

Theater as Metaphor

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Edited by
Elena Penskaya and Joachim Küpper

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Ekaterina Boltunova

War, Peace, and Territory in Late Eighteenth-Century Russian Outdoor Performances

In the historical narratives produced in present-day Russia, Catherine II (the Great) is largely associated with the conflict between the Russian and Ottoman Empires in the latter eighteenth century. Russia's victory culminated in its gaining the Black Sea provinces and the annexation of the Crimea.¹ Imagining the empress in such a way is radically different from earlier, late Imperial or Soviet interpretations. The latter see Catherine as more than just a figure associated with a successful foreign policy in the south, namely as a lawgiver on the throne, committed to the supremacy of law and shaping Russian legislation, and as an august patroness of the arts and sciences. The current emphasis on Catherine's foreign policy and its gains has undoubtedly been mandated by the need to set out a new historical narrative after the integration of the Crimea into Russia in 2014. The empress from the eighteenth century emerges as a potent factor in the legitimization of this step.

However, two and a half centuries ago, the empress herself found the search for symbolic forms to help appropriate the Black Sea provinces to be a much more difficult process. Looking back at the second half of the eighteenth century, modern scholars tend to focus on large-scale geopolitical designs such as the "Greek project" which aimed to restore the Byzantine Empire in some form.² The early stages of the quest for a new symbolic language are, by contrast, substantially less known. It began right after the Russian-Ottoman war of 1768–1774 was brought to an end by the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji (Küçük Kaynarca)—Russia emerged victorious from this war. This period reveals the first elements of the future geopolitical claims as well

¹ For example, this is how the empress is presented nowadays in the *Russia: My History* ("Ros-siia—moia istoria") chain of new history parks that promote a pro-governmental interpretation of Russian history.

² A. Brikner, *Istoriya Ekateriny Vtoroy*, vol. 2, St. Petersburg 1885, pp. 390–498; S. Zhigarev, *Russkaya politika v vostochnom voprose (ee istoriya v 16–19 vekakh, kriticheskaya otsenka i budushchie zadachi)*: *Istoriko-yuridicheskie ocherki*, vol. 1, Moscow 1896, pp. 203–223; A. Zorin, *Kormya dvuglavogo orla: literatura i gosudarstvennaya posledney treti 18—pervoy treti 19 vekov*, Moscow 2001, pp. 32–64.

as the metaphors and symbols through which Catherine II expressed her attitudes towards political events from the mid-1770s onward. When building the narrative of the Russian Black Sea and Crimea in later times, some of these were discarded as no longer necessary.

It is important to note that, in the first half of that decade, Russia was engaged in two, rather than one, war. In addition to the conflict with the Ottomans, Catherine's army appeared on the battlefields of the largest peasant revolt in Russia's history: Pugachov's rebellion (1773–1775). This revolt of various groups of peasants and Cossacks led by Yemelian Pugachov, who claimed to be the Emperor Peter III, can be seen as an act of resistance against the encroachment of the state on the lands and rights of the Yaik Cossacks who refused to comply with the duties imposed on them. The rebellion soon grew into a full-scale war in the Ural region and along the Volga river.

Having found her army challenged on both fronts, Catherine made a remarkable attempt at tracing a connection between the two. She even initiated an inquiry into possible French and Ottoman meddling in the internal affairs of Russia after Pugachov's rebellion had broken out. However, she soon discovered that her suspicions were groundless.³

Symbolically enough, victories on both fronts came in the same year (1774) and were remarkably interconnected, a configuration that can be seen in a timeline of events stretching from July 1774 to July 1775. On July 10, 1774, the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji between the Russian and Ottoman empires was signed at what is now Kaynardzha in Bulgaria. While the news had not yet reached the Russian capital (it reached St. Petersburg a fortnight after, on July 23) Catherine's government believed that at least with regard to the fight against the rebellion the imperial troops had already been victorious. The Pugachov Cossacks and peasants were thought to have been defeated and dispersed. However, the charismatic leader of the rebellion managed to escape to the Bashkir lands and rallied his supporters, raising a new army. From there, he proceeded back to the Volga and swiftly took the very important city of Kazan just a couple of days after the conclusion of the Kuchuk Kainarji Treaty (July 12). Frightened by the success of the insurgents, the Russian government dispatched the hero of the Turkish wars, Alexander Suvorov, to stop Pugachov's progress. In early September, Pugachov was arrested by his own Cossack colonels and handed over to the Imperial authorities. On November 4, he was transported to Moscow for trial; he was executed two months later. Two

