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## THE “GREEK PROJECT” OF CATHERINE II IN CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

**Khrol A.**

Referring Russian dream on Constantinople without Ottoman rule, the author analyses attempts of Catherine II to implement the “Greek project” based on two cultural motives: the Orthodox “brotherhood” of Greeks and Russians and the vision of Greece as the cradle of European culture. The paper describes military and ideological attempts of Catherine II to establish Greece as an independent state and shows their political and cultural consequences for Russia and Europe.

**Keywords:** Catherine II, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, Greece, Crimea, philhellenism, Orthodox Christianity.

## «ГРЕЧЕСКИЙ ПРОЕКТ» ЕКАТЕРИНЫ II В КУЛЬТУРНО-ИДЕОЛОГИЧЕСКОЙ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ

**Хруль А.**

В контексте многовековой русской мечты о Константинополе без османского владычества автор анализирует «греческий проект» императрицы Екатерины II, основанный на двух основных культурных мотивах: на православном «братстве» греков и русских и на восприятии Греции как колыбели европейской культуры. В статье описываются военные и идеологические попытки Екатерины II создания независимого греческого государства, а также показаны их политические и культурные последствия для России и Европы.

**Ключевые слова:** Екатерина II, Российская империя, Османская империя, Греция, Крым, филэллизм, Православное Христианство.

Greece and Greek heritage have been always in the sphere of political and cultural interests of the Russian Empire. Attempts of Catherine II to implement the

*Greek project* could be divided into two categories: *military and ideological*, and both of them had *cultural* consequences.

Peace treaty, signed 26 January 1699 in *Karlowitz* (Sremski Karlovci in contemporary Serbia), formally marked the end of the Great Turkish War of 1683-1697, started with the unsuccessful expedition of the vizier Kara Mustafa to Vienna in 1683. Representatives of the Venetian Republic, the Papal States, the Habsburg Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire were present at the peace treaty signing ceremony. An important consequence this document was the gaining the Azov port on the Azov Sea by the Russian Empire.

This port became a very important opportunity to expand the borders. Peter I who is known metaphorically in Russia as a leader, who “cut through a window to Europe”, was certainly influenced by Western European “*philhellenism*” – an intellectual mood focused on the culture of ancient Greece. Since the Russian Empire had the opportunity to build its own ships on the Azov Sea, the idea to liberate the cradle of European culture from the influence of the Ottoman Port was becoming more and more influent.

### **The Greek project in Russian context**

The *Greek project* was a geopolitical plan with the following goals:

1. Security of the Russian-Tatar border and economic development of the South-Russian periphery of that time [9, c. 5].
2. Weakening the Ottoman Empire and, as a long-term goal, to break it down.
3. Creation of a buffer state between the Habsburg and Russian Empires in the European part of the Ottoman one. The newly created state would enter into an alliance with Russia, which could change the political system in the Balkans. Such a state without British control would mean an increase in the power of the Russian Empire and, consequently, its hegemony in the Balkans.

Russian historian Andrej Zorin emphasizes that the idea of the expansion to the South was based on the conviction that Austria would not be against this expansion: “Plans to conquer the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire revived the Russian tsars in the 17th century, they were fed during Peter I trips the Azov (1695-1696) and

Prutsk (summer 1711) and they reappeared during the Turkish campaign of Anna Romanova (1736-1739). In 1762 the hero of this war Field Marshal Burkhard Christoph Münnich presented Catherine II a letter in which he called her to execute the will of Peter I and take over Constantinople” [4].

The old call to take over the Second Rome had been reactualized by Catherine’s idea to create a new monarchy in the Byzantine Empire and place her second grandson, Constantine, on the throne. The choice of the name of Constantine for him was also historically significant.

### **Military attempts**

The idea of a military expedition of Count Alexei Orlov during the Russian-Turkish war of 1764-1774 (approved and financed by Catherine II) had political advantages. Since the Russian Empire did not have a fleet in the Black Sea during the war, the Baltic fleet sailed from St. Petersburg through the Atlantic Ocean, entering the Mediterranean Sea via Gibraltar, stopping at the port of the Italian city of Livorno, and from this port the fleet reached the Aegean Sea [q.v.: 5; 6].

