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Portrait of Catherine II (1763) by Fedor Rokotov  
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**Compare the foreign policies of Peter I and Catherine II and their success in enhancing Russia's standing among European powers**

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## **Introduction**

Eighteenth-century Europe was dominated by imperial conflict and the spread of enlightenment ideas through which powerful empires emerged and others declined. Having been the backward Muscovite state cornered in the far east of Europe, Russia would become notorious for its remarkable entrance into the international scene. Recognised for its considerable reform both in its domestic and international policies, Russia was unequivocally the most significant emerging power of the epoch. This can be credited back to the policies of both Peter I and Catherine II who were symbolic for their contribution to transforming Russia from an isolated nation escaping its Time of Troubles into a formidable European power. Despite international emphasis on the importance of maintaining the balance of power in Europe, politics in this era was extremely dynamic and alliances were constantly changing.<sup>1</sup> Russia was not the only nation threatening the *status quo*, but because her influence had increased so rapidly, she represented one of the biggest threats in Europe.

Both rulers have been criticised for their brutal efforts to push Russia into central European affairs which can be identified in their imperialist ambitions. However, the successes of their foreign policy have been overshadowed by their autocratic methods, both in domestic and foreign matters, of achieving prestige. This essay aims to examine the foreign policies of Peter and Catherine and provide evidence to support the successes of their policies in enhancing Russia's standing. The start of Russia's transformation is marked by Peter's westernisation scheme which emphasised military reform through which he most successfully utilised against the Swedish Empire. Peter's active foreign policy is largely acknowledged for introducing Russia to the grand European stage but his successor, Catherine, would be infamous for her efforts to solidify this grandeur. By the end of Catherine's reign, Russia had expanded into Swedish, Polish, and Ottoman lands, proving its strength against previously dominant powers in the north and south.

There are limited contemporary sources discussing Peter and Catherine's foreign policies and as a result, there is a heavier reliance on historiography to support

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<sup>1</sup> W. C. Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia, 1600-1914* (New York, 1992), p. 90.

the argument. Some contemporaries, such as Voltaire and Shcherbatov, make judgement on the policies of both rulers, however, they are often one-sided and do not give an objective representation of the true success of their policies.

Much of the focus of this essay is centred on both rulers' relations with the Ottoman Empire and the northern states. Peter and Catherine shared very similar aims with both their foreign policies centred on the desire to abolish Swedish and Turkish hegemony in the Baltic and the Black Sea. Catherine's legacy is arguably more significant in the wider context of Russian history and her achievements more notable than that of Peters, although he must be credited for laying the foundations for Russia's enhanced prestige in Europe.

## **Chapter One: Peter's Foreign Policy**

### **1.1 Background and shipbuilding aims**

Following the death of his brother Ivan, Peter assumed sole authority over Russia in 1696 marking the start of its modernisation.<sup>2</sup> Russia's isolationism was obstructing its own development into a formidable power and Peter's solution for this was to gain inspiration directly from Western Europe of which he viewed as far advanced than Russia.<sup>3</sup> Peter's eagerness to modernise is reflected in the fact that he was the first tsar to travel abroad.<sup>4</sup> Peter's Grand Embassy to the west in 1697 was an attempt to gather a European alliance against the Ottomans but ultimately, Peter was seeking to observe the advanced west first hand.<sup>5</sup> His reign also initiated the start of regular Russian embassies in Europe and involvement in international affairs, as seen with Russia's first European alliance, the Holy League.<sup>6</sup> By the end of his reign, Russian representatives had participated in up to twenty embassies abroad.<sup>7</sup> This introduced Russia to the international scene, and initiated the start of her evolution into a European power with considerable influence in foreign affairs.

The west provided expertise in shipbuilding which could heavily aid Peter's ambitions of creating Russia's first imperial fleet. This was an important aim for Peter for he sought to overrule Swedish and Turkish dominance in the Baltic and the Black Sea. The need for a Russian fleet was inessential as Russia remained almost entirely landlocked. However, Peter had imperial ambitions and sought a trade route to the west, an aim that would help enhance Russia's standing in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Peter initiated mass mobilisation and a shipbuilding programme that involved the entire population. This was in line with his campaign plan to secure the port of Azov which was controlled by the Ottomans.<sup>9</sup> He rallied 25,000 men in the towns around Azov and in Ukraine to build a harbour, while landowners were

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<sup>2</sup> A. Lentin, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century: From Peter the Great to Catherine the Great* (London, 1973), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> B. H. Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Ottoman Empire* (Hamden, 1965), p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> I. Grey, 'Peter the Great and the Creation of the Russian Navy', *History Today* 11/9 (1961), p. 629.

<sup>6</sup> Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Ottoman Empire*, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> P. Dover and H. Scott, 'The Emergence of Diplomacy', in H. Scott, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350-1750: Volume II: Cultures and Power* (Oxford, 2015), p. 684.

