

## **Ukraine and the rejection of imperial enslavement**

**So fascinating to Angela Merkel, Catherine II liquidated Sich by violence - the last refuge of self-government for free Cossacks under her rule, the last vestige of Ukraine's political tradition.**

Chancellor Merkel has often referred to Russia as “our great neighbour”, an expression that was picked up by quite a few German media outlets. However, as we look at the map, we must admit that Russia does not border on Germany. In between, there are other countries such as Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus. The chancellor’s desk featured a portrait of German-born Catherine II, Empress of All Russia, considered to be the most outstanding ruler to have ever assumed the Russian throne. The point was most likely to show an example of a woman who achieved success in politics and was from Eastern Germany to boot (Stettin to be precise).

But it seems that the portrait has been cleansed of a tiny stain: after all, Catherine earned the moniker “the Great” among the Russians because she managed to see through the most efficient westward expansion of her empire in the entire 18th century: she seized the northern coast of the Black Sea, calling it *Novorossiya*, and disbanded the huge Polish state that had existed for over eight centuries, including as part of a voluntary union signed with Lithuania in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and covered the lands of today’s Belarus and Ukraine. Alexander Pushkin, the greatest eulogist of the Russian empire (next to Joseph Brodsky, who hated Ukraine, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, who hated Poland and the West), said that it was precisely that geopolitical feat that was Catherine’s most important claim to everlasting fame. In his private, and therefore honest, notes the poet also pointed out that Catherine had been preparing a successful north campaign aimed at taking Finland, a campaign that was eventually launched by her grandson, Tsar Alexander I.

Enlightened Europe admired Catherine as she could not only conquer neighbouring countries, but also buy the then “trendsetters” of ideas: Voltaire and Diderot in France and Baron von Grimm in Germany. They would go on to convince Europe that the lands Catherine seized were but a source of chaos, anarchy and backwardness in enlightened Europe and that, east of Germany, all that counted was Russia and its modernisation. Conquest as modernisation... Importantly, it was also in the name of “modernisation” that Catherine put a violent end to the Sich, the last refuge of the government of the free Cossacks under her rule and the last trace of Ukraine’s political tradition.

But what were the origins of that Ukraine which Catherine wanted to erase from the map and from memory, just like she did with Poland. Ukraine, Belarus and Russia share one common cradle, that is Kievan Rus’. This common cradle of statehood for Eastern Slavs was shattered in the 13th century following a Mongol invasion. It eventually fell apart into different political systems developed by the new centres of power: Moscow (which inherited some of the traditions of the Mongol empire) and Lithuania which, joined in a union with Poland, opened up the Ruthenian world (the world of Kievan Rus’) to Latin influence that spread across Poland to reach Lithuania and Lithuanian Rus’, i.e. the territories of today’s Belarus and Ukraine. Indeed, in the 14th-15th centuries, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania encompassed nearly all of Belarus and what was later to become Ukraine.

Western civilisation moved through Poland to change the Ruthenian traditions, completing and reshaping them. These influences have their symbols. One of them is a remarkable monument to Magdeburg Law erected near the banks of the Dnieper River. It stands in Kiev, a city that I hope will survive the conflagration of war and will soon be again open to tourists. Town charters were not a Polish invention. In offering the inhabitants of towns the right to self-determination, Poland followed the example of German countries in the 13th-14th centuries. Some towns were chartered anew based on these new principles, among them Kraków in the 13th century and Kiev at the outset of the 16th century.

The latter event, which turned Kievians into Europeans in the good sense of the word (i.e. people who value freedom and self-governance most) is celebrated as a great holiday. A similar monument to Magdeburg law was erected in Minsk in the 1990s (I do not know if it still stands), when Belarus was trying to consolidate its independence.

Another, even more important symbol is the sense of freedom which finds its justification and fundamental rationale in the Greco-Roman tradition permeating the universities in Kraków (from 1364), Vilnius (from 1579) and Lviv (od 1661) (it is worth bearing in mind that the first university in Russia was not founded until 1755). It was there that the concept of freedom was advocated for as the most important value in politics. Individual and civic freedoms were reflected by the culture of contract – no lords were invested with inherent power over us. The terms of the contract were agreed by us, who elect the rulers, and the rulers, who might soon be governed by us, depending on the results of the elections. This tradition of contracts, elections, and the freedom expressed by the right of every free citizen to vote at the local assembly flourished in the Commonwealth that comprised the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Ruthenia (meaning Belarus and Ukraine). In Ruthenia, the impulse of self-governance fused with the new tradition developed in free Cossack territories. The Cossacks also met in assemblies where everyone had the right to speak and elect their hetman. The elected hetman would rule as long as he was accepted by the members of the community, i.e. the free Cossacks. He had his own council, which was a type of senate made up of colonels. Each colonel was elected by his own regiment, a practice that amounted to a form of political self-government. The phenomenon of the free Cossacks that emerged in an organised fashion in the second half of the 16th century is linked to the origins of the official name “Ukraine” used to denote the area inhabited by these free people of independent spirit who defended their liberty. Until the mid-17th century, the Cossacks protected the border of the Commonwealth from both Moscow (Russia) and Turkey. However, social and religious conflicts within the Commonwealth, where Cossacks had not been granted full civic freedoms, prompted them to turn towards Moscow. In January 1654, the temptation led to the fatal decision made by Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, leader of the largest in a series of Ukrainian uprisings, to conclude a union with Moscow-Russia. Khmelnytskyi assumed that it would be an equal contract, sworn to by the tsar’s envoy on the ruler’s behalf, and that it would guarantee Ukraine full autonomy within the new partnership. He soon learnt how much different were the political cultures in Moscow and the Commonwealth when the tsarist envoy said: “In the tsardom of Moscow oaths are taken by the subjects who swear they will always be happy to serve the great tsar, but swearing on behalf of the tsar has never been practiced and never shall be...”. Khmelnytskyi did not back out of the union with Moscow, but a large group of the Cossacks preferred to return to the Commonwealth or form an alliance with Turkey or even Sweden to avoid being subject to the despotic rule of the tsars. Russia knew how to take advantage of that moment of crisis. Even though the Commonwealth tried to conclude a new, equal union with the Cossacks (Ukraine) in 1658 in Hadiach, it was not able to see it through.

The conflict between the Cossacks and the Polish nobility provided the foundation for Russia’s first great success during its western expansion: the seizure of the eastern half of Ukraine in 1667.

But the Cossacks did not forget about their tradition of freedom. They tried to claim their liberty back in the 18th century (a struggle symbolised by the hetmans Ivan Mazepa and his successor Pylyp Orlyk), and then toiled to rebuild their national identity after Catherine II deprived them of all their autonomy. Similarly, the Poles and Lithuanians never came to terms with having their independence taken away by Russia, Prussia and Austria. They fought for it with sword and pen from the late 18th century until 1918, when they finally regained their independence. At that time Ukrainians did not succeed. They had to continue fighting until 1991 and the break-up of the Soviet empire, before their independent state could be restored. Throughout their struggles they would sometimes confront the Poles, but the common tradition of freedom, opposition to imperial enslavement and the memory of those who perished in the clashes with the tsarist and then Stalinist systems of oppression proved stronger. The voice of the Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and other nations of the region that wants to be neither Putin’s *Russkiy mir* nor

a pawn in the game played by other European powers, can be heard loud and clear: it is a proud veto of free nations who stand together to reject any attempts to renew imperial domination over Eastern Europe.

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