In March 1770 the fleet was near the shores of Greece. It consisted of five squadrons. The commander of the first one was Admiral Grigory Spiridonov; the commander of the second one was Rear Admiral John Elphinston; the commander of the third squadron was Ivan Harf; the fourth squadron was initially commanded by Vasily Chichagov, but from September 1772 it was headed by Major General Mikhail Koniayev; the fifth squadron was commanded by Admiral Samuel Greig.

Grigory Spiridonov is an important figure as he participated in the Chesma Battle, one of the most important battles in the history of Russian fleet. He participated together with John Elphinston (it was he who developed a plan to attack the Ottoman fleet, consisting of an attack in the bay and the use of brander, which led to the burning of enemy ships). This whole battle was led by Count Alexei Orlov. For this fight, Grigory Spiridonov was awarded the Order of Saint Andrew, the highest distinction in the Russian Empire at that time.

John Elphinston should have got the designation too, but he made several mistakes and Catherine II disinherited him. During the blockade of the Dardanelles,

John Elphiston set off on his own towards the island of Limnos, and hit the reef. The crew of the ship tried to save him in six days, the Ottomans took advantage of this and at that time auxiliary troops were sent to defend the island and it was the fault of John Elphiston that the armed forces of the Russian fleet had to reconcile and leave Limnos. For such an offense he could be charged and arrested, but he was simply dismissed and after some time he returned to the British fleet.

The third commander Ivan Harf, of Danish origin, was a mercenary rear admiral, and Alexei Orlov was not satisfied with his character traits and his approach to military service. Harf received a salary in 1772 and was dismissed from his position.

The fourth commander Vasily Chichagov, an experienced navy officer, before the military expedition to Greece headed the port of Arkhangelsk. He was also dismissed, and the commandment of the fourth squadron was taken over by Mikhail Koniajew. He defeated Turkish fleet October 26-28, 1772 in the Patraska Bay and was awarded with the Order of Saint George.

Samuel Greig was one of the British officers that Catherine II hired to modernize Russian fleet. He arrived with the fifth squadron and collaborated with Grigory Spiridon in the battle of the Russian and Ottoman fleets near the island of Chios. Despite the Ottoman fleet had 15 ships and the Russian fleet had just 9 ships, the victory was on Russian side.

As a consequence of the victory, the Russian fleet took over 27 islands. After the Ottoman fleet was defeated, the Russians blocked the Dardanelles.

The Paros island was chosen as the resting place and military base. When the Russian fleet strengthened its positions in the Aegean Sea, Alexei Orlov went to St. Petersburg to file a report and await orders for further proceedings. He was ordered to develop the domination in the Aegean Sea and to continue blocking the Dardanelles.

The Ottoman Empire was enforced to a ceasefire, which lasted until June 1773. After negotiations in June 1773, the ceasefire was not extended and military operations started again. But very soon, on July 21, 1774, the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji, was signed. This document actually handed over the Crimea to the Russian

Empire. Catherine II was satisfied with the results of military campaign, she obtained another access to the Black Sea.

Despite the plan to create a New Greek independent state had been left for later, the Russian Empire strengthen its position as a successor of the Second Rome tradition.

In general, the expedition headed by Count Alexei Orlov was a military attempt to implement the Greek project of Catherine II, and the goal was not achieved. Moreover, the expedition led to a foreign debt, therefore is doubtful for historians whether the goal was worth of such funds.

### **Ideological attempts**

In fact, ideological in the context of Greek project means mostly religious. It was a will to restore a “fraternal” state, “fraternal” in the religious sense. The state religion of Russia was Orthodoxy and with the restoration of Greece from the state of “European property of the Ottoman Empire”, it was possible to gain on more ally of the same religious denomination.

These arguments had been discussed in the political agenda even before Catherine II gain the power, but they became much more important in 1780s after her letters to Joseph II Habsburg (May 21 and 24, 1781, September 20, 1782). The drafts were written by her secretary, Aleksander Bezborodko and checked by Grigory Potemkin, one of the leading promoters of the colonization of the South.

Catherine II planned to put her grandson (intentionally called Constantine) on the throne of restored Byzantine Empire. Grand Duke Constantine was looked after by a Greek tutor and learned the Greek language.

