

HISTORY

When Catherine the Great Invaded the Crimea and Put the Rest of the World on Edge

The Russian czarina attempted to show the West she was an Enlightened despot, her policies said otherwise

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Late 18th century English cartoon on Catherine the Great's territorial ambitions in Turkey. The Granger Collection, New York

In a matter of weeks, Russian President Vladimir Putin has gone from showcasing his nation's culture and athletics at the Winter Olympics in Sochi to sending troops into Ukraine's Crimean peninsula. The Games captured the world's imagination but European and North American leaders have condemned the invasion of the Crimea, comparing Putin's actions to Soviet or Czarist style military aggression.

Nearly 250 years ago, Empress Catherine II "the Great" played a similar hand when she attempted to impress the West while ruthlessly enforcing her authority over Russia and the surrounding region. Catherine presented herself to the world as an "Enlightened" autocrat who did not govern as a despot but as a monarch guided by the rule of law and the welfare of her subjects. Yet at the same time, she annexed much of what is now the Ukraine through wars with the Ottoman Empire and the partition of Poland and brutally suppressed the largest peasant rebellion in Russian history.

Catherine was not born to rule Russia. Born Princess Sophie, she grew up the daughter of Prince Christian of Analt-Zerbst, a small German principality. She was raised to marry a Prince rather than rule in her own right. In 1744, when Sophie was 15 years old, Empress Elizabeth of Russia selected her to be the wife of her nephew and heir, the future Emperor Peter III. They were married in St. Petersburg in 1745, and Sophie embraced her new home. She converted from Lutheranism to the Russian Orthodox faith, changed her name to that of Elizabeth's late mother, Catherine, and learned Russian.

Catherine's marriage, however, was unhappy. In her memoirs, she described Peter as an idiot and a drunkard. She avoided his company, spending her days reading the works of French Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu and Diderot. Peter came to the throne in 1762 and threatened to incarcerate her in a convent so that he could marry his mistress. Instead, Catherine seized the throne via a military coup orchestrated by her lover, Gregory Orlov, and his brothers with the support of the military class and the Russian Orthodox Church. Peter's decision to withdraw from the Seven Years War because he idolized King Frederick the Great of Prussia had outraged the Russian army, which had achieved victories against the Prussians. Peter had also alienated the Church because of his disdain for Russian Orthodox ritual.

As Empress, Catherine intended to continue the program of Westernization begun by Peter III's grandfather, Peter the Great. Catherine founded Russia's first state funded school for women in 1764 and began collecting the fine art that now comprises the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. When Catherine drafted a new law code for Russia, she made a public show of consulting her subjects. She summoned a legislative commission consisting of 142 delegates from the nobility, 209 delegates from the towns and 200 delegates from the peasantry and ethnic minorities within her empire to contribute ideas to the legislative process.

By the 1770s, Catherine appeared to preside over a court that was not so different from that of her fellow European rulers. In September 1773, Catherine hosted a lavish wedding for her son, Grand Duke Paul and

Princess Wilhelmina of Hesse-Darmstadt. Diderot visited Russia the following month. The presence of the French philosopher in St. Petersburg appeared to demonstrate that Catherine was open to influence from the West and the free exchange of ideas at her court.

Catherine risked her reputation in the West as an Enlightened ruler, however, to expand her territory into Ukraine. While Catherine entertained European royalty and thinkers at her court, her armies fought in a war with the Ottoman Empire (modern day Turkey) for control of the Black Sea. Peter the Great had opened Russia up to the Baltic Sea, founding St. Petersburg on the Baltic Coast, but Catherine was determined to expand her south eastern frontier and develop a permanent Russian presence on the Black Sea.

When the Russo-Turkish War began in 1768, the Tatars who lived on the Crimea operated somewhat autonomously under a Khanate. The predominantly Muslim population descended from centuries of intermarriage between the native Turkic people and Mongol armies who had occupied the region during Genghis Khan's time. They had a fractious relationship with the surrounding Russian and Polish-Lithuanian Empires because they raided their neighbors, engaging in human trafficking. As Russia expanded southward, these raids decreased in frequency, but continued to take place until the annexation of the Crimea.

The 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca temporarily ended the conflict, leaving the Crimea with nominal independence but giving Russia control of key ports on the peninsula. Catherine refused all offers from Prussia, Austria and France of further mediation, determined to continue pursue her territorial ambitions in the region. Catherine's fellow monarchs ultimately accepted the loss of the Crimea's independence, and Russia formally annexed the Crimea in 1783.

Russo-Turkish wars and three successive partitions of Poland during Catherine's reign brought much of the rest of modern Ukraine under Russian rule after the region had spent centuries under Polish-Lithuanian control. Catherine's victories enabled Russia to establish a Black Sea fleet. Special access to the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits that connected the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea via the Sea of Marmara became a key foreign policy goal for Catherine's descendants during the 19th century, contributing to the outbreak of the Crimean War (1853-1856).

The Ukrainian peasantry could no more enjoy the freedom of mobility that they were once permitted as subjects of the Polish-Lithuanian Empire. Despite her attempts to forge an "Enlightened" image, Catherine's espousal of serfdom lead to brutal consequences and sustained criticism from her European neighbors. Catherine owed her throne to the support of the nobility and therefore did little to improve the lives of the peasants who toiled on their estates. Yemelyan Pugachev, claiming to be Catherine's long-since-murdered husband Peter, promised to free enserfed peasants from their labour and financial obligations to the nobility. He quickly gained upwards of 200,00 supporters.

In 1774, Pugachev led 20,000 peasants in the capture of the Russian city of Kazan, setting fire to the city and slaughtering noble families. Catherine's troops responded to the violence with violence. Pugachev and hundreds of his supporters were executed and thousands more were flogged or mutilated.

In addition to the military response, Catherine acted legislatively too, issuing the 1785 Charter of the Nobility that affirmed the rights of nobles to own peasants and dispense justice on their estates. The newly conquered Ukrainian peasants suffered along with their adopted countrymen

Much like Putin today, Catherine valued her own sovereignty and the expansion of Russian political power over all other considerations. The Ukrainian people, and the Tatars especially, would continue to be ruled by various sovereignties, from the Russian Empire to the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Poland to the Soviet Union. From Catherine's reign through the Soviet Union to the present day, the Ukraine continues to be Europe's battleground.

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