<sup>8</sup> J. P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World 1700-1917* (Oxford, 1997), p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Grey, 'Peter the Great', p. 627.

ordered to build ships within a certain period.<sup>10</sup> These efforts proved a success during the second Azov campaign in which his galleys succeeded in blockading the area, thus marking the first major victory against the Turks.<sup>11</sup> Peter's active shipbuilding was paving the way for Russia to overcome Ottoman strongholds and gaining access to the Black Sea. He invited western shipwrights to work in Voronezh to help his efforts against the Turks.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to his triumph at Azov, Peter found success in the north during the Great Northern War in which Russia successfully conquered Ingria and initiated the construction of the strategic port city of St Petersburg, shocking western powers.<sup>13</sup> The Baltic now saw a formidable Russian fleet with galleys and brigantines, flaunting Russian naval power and securing its influence in the north. Mikhail Shcherbatov, a Russian statesman, credits the 'labours and solicitude' of Peter I for Russia's 'acquired fame in Europe and influence in affairs'.<sup>14</sup> He praises Peter's largescale mobilisation and shipbuilding in helping Russian 'fleets [to cover] the White Sea and the Baltic' and overcoming 'the Poles and the Swedes'.<sup>15</sup> Although Shcherbatov has criticised Peter's domestic policies, he makes evident the successes of his militaristic foreign policy. Because the source was written shortly after the end of Peter's reign, it is valuable in highlighting the legacy of Peter's naval reform and suggests it contributed to Russia's rising prestige.

## **1.2 Peter and the Ottoman Empire**

The Ottoman Turks had control of the Black Sea for 300 years and the Crimea an Ottoman protectorate, an area of great strategic importance.<sup>16</sup> The reason for this is that the Black Sea gave Ottomans a direct route to the Northern Caucasus, Transcaucasia and to Persia and India.<sup>17</sup> Historically, the Ottomans were far superior to Russia who had suffered continual raids by the Crimean Khanate during the seventeenth century.<sup>18</sup> This was a source of humiliation and growing

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 627-8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 627.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 628.

<sup>13</sup> Grey, 'Peter the Great', p. 629.

<sup>14</sup> *On the corruption of morals in Russia / Prince M. M. Shcherbatov*, A. Lentin (trans) (London, 1969), p. 157.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>16</sup> A. W. Fisher, *The Russian annexation of the Crimea, 1772-1783* (Cambridge, 1970), p. xi.

<sup>17</sup> A. Bennigsen, 'Peter the Great, the Ottoman Empire, and the Caucasus', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 8/2 (1974), p. 312.

<sup>18</sup> Fisher, *The Russian annexation of the Crimea*, p. 21.

frustration for a nation who referred to themselves as the 'Third Rome' yet consistently found themselves being raided by Muslim Tatars.<sup>19</sup> Upon Peter's accession, he immediately focused on challenging the Ottoman Turks with the ultimate aim of gaining access to both the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. This objective extended into Catherine's reign and was more successfully achieved under her jurisdiction because of Peter's inability to capitalise on his gains; this seriously hampered his efforts to gain a solid foothold in the area.

As mentioned previously, during the Great Turkish War, Russia successfully captured Azov in 1696 which was a celebrated victory for Peter as it contributed to one of his biggest aims so early into his reign.<sup>20</sup> This can be credited back to Peter's significant army and naval reform. From the Ottoman's perspective, the conquest of Azov was Peter's greatest victory, even more significant than Russia's triumph at Poltava.<sup>21</sup> This would suggest how impressive the campaign was for even the Ottoman's to admit the defeat was such a great blow, trumping Russia's symbolic victory against the Swedish. On top of this, news of the victory had reached London with the *London Gazette* reporting that the gain would lead to further Russian conquests of Ottoman lands.<sup>22</sup> For one of the most influential European powers of the period to publicly comment on the Ottoman defeat, it demonstrates the extent to which Russian imperial gains were beginning to alert the west and thus would suggest that Peter's policies undoubtedly enhanced Russia's status.

Attempts to consolidate authority around the Caucasus region persevered into Catherine's reign suggesting Peter was not entirely successful in his aims. This is made evident in his policies following the capture of Azov in which he failed to utilise his successes and advance into the northern Caucasus.<sup>23</sup> The mixture of his regrettable decisions to rely on Kalmyk assistance and the Pruth campaign resulted in the loss of Azov. Only under Anna of Russia, during her campaign against the Turks in 1736, would Azov be recaptured.<sup>24</sup> Considering the conquest of Azov was one of Peter's greatest achievements, his foreign policy regarding the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Bennigsen, 'Peter the Great', p. 311.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 312.

<sup>22</sup> L. Hughes, *Russia in the age of Peter the Great* (New Haven, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Bennigsen, 'Peter the Great', p. 315.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 316.

Ottomans can be deduced as being unproductive and proved that Russia still required political and military improvements. However, as made evident in the previous paragraph, the initial success shocked both the Ottomans and the west and suggests that Russia was becoming a more serious contender in European affairs. Fortunately for Peter, he found success elsewhere in the European mainland and eventually established Russian dominance in the north.