3 I. de Madariaga, *Rossiya v epokhu Ekateriny Velikoy*, Moscow 2002, pp. 431–432.

weeks after Pugachov was publicly decapitated in Moscow's Bolotnaya Square, Catherine II arrived in the city (January 25, 1775).⁴

The empress did not come to the old capital in order to attend the execution of Pugachov, as some scholars have suggested.⁵ This said, it was indeed the military events revolving around Pugachov as well as the Turks that made her come to Moscow. There, Catherine intended to speak on peace (or rather the end of two wars). While in Moscow, she announced "The Manifesto on Signing the Peace Treaty with the Ottoman Porte" (March 17, 1775). She waited a long time to produce it, as the Manifesto appeared almost eight months after the news of the end of the Russian-Ottoman war was received in St. Petersburg.⁶ On the same day, amnesty was granted to those who had engaged in the rebellion—death sentences were commuted to penal service, and some of the taxes due by peasants were waived. The amnesty was presented as an act of mercy on the occasion of the peace with the Ottoman Porte, thus establishing a connection between the two historical events, the internal revolt and the war against an external competitor.⁷ Both wars found their symbolic ending in Moscow, the old capital, which in 1775 became the venue for both the execution of Yemelian Pugachov and the peace celebrations half a year later.

Having announced in her peace manifesto that the Lord "blessed us, after a longtime and toilsome war, with the desired peace", Catherine soon went on to organize and to personally oversee a grandiose festival in Moscow in celebration of the end of the war and the signing of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji that took place July 21–23, 1775. The festival's culmination was a mass outdoor event on the Khodynska Field (*Khodynskoye pole*), located at some distance from the center of the city. The architect Vassily Bazhenov was commissioned to design a set that would explain the importance of the newly acquired lands north of the Black Sea to the Moscow crowd.

The centerpiece of the project was conceived in accordance with a plan developed by the empress herself. In a well-known letter to Baron von Grimm of April 7, 1775, Catherine explained her ideas:

[At first], a plan of the festivities was drawn in the familiar manner: a temple of Janus, and a temple of Bacchus, and a temple of some other devil, all those stupid, intolerable allegories, and so huge, with an incredible desire to produce something meaningless. I was very angry about these plans, and on one fine morning I ordered

⁴ *Kamer-fur'erskiy tseremonial'nyy zhurnal* [1775], St. Petersburg 1878, p. 69.

⁵ V. Proskurina, *Mify imperii: Literatura i vlast' v epokhu Ekateriny II*, Moscow 2006, p. 197.

⁶ *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiyskoy imperii*, vol. 20, St. Petersburg 1830, pp. 80–82, N° 14, 274.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–86, N° 14, 275.

my architect Bazhenov to me and said, ‘Dear Bazhenov, there is a meadow three versts [3.2 km] away from the city. Let the meadow stand for the Black Sea; the two roads from the city will represent the Tanais [the river Don] and the Borysthenes [the river Dnieper]. At the mouth of the former you will build a refectory which you will name Azov, and at the mouth of the other, *a theater which you will name Kinburn* [my italics, EB]. You will also construct a Crimean peninsula out of sand and on it, you shall erect two ballrooms—Kerch and Enikale.⁸ Left of the Tanais, a buffet will stand with wines and refreshments for the people; and in front of the Crimea, lights will signify both nations’ joy at the signing of the peace treaty; on the other bank [...] fireworks will be set off, while the area representing the Black Sea will have scattered boats and ships which you will illuminate; the banks of the rivers, which are also roads, will feature scenery, mills, trees, houses in full illumination, and thus you will have a festival not overwrought, but probably still better than many others, and much simpler. I forgot to say that to the right of the Tanais, Taganrog⁹ shall appear with a fair. You are prone to analyze everything, but is this not well-designed? Indeed, a sea on a piece of dry land is absurd, but please disregard this flaw and the rest will seem quite tolerable. The area is large, and the event will take place in the evening, and so it will pass off, at least, not worse than the ridiculous heathen temples, which so annoy me’.¹⁰

