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Political Justification of Territorial Expansion from Catherine II to Putin: Inventing “Novorossiya” in Imperial and in Post-imperial Context

Abstract: The province of “Novorossiya” was established in 1764 as Russia’s movable borderland, absorbing new conquered lands and gradually expanding to the shores of the Black Sea. In Russian imperial discourse the new province was reinvented and appropriated as the restoration of the periphery of ancient civilisations. The ancient Greek and Roman pasts of this area were rediscovered in the framework of Enlightened absolutism. After the annexation of Crimea and efforts to claim south-east of Ukraine as Russia’s “Novorossiya” in 2014 the old imperial narratives were used for justification of territorial expansion. Vladimir Putin’s “Novorossiya” was reinvented as a stronghold of Russian radical nationalism and isolationist obscurantism.

This chapter employs a retrospective approach to examine Russia’s current interference in Ukraine by comparing it to “the golden age of Catherine the Great.” Thus, the chapter examines imperial and post- or neo-imperial strategies used for the legitimization of Russia’s territorial expansion then and now. It compares the “Novorossiya” projects promoted by Catherine II and Putin. Of particular importance is the issue how historical imagination was used to justify Russian territorial expansion.

On 17 April 2014 Russia’s president Vladimir Putin introduced a new concept into the Ukraine crisis. During a four-hour question and answer session on Russian TV¹ he pointedly mentioned “Novorossiya”² – a large province gradually absorbed by the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century. Just like Plato’s Atlantis, “Novorossiya” suddenly emerged from the dark waters of oblivion in Russian po-

1 Direct Line with Vladimir Putin, Kremlin.ru, 17 April 2014, accessed 4 September 2023, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/7034>; video available at Priamaia liniia s Vladimirom Putinyim, 17 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IE54L3Xpqc>.

2 Novorossiya only existed as a territorial unit in the time of Catherine II and her son Paul I. However, it has been often used since then as an imagined space and a political myth. In this chapter, I will therefore use Novorossiya as the name of the historical territorial unit and “Novorossiya” as the political concept.

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litical and historical discourses. However, “Novorossiia” was once invented in the age of Enlightened absolutism by the Empress Catherine II and her creative lover and powerful favourite prince Grigory Potemkin.

In 1940s–1970s, one by one west European countries lost their overseas empires, thus, transforming into the “normative” nation-states. Finally, the collapse of the USSR in 1991 was considered as the end of the “age of empires.”³ However, Putin’s reinvention of “Novorossiia” brought to life a new phenomenon of territorial neo-imperialism cynically justified through imperial historical imagination – on 30 September 2022 Russia annexed a large section of south-east Ukraine “claimed back” by Putin as “Novorossiia.”⁴

This chapter employs a retrospective approach to examine Russia’s current interference in Ukraine in comparison with “the golden age of Catherine the Great.” Thus, the chapter examines imperial and post(neo)imperial strategies used for the legitimization of Russia’s territorial expansion then and now. It compares the “Novorossiia” projects promoted by Catherine II and Putin. Of particular importance is the issue of how historical imagination was used to justify Russian territorial expansion. Accordingly, the chapter starts with an analysis of the changes brought to Russia’s territorial expansion by Enlightened absolutism of Catherine II, particularly juxtaposition of the narratives of “civilisation” and “barbarianism.” It then goes on to examine the strategies of international legitimization and symbolic appropriation of territorial acquisitions made by Catherine II. Then it analyses the variety of Russia’s official and nationalist discourses on “Novorossiia” in 2014. The final section focuses on the legitimization of annexations through exhibitions.

3 Hendrik Spruyt, “The End of Empires: Developing a Comparative Research. Agenda for Imperial Dissolution in the Modern Era,” *Acta Politica* 32 (1997): 25–48; Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1997); Robert Strayer, “Decolonization, Democratization, and Communist Reform: The Soviet Collapse in Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of World History* 12, no. 2 (Fall, 2001): 375–406; John Arquilla, “The (B)end of History: Francis Fukuyama was wrong, and 2011 proves it,” *Foreign Policy*, 15 December 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/15/the-bend-of-history/>; John Mueller, “Did History End? Assessing the Fukuyama Thesis,” *Political Science Quarterly* 129, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 35–54; Francis Fukuyama, “Will We Ever Get Beyond The Nation-State?” *NOEMA*, 29 April 2021, <https://www.noemamag.com/francis-fukuyama-will-we-ever-get-beyond-the-nation-state/>; Alexander J. Motyl, “The Inevitable Fall of Putin’s New Russian Empire: What history tells us about collapsed empires trying to restore their former possessions,” *Foreign Policy*, 5 November 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/05/russia-ukraine-empire-imperialism-war/?tpcc=recirc_latest062921.

4 “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” Kremlin.ru, 21 September 2022, accessed 23 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>; “Podpisanie dogovorov o priniatii DNR, LNR, Zaporozhskoi i Khersonskoi oblastei v sostav Rossii,” Kremlin.ru, 30 September 2022, accessed 30 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.

Emergence of “Novorossiya” in the Framework of the Black Sea History

From the 1470s to the 1770s the sparsely populated plain between Russia, Poland-Lithuania, the Ottoman Empire, and the Crimean Khanate was a buffer zone without clearly defined borders. In early modern Russian sources these areas were called “wild field” (Дикое поле), that is “virgin land,” while in Latin *Loca deserta* or *Campi deserti inhabitati*.⁵ In 1752–1753 two provinces were established on the southern borderland of Russian Empire (in present day central Ukraine) – *Novaya Serbia* (New Serbia) and *Slavyano Serbia* – populated with Serbian military colonists.

In 1764 the Empress Catherine II (1762–1796) established a new province there – Novorossiya (New Russia) – which included Novaya Serbia and some other lands with an administrative centre in the town of Kremenchuk. Due to Catherine II’s successful expansionist politics, “Novorossiya” became Russia’s movable borderland which absorbed new conquered lands and gradually expanded to the shores of the Black Sea and Sea of Azov. After the Russian-Ottoman wars in 1768–1774 and 1787–1791, Russia conquered the Ottoman provinces, incorporated the Zaporozhian Cossack Host (1775),⁶ and annexed the Crimean Khanate (1783).⁷ Besides Russian generals and statesmen, “Novorossiya” was conquered and ruled by many Europeans on Russian service – José de Ribas, François Sainte de Wollant, Arman du Plessis Duke de Richelieu, Louis Alexandre Andrault, comte de Langéron, and John Paul Jones, to mention a few. New cities and sea ports were founded there – Yekaterinoslav (“Glory for Catherine”),⁸ Kherson, Nikolaiev (Ukrainian: Mykolaiv), Mariupol, Sevastopol, Simferopol, and Odesa, to mention the most important cities. Numerous settlers were invited to populate these lands – Germans,

5 Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Alexandr Osipian, “Restraining-encouraging violence: Commerce, diplomacy, and brigandage on the steppe routes between the Ottoman Empire, Poland-Lithuania, and Russia, 1470s-1570s,” in *A Global History of Early Modern Violence*, ed. Peter H. Wilson, Marie Houllemare, and Erica Charters (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 124–41.

6 Brian Davies, *The Russo-Turkish War, 1768-1774: Catherine II and the Ottoman Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 206–207, 213.

7 Alan W. Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1772-1783* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Kelly O'Neill, *Claiming Crimea. A History of Catherine the Great's Southern Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Ulrike von Hirschhausen and Jörn Leonhard, *Empires: Eine globale Geschichte 1780-1920* (München: C.H. Beck, 2023), 27–28.

8 Andrii Portnov. *Dnipro: An Entangled History of a European City* (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2022), 33–35, 38–40.

Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, Moldavians, Wallachians, Jews, along with Russians and Ukrainians who constituted majority of the multi-ethnic population there.⁹

The new province of “Novorossiia” was different from Russia’s southward territorial expansion in the “wild field” of the period between the sixteenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries.¹⁰ “Novorossiia” became a testing ground for the Catherine II’s efforts to reform Russian Empire in accordance with ideals of Enlightened absolutism – well-managed state bureaucracy, happiness of the subjects, safety on the roads, religious tolerance and secularization, pursuit of knowledge, natural law, progress, however, avoiding more radical ideals which led to the French revolution. Thus, “Novorossiia” was imagined and developed as a project based on Enlightenment ideas by the Empress Catherine II whose plans reached as far as the conquest of Constantinople and the restoration of the Byzantine Empire – the so-called “Greek project.”¹¹ The new province was reinvented and appropriated neither as former “realm of Islam”¹² nor as “land of savages” but as the restoration of the periphery of an ancient civilisation. This political imagination was not without foundation. Since the seventh century BCE there were prosperous Greek colonies along the shore of the Black Sea – Olbia, Tyras, Theodosia, Panticapaeum, Nymphaion, Myrmekion, Chersonesus (Chersonesus of Tauris), Kerkinitis, and numerous rural settlements.¹³ In the year 63 BCE the Romans established their control there after defeating Mithridates VI Eupator,

9 James A. Duran, Jr., “Catherine II, Potemkin, and Colonization Policy in Southern Russia,” *Russian Review* 28, no. 1 (1969): 23–36; Roger P. Bartlett, *Human Capital: The Settlement of Foreigners in Russia, 1762–1804* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 109–142.

10 Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia’s Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002); John P. LeDonne, “The Southern Borderlands,” in John P. LeDonne, *Ruling Russia: Politics and Administration in the Age of Absolutism, 1762–1796* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 291–315.

11 Hugh Ragsdale, “Evaluating the Traditions of Russian Aggression: Catherine II and the Greek Project,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 66, no. 1 (January 1988): 91–117; Emily Bryant, “A Third Rome?: Catherine the Great’s “Greek Project,”” *The Crimson Historical Review* (2004): 54–63; Elena Smilianskaia, “Catherine’s Liberation of the Greeks: High-Minded Discourse and Everyday Realities,” in *Word and Image in Russian History: Essays in Honor of Gary Marker*, ed. Maria di Salvo, Daniel H. Kaiser, and Valerie A. Kivelson (Academic Studies Press, 2019), 71–89; Olga I. Eliseeva, *Geopoliticheskie proekty G. A. Potemkina* (Moskva: RAN Institut rossiiskoi istorii, 2000); Martin Schulze Wessel, *Der Fluch des Imperiums: Die Ukraine, Polen und der Irrweg in der russischen Geschichte* (München: C. H. Beck, 2023), 53–60.

12 In the pre-Petrine Russia the world of Islam was defined either as “realm of Hagerenes” (царство Агарянское) or “realm of Ismaelians” (царство Измаилитянское).

13 Thomas S. Noonan, “The Grain Trade of the Northern Black Sea in Antiquity,” *American Journal of Philology* 94, no. 3 (1973): 231–42; Alfonso Moreno, *Feeding the Democracy: The Athenian Grain Supply in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

the king of Pontus and Bosphorus. Finally, the ancient civilisation there was gradually destroyed by the Goths and the Huns in the third to fifth centuries CE. For centuries the nomads replaced each other. Since the collapse of the Golden Horde in the first half of fifteenth century these lands constituted the Crimean Khanate (dependent from the Ottoman sultan since 1475) or were under direct Ottoman control. Then, for three centuries the Tatars backed by the Ottomans permanently raided Russia – as well as other neighbour countries – and trafficked numerous captives to the slave markets of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴



Figure 1: Greek colonies of the Black Sea, 7th century BCE – 5th century CE. George Tsiagalakis. Wikipedia Commons. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Greek_colonies_of_the_Northern_Euxine_Sea_%28Black_Sea%29.svg.

¹⁴ Alan Fisher, “Muscovy and the Black Sea Slave Trade,” in *A Precarious Balance: Conflict, Trade, and Diplomacy on the Russian-Ottoman Frontier* (Istanbul: the Isis Press, 1999), 27–46; Dariusz Kołodziejczyk. “Slave Hunting and Slave Redemption as a Business Enterprise. The Northern Black Sea Region in the Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries,” *Oriente Moderno* 86, no. 1 (2006): 149–59; Mikhail Kizilov, “The Slave Trade in the Early Modern Crimea from the Perspective of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 11 (2007): 1–31; Aleksandr Lavrov. “Captivity, slavery and gender: Muscovite female captives in the Crimean Khanate and in the Ottoman empire,” in *Eurasian Slavery, Ransom and Abolition in World History, 1200-1860*, ed. Christoph Witzernath (London: Routledge, 2016), 309–19; Eizo Matsuki. “The Crimean Tatars and their Russian-Captive Slaves. An Aspect of Muscovite-Crimean Relations in the 16th and 17th Centuries,” *Mediterranean World* 3 (2006): 171–82.

Civilization Versus Barbarians: an Enlightened Justification of Territorial Expansion

For centuries Russia/Muscovy was considered in Europe to be a landlocked peripheral country with rather Asian features bordering the Tatar nomads and the primitive hunters of the Arctic and Siberia whom Russia absorbed one by one, finally reaching the shores of the Pacific Ocean. In an attempt to change this, Tsar Peter I (1689-1725) tried to westernize Russia's army and nobility.¹⁵ In 1703 he founded a new capital on the Baltic shore named Petersburg after the western habit and invited westerners to settle there. His summer palace followed Versailles as a model and was named in a western way – Peterhof (German: *Peterhof*). Conquered by Peter I from Sweden in 1721, the Baltic provinces of Estland and Livland looked quite European after centuries of German colonization.¹⁶ However, the vast majority of Russia's provinces continued to follow their traditional – or barbarian from the western point of view – way of life. It was of particular importance for Catherine II to represent the Russian Empire as part of European civilization. Russia's new legal code – the Instruction (*Nakaz*) passed in 1767 – opened with the declaration that “Russia is a European state.”¹⁷ The ancient Greco-Roman legacy of the Black Sea northern shores, which Russia persistently tried to conquer¹⁸ and which was mainly known from ancient writings of Herodotus and Strabo, was of particular importance for representing a “European Russia” to Europe. At the beginning of her rule, Catherine II corresponded with Voltaire, Diderot, and d'Alembert to spread through the famous intellectuals a new positive image of Russia in Europe.¹⁹

15 Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004).

16 Reinhard Wittram, *Geschichte der Ostseelände Livland, Estland, Kurland 1180–1918. Umriss und Querschnitte* (Oldenbourg: Wissenschaftsverlag, 2009).

17 *Nakaz Ekateriny II Komissii o sostavlenii proekta novogo Ulozheniia. 1767 god*, accessed 23 June 2023, https://runivers.ru/doc/d2.php?CENTER_ELEMENT_ID=147504&PORTAL_ID=7138&SECTION_ID=6778.

18 John P. LeDonne, “Geopolitics, Logistics, and Grain: Russia's Ambitions in the Black Sea Basin, 1737–1834,” *International History Review* 28, no. 1 (2006): 1–41.

19 Maurice Tournieux, *Diderot et Catherine II* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1899); “Catherine the Great letter to D'Alembert,” in *Readings in Modern European History*, ed. James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1908), vol. 1, 209–10; *Voltaire, Catherine II. Correspondance, 1763–1778*. Texte présenté et annoté par Alexandre Stroev (Paris, 2006); *Catherine the Great: Selected Letters*, ed. Andrew Kahn and Kelsey Rubin-Detlev (Oxford: OUP, 2018); Vesa Oitti-

Since the outbreak of the Russo-Ottoman war on 25 September 1768 Voltaire encouraged the Empress to expel the Ottomans from Europe and liberate Greece – a motherland of arts and sciences – in almost every letter he sent. The war was represented by Voltaire as a combat between civilization and barbarians with the main goal to restore the ancient glory of enslaved Greece. Voltaire insisted that Catherine II must conquer Constantinople, Adrianople, and Athens. He promised to join the Empress' court in the conquered Istanbul – ancient Byzantium.

