




**CONTESTED  
HISTORIES**  
Occasional Paper

#177

No. X · May · 2022

 **Ukraine**  
46.487312,30.73708

# The Statue of Catherine II ‘the Great’ or the Monument to the Odessa Founders



# The Statue of Catherine II ‘the Great’ or the Monument to the Odessa Founders

Ukraine

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## Abstract

The Monument to the Odesa/Odessa Founders features prominently Catherine II of Russia and the men who assisted in creating the Russian Empire’s new southern frontier along the northern Black Sea coast in modern-day Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> The monument was initially planned in 1894 and inaugurated in 1900, but the start of communist rule in Ukraine prompted a series of removals and replacements of symbols of the tsarist past. After Ukraine’s independence in 1991, local leaders pushed for the restoration of the monument to Odesa’s city centre, sparking controversies, and questioning the identity politics of the southern port city, against a backdrop of new-colonial claims by Russia. The monument was re-inaugurated in 2007, but it has since been criticised for commemorating a monarch who brought serfdom to Ukraine and utilising the imperial narrative to circumvent national memory laws. Since the start of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, arguments focusing on the use of history and colonial ideology have further shaped the rhetoric surrounding the conflict. This case study explores the entanglements between anti-Soviet narratives, a new understanding of colonial paradigms in Eastern Europe, and the trans-regional symbolism of Catherine II.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, I will use ‘Odesa’ when writing about post-1991 Ukraine and ‘Odessa’ when referring to historical episodes during the Russian Empire / Soviet era.

## Introduction



Figure 1: 'Monument to the Odessa Founders' Image taken by the author, 2015

On March 8, 2022, thirteen days after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin held a speech in Moscow on the occasion of International Women's Day, a celebrated bank holiday in many former Soviet countries. As a backdrop to his address, he chose a statue of Catherine II 'the Great' (r. 1762-1796), a former Empress of Russia whose reign stretches across most of the second half of the eighteenth century. In this speech, the president of Russia quoted words penned by Catherine two centuries earlier: 'I will defend my homeland with my tongue, and with a pen, and with a sword, as long as I have enough life.'<sup>2</sup> By focusing on the military aspects of Catherine II's reign, he implied that the expansion campaigns undertaken under her rule turned the Russian Empire into a world power through, among other things, the annexation of Crimea (1783) and large parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (in 1772, 1793, and 1795), the development of 'New Russia' colonies in modern-day southern Ukraine, the destruction of the Cossack Zaporizhian Sich, and the founding of several new cities, including the port of Odesa/Odessa on the Black Sea.<sup>3</sup> Referencing Catherine's conquests in the past was an ominous message, hinting at a roadmap for the future of Russia that would embrace the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world)

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<sup>2</sup> Youtube, "Putin quoted Catherine II, congratulating women on March 8," 8 March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> The New Russia gubernia (*Novorossiiskaia gubernia*) was an administrative-territorial name applied to Southern Ukraine by the Russian Empire after its annexation. Before that, these lands had been shared by the Zaporozhian Cossacks, the Hetman state, the Crimean Khanate, and the Ottoman Empire. The Russian Senate outlined the new territory's government in the 'Plan for the Colonisation of New Russia Gubernia.' In 1774 the gubernia grew to include new lands annexed from Turkey between the Dniro River and the Buh River and along the Black Sea littoral, and in 1783 the Crimean Peninsula. Senkus Roman, 'New Russia Gubernia,' *Encyclopaedias of Ukraine*, vol. 3 (1993).

ideology.<sup>4</sup> Speaking in front of a statue of Catherine II, Putin demonstrated the further instrumentalisation of imperial-era symbols to defend against invasion in the present.