### **1.3 Peter and the Great Northern War**

The Great Northern War was an ongoing conflict for almost the entirety of Peter's reign. Despite the many costs and great efforts exercised against Charles XII of Sweden, the war ultimately awarded Russia with a new status and therefore proved worthwhile. Peter laid the groundwork for Russia's foreign policy against Sweden and by connection, Poland, which would also continue into Catherine's reign. It must be reiterated that at this time, Russia was still a second-rate power having only just escaped the Time of Troubles. The Swedish Empire had been the dominant power in the north and proved its superiority against Russia early in Peter's reign at the Battle of Narva in 1700.<sup>25</sup> Although the battle had proven that Russia's reforms were not sufficient enough, the defeat only encouraged Peter to increase military reform, even compelling him to melt down church bells to create artillery.<sup>26</sup> His efforts undoubtedly paid off as seen in the Russian triumph at Poltava in 1709 in which the Swedish army was vanquished.<sup>27</sup> This victory signified Russia's new status as the dominant power in the north, overthrowing Swedish hegemony and altering the balance of power.

When the Great Northern War concluded, Peter had attained his goal of westernisation. Russia's enhanced standing was solidified at the Treaty of Nystadt in 1721 which resulted in the concession of several Baltic regions, areas that provided Russia a connection to the west.<sup>28</sup> Russia's position was further secured with the creation of St Petersburg as a port on the Baltic coast, it posed as the new centre for Russian commercial interests aligned with the west.<sup>29</sup> The opening

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<sup>25</sup> LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World*, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia*, p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> Lentini, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Grey, 'Peter the Great', p. 631.



of a new route for commerce fulfilled one of Peter's aims following his observance of imperial gain during his western embassy; this broadened Russia's involvement in the international sphere and thus enhanced its status. Furthermore, Peter was granted the western title of 'Emperor' as a result of his victories, symbolising his role as the creator of a new, modernised Russia.<sup>30</sup> Peter was certainly satisfied with his achievements during his reign, however, there was strong concern over the disruption in the European equilibrium. On account of her new territorial gains in the Baltic and the acquirement of southern Finland during a successful fleet campaign in 1713, Russian influence in the north was expanding rapidly.<sup>31</sup> Despite Peter's admiration for the western powers, this was not reciprocated as great imperial powers, such as France and Britain, grew concerned with the rising Russian threat.<sup>32</sup> This only signified that Russia was becoming a more formidable power in the continent.

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<sup>30</sup> Lentin, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Grey, 'Peter the Great', p. 630.

<sup>32</sup> LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World*, p. 25.

## **Chapter Two: Catherine's Foreign Policy**

### **2.1 Catherine's accession and aims**

Peter left a legacy symbolic of Muscovy's transition from a backward and isolated nation to a westernised power more heavily involved in international affairs. Peter's greatest aims were passed down the following successors but were most seriously readopted by Catherine upon her seizure of power in 1762.<sup>33</sup> She expanded on Peter's aims to enlighten Russia and to expand Russia's frontiers to the Baltic and Transcaucasian region.<sup>34</sup> From the words of Catherine herself, she had aimed to 'join the Caspian Sea with the Black Sea and link both of these with the North Sea' in an effort to inspire commerce and promote Russia's status above European empires.<sup>35</sup> The three powers that most obstructed Russia's advancement had started to decline by Peter I's death, this included of Sweden, Poland and Turkey.<sup>36</sup> The appearance of the 'Eastern Question' precipitated as a result of Catherine's aggressive policies against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>37</sup> The dangers of the decline of the Turks gravely threatened the interests of other European powers as it represented the perfect opportunity for Catherine to pursue her imperial ambitions in an effort to further elevate Russia's standing.<sup>38</sup>

Catherine is remembered for being an ambitious character and her foreign policies were determined by her desire to create an imperial Russia.<sup>39</sup> Seeing as she was of German descent and had usurped the throne from her Russian husband Peter, Catherine promptly initiated attempts to consolidate her position through informed policy-making.<sup>40</sup> To further secure her status, she also sought to be seen as an enlightened autocrat in line with the rest of Europe and is made evident by her close relations with French enlightenment writer, Voltaire. As will be discussed later, she exploited her friendship with Voltaire in an attempt to crush negative

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<sup>33</sup> A. Kamenskii, 'Catherine the Great's Foreign Policy Reconsidered', *Journal of modern Russian history and historiography* 12/1 (2019), pp. 150.

<sup>34</sup> J. M. O'Sullivan, 'Catherine the Great and Russian Policy', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 4/15 (1915), p. 399.

<sup>35</sup> *The memoirs of Catherine the Great*, Maroger, D. and Gooch, G. P. (eds. and trans.) (London, 1955), p. 385.