On 30 July 1771, after receiving news about the Russian conquest of the Crimea (ancient Tauris), Voltaire dressed his greetings to the Empress into the garments of ancient Greek myth and drama: "Now you can enjoy at least ruling the Kingdom of Thoas where Iphigenia was a priestess for a long time and from there her brother Orestes took off the idol."²⁰ Voltaire referred to the ancient Greek hero Orestes²¹ whose story was a subject of many classic dramas by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. One of the dramas – *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Euripides – is directly related to the ancient Crimea – Tauris. According to the playwright, Orestes was ordered by Apollo to go to Tauris, carry off the statue of Artemis, and bring it to Athens. When Orestes arrived to Tauris – ruled by the King Thoas – he was imprisoned by indigenous people – the Taurians – whose custom was to sacrifice all strangers in honour of Artemis. Nevertheless, Orestes successfully escaped from Tauris carrying with him the statue of Artemis.

Writing in response to Voltaire on 14 August 1771, Catherine II used the Orestes story to suggest that present day Crimean Tatars were even more barbarian than cruel ancient Taurians: "I am sure now Orestes couldn't steal a single statue in Crimea, because there is not a shred of fine art among these people."²² Naturally, as Muslims, the Tatars were forbidden to make any statues. In the same letter, Catherine II informed Voltaire that after every Russian victory over the Ottomans she erected a marble column in her garden: "However, if this war goes on, my garden at Tsarskoe-Selo will be like a skittle alley, because every

nen. "When Diderot Met Catherine: Some Reflections on an Archetypic Event," *Transcultural Studies: A Journal in Interdisciplinary Research* 14, no. 2 (2018): 171–82.

²⁰ *Perepiska rossiiskoi imperatritsy Ekateriny II i gospodina Voltera, prodolzhashaiasia s 1763 po 1778 god*, trans. Ivan Fabian (Moskva: V volnoi tipografii Garii i Kompanii, 1803), 20.

²¹ Voltaire wrote a play called *Oreste* in 1750.

²² "Je défierais à présent Oreste de voler une seule statue en Crimée, parce qu'il n'y a pas l'ombre des beaux-arts chez ces gens-là," in *Bumagi imperatritsy Ekateriny II, khраниashchiesia v gosudarstvennom archive ministerstva inostrannykh del. Sbornik Rossiiskogo Imperatorskogo Obshchestva*. Vol. 13, ed. Iakov Karlovich Grot (Sankt Peterburg: Tipografiia Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk, 1874), 145–46. Transl. author.

time I win, I have some monument erected there.”²³ The juxtaposition was clear: while the Tatars had no idea on fine arts, the Empress – frequently compared to Minerva, patroness of arts – transformed her garden into a classic Mouseion.

Though in 1772 the war was far from concluded and the Russian army held no single fortress south of the Danube, a painting was commissioned to Stefano Torelli to glorify the victory of the Russian army, with “Allegory of Catherine the Great’s Victory over the Turks and Tatars” depicting the Russians’ triumphal entry to Istanbul/Constantinople. The city can be identified by the Patriarch greeting Russian Empress at the city gates, the minarets of invisible Hagia Sophia, and the Russian fleet in a bay. Catherine II is portrayed as the ancient goddess Minerva in a triumphal chariot, with the Empress crowned with a wreath by the flying goddess Nike. The chariot is accompanied by a group of women dressed in luxurious oriental garments. However, their faces are unveiled. In their correspondence Catherine II and Voltaire frequently discussed the liberation of women from the sultan’s seraglio after Russia’s expected victory. With the sultan defeated and the Russian army entering Istanbul, the women would be liberated out of the seraglio and from their restrictive dress-code. Catherine II’s chariot is followed by a group of mounted Russian generals – dressed as ancient Greco-Roman warriors – the cavaliers of the recently established Russian military order of St George: Petr Rumyantsev, Alexei Orlov, Petr Panin, Vasily Dolgorukov, Nicholas Repnin, and Fedor Orlov. The procession is led by Grigory Orlov – then the Empress’ favourite – a leader of the coup d’état which brought Catherine II to power in 1762, who is decorated with a diamond portrait of the Empress. At the very end of the procession a group of dismounted Ottoman statesmen and Janissaries are accompanied by some camels loaded with trophies.

Although the previous Russo-Ottoman wars were represented as religious clashes between the world of Islam and Russian Orthodox (post-Byzantine) Christianity, the war of 1768–1774 is contrastingly represented as a combat between Enlightened civilization and barbarianism. Furthermore, through liberating Greece – perceived as the cradle of European civilization – Russia proved its belonging to Europe and for this reason the triumphant Russians are dressed as ancient warriors. The imagined victorious entrance of the Russians into Constantinople is displayed not only as coming back to the original source of the Russian Orthodox Christianity – a patriarch and St Sophia cathedral – but mainly as joining the cohort of European powers through appropriating the legacy of ancient civilization.

23 “Mais si cette guerre continue, mon jardin de Tsarskoé-Selo ressemblera à un jeu de quilles, car à chaque action d’éclat j’y fais élever quelque monument,” *ibid.*, 146.



Figure 2: “Allegory of Catherine the Great’s victory over the Turks and Tatars” by Stefano Torelli in 1772. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. © Heritage images / Fine Art Images / akq-images.

International Legitimation and Symbolic Appropriation of Territorial Acquisitions

Catherine II’s solemn journey to her new domains in January-July 1787 greatly contributed to the foundation myth of “Novorossiia” – the narrative of “enlightened power” reclaiming back this space after the “dark ages of barbarianism.” The journey was organized by the Catherine II’s favorite/lover – prince Grigory Potemkin (1739-1791), the powerful and industrious general-governor of Russia’s new provinces.

Among the most important goals of the voyage was international legitimation of Russia’s recent territorial acquisitions. Catherine II’s court was accompanied by diplomatic fellow-travellers: Austrian ambassador Johann Ludwig Joseph von Cobenzl, British ambassador Alleyne FitzHerbert, French ambassador Louis Philippe, *comte de Ségur*, and Prince Charles-Joseph de Ligne.

Several European monarchs were also engaged into the journey at some important points. In the town of Kaniv on Russian-Polish border Catherine II was greeted by Stanisław August, the last king of Poland (r. 1764–1795). There, an obelisk was erected on the hilltop, while at night fireworks lighted up the picturesque landscape of Dnipro river. The Empress and her court continued their journey on

galleys down the Dnipro river. In the vicinity of recently founded town of Yekaterinoslav Catherine II was joined by the Emperor Joseph II (r. 1765–1790) who travelled under the name “Comte Falkenstein”; together they visited the most important locations in Crimea.

Along the Empress’ path monuments were erected and theatrical events took place referring to the imagined ancient past. A triumphal arch was built in the city of Novhorod-Siverskyi symbolising the transit from “Great Russia” (*Velikorossiya*) to “Little Russia” (*Malorossiya* – former Ukrainian Hetmanate abolished by the Empress in 1763). Catherine’s so-called milestones – an imitation of the ancient Roman milestones – were erected along the road from Kherson to the Crimean cities. In Balaklava, Crimea, Catherine II and Joseph II were greeted by the notorious Amazon company, a troop of Greek women whom the governor Potemkin smartly dressed in raspberry velvet skirts edged with golden fringe, green velvet jackets, and white gauze turbans with ostrich feathers, each armed with a rifle and three cartridges. It was meant as the costume of the ancient Amazons who, according to Herodotus, inhabited Scythia and Sarmatia to the north of the Black Sea.²⁴

The journey was immortalized by the means of visual propaganda. A painting by Ferdinand de Meyes called “Catherine II’s journey in her own country in 1787” depicts the journey and displays the programme of appropriation and incorporation of the new area through the narratives of Enlightenment and ancient Greek-Roman past. The Empress is depicted as travelling in the ancient Roman chariot, a *quadriga*. In her left hand she keeps a torch as a symbol of the Enlightenment she brought to the lands recently liberated from the “barbarian hands” of the Ottomans and Tatars. The Empress is crowned by Nike – the ancient goddess of victory – keeping in her right hand an ancient golden crown and two laurel crowns. Catherine II’s triumph is also observed from the heaven by two men, one of them the first Russian emperor Peter I (1689–1725) who initiated Russia’s military expansion to the Black Sea region,²⁵ depicted in the laurel crown holding his right hand on the globe. Peter I is accompanied by Zeus/Jupiter depicted with naked torso and an eagle. The empress is greeted by the mobs of her Russian and Ukrainian subjects as well as by single female and male persons dressed as Tatars and, finally, a woman in western dress (presumably a wife of the painter) representing the western settlers.