Another statue of Catherine II decorates one of the central squares of the Ukrainian port city of Odesa/Odessa. A symbol of the Russian imperial past, the monument had been condemned even before the start of the 2022 conflict by some parts of the local and national population, who described it as a tool of Russian influence and propaganda on Ukraine's Black Sea shores.<sup>5</sup> The monument is not new, but its fortunes have followed the territorial changes involved with the transition from the Russian Empire to the USSR (1917) and then from the USSR to independent Ukraine (1991): the monument was once removed, once re-established, and now faces renewed criticism in the public space. Catherine II herself, as a historical character, is disliked by Ukrainians, following the words of Ukraine's national poet Taras Shevchenko who described her as a 'bloodthirsty she-wolf,' and she is generally seen as the monarch who extended serfdom into Ukrainian lands<sup>6</sup> and destroyed the independence of the Cossack Zaporozhian Sich.<sup>7</sup> Her rule represented a pivotal moment in Ukrainian history, with the conquest of large sections of the Black Sea steppes through warfare against the Ottoman Empire, using the military support of Cossack warriors, but then annexing their lands altogether into the Russian Empire.<sup>8</sup> The conquest of



**Figure 2:** 'Map of the Ukrainian Cossack Hetmanate and Russian Empire (1751)' Image by SeikoEn via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0

<sup>4</sup> Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (UCMC), "'Russkiy Mir' as the Kremlin's Quasi-ideology," May 28, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> "Kremlin propagandists have also drawn heavily upon the period of imperial expansion under Catherine the Great, particularly her annexation of Crimea in 1783," in Balkanist, "History Revisited: Criminalising Communist Symbols and Sympathies in Ukraine," May 28, 2015

<sup>6</sup> Serfdom was extended first to Left-Bank Ukraine in 1783, then to Right-Bank and southern Ukraine in 1796, following the third partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Before these conquests, Russian serfs had sometimes escaped from their owners' estates to the steppe of Southern Ukraine and the areas controlled by Cossack regiments such as Slobidska Ukraine in the northeast. After 1796, serfdom tended to be the weakest in Southern Ukraine because it had less cultivated lands, formerly controlled by the Crimean Tatars. Developing agriculture was a lot more common to lease out the lands to tenants according to a more West European farming model, and rents were initially lower to attract settlers.

<sup>7</sup> The Zaporizhian Sich is the name used to refer to several successive Cossack fortified settlements along the floodplains of the Dnipro River, at the centre of the region known as Zaporizhia (the 'Wild Fields,' today part of Central and Eastern Ukraine). The first Sich dates back to 1552, and runaway serfs made large sections of their population. The Sich established a parliamentary system of government and was an important political and military force in the region until its forced disbandment in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup> These conquests represented the territories of most modern-day Ukraine territories, except for Western territories, then at the hands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the extreme South-West, still under the control of the Ottoman Empire. The military campaigns waged under the reign of Catherine II were instrumental in extending Russian rule over substantial parts of modern Ukraine: before her reign, Russia formally controlled the north-eastern parts of the country, including Kyiv (annexed in 1686, through the Eternal Peace Treaty with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) as well as the regions of the autonomous Hetman state in Left-Bank Ukraine (including cities such as Chernihiv and Poltava) and Sloboda Ukraine (with Kharkiv and Sumy as urban centres).

south Ukraine from the Ottomans also included the annexation of the separate Crimean Khanate in 1783, not part of the Zaporizhian Sich.

The statue of Catherine II is part of a larger sculptural ensemble showcasing the Empress at the top and key individuals for creating the city below her – a composition named the 'Monument to the Founders of Odessa.' That Odessa was founded in 1794 after the Russian conquest of south Ukraine is significant and adds a layer of complexity to the debate: Odessa was born a Russian imperial city, notwithstanding earlier settlements on this site. The Monument to the Founders was first erected for the 100th anniversary of the city's foundation. Yet, it was removed a quarter of a century later, in the early years of the Ukraine People's Republic (1917-1920, including the short-lived Odessa Soviet Republic in 1918). The central square on which the monument stood, close to the sea, changed both name and artistic ornamentation several times. The desire to recover the historical features of old Odessa led to the second inauguration of the original monument in 2007.

The opening ceremony happened in the backdrop of memory wars playing out in Ukraine in the 2000s, with the rapid installation of monuments and memorials to patriotic Ukrainian figures, including Ukrainian Insurgent Army leaders (also UPA - *Ukrayins'ka Povstans'ka Armiya*), at the same time as many communist statues and memorials were being removed. The re-installation of the old monument featuring Catherine II cut across these two movements and highlighted more complex and overlapping dividing lines. The monument was protested then and yet again in 2014-2015 in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. In 2020, as other protests focusing on public sculpture and memory unfolded worldwide, the Odessa monument came under renewed demonstrations, this time with a more express focus on decoloniality, placing Ukraine in the broader landscape of postcolonial struggles against former imperial rulers.<sup>9</sup> For over a decade, petitions to remove the statue were made at the local and national levels, making their way to the Ukrainian Supreme Court. Still, the case was ultimately declined in 2019.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This feeds into rising scholarship on Eastern Europe as a trans-imperial and semi-colonial space, where techniques of colonial management were redeployed. For instance: Kalinovsky, Mark, J.A., and Marung, S. (eds.)(2020): *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*. Indiana University Press; Fowkes, James, and Hailbronner, Michaela. "Decolonizing Eastern Europe: A Global Perspective on 1989 and the World It Made." *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 17, no. 2 (2019): 497-509.

