Catherine's Crimea: Geopolitics and Imperial Messianism

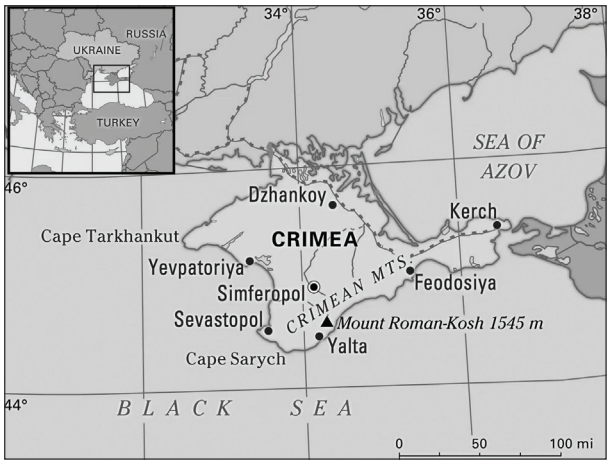
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Despite her desire to be perceived as an enlightened despot who championed individual liberty and collective well-being, Catherine II (1762-96) possessed an immense appetite for imperialist expansion and built her foreign policy primarily on territorial acquisition and political authority. Like the rulers before her, she turned toward religion to justify her reign and, although the concept of 'Moscow, Third Rome' [*Moskva, Tretii Rim*] had already emerged in the early 16th century, Catherine was first to morph this theology into state doctrine. Indeed, Catherine's late rule assumed an increasingly messianic character, in which she saw the Russian Empire as the rightful heir to Byzantium and the Russians as the 'chosen people' who would protect and bring justice to the world. In the early 1780s she thus developed a plan to weaken the Ottoman Porte, Russia's long-standing rival: conquer Constantinople and partition the Ottoman Empire (or at least its dependencies) and establish a new Greek Orthodox state in Crimea, effectively "restoring Byzantium." Such an ambitious vision came to be known as the "Greek Project."[1] The first critical task of Catherine's messianic Greek Project was to seize Crimea, which was strategically important due to its geographical proximity to the Ottoman Empire, its connections to the Mediterranean Sea via the Black Sea, and its population of Orthodox Christians, whom she sought to defend under Orthodox Christian rule. Claiming this territory and setting the stage for further developments in her Greek Project was too attractive of an opportunity for Catherine to ignore: control over the Crimean peninsula promised her geopolitical security and a clear path for messianic empire-building.

Since the late 15th century, the Crimean Khanate had been under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire, an arrangement that allowed the former to maintain a sufficient degree of internal autonomy while acknowledging the sovereignty of

1. Nicholas V Riasanovsky and Mark D Steinberg, A History of Russia Ninth ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 263.

the latter. As a vassal state, the Crimean Khanate frequently provided military support to the Ottoman Turks, most notably in their campaigns against the Russian Tsardom and Empire.[2] These devastating large-scale invasions of Russia's southern steppe culminated in a long series of Russo-Turkish wars, spanning the late 16th to early 20th century. After the first major Russo-Turkish War, the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca forced the Ottomans to grant Russia southward expansion into the Black Sea region and to recognize the independence of the Crimean Tatars.[3] The Turks were utterly humiliated by this loss of territory and prestige. The Crimean Khanate had been considered a valuable ally against the Russian Empire, but now Ottoman territorial holdings and regional influence were exhausted. However, they were not the only ones upset with this concession.



Map Courtesy of Encyclopaedia Britannica

On the one hand, Tatar submission to the Ottoman Porte had caused discord and disputes; on the other, the reorganization of Crimea into a free state only exacerbated the "disturbances, losses, and difficulties for [Russian] troops."[4] Due to fears of Russian despotism, many Crimean Tatars were unwilling to accept forced independence. Crimea remained a thorn in Catherine's side: firstly, because of its internal instability and enmity toward the Russian Empire; and secondly, notwithstanding this, because of its strategic geopolitical importance that she could not harness even after military subjugation. The Crimean Tatars remained stubborn to Russian control and persisting domestic power struggles made the southern steppe an even more volatile territory. Indeed, pillages, lootings, and raids continued into Russia until Catherine finally felt "compelled to take stern measures… [against] the harmful mob of Zaporozhian Cossacks" in 1783 and safeguard her position against both the Ottoman Turks and Crimean Tatars.[5] This decision was echoed by her advisor Grigory Potemkin, who affirmed that Crimea's location on the northern coast of the Black Sea made it a strategic buffer zone: the peninsula's rugged and mountainous terrain would grant a degree of security for Russia's vul-

2. Ibid., 144.
3. Ibid., 262.
4. Catherine II, "Manifesto on the Annexation of the Crimea, 8 April 1783," in George Vernadsky, ed. A Source Book from Russian History from Early Times to 1917, Vol. 2: Peter the Great to Nicholas I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 412.
5. "The Abolition of the Zaporozhian Sech', August 3, 1775," in George Vernadsky, ed. A Source Book from Russian History from Early Times to 1917, Vol. 2: Peter the Great to Nicholas I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 459-460.

nerable southern territories and the greater population of the *Novorossiia guberniia*.[6] Overall, taking Crimea allowed Catherine to neutralize the potential threats posed by the Crimean Khanate, and gave Russia a formidable geographic barrier against future aggressions from the Ottoman Empire.