<sup>36</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Catherine the Great and Russian Policy', p. 400.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 401.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 401.

<sup>39</sup> Lentin, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 93.

<sup>40</sup> Kamenskii, 'Catherine the Great's Foreign Policy Reconsidered', p. 172.

perceptions of her reign and boost her reputation amongst European powers.<sup>41</sup> This was part of her plan to enlighten and promote Russia as a reformed empire, an empire on par with the most influential European states of the eighteenth century. One of her biggest aims was to gain Russia the status of European mediator in international politics, however, this was not achieved, and instead Russia adopted the reputation of an international violator. This was made evident following Catherine's numerous brutal campaigns against the Turks which represented her impressive attempts to fulfil Peter's ambitions in the Transcaucasian area. Despite her ambitious wars, Catherine was cautious not to intimidate her European counterparts and used skilful diplomacy to navigate her international affairs. This can be seen in both her Polish and Turkish affairs which were central to Catherine's foreign policy. Consistent defeats or consistent victories both endangered Russia's position and put the nation at risk of falling victim to stronger powers.<sup>42</sup> To say her foreign policy greatly enhanced Russia's status would be accurate because ultimately, she did accomplish her territorial ambitions, at least in Turkey, and greatly expanded the empire. However, aspects of Catherine's foreign policy were not as successful as historiography would suggest, particularly regarding her policy against Poland.

## **2.2 Catherine and the Poland-Lithuanian Commonwealth**

Under Peter I, Russia obtained considerable influence in the Poland-Lithuanian Commonwealth following the Battle of Poltava. Russia now had a say in the selection of monarchs and continued efforts to protect the non-Catholic minorities living in the commonwealth.<sup>43</sup> Peter had consistently reminded Poland of the rights of Orthodox dissidents as per the Treaty of Eternal Peace formalised in 1686.<sup>44</sup> However, until Catherine's reign, the Russian government failed in its position as protector of Orthodoxy to formally aid dissidents under persecution.<sup>45</sup> Her accession brought about increased intervention in Poland with the ultimate aim of conquering it to expand Russia's frontiers.

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<sup>41</sup> I. Gorbatov, 'Voltaire and Russia in the Age of Enlightenment', *Orbis Litterarum* 62/5 (2007), p. 387.

<sup>42</sup> Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia*, p. 144.

<sup>43</sup> LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World*, p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> E. Thaden, *Russia's western borderlands, 1710-1870* (Princeton, 1984), p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

Peter had never formally waged war against Poland, instead only disrupting internal issues and making it a protectorate of Russia while Catherine favoured a more interventionist policy. Catherine immediately commenced with her Polish policy in which she initiated a scheme to gain the approval of the Russian populace as the protector of the Orthodox religion.<sup>46</sup> As part of this policy, she shifted away from Russia's traditional Austrian alliance to a Prussian one in 1764 because of a shared desire to conquer Poland.<sup>47</sup> Catherine concealed her aims of dividing Poland by excusing Russian involvement as a means of protecting the Orthodox minorities in an effort not to intimidate other European powers.

Her Polish policies were staunchly supported by Voltaire who saw it as an enlightened effort to 'establish freedom of conscience' in regard to the liberties of Orthodox minorities.<sup>48</sup> In reality, Catherine was masking her true intentions of solidifying undivided power through territorial expansion and expanding Russian influence in Europe.<sup>49</sup> Voltaire was clearly deceived by Catherine who exploited his fame in a bid to secure her goal of being seen as an enlightened autocrat. Because Voltaire was so greatly admired and his works read by intellectuals across the continent, his influential position provided Catherine with the perfect figure to promote her status and empire.<sup>50</sup> Catherine could fulfil Voltaire's political ideas by becoming the perfect model of an enlightened autocrat to showcase to other European powers. Ultimately, however, Catherine was striving to establish her legitimacy in the eyes of European powers and wanted to represent Russia as an intellectual and influential state.

In contrast, Shcherbatov, a contemporary critic of Catherine, saw through her deceit stating that her decision to forcibly place a favourite of hers, Poniatowski, on the Polish throne was used to implement an 'autocratic form of government, contrary to the Polish liberties.'<sup>51</sup> Shcherbatov likely shared the same view as the western powers who undoubtedly viewed Russian involvement in Poland as a mere plot to accomplish imperialistic ambitions. The French had adopted a policy aimed at establishing a strong barrier against Russia using its main imperial

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<sup>46</sup> Kamenskii, 'Catherine the Great's Foreign Policy Reconsidered', p. 167.

<sup>47</sup> Lentin, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 93.

<sup>48</sup> *Voltaire and Catherine the Great: selected correspondence*, A. Lentin (trans) (Cambridge, 1974), p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> I. Gorbachov, 'Voltaire and Russia in the Age of Enlightenment', p. 387.