<sup>10</sup> Synenko, Alyona, "Odessa, the city of broken statues," *Odessa Journal*, September 19, 2020.



## Background

### *The City of Odesa*

The history of Odesa is closely linked to the rule of Catherine II because the modern city was a colonial creation of the Russian Empire. The Tsarina's reign was marked by a series of expansion campaigns against the Ottoman Empire through the first Russo-Turkish war of 1768-1774 and the second conflict in 1787-1792, both of which resulted in extended territorial gains for the Russian Empire, including strategic access to the Black Sea and the seizure of the Crimean Peninsula. Odesa itself is located on the site of the Turkish fortress of Khadjibey, where a small local population of Cossacks, Jews, Moldovan, and Greek merchants already lived. A rescript by Catherine II in 1794 declared the founding of a city and port on the site of the old fortress, and in January 1795, the Greek-inspired name 'Odessa' was used for the first time.<sup>11</sup> The Monument to the Founders also features, in addition to Catherine II, some individuals who shaped the founding decade of the new city: Prince Grigory Potemkin, the first governor-general of the new territory known as 'Novorossiya' (New Russia); Joseph de Ribas, an Italo-Spanish military officer of Irish descent who acted as an admiral in the Russian army and took the site of Odessa by storm on 25 September 1789; Prince Platon Zubov, the second governor-general of the territory and a contemporary of the city during its construction; and Franz de Volan or Wollant, a Flemish engineer and author of the original plan and innovative 'classical' street grid of Odessa.

The history of Odesa is thus closely linked to that of Russian expansionism and its transformation into a continental colonial empire, and it is also tied to the history of settler societies. A fishing village counting some two thousand inhabitants in 1795, it became the third-largest city of the Russian Empire by the end of the Crimean War. In just sixty years, it was considered Russia's third capital, after St Petersburg and Moscow, with a population of over 100,000. Odesa was a boomtown with growth on par with what could be observed in the nineteenth century in the American West. Still, its population was also infinitely more diverse, with only half of its residents registering Russian as their native language in the first All-Russian Census of 1897.<sup>12</sup> A third of the residents indicated Yiddish as their mother tongue, and the remaining 20 per cent combined Ukrainian, Polish, German, Greek, Tatar, Armenian, French, and Belarusian. However, this plurilingualism and multiculturalism were still a step down from Odesa's early decades.<sup>13</sup> A rising metropolis on the margins of the

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<sup>11</sup> Od-News.com, "Odessa, like a shy lady, hides her age? The main versions of how old she is / Odessa, kak zastentchivaja ledi, skryvaet svoj vozrast? Osnovnye versii togo, skol'ko ey let," February 18, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Demockop Weekly, *The First General Census of the Russian Empire of 1897. Breakdown of population by mother tongue and districts in 50 Governorates of European Russia (1777 territorial units)*.

<sup>13</sup> Herlihy, Patricia. *Odessa Recollected : The Port and the People*. Ukrainian Studies. Boston, MA, 2019; Troinitskii, Nikolai A. "Pervaia vseobshchaia perepis' naseleniya Rossiiskoi Imperii, 1897 g." *St. Petersburg* (1905). Vol 47.

Russian Empire, a diverse city in an age of nationalisms, Odessa's history and population both overlapped and diverged from the history of the Russian Empire proposed as the extension of a 'Russian world,' and from the discourses shaping Ukrainian nationalism in the nineteenth century, supporting modern state-led interpretations.