Although securing Russia's southern borders was certainly attractive for Catherine II, the most decisive factor of her annexation of Crimea was its maritime geopolitics. Potemkin repeatedly stressed to Catherine the significance of naval security, assuring that "navigation on the Black Sea [would] be free" if the peninsula were seized by Russia.[7] Previously, the Ottoman Porte had controlled the Turkish Straits (the Dardanelles and Bosporus connected the Black Sea to the Mediterranean) and limited the size, armament, and number of Russian vessels permitted in the water at any time. Given the difficulty of entering and leaving these Black Sea ports, Russian ships were hindered from asserting their naval presence and fully participating in maritime commerce. However, Russia emerged as a leading Black Sea power after gaining access to Crimea and the Turkish Straits, which provided Catherine with significant precedence in any geopolitical maneuver she chose to make. It was now within her jurisdiction to regulate the flow of goods, to restrict the movement of naval forces between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and most importantly, to "blockade the Turks, to feed them or to starve them."[8]

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The Black Sea also addressed the most crucial priority of Russian geopolitics: warm deepwater ports. Although Peter the Great had opened Russia up to the Baltic Sea in 1703, these ports and waterways suffered subzero temperatures and froze during the long winter months, thereby limiting accessibility and operational capacity and compromising Russian military security. Total control over the Crimean coast's warm water promised Catherine direct sea-based trade with Western European countries, a launching point for a naval fleet, and global power projection, in any season. In 1785, Russian military leader Grigory Potemkin built the fortress of Sevastopol', a physical manifestation of Crimea's unique role as a fortified buffer zone between Russia and its neighbors. This port city would also become the hub of Catherine's new Black Sea Fleet.[9] For a landlocked country largely isolated from Western development, the Crimean peninsula's synthetic character of both coastal and continental access relieved Russia of inland sedentarism, effectively opening a gateway to the trade and international networks of littoral dynamics.

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Catherine II's success in obtaining control of the Black Sea region was a testament to her ambition of enhancing the

6. "Memorandum Urging the Annexation of Crimea," in George Vernadsky, ed. A Source Book from Russian History from Early Times to 1917, Vol. 2: Peter the Great to Nicholas I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 411.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Riasanovsky and Steinberg, A History of Russia Ninth ed., 263.

Russian Empire's influence and reputation on the world stage. She seized Crimea not merely apropos of the peninsula's geopolitical importance, but also of its symbolic implication for her messianic expansionist ideology. This was a rhetoric of salvation– religious as well as secular– in which she deemed Russia a beacon of civilization and enlightenment. Her characterization of the Russian Empire as the unique defender of mankind, and her sense of "[obligation] before God, before [her] empire, and before all mankind," related directly to her Greek Project and vision of a 'Third Rome,' in which she considered her empire as continuous with the great civilizations of antiquity. She tasked the Russian Empire with preserving Orthodox Christianity and Greek culture on a global scale.[10] Catherine emphasized a universalist messianic role for Russia, underscoring her deep commitment to the idea that she was divinely appointed to lead Russia and advance its interests, which included the well-being and progress not only of her subjects, but of the world's subjects.

Indeed, she was to bring peace and enlightenment to Crimea precisely through Christian rule.[11] During her tour around Crimea in 1787, she wrote a series of letters to literary critic Melchior von Grimm, describing the former backwardness of cities such as Kherson and Bakhchisarai. She portrayed the Russian Empire as the mother of civilization, having transformed the region, "where at the time of the [Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca] there was hardly a hut, into a flourishing town and countryside."[12] By highlighting the emptiness and virginity of Crimea, Catherine emphasized its potential for cultural and intellectual growth, a blank canvas for Greek scholars, artists, and intellectuals to resurrect the spirit of Byzantium. For example, Catherine praised Potemkin's construction efforts in Sevastopol', comparing it to "the fantasies of the Arabian Nights."[13] She effectively depicted the peninsula as underdeveloped and barbaric before Russian intervention, which upheld the messianic narrative of Russia's global civilizing mission: that Russian imperialism was not merely about conquering territories, but about saving these regions from the damnation of prehistory.

Crimea seemed to answer all of Russia's most critical civilizational questions, political and existential.

Crimea seemed to answer all of Russia's most critical civilizational questions, political and existential. It had the potential to both dismantle the Ottomans from their pedestal and fulfill the historical and cultural destiny of the Russian Empire. Thus, Catherine II's annexation of Crimea in 1783 was decisively predicated not only by the geopolitics of border and maritime security, but also by her self-proclaimed spiritual duty to protect and advance Orthodox Christianity. Despite her voracious palate for imperialism, Catherine's Greek Project ultimately failed to come to full fruition– a Bavarian prince became King of Greece in 1832 and Russia quickly lost its influence on the region. Nevertheless, her annexation of Crimea and southward expansion granted Russia immense status in southeastern Europe and would become the fundamental pillars of Russian-Eurasian geopolitics and eschatological state-building ideologies to come.

10. "The Abolition of the Zaporozhian Sech', August 3, 1775," 459-460.
11. Potemkin, "Memorandum Urging the Annexation of Crimea," 411.
12. Catherine II, "Letters to Grimm, 1774-1795," in George Vernadsky, ed. A Source Book from Russian History from Early Times to 1917, Vol. 2: Peter the Great to Nicholas I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 408.
13. Ibid.

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