²⁴ Hdt. 4.110–17.

²⁵ Brian J. Boeck, “When Peter I Was Forced to Settle for Less: Coerced Labor and Resistance in a Failed Russian Colony (1695–1711),” *Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 3 (2008): 485–514; Andrei G. Guskov, Kirill A. Kochegarov, and Stepan M. Shamin, “Russko-turetskaia voina 1686-1700 gg.,” *Rossiiskaia istoriia* 6 (2020): 30–49.



Figure 3: “Catherine II’s journey in her own country in 1787” by Ferdinand de Meyes in 1787. State Historical Museum, Moscow, Russia. © Heritage images / Fine Art Images / akg-images.

The newly colonised space was shaped through replacing the Tatar and Ottoman placenames with “ancient” ones. Russian officials did not care if the “recovered” Greek placenames correlated with the real name of an ancient town. No one did any archaeological excavations to define the real name of the ancient ruins, and in many cases the ancient ruins were invisible. In some cases, Greek names were given to new towns with no ancient legacy. For instance, the city of Kherson (Херсон) got its name after the ancient Greek city of Chersonesus (Russian: Херсонес), despite the fact that Chersonesus was in Crimea while Kherson was founded in 1778 in the estuary of the Dnipro river. Furthermore, in the vicinity of the ruins of Chersonesus a new city was founded in 1783 and named Sevastopol, referring to the ancient Greek city of Sebastopolis. However, the ancient Sebastopolis was located in Abkhazia (present-day city of Sukhumi), far away from Crimea.

Many new Greek names were given to the settlements founded long before Catherine II’s accession to power. The key element in a new name was the ending *polis* (Greek: *city*) – Russian *pol’* (поль) – which ultimately turned any place

name into a Greek one. In 1784 the Tatar town Aqmescit (Tatar: *White Mosque*) in Crimea was renamed as Simferopol (Greek: *City of common good*). However, in ancient times there was a city called Scythian Neapolis (Σκυθική Νεάπολις) mentioned by Strabo.²⁶

It was well known that the ancient Greeks founded their settlements along the Black Sea shores. However, even those old and new towns in the hinterland – having no chance for any ancient Greek legacy – were renamed in a Greek way. For instance, in 1770 in the Ukrainian village Orlik a Russian fortress was built and given the German name Katherinenschantz (Russian: Катериненшанц) which in turn was renamed Olviopol in 1781 (since 1919 the town of Pervomaisk in Ukraine). Olviopol referred to the ancient Greek city of Olbia. However, the ruins of Olbia (present-day village Parutyne in Ukraine) are 200 kilometres to the south of Olviopol, and at that time were still in the Ottoman domains. Some new names did not last for long; in 1783 town of Eski Qırım (Tatar: Old Crimea) was renamed Levkopol and in 1787 was renamed again as Staryi Krym (Russian equivalent for Tatar Eski Qırım).

For a long time, the material traces of the ancient civilization were rather neglected by Russian authorities. In 1783 Potemkin founded Sevastopol which became the home base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Sevastopol was built on the ruins of the ancient city of Chersonesus, which was founded by the ancient Greeks in 422 BCE and abandoned by inhabitants in 1399 CE. The ruins of the ancient city were dilapidated by Russians to be used as construction material to build Sevastopol, with the same happening to the ancient and medieval ruins and antiquities in other places on the Black Sea shores.²⁷ Only in 1827 did Alexis Greig, a Russian admiral of Scottish origin, order lieutenant Karl Kruse to excavate in Sevastopol the ruins of the basilica where Volodymir, the Grand Prince of Kyiv, was reportedly baptised in 988.²⁸

Catherine II's contribution to Russia's imperial future could be described in such terms as Enlightenment (enlightened absolutism), secularization, cosmopolitanism, urbanization, integration into global maritime trade (grain export through the Black Sea ports), territorial expansion, and planned restoration of the Byzantine

²⁶ Strabo 7.4.7.

²⁷ Genrikh E. Koller [Heinrich K. E. Köhler]. "O sredstvakh k sokhraneniui dostopamiatnostei Tavridy," *Zhurnal Departamenta narodnogo prosveshcheniia* 6 (1822): 249–61; Ivan A. Stempkovskii [Stępkowski]. "Mysli otnositelno drevnostei v Novorossiiskom krae," *Otechestvennye zapiski* 29, no. 81 (1827): 40–72; Irina V. Tunkina. "Akademicheskaiia arkhologicheskaiia ekspeditsiia v Novorossiiskii krai 1821 g. pod rukovodstvom akademika E. E. Kellera (Novye arkhivnye materialy)," *Vestnik drevnei istorii* 1 (284) (2013): 197–214.

²⁸ Vadim V. Khapaev. "Zavedyvauiushchii otkrytiiami": pervye soobshcheniia o raskopkakh Khersonesa," *Prichernomorie. Istoriia, politika, kultura. Seriia A*, 19, no. 6 (2016), 12–13; Irina V. Tunkina, *Russkaia nauka o klassicheskikh drevnostiakh Iuga Rossii (XVIII - seredina XIX v.)* (Sankt Peterburg: Nauka, 2002), 511–12.

Empire (the so-called “Greek project”). “Novorossiia” was an exhibit of all these achievements which the Empress proudly displayed to the Emperor Joseph II and western ambassadors in 1787.

Replacing the Ottoman/Tatar “barbarianism” with Enlightened civilization rooted in the Greek-Roman heritage had justified the Russian conquest and colonization of the northern shores of the Black Sea. Numerous references to real and imagined Greek-Roman legacy helped to fulfil Russia’s imperial mission in the Black Sea region.

Catherine II’s Enlightenment zeal had its clear limits. On the one hand, she declared her intention to liberate the women of the sultan’s seraglio/harem while, on the other hand, she expressed a negative attitude to the French Revolution of 1789. The Empress saw Russia as a force for stability, pitted against the French Revolution as a force for anarchy. Catherine II remained a staunch defender of absolutism against all forms of popular rule because, she argued, it had delivered the economic, cultural, and social achievements that she regarded as the civilisational achievement of reign. Revolution, she believed, had reduced France to a barbarism that undid the advances of the Age of Reason. Russia, she argued, would remain a bulwark of the tolerance, reason, and advances in social welfare she believed she had fostered as a pragmatic Enlightened ruler.²⁹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the term “Novorossiia” was replaced with “South Russia” and its industrial heartland of Donbas – the Donets coal basin. Finally, the term “Novorossiia” was put into oblivion in the USSR and independent Ukraine.

Reinventing “Novorossiia” in Post-imperial and Neo-imperial Context: Russia’s Official and Far-right Discourses in 2014

The successful annexation of Crimea in March 2014 became a watershed moment for a rising Russian revanchist resentment with an imperial consciousness. When justifying the annexation of Crimea in his speech on 18 March 2014 Russian president Vladimir Putin, among other arguments, referred to the historical legacy of the peninsula:³⁰

²⁹ Elena E. Prikazchikova. “Frantsuzskaia revoliutsiia v diskurse rossiiskoi aristokratii,” *Izvestiia Uralskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*. Serii 2: *Gumanitarnye nauki* 49, no. 13 (2007): 303–11.

³⁰ For more details, see: Edwin Bacon, “Putin’s Crimea Speech, 18 March 2014: Russia’s Changing Public Political Narrative,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, no. 1 (2015): 13–36.