### *The Construction and Removal of the Monument*

The statue's design was chosen in the 1890s after a competition for a monument to commemorate the centenary of the founding of the city of Odessa. The Odessa City Duma decided between different projects, eventually choosing the proposal titled 'Odessa Port' submitted by local architect Yuri Meletyevitch Dmitrenko on August 24, 1892 – with a projected cost of 57,000 roubles.<sup>14</sup> Although the monument was only completed and opened in 1900, the laying of its base was part of the celebration of the centenary of the Russian founding of the city



Figure 3: 'Opening Ceremony for the Monument to the Founders in 1900' Image by HOBOPCC via Wikimedia Commons CC 1.0

on August 22 (September 2) 1894.<sup>15</sup> During the Paris World Exhibition of 1901, the square, as a whole, received praise and was recognised as one of the best in Europe. However, this highly anticipated statue did not remain in the public space for long. After the 1917 October Revolution, the city council received the official order to immediately remove the monument, as it celebrated a monarch from the Tsarist past. It was only saved from destruction through the intervention of the Petrograd/St Petersburg artistic commission led by M. Gorky. Between 1918 and 1920, Odessa witnessed several Bolshevik insurgencies, a short-lived Odessa Soviet Republic (January-March 1918) and occupation by French and Greek armies supporting loyalist White Russians.<sup>16</sup> During that time, the monument was covered by a canopy and eventually removed in 1920 to the archaeological and local history museums in separate parts – preserved merely because of their artistic merits. Catherine's statue, however, was melted down to produce shells, except for her head, which was kept with the

<sup>14</sup> "Catherine Square / Ekaterininskaya ploshchad'," Odesskyi.com. The monument builders were Odessa architect Dmitrenko, sculptor MP Popov helped by Boris Eduards and Leopold Mencione, and engineer AA Sikorsky.

<sup>15</sup> The Gregorian calendar (new style) was introduced in the 16th century to correct the previously used Julian calendar (old style), mistakenly calculating the solar year. However, since not all countries adopted it simultaneously, it resulted in a difference between the two calendars of about 12 days, hence the habit in nineteenth-century Russia to provide both dates (the second being a new style). The new style calendar was only accepted in Russia after the 1917 October Revolution.

<sup>16</sup> The White Russians supported the White Army and Guardsmen, a collective name for the armed formations of the pro-Tsarist movement and anti-Soviet government during the Civil War in Russia (1917-1923). They opposed the Red Army of the Bolsheviks.



**Figure 4:** 'Monument to the Founders veiled after the 1917 Revolution' Image by Unknown Author via Wikimedia Commons CC 1.0

sculptures of the other founding figures of the city in the Odessa Local History Museum.<sup>17</sup>

The monument's location – today's Catherine Square – has also changed functions over time. Initially, the square was not specifically designated to commemorate Catherine II: it was planned as the site of a military church in honour of her religious namesake, Saint Catherine of Alexandria. That church was never completed, but the square eventually kept the name.<sup>18</sup> When Catherine II died soon after founding the city in 1796, her son, Emperor Paul I, suspended the church's construction and completely dismantled its foundations in 1821. In 1873, Odessa's first fountain was installed at the centre of the square to celebrate the launch of the Dniester water conduit, which was no small achievement as the city had regularly suffered from droughts, dust

storms and lack of clean water.<sup>19</sup> The name of the square itself underwent at least seven changes, first named after late empress Elizabeth (Elizavetskaya), then Dyukovskaya (commemorating the French Duke of Richelieu, another transnational founding figure in Odessa's early history). Under the Soviet Union, from 1920 onwards, it was known as Karl Marx Square, and from 1965, it became Potemkin Square. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, it was re-named after Catherine II.

### *The Reinstallation of the Monument*

The context of the reinstallation of the statue of Catherine II – or rather of the Monument to the Founders as a whole – is thus entrenched in previous processes of historical erasure. In its attempts to bridge the temporal gap towards a famed and fantasised old Odessa of the city's foundation era, proponents of the memorial also engage in selective remembrance to connect Odesa to Odessa. On April 30, 1921, four years after the Soviet removal of the Catherine II statue, a concrete and pink granite bust of Karl Marx was placed on the pedestal of the former monument, only for it to be destroyed by a violent storm. A new statue of the philosopher replaced it, this time in total length, and was nicknamed 'Karl the Second' by locals. It remained until June 27, 1965, when it was replaced by a monument to the mutineer

<sup>17</sup> O48 City of Odessa website, "Destroyer of the Zaporozhian Sich or founder of Odessa: the history of the monument to Catherine II/ Razrushitel'nitsa Zaporozhskoj Setchi ili osnovatel'nitsa Odyssey: istoriya pamjatnika Ekateriny II," June 14, 2021. When melting the statue of Catherine, some contemporaries remarked that "It is worse to have shells of non-proletarian origins."