<sup>50</sup> *Voltaire and Catherine the Great*, Lentin, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> *On the corruption of morals in Russia*, p. 253.

targets: Sweden, Poland, and Turkey.<sup>52</sup> The threat of disturbing the *status quo* in Europe was clearly an intimidating factor to the west and therefore Catherine was viewed as a despotic violator of the northern equilibrium. A weak Poland meant that the west had an inadequate buffer between itself and the emerging Russian Empire, on top of the fact that Peter had already established dominance against Sweden, a crippled Poland would certainly strengthen the nation.<sup>53</sup> In this instance, both Peter and Catherine's combined efforts proved to be influential in enhancing Russia's influence in the north.

Catherine's appointment of Russian favourite, Stanislaw Poniatowski, on the Polish throne and the Treaty of Friendship between Russia and Poland meant that her foreign affairs would become focused on Poland for the next 30 years.<sup>54</sup> Her disingenuous protection of non-Catholic dissidents angered Polish nobles and the Catholic confederation leading to civil war.<sup>55</sup> Catherine's laws were harshly opposed by Polish nobles who enforced mass killings of Polish minorities and at the same time declared war on Russia.<sup>56</sup> The drawbacks of gaining Poland as a buffer state were seemingly outweighing the benefits, Poland was a constant source of frustration for Catherine and continuously proved her foreign policies there futile. The efforts and resources spent trying to tranquilise the Polish situation while solidifying Russian authority in the commonwealth could have been better used elsewhere. The failures of her Polish policies also had domino effects on her other foreign policies. Not only did the Turks declare war on Russia as a result of her actions in Poland, but Russia could no longer rely on her traditional ally, Austria, against the Ottomans as it would directly threaten her standing alliance with Prussia which had been attained to conquer Poland.<sup>57</sup> Frequent changes in allies did not suit the still emerging Russian empire and the failures in Poland symbolised the fact that Russia was still inferior to more dominant nations like Prussia.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, Catherine's efforts to implement effective policies in Poland had failed and restricted her ability to respond to threats from the Ottomans. This was made clear when Prussia signed a separate treaty with Poland

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<sup>52</sup> Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia*, p. 91.

<sup>53</sup> Kamenskii, 'Catherine the Great's Foreign Policy Reconsidered', p. 175.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 175.

<sup>55</sup> Lentin, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> Kamenskii, 'Catherine the Great's Foreign Policy Reconsidered', p. 176.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p. 175.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 187.

and adopted the Constitution of 3 May 1791 virtually invalidating 30 years' worth of Catherine's policies.<sup>59</sup>

Historian Alexander Kamenskii argues that Catherine's Polish policy was a failure because she was forced to take into account Prussian interests stemming from an alliance that more favourably benefitted Prussia.<sup>60</sup> When Poland was first partitioned, the Russian Empire acquired an additional 1.3 million subjects.<sup>61</sup> Due to Russia's political dependence on Prussia, Catherine was forced to partition Polish lands amongst Prussia and Austria. Kamenskii's views supports Shcherbatov's argument in that the partition of Poland '[strengthened] the houses of Austria and Brandenburg, and losing Russia her powerful influence over Poland.'<sup>62</sup> This would suggest that Catherine failed in her aims to fully conquer Poland. Once more, Shcherbatov professes his disapproval of Catherine's policies in Poland and questions the true extent of the acquired benefits from Polish lands. Shcherbatov described the new possessions as economically weak and infertile regions made up of 'a lot of marshes and frogs'.<sup>63</sup> It must be noted that Shcherbatov was a conservative and enlightened statesman who considerably opposed autocracy and imperialism.<sup>64</sup> As a result, it is no surprise that he was so critical of Catherine's policies in Poland as he was primarily concerned with the immorality of conquest. In reality, the acquirement of Polish lands granted Russia a useful buffer state between itself and the west.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Shcherbatov's assessment of the partition occurred only after the First Partition of Poland in 1772 which saw Russia acquire limited gains compared to that of the following two partitions. By the Third Partition of Poland, Russia had gained an additional area of 326,000 square kilometres of land populated by nearly 6 million inhabitants.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, although dictated by the policies of the German states, Catherine had accomplished her ambition to conquer Poland, although not entirely but for good reasons explained in the following paragraph. There is no doubt that it was a brutal campaign that aided Catherine's love for glory, however, this was not her principal

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<sup>59</sup> Kamenskii, 'Catherine the Great's Foreign Policy Reconsidered', p. 184.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 174.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 175.

<sup>62</sup> *On the corruption of morals in Russia*, p. 253.

<sup>63</sup> A. Lentin, 'Prince M. M. Shcherbatov as Critic of Catherine II's Foreign Policy', *Slavonic and East European Review* 49/116 (1971), p. 379.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 380.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 379.

<sup>66</sup> Thaden, *Russia's western borderlands*, p. 51.

concern, her overarching aim was to expand Russia's frontiers and influence in the continent which she succeeded in achieving at the expense of Poland.

