were certainly aware of Catherine's ambitions and could not but realize that Russian activities in Crimea were directed against them. On 11 July Catherine returned to St. Petersburg, and several days later the Turks demanded the return of Crimea and declared a new war on Russia.

The Russian-Turkish war of 1787–1791 was no less victorious for Russian arms and no less burdensome. Besides, Sweden declared war on Russia as well. Turkey was supported by Britain, France and Prussia, but proved to be too weak to fight the Russian army. On the other hand, Austria was not a reliable ally for Russia. Its army lost several battles, and in 1788 the people of the Austrian Netherlands rebelled against Austria. In January 1790, inspired by the French Revolution, the rebels in the Netherlands established the United States of Belgium. Emperor Joseph II, with whom Catherine had discussed her ambitious plans, died in February the same year and was succeeded by Emperor Leopold II, who found himself under pressure from Prussia and Britain. In July Leopold signed the Treaty of Reichenbach, which ended Austrian participation in the war, leaving Russia to fight alone. Ultimately, the main result of the war was that Turkey dropped all claims to the Crimea, while the Greek project remained a dream.

The Turkish war again brought the Polish problem to the fore. At first, Potemkin suggested that several military detachments consisting of Poles be used in the war. In Poland, the idea was supported by the pro-Russian party, which

hoped that the country would now be treated as Russia's ally and would be able to acquire new lands from Turkey. Catherine was skeptical, however. Potemkin insisted that the Poles had been very good soldiers and that he himself was "as much a Pole as they are."<sup>37</sup> Potemkin seemed to forget about Prussia, which protested any change in Poland's status. If not for the war, Prussia probably could have been ignored. But at the time Catherine did not want to take any risk. The idea of Polish involvement in the war was dropped. Upon receiving a rebuff from Russia, the pro-Russian Polish party lost out to the so-called "patriotic" party, which insisted on breaking with Russia and allying with Prussia. The "patriotic" party dominated the Four Years Diet, which opened in 1788 and voted to reform administration and increase the size of the Polish army five-fold. A treaty designed to protect Poland from foreign intervention was then signed with Prussia.

Both Prussia and Poland now demonstrated their hostility towards Russia, and in St. Petersburg the government expected war. In fact, the threat was not real. Prussia was not going to fight Russia or support Poland; it was still playing its own game. Frederick William II of Prussia, who came to power in 1786, was not as effective a statesman as his uncle Frederick the Great had been. One can only wonder at how Frederick William overplayed Catherine, who by that time should have been much more experienced. The new situation drastically changed Potemkin's mood. He suggested that a rebellion of Orthodox peasants be instigated in Eastern Poland, insisting that those who rose up would identify with "the Cossacks," who in the seventeenth century fought under Bogdan Khmel'nitskii against Polish domination. Catherine was reluctant to support this initiative as she probably foresaw that the outcome of such an adventure might be unpredictable.

The Prussians managed to deceive not only Catherine, but also those Polish patriots who believed that Prussia would protect Poland after they adopted the Constitution of May 1791. Catherine was enraged and frightened by the constitution: in combination with the French revolution, it changed the entire political system of Europe. Equally significant, the constitution represented the failure of almost thirty years of Catherinian policy aimed at making Poland a puppet state. To accept the constitution seemed to her a disgrace and a demonstration of her weakness. But there was another dilemma. The Constitution of May 1791 established a democratic constitutional monarchy in Poland, broadened the civil rights of the townspeople, and placed the peasants under the protection of the government, thus mitigating the worst abuses of serfdom. It corresponded to the principles of Enlightenment that Catherine

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37 Smith, *Love and Conquest*, 230.



had proclaimed since becoming the Russian empress. By supporting the constitution, she might have gained the approval of European public opinion and would probably have gained a strong ally in Poland. But the fate of Poland was predetermined. In 1790, long before the adoption of the Polish Constitution, Potemkin had written to Catherine: "On Poland. It would be better if it were not divided, but as it already has been divided, it would be better if it was absolutely destroyed. <...> Poland cannot be left as it is. There is so much roughness going on that is not possible to bear. <...> [T]heir rage towards us will never disappear because of all the intolerable harm that we have done to them."<sup>38</sup>

As the last phrase shows, both Catherine and her most influential adviser realized that the situation they were facing was the result of their own policy. Nevertheless, soon after the peace treaty with Turkey was signed, Russian troops invaded Poland. Catherine wanted to restore the pre-constitutional order, whereas Prussia proposed to exchange its alliance with Poland for another partition of the country. Russia was ready. The Prussian suggestion came as no surprise. A year earlier Catherine had written to Potemkin: "If the Prussian king appears insuperably greedy, we will have to agree to the partition of the Polish lands in favor of the three neighboring powers to avoid future efforts and concerns. Here we will benefit from broadening the borders of our state, and we will extend its safety by bringing in new subjects of the same [religious] law and patrimony as ours."<sup>39</sup> The empress's words show that this time she was not only ready for the second partition of Poland, but also had a new excuse for it at hand.