In 1782 Catherine II ordered to build the Cathedral of the Ascension in the newly built town Sofia near the residence of the Russian imperial family known as Tsarskoye Selo. The cathedral was a kind of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople replica. And one more material object confirms strongly the hypothesis of Catherine II intentions. Some medals held in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg reflect her new title “Orthodox Church defender”. There is a portrait of Catherine II on the avers

of the medal and its revers shows the fall of minarets surrounding Hagia Sofia in Istanbul.

After the return of the first archipelago expedition, Catherine II ordered to build a column in honour of the Chesma Battle (5-7 July 1770). In 1776 the column was opened in the centre of Tsarskoye Selo. The monument was erected by Italian architect Antonio Rinaldi, who implemented many projects for Catherine II. Italian architect presented the ideological message very accurately: on the monument presents the eagle as the coat of arms of the Russian Empire, this eagle destroys the crescent, which in this case is a symbol of the Ottoman Empire and Islam.

Additionally, Catherine II herself liked very much Greek culture and often wore Greek style vestments. In order to implement any project the King, Emperor, Tsar, Chancellor or ruler should be sure and know that he had a party on his side that could help in case of problems and uncertainties. One of Catherine II's supporters was Grigory Potemkin [q.v.: 11].

On April 8, 1783 the proclamation of the annexation of the Crimea to the Russian Empire was issued, and Grigory Potemkin had ambitious projects to transform it for the glory of Catherine II. Therefore he did the following: he changed the names of the cities to Greek manner; tried to modernize agriculture, built new towns in the Crimea; welcomed displaced persons (Greek, Balkan Slavs, Albanians) fighting during the first archipelago expedition to the Crimea.

In addition, Potemkin was interested in religious issues and therefore Greece could have expressed for him the gratitude for establishing Orthodox Christianity as a national religion. Religion is a very strong factor in order to explain why the Russian Empire chose the Greeks as a buffer state.

Russian historian Olga Eliseewa in her scientific and popular work "Potemkin" recalls: "While preparing his book, Sergey Mikhailovich (Soloviev – A.K.) worked in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he found a significant number of letters from Catherine II and Grigory Potemkin for the years 1783-1791, with an attached project "About Crimea" [2].

Other supporting Catherine II's aspirations towards Greece were Orlov brothers. One of them, Grigory, followed and supervised the events in St. Petersburg, and the other, Alexei Orlov, set off for Italy to take over the leadership of the two squadrons of the first archipelago expedition, and he was in charge of this campaign.

Orlov brothers were active both in state offices and at sea. The awareness of the Catherine II and the aristocracy was influenced by poets who created odes in honour of the Russian fleet. Greco-Roman mythology was extensively used in the patriotic poetry. Just one example from Vasily Petrov "*Ode to victory in Morea*":

Oh heaven, we are happy! – Greeks scream.

Our heroes are alive in Russians who arrived!

If you humble us, if the image is dangerous to the Turks!

People of Argolis, Nafplio, get ready, the fight is waiting,

Corinthians, don't be afraid:

In Sparta Leonidas!

*(Колико, – вопиют, – о небо, мы счастливы!*

*Герои наши днесь в прибывших россах живы!*

*Коль кроток оных нам, коль грозен туркам вид!*

*Аргольцы, навпляне, к сражению устройтесь,*

*Коринфяне, не бойтесь:*

*Во Спарте Леонид!) [7].*

Yet another example from Mikhail Kheraskov "*Ode to the Russian soldiers in February 1769*":

The Russians hard chest

Will hold back, as a wall, without a fight;

Then not Muhammad,

but Russian sword will cut the Moon

Right over your head.

*(Россиян храбрых тверда грудь*

*Удержит, как стена, без бою;*

*Тогда луну не Магомет,*

*Но меч российский рассечет*

*Над самую твоей главою) [10].*

Therefore, summarising the evaluation of Catherine II Greek project, several arguments should be underlined.

1. Catherine II was fascinated by the idea of a New Greek monarchy, but Grigory Potemkin attracted her view on the Crimea, not Constantinople. And that is why the Greek project was realized not on the European part of the Ottoman Empire, but only on the Crimean peninsula.

2. Grigory Potemkin himself was inspired by religious issues, and therefore the Greeks Orthodoxy were a suitable cover for the entry into the Aegean Sea.