Kamenskii is not wrong in suggesting that Poland occupied much of Catherine's foreign policy, but his argument is limited in stating that it was a failure as Catherine must be credited for her intelligent decision-making. Despite her failure to occupy the entirety of Poland, she acknowledged the broader consequences of attempting to do so. In keeping with the international *status quo*, Catherine understood that complete Russian dominance over Poland was unrealistic and likely would have been challenged by the European powers. Historian William Fuller describes the agreement to partition Poland as a 'form of bribery' aimed to protect Catherine's southern conquests.<sup>67</sup> Catherine and her councillors were not oblivious to the threat that Russia held in disrupting the European balance of power. The First Partition of Poland was completed with considerable assessment and it was agreed that it would be best not to encroach on Austria's sphere of influence in the Balkans amid the Russo-Turkish War.<sup>68</sup> Catherine knew she needed the support of the German states to reduce the threat that Russia posed. This is made evident in the council's preparation for a Polish invasion following the Constitution of 3 May stating that 'to be confident of our success we must be no less confident in the agreement' to invade Poland in accordance with 'the Vienna court, and most particularly the court of Berlin'.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, although Catherine's aim to completely conquer Poland only partially succeeded, ultimately, her foreign policy was pragmatic and took into account the broader international situation. This avoided further conflict with Poland's neighbours and other western powers who were increasingly wary of Russia's growing power. The fact that Catherine considered the wider effects of her imperialism suggests she was aware of Russia's growing status and sought to continue increasing it but not at the cost of further conflict with the leading European powers.

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<sup>67</sup> Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia*, p. 146.

<sup>68</sup> Lentin, 'Prince M. M. Shcherbatov', p. 379.

<sup>69</sup> Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia*, p. 146.

### **2.3 Background to Catherine's Ottoman campaigns**

Catherine sought more favourable outcomes against the declining Ottoman empire. After the failure to dissuade Crimean Khanates from following Ottoman orders, Catherine planned an invasion in January 1771 as a part of her general war against the Turks.<sup>70</sup> This invasion would lead to Crimea's independence from the Ottomans and the accession of the newly elected Khan Sahip Giray as Russia's puppet.<sup>71</sup>

The war was not expected to be a guaranteed success considering Russia had waged a number of wars by this time, exhausting her resources and military capabilities. However, Russia's position remained underestimated by the west including that of France who viewed incursions to their Ottoman allies as highly threatening. French military officer, Baron de Viomenil was sent to Poland to support anti-Russian uprisings while the Russo-Turkish War was underway during which he commented that the war was costing 'too much money and too much men' for it to result in a Russian triumph.<sup>72</sup> Russia shocked Europe in its ability to disrupt Ottoman strongholds which contributed to Catherine's ultimate aim of gaining access to the Black Sea. As Peter I had secured dominance in the Baltic Sea, gaining Russian influence over the Black Sea would mean Russia would acquire some of the most significant strategic points and consequently spread Russia's influence in the north and the southeast of Europe. This would inevitably pose a great threat to the equilibrium in Europe.

### **2.4 Catherine's successes and failures during the Ottoman campaigns**

In the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainardzhi which concluded the Russo-Turkish War in 1774, Russia benefitted significantly. She gained the Dnieper, Sea of Azov and at last, the Black Sea which consequently opened access to the west via the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>73</sup> Catherine had proven her skilful militarism against the Turks, confirming their status as the sick man of Europe, and fulfilled Peter the Great's biggest aim. Furthermore, Catherine now held the position of

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<sup>70</sup> Fisher, *The Russian annexation of the Crimea*, p. 42.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 43-4.

<sup>72</sup> Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia*, p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> Lentin, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 95.



official protector of Orthodox minorities in Ottoman territories which acted as a pretext for future intervention similar to that of her Polish policies.<sup>74</sup> The humiliation imposed on the Ottomans encouraged Catherine to intensify her imperialist ambitions against the empire; Catherine now had her sights set on the restoration of a 'Greek Empire' by means of expelling Turkey from Europe.<sup>75</sup> It was a culmination of Catherine's victories and encouragement by both Voltaire and her zealous councillors which led to this idea. Following Turkey's declaration of war in response to Russian intervention in Poland in 1768, Voltaire had actively encouraged Catherine to fulfil 'what Peter the Great once had in mind...namely that Constantinople will become the capital of the Russian Empire.'<sup>76</sup> This was an opportunity for Catherine to further expand her frontiers and completely overcome the Ottoman Empire, undoubtedly proving Russia's power in the continent. A Crimean uprising against Russian rule provided the perfect pretext for Catherine to formally annex the area which was accomplished in 1783.<sup>77</sup> Shcherbatov argues that this was Catherine's way of triggering another Russo-Turkish War as the Ottomans could not ignore this complete violation for fear of humiliation.<sup>78</sup>