The geographical names in the empress’s letter, which are mostly Greek, immediately stand out to the reader.¹¹ Each of the four coastal fortresses mentioned is matched with a recreational area—a ballroom, a refectory, a fair, or a theater. The extant drafts show that Bazhenov followed Catherine’s vision almost to the letter: the Khodynka field was turned into a stylized version of the Black Sea, and four fortresses appeared on its “coast”, matching those being integrated into the empire by the terms of the peace treaty—Kerch, Enikale, Azov, and Kinburn.¹²

The Khodynka field festivities were part of a larger event that was promised in the Manifesto of March 17.¹³ It began with a solemn procession of the empress from the Kremlin to the Assumption Cathedral for a thanksgiving service and the gift-giving ceremony at the Faceted Chamber (*Granovitaya Palata*), the oldest throne hall of the Russian monarchs.¹⁴

⁸ These are the names of two fortresses (which, accordingly, are represented by the ballrooms).

⁹ Taganrog is a harbor city located on the shores of the Sea of Azov.

¹⁰ “Pis’ma Ekateriny Vtoroy baronu Grimmu (1774–1796)”, in: *Sbornik Russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva*, vol. 23, St. Petersburg 1878, pp. 20–21.

¹¹ Such references will later be made in the “Greek project” that presented the new territorial acquisitions as the lands of (the Christian) Byzantine empire and of ancient Greece.

¹² Yu. Gerchuk (ed.), *Vasily Ivanovitch Bazhenov: Pis’ma. Poyasneniya k proektam. Svidetel’sva sovremennikov. Biograficheskie dokumenty*, Moscow 2001, p. 259.

¹³ *Polnoe sobranie zakonov*, vol. 20, p. 82, № 14, 274.

¹⁴ *Opisanie vseradostnogo torzhestvovaniya mira s Ottomanskoyu Portoyu, byvshago v Moskve 1775 goda iyulya 10 i posledovavshiya po tom chisla*, Moscow [1775], pp. 4–8 and 19–32.

During the latter, the empress sat on the throne with her imperial regalia displayed by her side.¹⁵ The ceremony was also attended by the Grand Duke Pavel—the heir to the throne and, as some thought, its legitimate claimant (unlike the empress herself, who had acceded to it under a palace coup). He had already come of age and married in 1773. It is interesting to note that during the ceremony, the Grand Duke and his wife occupied seats typically reserved for females and children: they watched the ceremony through the window of the so-called Secret Room (*Tainik*) within the Faceted Chamber.¹⁶ In the seventeenth century, this was the location where the tsarevny (imperial princesses) and underage tsareviches (imperial princes) stayed during important ceremonies taking place in the Chamber (audiences, embassy receptions, banquets, etc.).¹⁷ In this way, the empress once again emphasized the existing hierarchy of power.

Upon the end of the official part, the public, popular festival started. Studying the 1775 festivities at the Khodynka field as they may be reconstructed from both textual and visual sources allows one to discern several levels of symbolism—from mental geography, which was in high demand in the political discourse of the period, to the use of theater as a powerful metaphor within the political practices of eighteenth-century Russia.