<sup>18</sup> Koshetavesky, Valentin: "About The Monument Of Catherine The Great In Odessa/ O Pamyatnike Ekaterine Velikoy v Odesse," *Kontinent.org*, September 25, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> "Catherine Square / Ekaterinskaya ploshchad'," *Odesskyi.com*.



mariners of the Potemkin battleship on the 60th anniversary of the famous 1905 uprising.<sup>20</sup> The Potemkin Mariners monument represented idealised Soviet men and was nicknamed 'the Iron.' It was generally considered non-aesthetic; its own relocation in 2007 to Tamozhennaya Square, closer to the port entrance, did not prompt many protests, as it was tied with nationwide demands to remove celebratory symbols of the Soviet past.<sup>21</sup> However, opponents to the restoration of the Monument have since argued that the move of the Potemkin sailors had been unilaterally decided by the city government and therefore constituted an illegal relocation.<sup>22</sup>

The choice of the name 'Monument to the Founders' for the reconstruction of the statue ensemble was also a conscious choice to avoid focussing exclusively – and perhaps celebratorily – on Catherine II. Looking more closely at the physical characteristics of the monument, the base is composed of a two-tier basement resembling the embankment of the port it is celebrating. The whole monument is about 35-feet (10,5m) tall; above the base stands a column-shaped pedestal surrounded by four lower plinths supporting the bronze figures of Catherine's aides in conquering southern Ukraine, laying the basis of Odessa. They are all represented in full length, with Prince Potemkin on the front side. Catherine II towers above them, dressed in a royal mantle and trampling an Ottoman flag with her foot, a symbol of the lands she had obtained for Russia after the Treaties of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) and Jassy (1792). Her left arm is raised, pointing towards the sea – and effectively pointing toward a more ancient statue commemorating the Duke of Richelieu in Roman attire, a less divisive founding father of Odessa.<sup>23</sup> The Empress holds in her left hand the decree linked to the founding of Odessa, a rescript to Count Zubov that reads: 'We command the port and the city to be.' Although considered one of the founders of Odessa, Catherine never visited the city herself.

## History of Contestation

### *From the 1990s to 2007*

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<sup>20</sup> Sailors on the Battleship Potemkin, harboured in Odesa, started an uprising or mutiny against their officers, which spread into the city. More largely, the uprising was tied to wider civil unrest and the Russo-Japanese war. It is seen as a prelude to the Russian Revolution of 1905.

<sup>21</sup> Synenko, Alyona, "Odessa, the city of broken statues," *Odessa Journal*, September 19, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> In September 2012, the Primorsky Court and then in March 2015, the Odessa Administrative Court of Appeal dismissed a lawsuit brought by the Sich Association of Cossack Societies, demanding to overturn the 2006 decision of the Odessa City Council to move the monument to the Potemkin sailors. "In Odessa, the court postponed the hearing on the demolition of the monument to Catherine II to February 2018/ V Odesi sud perenis rozglyad spravi shchodo znesennya pam'yatnika Katerini II na lyuty 2018 roku," Radio Svoboda, December 27, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Savchuk, Ivan. "Significance of Main Monuments in Historical Districts of Odessa and St. Petersburg for perception of these cities." *Geography, Environment, Sustainability* 3.3 (2010): 14-31

Debates about restoring the monument to its central location started after Ukraine's independence in the early 1990s, with the first serious attempt undertaken in 1995 under Mayor Edward Gurvits. The Odesa City Council decided to use the surviving bronze fragments of the original monuments; only the figure of the Empress had to be remade – most of today's structure is original. It was possible to establish what the monument had initially looked like because the plan for the original project, presented for the 1894 centenary competition, was preserved in the city archives. However, the 1995 project was halted by the then-President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005).<sup>24</sup> It was only twelve years later that the city council decision no. 1401-V of 4 July 2007 resulted in creating a commission to control and facilitate a 'comprehensive restoration and improvement of the Ekaterininskaya Square in Odessa with the reproduction of its historical appearance.' The ensemble was purposely renamed 'Monument to the Founders' to avoid explicitly singling out the former Empress (to avoid questions of monarchism or engaging with the anti-Ukrainian policies implemented by Catherine II), and city deputy Ruslan Tarpan sponsored the entire project. Supporters of the project wanted to highlight Odesa/Odessa's Russian rather than Soviet past and restore the city's historic centre to garner support from UNESCO in the hope of obtaining heritage site status..<sup>25</sup> In preparation for this restoration, the Potemkin Mariners statue was moved to the port entrance.