Another Russo-Turkish War commenced in 1787 and proved to be the most strenuous and costly of all of Catherine's offensives.<sup>79</sup> Despite the ultimate gains Russia acquired, Catherine's policies were questionable and her misjudgements in the conflict were greatly overlooked by her contemporaries. Catherine's policies were driven by her ambitious outlook in which can be seen to have had harmful consequences on the successes of these policies. Not only was Russia greatly underprepared but she was also isolated in Europe; her aggressive Turkish policies had greatly alarmed neighbouring countries. To say Russia's status was enhanced at this time is dubious as she faced a coalition comprised of Britain, France and Prussia in support of Turkey.<sup>80</sup> As a result, it can be presumed that Russia was neither respected or seen as enlightened but a violator of international law. Catherine solidified this view in her attempts to flaunt Russia's military power in Europe as seen during the naval expedition to Morea in which Russia's victory was

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<sup>74</sup> Lentin, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 96.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 96.

<sup>76</sup> *Voltaire and Catherine the Great*, Lentin, p. 51.

<sup>77</sup> Kamenskii, 'Catherine the Great's Foreign Policy Reconsidered', p. 176.

<sup>78</sup> Lentin, 'Prince M. M. Shcherbatov', p. 372.

<sup>79</sup> Lentin, 'Prince M. M. Shcherbatov', p. 368.

<sup>80</sup> Kamenskii, 'Catherine the Great's Foreign Policy Reconsidered', p. 178.

greatly exaggerated.<sup>81</sup> In reality, the victory could be credited to the failures of the Turkish fleet as Shcherbatov states that the expedition 'was sent to Greece and under God's protection won a victory.'<sup>82</sup> In this instance, because of Shcherbatov's close acquaintance with the admiral who commanded the expedition, his source is trustworthy and competes with the Russian consensus that the war was completely successful.<sup>83</sup> The victory was heavily down to luck and could not be credited back to Catherine's policies.

Not only did Catherine encounter difficulties against the Turks, but she experienced humiliation at the hands of Sweden who had been devastated by Peter I during the Great Northern War. Her troops were preoccupied with both the Ottomans and the Polish, leaving her vulnerable in the Baltic. Because she was so entranced with the prospect of her 'Greek Project', Russia suffered a surprise attack from Sweden. The conflict resulted in a draw with both sides suffering heavy losses.<sup>84</sup> Russia had been humiliated and some of the terms agreed under the Treaty of Nystad, which had been one of Peter's greatest achievements during his reign, had been revoked.<sup>85</sup> For St Petersburg to have been threatened by a nation that Russia had annihilated several years prior, it was an extreme blow to Russian prestige. On top of the fact that they had faced difficulties against the Ottoman Empire, Catherine's aim to secure the Black Sea was seriously hampered.

Ultimately, however, Russia proved itself superior and the war was concluded with the Peace of Jassy in 1792. Not only did this confirm the gains obtained in Kuchuk-Kainardzhi, but the Ottomans officially recognised Russian sovereignty over Crimea.<sup>86</sup> Catherine had finally achieved Peter's aim to gain the strategically important Crimea. As a result of her victory, Russia faced significant opposition from France and Britain, again proving Russia's standing was growing and threatening the equilibrium in Europe. The Ottomans had been sent French artillery instructors during the war whilst Britain sent naval assistance to aid Turkey against Russian incursions.<sup>87</sup> It is clear neither power desired to see Russia

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<sup>81</sup> Lentin, 'Prince M. M. Shcherbatov', p. 372.

<sup>82</sup> 'On the corruption of morals in Russia', p. 253.

<sup>83</sup> Lentin, 'Prince M. M. Shcherbatov', p. 369.

<sup>84</sup> I. de Mardiga, *Russia in the age of Catherine the Great* (London, 1981), p. 401.

<sup>85</sup> LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World*, p. 57.

<sup>86</sup> Lentin, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 96.

<sup>87</sup> Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia*, pp. 91-92.

succeed in its attempts to gain strategically important Ottoman territories. Catherine's policies thus far had been very aggressive and demonstrated the growing weaknesses of the once-powerful Ottoman Empire; a declining Ottoman Empire was a great hazard to the *status quo* in Europe, the effects of which would be seen a century later. Unfortunately for the west, Catherine succeeded in her imperialist aims and Russia's borders were greatly enlarged; the empire became more powerful as a result. After centuries of Ottoman dominance and humiliating Crimean raids, Russia was now the superior nation in the southeast and her status greatly enhanced. Despite support from two of the most powerful European nations, the Ottoman empire again proved to be inferior to Russian militarism demonstrating the altering statuses in Europe.

Catherine's numerous incursions on Ottoman territories severely diminished Turkish prestige and resulted in the expansion of Russia. Overall, Russia's standing undoubtedly grew as Catherine had accomplished the aims arising from Peter I's reign. Russia's acquirement of the Black Sea meant it secured a maritime route to the west via the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea meaning she could become more involved in commerce and held more influence in these areas.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, her position as Orthodox protector both in Poland and now Turkey earned her grounds to intervene and impose her influence on domestic affairs. Although the campaigns severely tarnished Catherine's status as an enlightened despot, she nevertheless succeeded in her imperial ambitions against the Ottoman Empire resulting in Russia's enhanced standing.