To understand the reason behind such a choice it is enough to know the history of Crimea and what Russia and Crimea have always meant for each other. Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea. This is also Sevastopol – a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Crimea is Balaklava and Kerch, Malakhov Kurgan³¹ and Sapun Ridge.³² Each one of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolising Russian military glory and outstanding valour.³³

Russia had an interest in keeping Ukraine within its sphere of influence and establishing a protectorate over south-eastern Ukraine defined as “Novorossiia,” mentioned for the first time by Putin on 17 April 2014. That day, during talks in Geneva on resolving the crisis, the Russian president stated at a question and answer session that

I would like to remind you that what was called “Novorossiia” (New Russia) back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev, and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows. They were won by Potemkin and Catherine the Great in a series of well-known wars. The center of that territory was Novorossiysk, so the region is called “Novorossiia”. Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained.³⁴

Here Putin showed his lack – as well as his aides' and speechwriters' – of historical accuracy and his ability to manipulate history. First, Kharkiv oblast as well as most of Luhansk oblast and the north of Donetsk oblast were never part of the “Novorossiia” governorate, but were part of the Sloboda Ukraine governorate, later known as the Kharkiv governorate. Second, the Russian Black Sea port city of Novorossiysk was never part of the “Novorossiia” governorate. Third, the city could not have given its name to the governorate because Novorossiysk was founded in 1838 while “Novorossiia” was established in 1764. Instead, Putin's “Novorossiia” reflects the electoral geography of post-Soviet Ukraine. Putin included into “Novorossiia” those regions which in 2002–2012 voted for the Party of Re-

31 Malakhov Kurgan is a ridge used by Russian troops to defend Sevastopol against British and French attacks during the Crimean War.

32 Sapun Ridge or Mount Sapun became the site of heavy fighting during the siege of Sevastopol in 1941–1942 and again in 1944.

33 Address by President of the Russian Federation, *Kremlin.ru*, 18 March 2014, accessed 4 September 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

34 Direct Line with Vladimir Putin, *Kremlin.ru*, 17 April 2014, accessed 4 September 2023, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/7034>.

gions and its leader Viktor Yanukovych.³⁵ Thus, Putin's statement reflects his imagined political geography – plans to transform Ukraine into fragile confederation of the proper “Ukraine” and so-called “Novorossiia” – a Russian protectorate. Thus, “Ukraine” with pro-western government in Kyiv would have no border with Crimea and could not claim back the annexed peninsula. Moreover, Crimea would be supplied with water, power, gas, and food from “Novorossiia.” This confederation of Ukraine and “Novorossiia” would be modelled on Bosnia and Herzegovina after Dayton accords, consisting of a Muslim-Croatian federation and *Republika Srpska*, a Serbian protectorate.³⁶

The idea that the lands of “Novorossiia” had been irresponsibly ceded to Ukraine by the Bolsheviks led by Vladimir Lenin was repeated by Putin much later in his essay (2021)³⁷ and in his speeches justifying the annexation of the south-eastern Ukraine on 30 September 2022.³⁸ Putin mentioned “Novorossiia” for the second time on 29 August 2014 in the course of the battle of Ilovaisk in Donbas, issuing a statement addressed to the “Militia of Novorossiia” calling on it to show humanitarian compassion and allow surrounded Ukrainian soldiers to withdraw and reunite with their families. However, the actual text does not use that specific phrasing, mentioning only “the representatives of Donbas.”³⁹ This was the last official statement by Putin addressing “Novorossiia” until 2022.

In his speech on 4 December 2014 Putin emphasised the symbolic significance of Crimea to Russian culture: “It was here in Crimea in ancient Khersones or Kor-

35 Alexandr Osipian and Ararat Osipian, “Regional Diversity and Divided Memories in Ukraine: Contested Past as Electoral Resource, 2004-2010,” *East European Politics and Societies* 26, no. 3 (2012): 616–42.

36 Alexei Fenenko, “A Bosnian Scenario for Ukraine,” *Valdai club*, 17 July 2014, accessed 10 October 2023, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/a_bosnian_scenario_for_ukraine/; Vladimir Dergachev and Sergei Podosenov, “Novorossiia pishet ‘bosniiskii stsenarii,’” *Gazeta.ru*, 1 September 2014, accessed 10 October 2023, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/09/01_a_6199469.shtml; “Bosniiskii stsenarii dlia Ukrainy: Zapad popytaetsia vvesti v Donbass ‘mezhdunarodnykh mirotvortsev,’” *Regnum.ru*, 24 July 2014, accessed 10 October 2023, <https://regnum.ru/article/1829013>; “Balkanskii motivy na ukrainskii lad. Gennadii Sysoev o tom, chem grozit Ukraine iugoslavskii stsenarii,” *Kommersant*, 22 February 2022, accessed 10 October 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5228293>.

37 Vladimir Putin. “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” 12 July 2021, accessed 14 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

38 “Obrazhenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” *Kremlin.ru*, 21 September 2022, accessed 23 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>; “Podpisanie dogovorov o priinatii DNR, LNR, Zaporozhskoi i Khersonskoi oblastei v sostav Rossii,” *Kremlin.ru*, 30 September 2022, accessed 30 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.

39 “President of Russia Vladimir Putin Addressed “Novorossiia” Militia,” *Kremlin.ru*, August 29, 2014, accessed September 4, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46506>.

sun⁴⁰ as the chroniclers called it, that Count Vladimir was baptized [in the tenth century] to then baptize the rest of Rus.”⁴¹ Here, too, the word “Novorossiia” was absent. However, “Novorossiia” returned in Putin’s public speeches and interviews after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The efforts of pro-Russian activists backed by the Russian Security Service (FSB) to fuel insurgency in south-eastern Ukraine had failed. The insurgents only had succeed in establishing shaky control over 30 percent of the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts – two regions out of eight targeted by Russia in the early spring 2014. The failure of the secessionist insurgency became evident in August 2014.

The reinvented concept of “Novorossiia” was enthusiastically accepted by Russian nationalists and far-right extremists who flooded Donbas in spring-summer 2014 and fuelled military conflict there.⁴² Marlene Laruelle has divided the nationalist readings of “Novorossiia” into three currents – red, white, and brown. “Red Novorossiia” is a leftist project of “Novorossiia” as an oligarchy-free part of “greater Russia,” with strong nostalgia for the USSR as a superpower. “White Novorossiia” is based on ultraconservative political orthodoxy, with strong nostalgia for the Romanov Empire and a perception of Ukraine as “an artificial construct sponsored by the Bolsheviks to weaken Russia.”⁴³ “Brown Novorossiia” is defined by Laruelle as an openly anti-regime project of Russian neo-fascists whose goal is to export “national revolution” (*Russkaya vesna* – “Russian spring”) from Eastern Ukraine to Russia.⁴⁴ Thus, for Russian nationalists of various currents “Novorossiia” was both a promised land to be added to Russia and an anticipation of Russia’s own transformation.

Contrastingly, most of the local Donbas insurgents in 2014 considered Putin’s regime as their only hope and its conservative rhetoric as a model to follow.⁴⁵ For them “Novorossiia” was something new and exotic. They were proud of their regional Donbas identity while “Novorossiia” was out of use for almost a century.⁴⁶

40 Korsun is the old-Slavonic name of medieval Chersonesus used in contemporary chronicles of Rus’.

41 “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” *Kremlin.ru*, 4 December 2014, accessed 4 September 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>.

42 Nikolay Mitrokhin, “Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia’s War in the Donbass,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, no. 1 (2015): 219–49; Nikolay Mitrokhin: “Transnationale Provokation. Russische Nationalisten in der Ukraine,” *Osteuropa* 5–6 (2014): 157–74.

43 Marlene Laruelle, “The Three Colors of “Novorossiia”, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2016): 61–66.

44 Laruelle, “The Three Colors of Novorossiia,” 66–70.

45 Alexandr Osipian, “The decline of the Left, populist mobilization and insurgency in the old industrial region of Donbas, 1991–2014,” *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* 19, no. 1 (2022): 73–95.

46 Alexandr Osipian, “Historical Myths, Enemy Images and Regional Identity in the Donbass Insurgency (Spring 2014),” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, no. 1 (2015): 109–40.