The French Revolution put forward the idea of nation, yet Russia was a multinational empire. Because the transformation of Muscovy into an empire started already in the middle of the sixteenth century and continued until the early eighteenth century, Russia had no chance to become a nation state. Still, by the middle of the century, when the second generation of Russians born after the reforms of Peter the Great became socially active, national consciousness of the modern type started to take shape. Catherine the Great promoted this process through her interest in Russian history. Her propaganda about Russia's greatness and military victories imagined the Russian people as proud and confident. The idea of Russia as part of the international community gradually evolved into the idea of Russia's superiority and uniqueness. A couple of months before her death Catherine wrote in a personal letter that the narrow

38 *Ekaterina II i G.A. Potemkin. Lichnaia perepiska 1769–1791*, ed. V. Lopatin (Moscow: Nauka, 1997), 893.

39 "Reskripty imperatritsy Ekateriny Vtoroi kniazuiu Potemkinu," *Russkii arkhiv* 8 (1874): 283–284.

clothes of foreign bodies had become unsuitable for the Russian colossus. In the face of threats to the political system of the Old Regime, principles and ideas of Enlightenment became irrelevant. They did not work any longer, and so an old idea about the principal mission of Russian tsars reemerged from a dusty closet. The ideology of “gathering the Russian lands” had been widely used since the late fifteenth century and had been dropped after the death of Peter the Great, when Russia was trying to play according to international rules. But in September 1792 the second partition of Poland was officially announced as the return of lands that had been torn away from Russia in the previous centuries.

While the name of Poland disappeared from the map of Europe for the next 123 years, the Polish problem remained. According to Madariaga, “The territories Russia acquired could, in the long run, be assimilated. The manner of their acquisition, the obligation to share with two other predatory powers, permanently weakened Russia’s western barrier.” “[F]rom 1795 onwards – like Banquo’s ghost – the problem of Poland was at the center of Russian foreign policy in Europe, and Russia could take no step without pondering the possible repercussions on the delicate balance between the three partitioning powers.” Furthermore, “judging by the size of her conquests, Catherine’s foreign policy was extremely successful,” but only “on the surface.” “[I]t is here, in the field in which she prided herself most on her skill, that she did the greatest disservice to Russia.” “Catherine was fortunate in that the victories of her armies covered up the flaws in her diplomacy.”<sup>40</sup> These few lines are in fact the only attempt at a general evaluation of the results of Catherine’s foreign policy that one can find. The latest biographies of Catherine skip the topic altogether.<sup>41</sup>

Historians often assume that by the end of Catherine’s reign she had persuaded herself of her own greatness and of the success of her policies both inside and outside Russia. In fact, we do not have any documentary evidence that can either prove or disprove this claim. On the one hand, Catherine could be proud because she had remained in power for more than thirty years. The constant praise and flattery that she received from many quarters made this feeling even stronger. On the other hand, being a person with a rational mind, Catherine could not miss the fact that none of the initial goals of her foreign policy that she herself had put forward had in fact been accomplished.

40 Madariaga, *Age of Catherine the Great*, 236, 451, 586–87.

41 See for instance, John Alexander, *Catherine the Great. Life and Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Simon Dixon, *Catherine the Great* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

The empress certainly got used to flattery and realized its value. Yet two things seem obvious. First, frequent change in one's allies, which was characteristic of eighteenth-century international politics, did not suit Russia, which was a "young" power vulnerable to being overplayed by more experienced partners. Second, Catherine's own experience taught her that the principles of "fair play" that she initially internalized, did not work. A Russian grandee and the empress's former favorite, Petr Vasil'evich Zavadovskii, wrote to the Russian envoy in London, Semen Vorontsov, in 1793 about the partition of Poland: "If you do not approve this deed from the moral side, I wouldn't argue. But even here I would say – where are morals in politics?"<sup>42</sup>

Catherine the Great died on 17 November 1796 soon after she failed to persuade the young Gustav IV Adolf of Sweden to marry her granddaughter Alexandra. Here was yet another, and her last, failure in the international arena.

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42 *Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova*, vol. 12 (Moscow, 1877): 77–78.