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<sup>88</sup> Lentin, *Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 95.

## Conclusion

Fuller expresses that 'this age was the greatest epoch of Russian expansionism until the time of Stalin.'<sup>89</sup> He credits the governments of eighteenth-century Russia for their 'extraordinary adaptability' in progressing the nation through the challenges of war.<sup>90</sup> Peter and Catherine were the most symbolic monarchs of the century and both their reigns influenced Russia's progression from that of a backward Muscovite state to an imperial European power. Peter's reign is most associated with the westernisation and initial modernisation of Russia while Catherine's left a legacy of imperialism and enlightenment. Catherine's foreign policies more significantly enhanced Russia's standing in Europe, albeit rather aggressively, but she built on the foundations of Peter's policies to achieve their shared aims.

Peter's western-inspired maritime ambitions paved the way for Russia's formidable fleet. Owing to his military reform and increased embassies, Russia became more involved in foreign affairs. Peter's expeditions against the southern frontier towards the Black Sea dominated much of his foreign policy.<sup>91</sup> As has been explained, his successes were limited here and his aims were better achieved under Catherine. Despite the setbacks, mainly seen in the Pruth Campaign, Peter proved that his naval reform was effective and successfully challenged the Ottoman stronghold in Azov. For a nation that had been the victim of Ottoman and Crimean attacks for centuries, this was a great source of prestige for Russia and made evident her evolving power.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, Peter's triumph over Sweden had further proven that Russia's military strength was expanding. The Battle of Poltava symbolised Russia's hegemony in the Baltic and posed a threat to the European equilibrium. Peter succeeded in his attempts to westernise Russia and as a result, Russia enjoyed more influence across the continent, particularly in the north. However, the failures against the Ottomans proved that Russia remained a second-rate power during this time, a position which would be overcome on account of Catherine's foreign policies.

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<sup>89</sup> Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia*, p. 131.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, p. 176.

<sup>91</sup> LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World*, p. 23.

<sup>92</sup> Fisher, *The Russian annexation of the Crimea*, p. 21.

Shcherbatov appreciated Peter's contributions to improving Russia's international standing, however, he greatly criticised the majority of Catherine's foreign policy, arguing that her campaigns were costly and brutal.<sup>93</sup> If this essay examined the successes of Catherine's foreign policy solely concerning the morality of her campaigns, then more criticism could be made. Ultimately, however, Catherine significantly expanded Russia's frontiers, a goal which drove her entire foreign policy and grew Russia's influence. It is agreeable though that she was not discerned as an enlightened despot as Voltaire might have suggested. The partitioning of Poland, although was not completed to the full extent that Catherine desired, was achieved through pragmatic decision-making and consideration of Russia's other international interests. Russia annexed around 500,000 square kilometres of Polish land as a result of the partition, but more significantly, she acquired the Crimea and the Black Sea.<sup>94</sup> Though Catherine's Turkish Wars were expensive and harsh, her triumph was greatly humiliating for the Ottomans who had historically been superior to Russia. Under Catherine, eighteenth-century Russia altered this balance of power with Russia now emerging as the dominant state in both the north and southeast of Europe. Voltaire designated Catherine the title of 'Vanquisher of the Ottoman Empire and Pacifier of Poland.'<sup>95</sup> Although very one-sided, Voltaire's correspondence provides an interesting insight into Catherine's efforts to promote Russia as a prestigious nation.

Catherine's foreign policy was evidently more successful in enhancing Russia's standing in Europe than Peter's. But it must be remembered that during the reign of Peter, Russia was still coming out of its old Muscovite traditions and previously had very limited interaction with the west. In the span of a century, Russia had developed immensely as both an imperial power with a formidable military and as an influential figure in international affairs. Both Peter and Catherine were undoubtedly patriots and their foreign policies were driven by the goal to achieve Russia the status of a leading European power. This was achieved by the conclusion of Catherine's reign which contradicts Kamenskii's opinion that her foreign policy aims were not achieved at all. Catherine's goals, originating from

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<sup>93</sup> Lentin, 'Prince M. M. Shcherbatov', p. 368.

<sup>94</sup> Thaden, *Russia's western borderlands*, p. 18.

<sup>95</sup> *Voltaire and Catherine the Great*, Lentin, p. 60.

Peter's reign, were centred on the expansion of Russia's frontiers and solidifying the empire's prestige in Europe, whether it was immoral or long-lasting is not the relevance of this essay, it is whether Russia's standing was enhanced as a result of their rules, of which, it undoubtedly was. Eighteenth-century Russia, dominated by the foreign policies of both Peter and Catherine, paved the way for its transformation into one of the leading European powers in the following centuries. Peter can be credited for laying the foundations through military reform which Catherine built on to a significant extent for her imperialist conquests.

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