There is a longstanding belief among historians that Catherine II disliked Moscow. Indeed, during her reign, she paid only a few visits to the traditional capital of the Tsars (1762, 1767, 1775, 1787), and each of these was a highly symbolic one, marking respectively her coronation, the inauguration of the Legislative Commission (*Ulozhennaya Komissia*) that convened to give the country a modern law code, the victory in the war against the Ottoman Empire, and the celebration of her coronation's Silver Jubilee. Each had its own aspect of representing the empress—as a legitimate ruler, a lawgiver, or a victor. With time, the theatrical appeal of the “Russian tradition” also became part of Catherine's visits to Moscow: she would stay at the village of Kolomenskoye, a countryside residence of the Russian Tsars,¹⁸ and would often wear what was then known as the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ E. Boltunova, “Imperial Throne Halls and Discourse of Power in the Topography of Early Modern Russia (late 17th–18th centuries)”, in: *The Emperor's House: Palaces from Augustus to the Age of Absolutism*, ed. M. Featherstone, J.-M. Spieser, G. Tanman, and U. Wulf-Rheidt, Berlin 2015, pp. 341–352.

¹⁸ E. Gorokhova, “Prebyvanie Ekateriny II v Kolomenskom”, in: *Kolomenskoe: Materialy i issledovaniya*, ed. L. Kopesnikova, vol. 13, Moscow 2011, pp. 145–162.

Russian attire (*russkoe plat'e*),¹⁹ thus performing in some way as a sort of autochthonous ruler.

In this connection, the choice of the city in which to celebrate the victory over the Ottomans presents a most interesting link between Moscow and the Ottoman capital in the imperial discourse of the period. It is interesting to note that there were never any plans to host the victory celebration in the actual capital, St. Petersburg. Moscow was cast as a symbolic construct commensurate with Istanbul. The old Russian capital was Istanbul's true opposite. In terms of religious belief and the arts, it originated from Byzantium or Constantinople, that is, the city the Ottomans had transformed into Istanbul after having conquered the capital of the eastern Roman empire.

It is quite significant that historians of costume, in their discussions of how "the Russian attire" was introduced at the court in the 1770s, mention that one of the first occasions when the empress was wearing it was a public audience she gave to the ambassador of the Khan of Crimea, a vassal of the Ottoman Sultan in 1771. Four years later, all women at court were ordered to wear the traditional Russian dress on the occasion of the visit by the Ottoman ambassador.²⁰

One might not be misled to put the festivities organized in Moscow on the occasion of the felicitous end of the two wars mentioned in a similar strategic-symbolic context: they were intended to establish a close link between the present and the Russian tradition, in this case by means of a festival for the people.

Such a speculation is all the more probable as there was a historical retropection implied in the way the festival was arranged. By celebrating the victory over the Ottomans in Moscow, Catherine reminded her subjects of the age of Russia's first emperor, Peter I, and even of a slightly earlier period when the country's foreign policy was focused on wringing the fortress of Azov from the Ottomans. Thus, the empress underscored the continuity of Russia's foreign policy, painting the Russian-Ottoman war as a "Moscow war" rather than a St. Petersburg war, as a declaration of victory over a longtime historical adversary.

This is probably why the "Black Sea" designed by Bazhenov seems in fact to be more like the Sea of Azov under close scrutiny. In her letter to von Grimm, Catherine mentions two roads imagined as rivers under their Greek names, the Tanais and the Borysthene, which in Russian are known as the Don and the Dnieper. The empress directly connects those rivers to the Black Sea. However,

¹⁹ An attire wherein the standard Western design was complemented by elements borrowed from seventeenth-century-style Russian dress (a specific type of sleeve, girdle, and floral ornament); cf. K. Borderiu, *Plat'e imperatritsy: Ekaterina II i evropeyskiy kostyum v Rossiyskoy imperii*, Moscow 2016, pp. 23–26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

the Don, with the fortress of Azov at its mouth, flows into the Sea of Azov. The poet Vassily Maykov (1728–1778) endorsed Catherine’s view in his poem “Description of the Triumphal Buildings at the Khodynka Representing the Benefits of Peace”. Attempting to decipher Catherine’s allegorical language, he mentions that “the Don flows into the Black [sic!] Sea and improves the commerce therein”, while the fortress of “Azov at the mouth of the Don” guards “the passage into the Black Sea”.²¹ Importantly, the sketches of the Bazhenov-designed festivities feature both geographic names—the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. The observer is located on the “coast” of the former, between the fortresses of Azov and Taganrog²²; the description of the territory is in contradiction with its visual “reading”. Evidently, Catherine’s fashioning of Russian victories intended to associate Azov, the area of the historical Russian-Ottoman conflict, directly with the Black Sea, without paying attention to the geographic facts.²³