The local Donbas insurgents internalised the Russian narrative of the “fascist junta” that came to power in Kyiv in late February 2014⁴⁷ and thus justified their insurgency as a sequel of the “Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945” (Russian name for the German-Soviet war) – a narrative distributed by Russian mass-media.⁴⁸

For the first time since the lost fight for the *Supreme Soviet* (Russian parliament) in October 1993, Russian nationalists finally had a story that celebrated their achievements in actions, words, images, and music, offering a full complement of heroic battles and martyrs.⁴⁹ Putin has since disappointed all three “Novorossiya” camps; many were hoping that the Donbas would be integrated into Russia following Crimea’s annexation, while Moscow saw the insurgency only as a way to maintain its influence over Ukraine’s future.⁵⁰ The “Novorossiya” storyline validated a new kind of geopolitical adventurism and blurred the boundaries, both territorial and imaginary, of the Russian state, with possible boomerang effects that are difficult to forecast.⁵¹ In order to reduce the growing popularity of the Russian nationalists inside Russia itself, some of the insurgent leaders were killed in Donbas, while others agreed to come back to Russia and live a quiet life.⁵² They were replaced with the most loyal social climbers who agreed to play “the authorities” of the breakaway statelets actually ruled by the Russian FSB and GRU.⁵³

Since 5 September 2014, when the so-called Minsk Accords were signed, Russia pursued the strategy of the “Trojan horse” to reintroduce the breakaway regions of DPR and LPR back into Ukraine as autonomous Russian protectorates, which could

47 Shaun Walker, “Donetsk’s pro-Russia rebels celebrate expelling ‘fascist Ukrainian junta’,” *The Guardian*, 8 September 2014, accessed 7 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/08/donetsk-pro-russia-rebels-ukrainian-junta>; Mykola Riabchuk, “Ukrainians as Russia’s negative ‘other’: History comes full circle,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 75–85.

48 Alexandr Osipian, “World War II Memory Politics in Russia and Ukraine, and Their Uses During the Conflict in the Donbas (Spring–Summer 2014),” in *Official History in Eastern Europe*, ed. Korine Amacher, Andrii Portnov, and Viktoriia Serhienko (Osnabrück: fibre Verlag, 2020), 267–90.

49 Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism. Imaginaries, Doctrines and Political Battlefields* (London: Routledge, 2019), 208.

50 Laruelle (2019), 209.

51 Idem.

52 Marlene Laruelle, “Back From Utopia: How Donbas Fighters Reinvent Themselves in a Post-Novorossiya Russia,” *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019): 719–33.

53 Vladislav Surkov was the main kingmaker to remove the most radical figures of the insurgency in order to transform it into a more classic frozen secessionist conflict under Moscow’s stranglehold. See Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, “Kremlin ‘Grey Cardinal’ Surkov’s Deal for a ‘Donetsk Transdnistria’?”, *The Interpreter*, 9 July 2014, accessed 11 July 2014, www.interpretermag.com/kremlin-grey-cardinal-surkovs-deal-for-a-donetsk-transdnistria/.

thus help Russia to undermine any democratic processes in Ukraine and block the country's pro-western drift. However, this strategy failed, and Russia launched the full-scale military invasion on 24 February 2022.⁵⁴ Now efforts were made to transform the annexed Crimea into the imagined sacral space of Russia.

When legitimizing the annexation of Crimea in his "Crimean speeches" of 18 March and 4 December 2014, Putin particularly emphasized two events: the baptism of Vladimir/Volodymyr, the grand prince of Kyiv, in Chersonesus in 988 (who then baptized the whole of Rus'), and the Crimean War of 1853–1855 fought by Russia against the Great Britain, France, Italy (Kingdom of Sardegnia), and the Ottoman Empire. During his numerous visits to the Crimea since 2014 Putin predominantly visited memorials and monuments historically related to these two events – the baptism of Prince Vladimir and the Crimean War. According to Russian historical narrative and political discourse the baptism of Prince Vladimir in 988 separated Rus' from western Christendom (Catholicism) and led to the making of a particular "Russian civilization" – or a Russian *Sonderweg*. This "Russian civilization" includes Ukraine and Belarus as well, while the Crimean War symbolizes the stalemate between Russia and the West.

How are the annexations of Crimea in 2014 and of a big portion of south-east Ukraine in 2022 important for Russia's future? The annexation of Crimea is an integral part of Russia's naval expansion in Eastern Mediterranean. In 2013 Russia established a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea with its Mediterranean Squadron. The Black Sea Fleet based in Sevastopol, Crimea, has been the primary supplier of ships and logistics for the squadron, particularly since Russian military interference in Syria in September 2015. A Russian naval base in Tarsus, Syria, was established in 2017.⁵⁵ Between 2013 and 2016 Russia also made unsuccessful efforts to establish its naval base in Montenegro, albeit unsuccessfully.⁵⁶

54 Adam Potočník and Miroslav Mares, "Donbas Conflict: How Russia's Trojan Horse Failed and Forced Moscow to Alter Its Strategy," *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 4 (2023): 341–51.

55 Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Naval Strategy in the Mediterranean," *Marshall Center Security Insight*, no. 35, July 2019, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/russias-naval-strategy-mediterranean-0>.

56 "Montenegro government refuses Russia's request to set up a military base," *Sofia Globe*, 22 December 2013, accessed 27 July 2023, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2013/12/22/montenegro-government-refuses-russias-request-to-set-up-a-military-base/#:~:text=The%20government%20of%20Montenegro%20has,the%20military%20base%20near%20Syria>; "Officials dismiss talk of Russian military base in Montenegro," *Radio Svobodna Evropa*, 10 February 2015, accessed 28 July 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/officials-squash-talk-of-russian-military-base-in-montenegro/26839898.html>; Ivana Sekularac, "End of the affair: Montenegro jilts Russia by joining NATO," *Reuters*, 22 May 2017, accessed 24 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-montenegro-nato-idCAKBN18I0W3-OCATP>.

These events refer to Russia's historical naval domination in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Archipelago expeditions of the Russian Baltic fleet in 1769–1774 and 1805–1807. In the first expedition the Russian Baltic fleet had fuelled the Greek uprising in the Peloponnese, which declared the independence of the Archipelago province under the protectorate of the Empress Catherine II. The Empress then blocked the sea routes, cutting the food supply to Istanbul and supporting the anti-Ottoman secession of Egypt.⁵⁷ During the conflict the island of Malta was used by the Russian fleet as its transit hub. The Order of Knights of the Hospital – also known as the Knights of Malta⁵⁸ – was protected by Catherine II while her son – the Emperor Paul I (1796–1801) – became a Grandmaster of the Order in 1799. During the second expedition the Russian Baltic fleet blockaded the Dardanelles while the Russian army operated in south of Italy, on the Danube, and in the Caucasus.⁵⁹

In October 2021 the expedition “Flame of Chesma. The Greek Gambit” on the sailing vessel *Shtandart* – a 1999 replica of the 1703 frigate – followed the way of the Archipelago expedition of 1769–1774. The expedition was named after the Battle of Çeşme of 1770 (Chesma is the Russian name for Turkish Çeşme) and the Greek anti-Ottoman uprising backed by the Russian fleet. The expedition was organized by the Russian Geographical Society and financed by the Foundation of the Russian President's Grants.⁶⁰ It is even more interesting and telling of the significance of the expedition in the grand scheme of Russia's “Novorossiia” discourse that since 2009 the Russian Geographical Society has been headed by Sergei Shoigu, Russia's former Minister of Defence (2012–2024).⁶¹ Furthermore, on 5 July 2012 Shoigu –

57 Paul du Quenoy, “Arabs under Tsarist Rule: The Russian Occupation of Beirut, 1773–1774,” *Russian History* 41, no. 2 (2014): 128–41; Smilyanskaya, Elena, “Russian Warriors in the Land of Miltiades and Themistocles: The Colonial Ambitions of Catherine the Great in the Mediterranean,” *Higher School of Economics Research Paper No. WP BRP 55/HUM/2014*, 13 May 2014, accessed 14 June 2023, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2436332> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2436332>.

58 Since 1831 the official name is the Order of the Knights of St John.

59 Irina M. Smilianskaia, Mikhail Velizhev, and Elena B. Smilianskaia, *Rossia v Sredizemnomorie. Arkhipelagaskaia ekspeditsiia Ekateriny Velikoi* (Moskva: Indrik, 2011).