3. Russian poets were inspired not so much by religious issues as by motives of Greek-Roman culture and mythology.

In the 18th century European vision of Greece was different in comparison to Russian one. From European point of view, Orthodox religiosity of Greeks was much less important than the patterns of Greco-Roman culture in architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry and etc. For example, Voltaire, one of the controversial figures of the 18th century, was very interested in rebuilding the New Greece, not because of religion, but because of the model Classical Greece. And it was Voltaire who was Catherine II's "voice" in Europe [1]. He believed that Catherine II and should rule over the territories of the former Byzantine Empire [3, c. 89].

### **Catherine II policy towards Greeks in Russia and abroad**

In this context the policy of the Russian monarchs towards Greeks inside the Russian Empire is very important. The Greek community that was established in the Ukraine in the in the middle of the 17th century, and Peter I confirmed their privileges in Niezhin. The Greeks were given the right to have own church and court. Also during the reign of Peter I, educated Greeks who had immigrated to Russia, were given important positions. The policy of the Russian Emperor earned him great respect among the Greeks. Pamphlets about his exploits, his portraits, spread throughout Greece and Greek foreign colonies. Among them there is a portrait of



Peter engraved in Amsterdam with a characteristic inscription: “*Petrus Primus Russograecorum Monarcha*” (Peter the First, Russian-Greek monarch).

And even during the reign of Catherine II the conditions for the Greeks in Ottoman Empire were in the process of improving. Her *Greek Project* took an important place in foreign policy and Greek patronage has expanded considerably all over Ottoman Empire. Catherine II conducted two wars against the High Porte, as a result of which Russia captured the northern coast of the Black Sea, including the Crimea, and after these victories Greeks were better treated by Ottomans.

The war of 1768-1774 further strengthened the relationship between the Greek minorities in the Ottoman and the Russian Empire. During the reign of Catherine II the Greeks were the most “favoured people” in Russia. In 1785 Catherine II granted them new allowances and favourable prerogatives. They received an exemption from all taxes and the right to create their own magistrate in the city with wide powers. Some prominent Greeks were invited to Russia and got a good job from the government. In this way should be named the famous Greek scientists and philosophers, known as bishop Eugenios Voulgaris (Ελευθέριος Βούλγαρης) and archbishop Nikephoros Feotokis (Νικηφόρος Θεοτόκης) who both made successful careers in the Russian Empire.

The government’s policy encouraged scientists and writers to use the resources and study Greek culture. In the 18th century some of the works of the Greek classics, including Homer, were fully or partially translated into Russian for the first time. For example, Eugenios Voulgaris, who worked intensively, focusing on the philology of the Ancient Greek language, with his Russian students made a significant contribution to the familiarization of Russian society with the cultural heritage of Ancient Greece. Voulgaris was not only a Greek scholar, but also an ardent patriot of Greece. Upon his arrival in St. Petersburg in July 1771, he was introduced to Catherine II [q.v.: 8].

Many Greeks were accepted in Russia for diplomatic or military service. Russia was given the right to open consulates throughout the Ottoman Empire. As Catherine II focused her special attention on Greece, most of the consulates were set

up there. Thirteen Russian consulates were established in mainland Greece and on the islands between 1783 and 1786. Russia had never had such an extensive consular network in this country. Russian consuls collected political and military information in Greece.

Catherine II's wars against the Ottoman Empire did not lead to the liberation of Greece. The main result was the capture of lands on the Northern Black Sea coast by Russia. For many Greeks Catherine II era was the golden age of Russian-Greek relations. It could even be argued that Catherine II's policy contributed to the spiritual awakening of the Greek people.

### **Conclusion**

The *Greek project* during the reign of Catherine II had several attempts of the implementation. One of them was military, i.e. the first archipelago expedition. On the one hand, this expedition had succeeded in battles with the Ottoman fleet; on the other hand it ended in failure due to the return of British officers to Great Britain. The second attempt was conducted by Grigory Potemkin in order to transform the Crimea to Greek enclave.

The dream on Constantinople without Ottoman rule was rooted in centuries, but Catherine II revived that idea and partly implemented the project combined two motives. The first one was the "brotherhood" of Greeks and Russians based on the same religion, and the second motive was based on the idea of Voltaire, on vision of Greece as the cradle of European culture. The both motives served to increase the Catherine II ambitions and to establish the Russian Empire hegemony of the Balkans in the current international situation.

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