It is important to note the role the rivers Don and Dnieper play in this narrative of the Black Sea. Choosing the locations for the Khodynka performance, Catherine could have referred to other waterways, namely the rivers Larga and Kagul (Cahul), which were the locations of the Russian army’s decisive victories in the Turkish wars. Yet, she preferred not to do that. Her choice was probably informed by the fact that the area where these battles had been won did not belong to Russia’s territorial gains by the terms of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji. But the preference for the Don and Dnieper, which played an extremely significant role in the Russian Empire’s mental geography, might also have constituted an attempt to distract attention from another “river war”: the geography of the Pugachov rebellion shows the rebels active by the rivers Volga and Yaik (which Catherine later renamed the Ural). Also significant in this context is Catherine’s claim that she “creates sea on dry land”, or, reversing the symbolism, she structures, that is, brings order to and controls the wild element of the sea (or rebellion).

The Don and the Dnieper, located by the Black Sea and matched to the geography of victory, are thus presented as the space of peace and prosperity. The Don-upon-Khodynka staged at the outskirts of Moscow becomes an

²¹ Vassily Maykov, “Opisanie Torzhestvennykh zdaniy na Khodynke, predstavlyayushchikh pol’zu mira”, in: V. Maykov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniya* [Selected Works], ed. A. Zapadov, Moscow and Leningrad 1966, pp. 306–307.

²² “Plan ansamblya uvesilitel’nykh stroeniy na Khodynskom lugu v Moskve: Gravyura”, Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy arkhiv drevnikh aktov (Russian State Archive/RGADA), f. 192, op. 1, d. 159.

²³ In fact, the Sea of Azov is separated by the Taman peninsula from the Black Sea, though they are connected by the Kerch Strait.

allegory of plenty. Maykov explains that the “Azov on Don, where the refectory is, represents abundance brought about by peace”.²⁴ The Dnieper (with the fortress of Kinburn at its mouth), situated “at the edge of [Russian] power”, is turned into a space where “the resounding voices of the lyres are heard, singing how beneficial peace is to the monarchs”.²⁵

The festival field featured two theaters—one, meant for balancing acts, was erected on the Taman Peninsula,²⁶ and the other, as indicated by the empress in her letter to von Grimm, in the area representing the fortress Kinburn, now Russia’s main outpost on the Black Sea. It is evidently this latter theater where Catherine watched a performance on July 23. In his book *Moscow of Old (Staraya Moskva)*, M. Pyliayev states that two performances were given at the Khodynka Field: a French comedy and a Russian opera. Pyliayev reports that the empress, who was quite capable, if necessary, to evaluate European and Russian playwrights and performances in terms of their ability to communicate political messages,²⁷ did not attend the performance of the French play, but paid a visit to a piece titled *Ivan Tsarevich*, an opera whose libretto was in Russian.²⁸ The empress’s choice of a performance in Russian on the set representing a former Ottoman fortress was hardly accidental. Celebrating the victory over the Ottoman Empire in the old capital of Russia, regarded as the seat of Orthodoxy and Russianness, the empress used theater as a kind of mediating power, an intermediary propagating symbolically her political strategy of appropriating the Black Sea provinces and converting them into genuinely Russian territory.²⁹

The festivities at the Khodynka field, though outstanding and memorable, did not constitute the only symbolic interpretation suggested. The above-mentioned official ceremony at the Faceted Chamber included a speech given by the procurator general Alexander Vyazemsky, who addressed the empress herself and the

²⁴ Maykov, “Opisanie”, pp. 306–307.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ See n. 23.