60 Pavel Onoiko, “9 oktiabria v Piree startovala ekspeditsiia na frigate ‘Shtandart’,” *Afinskie novosti*, 14 October 2021, accessed 28 August 2023, <https://rua.gr/news/news/44196-9-oktyabrya-v-piree-startovala-ekspeditsiya-na-fregate-shtandart.html>; Ольга Венци, “Plamia Chesmy. Grecheskii Gambit,” *Afinskie novosti*, 15 October 2021, accessed 28 August 2023, <https://rua.gr/news/news/44210-plamya-chesmy-grecheskij-gambit.html>.

61 “Sergei Kuzhugetovich Shoigu,” *Russkoe geograficheskoe obshchestvo*, accessed 8 August 2023, <https://rgo.ru/about/structure/president-of-the-rgs/>; “Sergei Shoigu nagradil serebrianoi medalii glavnogo kostromskogo geografa,” *k1news*, 27 May 2022, accessed 8 August 2023, <https://k1news.ru/news/society/sergey-shoigu-nagradil-serebrianoi-medalyu-glavnogo-kostromskogo-geografa/>.

then the governor of Moscow oblast – was awarded the Knight's Military Cross, the highest award of the Order of Malta.⁶²

Shoigu has contributed to the glorification of the Crimea annexation through the visual propaganda. As powerful minister of defence he commissioned to build the Main Church of the Russian Armed Forces, which was dedicated on the outskirts of Moscow in a military theme park, "Patriot," in June 2020. Frescoes in the cathedral celebrate Russia's military might through history, from medieval battles to modern-day wars in Georgia and Syria, while mosaics depict the annexation of Crimea in 2014 with portraits of Putin, Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu, Russia's political leadership, and soldiers. Undoubtedly, one can recognize the historical reference to the Byzantine model of depicting the emperors on frescoes and mosaics in the churches they built. On the one hand, it could reflect the Russian aspirations to be considered as the only true heir of the Byzantine imperial legacy. On the other hand, it could be reference to the Neo-Byzantine style which became dominant in Russian architecture in the reign of the Emperor Alexander II (1855–1881), illustrated by the cathedrals of St. prince Vladimir in Kyiv (1862–1882) and in Sevastopol on the ruins of Chersonesus (1861–1879) which were built in this style. The Byzantine model reflects the Putin's conservative turn, distancing Russia's *Sonderweg* from Western civilization. However, the mosaic was removed after public controversy, with Putin himself reportedly giving orders to take it down, saying it was too early to celebrate the country's current leadership.⁶³

62 "Shoigu poluchil vysshuii nagradu Maltiiskogo ordena," *RIA novosti*, 5 July 2012, accessed October 7, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20120705/692720936.html>.

63 Alexandra Dzhordzhevich. "Izobrazheny rukovoditeli nashego gosudarstva, v tom chisle sredi naroda'. Pochemu Glavnyi khram VS RF ukrali mozaikami s litsami Vladimira Putina i Iosifa Stalina," *Novaia gazeta*, 24 April 2020, accessed 25 April 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/24/85085-izobrazheny-rukovoditeli-nashego-gosudarstva-v-tom-chisle-sredi-naroda>; "Russia's New Military Mega-Church to Feature Putin, Stalin, Crimea Mosaics," *The Moscow Times*, 24 April 2020, accessed 25 April 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/24/russias-new-military-mega-church-to-feature-putin-stalin-crimea-mosaics-a70100>; Lena Surzhko Harned. "Holy wars: How a cathedral of guns and glory symbolizes Putin's Russia," *The Conversation*, 2 March 2022, accessed 4 September 2023, <https://theconversation.com/holy-wars-how-a-cathedral-of-guns-and-glory-symbolizes-putins-russia-176786>.

Mapping Space and Legitimizing Annexations Through Exhibitions

The official myth of “Novorossiya” was spread through historical narratives, novels, movies, and exhibitions in the central and local museums. The main focus was laid on the Russian victory in the Russo-Ottoman wars of 1768–1774 and 1787–1791, as well as annexation of the Crimean Khanate in 1783. Myth was developed on the well-prepared ground. Even in the USSR – despite the dominant narrative of class struggle and fierce criticism of “corrupted nobility” and “despotic monarchy” – generals Alexander Suvorov, Petr Rumyantsev, Mikhail Kutuzov, and admiral Fedor Ushakov were officially glorified for their victories over the Ottoman army and fleet. In post-2014 Russia one can witness the growing significance of Catherine II’s cult, for example in the state-organised exhibition “the golden age of Catherine the Great.”

Though Catherine II ruled in Saint Petersburg, the focal point of reinvented myth of “the golden age” was shifted to the actual capital in Moscow. In 2015 in Tsaritsyno museum in Moscow the exhibition series “Catherine II. The Golden Age of the Russian Empire” was launched,⁶⁴ after which the exhibition travelled to some other cities in Russia.⁶⁵ Predictably, series were open with the painting “Allegory of Catherine the Great’s Victory over the Turks and Tatars” painted by Stefano Torelli in 1772.⁶⁶ Perhaps the choice of this painting is the best explanation of why Catherine II’s rule is considered “the golden age” in Putin’s Russia – because of military victories and territorial expansion. As Putin said on 6 February 2012: “Under Catherine II Russia incorporated more lands than ever. . . . She was a more effective ruler than Peter I – less blood, more deeds.”⁶⁷ Putin repeated this point again on 30 June 2021, that “Under Catherine the Great Russia territori-

64 “Ekaterina II. Zolotoi vek Rossiiskoi imperii,” *Musei Tsaritsyno*, accessed 5 July 2023, <https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/events/exhibitions/p/ekaterina-ii-zolotoj-vek-rossijskoj-imperii-postoyanno-obnovlyayushhayasya-ekspozitsiya/>.

65 From 7 November 2020 to 9 May 2021, as part of the Hermitage Days, the exhibition “Catherine the Great. The Golden Age of the Russian Empire” was opened in the Hermitage-Kazan Centre. Mikhail B. Piotrovskii, *Ekaterina Velikaia: Zolotoi vek Rossiiskoi imperii: katalog vystavki iz sobraniia Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha* (Saint Petersburg: Gosudarstvennyi Ėrmitazh, 2020); *Ekaterina Velikaia: Zolotoi vek Rossiiskoi imperii*, 7 November 2020, accessed 15 March 2023, <https://kazan-kremlin.ru/exhibition/ekaterina-velikaya-zolotoj-vek-rossijskoj-imperii/>.

66 “Ekaterina II. Vystavka odnoi kartiny: 23 apreliia 2018 – 23 avgusta 2018, *Musei Tsaritsyno*, accessed 4 July 2023, <https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/events/exhibitions/p/obnovleniya-v-ekspozitsii-ekaterina-ii-zolotoj-vek-rossijskoj-imperii/>.

67 “Putin schitaet samym ‘effektivnym pravitelem’ Ekaterinu II: ‘menshe krovishchi, bolshe del’,” *Gazeta.ru*, 6 February 2012, accessed 27 July 2023, https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2012/02/06/n_2194321.shtml.

ally expanded more than ever.”⁶⁸ Numerous exhibitions glorifying Russia’s imperial past were accompanied with a series of lectures arranged by the “Arzamas project in humanities” and delivered by the best Russian experts on eighteenth-century history.⁶⁹



Figure 4: Exhibition “Catherine the Great. The golden age of the Russian Empire”. Kazan, Russia. 2020–2021. (Heading made in two languages – Russian and Tatar). Ekaterina Velikaia. Zolotoi vek Rossiiskoi imperii, November 7, 2020, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://kazan-kremlin.ru/exhibition/ekaterina-velikaya-zolotoj-vek-rossijskoj-imperii/>.

⁶⁸ Aisel Gereikhanova, “Putin otmetil vydaiushchiesia dostizheniia Petra I, Ekateriny II i Aleksandra I,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 30 June 2021, accessed 24 June 2023, <https://rg.ru/2021/06/30/putin-otmetil-vydaiushchiesia-dostizheniia-petra-i-ekateriny-ii-i-aleksandra-i.html>.

⁶⁹ “Ekaterina II. Zolotoi vek Rossiiskoi imperii,” *Musei Tsaritsyno*, accessed 5 July 2023, <https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/events/exhibitions/p/ekaterina-ii-zolotoj-vek-rossijskoj-imperii-post-oyanno-obnovlyayushhayasya-ekspozitsiya/>.

Tsaritsyno palace was founded by the Empress in 1775 in vicinity of Moscow and is now the most visited museum in Moscow, with 1,470,367 visitors in 2019.⁷⁰ That year there were five exhibitions in the museum devoted to Catherine II, with a permanent exhibition, “Tsaritsyno of Catherine the Great,” inaugurated on 19 April 2019 and visited by 193,326 visitors by the end of the year.⁷¹ The political message is evident: if the conquest of the shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov inaugurated “the golden age of Catherine the Great,” the annexation of Crimea in 2014 became an apotheosis of “the golden age of Putin.”

In 2019 a single portrait of Catherine II was displayed in Tsaritsyno palace.⁷² In 1787 – after her solemn voyage to the annexed Crimea – Catherine II commissioned this portrait to famous painter Dmitry Levitzky as a gift to Emmanuel de Rohan, Grandmaster of the Order of the Knights of St John. Since 1790 the portrait was displayed in the Ambassadors Room of the Grandmaster’s Palace in Valletta, Malta.⁷³ With this diplomatic gift Catherine II showed her gratitude for maritime services and assistance received from the Order of St John against their common enemy, the Ottoman Empire, to the Russian Baltic fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Archipelago Expedition in 1769–1774. In the course of the expedition, on 24–26 June 1770, the Russian fleet completely defeated the Ottoman one in the Battle of Chesma. In 1774 Catherine II founded the palace of Chesma between Petersburg and her summer residence in Tsarskoe Selo (with the Chesma column erected there in 1778). In 1782–1796 the palace was used for the meetings of the leadership of the St George’s Order frequently presided by the Empress.⁷⁴

70 “Tsaritsyno musei-zapovednik. Itogi 2019. Plany na 2020,” *Musei Tsaritsyno*, accessed 25 May 2023, <https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/uploads/2020/02/GMZ-Tsaritsyno-Itogi-2019-goda-i-plany-na-2020-god.pdf>.

71 “Tsaritsyno musei-zapovednik. Itogi 2019. Plany na 2020,” *Musei Tsaritsyno*, accessed 25 May 2023, <https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/uploads/2020/02/GMZ-Tsaritsyno-Itogi-2019-goda-i-plany-na-2020-god.pdf>.

72 “Portret Ekateriny Velikoi s georgievskoi lentoi. Vystavka odnoi kartiny. 18 avgusta 2019 – 12 ianvaria 2020,” *Musei Tsaritsyno*, accessed 25 May 2023, <https://tsaritsyno-museum.ru/events/exhibitions/p/portret-ekateriny-velikoj-s-georgievskoj-lentoi/>; Liudmila A. Markina. *Maltiiskii portret Ekateriny Velikoi* (Moskva: Art volkhonka, 2019); Mikhail Trenikhin and Sergei Golovin. “Ekaterina II: iz Malty v Rossiiu,” *Diletant*, 17 September 2019, accessed 25 May 2023, <https://diletant.media/articles/45267076/>.

73 Alvin Vassallo, “Painting from the National Collection to be displayed for five months in Moscow,” *TVM news*, 18 July 2019, accessed 25 May 2023, <https://tvmnews.mt/en/news/pittura-mill-kol-lezzjoni-painting-from-the-national-collection-to-be-displayed-for-five-months-in-moscow-se-tit-tiehed-ghall-wirja-ta-5-xhur-fmoska/>; Amy Sciberras and Christopher Grech, “Catherine the Great to head from Valletta to Moscow and then back. An oil painting by Levitzky will feature at a museum following restoration,” *Times of Malta*, 18 August 2019, accessed 25 May 2023, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/a-portrait-of-catherine-the-great-by-dimitri-levitzky.729431>.

74 “Ansambl Chesmenskogo dvortsa,” *Nash okrug*, accessed 4 July 2023, <http://xn--b1aechgc5andg.xn--p1ai/nash-okrug/dostoprimechatelnosti/ansambl-chesmenskogo-dvorca.html>.

Why was this particular portrait from faraway Malta chosen for the exhibition in Moscow? In this portrait Catherine II is depicted with the ribbon of the Order of St George,⁷⁵ which she founded in 1769. The very name of the exhibition – “The Portrait of Catherine the Great with St George’s Ribbon” – emphasised the significance of the order and its ribbon. The exhibition commemorated the two hundred and ninetieth anniversary of the Empress’ birthday (1729) and the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Order of the St George’s foundation (1769). In Putin’s Russia the St George’s ribbon has become the main symbol of “the Great Victory” in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 and a symbol of loyalty to the ruling regime (though in the Soviet time the ribbon was called “ribbon of the guard” – *gvardeiskaya lenta*). Since 2014 pro-Russian insurgents and Russian commandos in Donbas have been decorating themselves with the St George’s ribbon,⁷⁶ and during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 numerous Russian servicemen attached the ribbon to their uniform as well. The exhibition of 2019 was therefore a combination of two historical myths (and symbols) – “the golden age of Catherine the Great” (plus “Novorossiia”) and “the Great Victory in the Great Patriotic War.”

Conclusion

The province of “Novorossiia” was established in 1764 as Russia’s movable borderland. Then, after the Russian-Ottoman wars in 1768–1774 and 1787–1791, when Russia conquered the Ottoman provinces, the Zaporozhian Cossack Host was dissolved and its lands incorporated into the Russian empire (1775), just as the Crimean Khanate (1783). The province of “Novorossiia” was imagined and developed as a project of the Enlightenment by the Empress Catherine II (r. 1762–1796) whose plans reached as far as the reconquest of Constantinople and the restoration of the Byzantine Empire. The new province was reinvented and appropriated neither as the former “realm of Islam” nor as the “land of savages” but as restoration of the periphery of ancient civilisation. Catherine II’s triumphant journey through her new domains in 1787 greatly contributed to the foundation myth of

⁷⁵ The Exhibition of One Painting – The Portrait of Catherine the Great with St George’s Ribbon, 18 August 2019, accessed 25 May 2023, <https://heritagemalta.mt/whats-on/the-exhibition-of-one-painting-the-portrait-of-catherine-the-great-with-st-georges-ribbon/>.

⁷⁶ Brandon Schechter, “St. George’s Ribbon,” Perspectives on History. The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association, 29 March 2023, accessed 6 November 2023, <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/april-2023/st-georges-ribbon>.

“Novorossiia” – the narrative of “enlightened power” reclaiming back this space after the “dark ages of barbarianism.” The ancient Greek and Roman pasts of this area were rediscovered in the framework of Enlightened absolutism. New colonised space was shaped through replacing the Tatar and Ottoman place names with “ancient” ones. Settlers of various religious and ethnic backgrounds – Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Lutherans and Mennonites – were invited from Western and South-Eastern Europe to settle in “Novorossiia” along with the Empress’s own subjects.

In the nineteenth century, however, “Novorossiia” was reimagined by Russian men-of-letters as promised land for adventurous businessmen, industrious landowners, runaway serfs, even as a foreshadowing of the communist utopia. Then, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “Novorossiia” was replaced with “South Russia” and “Donbas” as its “industrial heart,” and, finally, put into oblivion in the USSR and independent Ukraine.

After the annexation of Crimea and efforts to claim south-east of Ukraine as Russia’s “Novorossiia” in 2014, however, the old imperial narratives were used for justification of territorial expansion. Despite claiming succession to the imperial past, Putin’s “Novorossiia” has nothing in common with Catherine II’s cosmopolitan project and its Greek-Roman background. In current revanchist narrative “Novorossiia” is represented as the promised land for ethnic Russians blessed by the Russian Orthodox Church. While the old imperial myth of “Novorossiia” symbolized the imagined futures and progress, Putin’s “Novorossiia” is reinvented as a stronghold of radical nationalism and isolationist obscurantism.

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