²⁷ G. Ibneeva, “Ekaterina II i dvoryanstvo v tseremoniale imperatorskikh puteshestviy”, in: *Romanovy v doroge: Puteshestviya i poezdki chlenov tsarskoy sem’i po Rossii i za granitsu*, ed. M. Leskinen and O. Khavanova, Moscow 2016, p. 38.

²⁸ M. Pylyayev, *Staraya Moskva: Istoriya byloy zhizni pervoprestol’noy stolitsy*, St. Petersburg 1891.

²⁹ The location of Kinburn at the mouth of the Dnieper was an additional hint at what was later called “Pan-Slavic” ideology. A. Zorin writes that “in Petrov’s rhetoric [a late eighteenth-century poet, author of odes, EB] it is the Dnieper as the river uniting Great Russia, Little Russia and Poland that has come to symbolize the Russian empire itself and to prophesy the future Slavic brotherhood where Russia will play the leading role.” (*Kormya dvuglavogo orla*, p. 151).

audience of courtiers, dignitaries, and military leaders. He glorified Catherine II's deeds and thanked her on behalf of the Senate and the people.³⁰

Vyazemsky names the Russian empress the “wonder of the century”³¹; he then speaks on her achievements (the protection of Orthodoxy, the propagation of civil justice, the introduction of laws that encourage prosperity amongst the nobility as well as the merchants, the building of cities, etc.).³² He goes back to the time of Peter the Great in order to recall the emperor's much less fortunate fight for the Black Sea, which enables him to describe Catherine (in a manner quite customary for the ideology of her rule) as the one who succeeded in achieving what Peter had intended to do. At one point, Vyazemsky mentions the Pugachov revolt, stating that Catherine “restored domestic peace shaken by evil disturbance in some region of the Fatherland”.³³ By establishing this link, he obviously follows the same symbolic pattern presented by the 1775 festivities at the Khodynka field.

However, the dignitary suggests a meaningful alteration. He chooses to speak on the series of events of 1768–1774 by referring to a variety of locations and territories. The procurator general paints the picture of the whole world submitting to the will of the Russian empress—the fortresses of Khotin, Kagul (Cahul), and Bendery are conquered, the lands of Moldavia and Walachia “obey Catherine's scepter”, the river Danube turns red with blood, the waters of the Bosphorus strait run in “fear and despair” as the Russian fleet appears, the Dardanelles “tremble as they witness victories of the Russian navy”, and even the Mediterranean Sea is “covered with [Catherine's] ships”. He reports that Crimea, Russia's “source of countless scourges since ancient times” is now embracing “the empress' sincerity and generosity”, and the people of the Peloponnese and the islands of the Greek archipelago “are stretching out their hands” to Catherine in search of protection. At the end of his speech, the dignitary states that “[Catherine's] trophies of glory rise almost to the gates of Adrianople”³⁴ and the empress's power makes Assyria and even the African lands tremble.³⁵ He focuses more on lands, seas, and adjoining straits than fortresses and rivers. Above all, he highlights the peoples of distant lands rather than those who populated the newly conquered territories. He is not restricting

³⁰ The empress's short reply to it was delivered by the Imperial Vice Chancellor Ivan Osterman (*Opisanie vseradostnogo torzhestvovaniya mira*, p. 18–19).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 8 and pp. 16–17.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁴ The present-day Turkish city Edirne.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–12.

himself to the Russian achievements on the terms of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji. Unlike the Khodynka field festivities, with their focus on the history of the Russian-Ottoman conflict and the need to communicate the idea of restored security inside the country, Vyazemsky's mental map knows no limits—his speech on Russian military power and expansion clearly reveals a geopolitical ambition. It is highly probable that he did not express this ambition on his own initiative only.

Interestingly enough, a detailed description of the Khodynka festivities and of the celebration at the Faceted Chamber (including the full version of Alexander Vyazemsky's speech) were published under one cover and were later sold by booksellers.³⁶ These interpretations of the historical events of the mid-1770s were equally usable for the discourse of power in Catherinian Russia.

³⁶ Gerchuk (ed.), *Bazhenov*, p. 259.

Notes on Contributors

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