However, the project faced renewed public opposition. The monument's inauguration, initially planned for 22 August 2007, had to be postponed until October of that year because of the resistance of several patriotic organisations. A month before the official installation, some protestors knocked down the fence protecting the empty site and built an Orthodox cross to prevent further construction work. The opposition was primarily composed of Ukrainian patriots and nationalists, self-described 'Cossacks,' but also of public organisations (such as VO 'Svoboda') and was supported by Ukrainian President Yushchenko (2005-2010) himself. All claimed that such a monument was inappropriate in independent Ukraine, as Catherine was characterised as 'an executioner of the Ukrainian people.'<sup>26</sup> These different groups demonstrated against the project during a large summer rally by burning stuffed effigies of the Empress, sometimes adopting explicitly misogynistic performances, such as holding a rubber woman on a stick.<sup>27</sup> Some statue defenders had nicknamed the doll 'Yulka,' about the

<sup>24</sup> "Memorial to Catherine II / Pamyatnik Ekaterine II," [visit.odessa.ua](http://visit.odessa.ua)

<sup>25</sup> UNESCO - World Heritage Centre; Global strategy - Tentative Lists "Historic Center of the Port City of Odessa," submitted on January 6, 2009. By April 2022, Odessa's city centre has not made it to the UNESCO List of Protected Heritage, prompting anxieties about the potential destruction wrought by the ongoing conflict.

<sup>26</sup> "Under her, a peasant war broke out (...) the Northern Black Sea region, Crimea, the North Caucasus, Western Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian lands were annexed to Russia. By her decrees the Hetmanate in Ukraine was liquidated, and peasants were transferred to the landowners on the lands inhabited by them, the Zaporizhzhian Sich was disbanded, and the Black Sea Cossacks were created, the leaders of which were equated in legal terms with the nobles." Koshetavesky, Valentin: "About The Monument Of Catherine The Great In Odessa/ O Pamyatnike Ekaterine Velikoy v Odesse," *Kontinent.org*, 25 September 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Balkanist, "History Revisited: Criminalising Communist Symbols and Sympathies in Ukraine," May 28, 2015.

Orange Revolution leader Yulia Tymoshenko.<sup>28</sup> Opponents clashed with supporters of the monuments but also with the police. Yet out of the several hundreds of protesters, many opponents had come from various parts of Ukraine, not just from Odesa itself.<sup>29</sup> While the local Odesa Cossacks had not overtly challenged the statue, the main opposition came from groups based in regions whose historical entanglements differed significantly from Odesa's unusual historical ties to the Russian Empire – both a colony and a metropolis of the empire.<sup>30</sup>

The monument's main adversaries included Ukrainian Cossacks from other regions (particularly Kharkiv), members of the nationalist organisations Svoboda, the Ukrainian People's Party, and Our Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> Other groups petitioned Ukraine's National Security Services not to unveil the monument for fear of triggering further social unrest and interethnic hostility. In September 2007, President Victor Yushchenko himself asked explicitly in a press conference not to inaugurate more monuments to Russian monarchs in Ukraine: 'my only request is not to build a monument to Peter the Great or anyone else there. Let's respect our history. Let us remember that we are Ukrainians.'<sup>32</sup> This public call demonstrated the national resonance that the monument's restoration received. The Monument to the Founders was eventually unveiled on 27 October 2007 with no mention of Catherine II in its official name, though it remains known by most as the Catherine Statue. There was no significant protest on inauguration day except a few individuals shouting. However, after the monument's opening, the Kyiv District Administrative Court revoked the 2007 permit granted by the Ministry of Culture to improve the square.

### *Reignition of the Contestation in 2014*

Following the first public demonstrations, opposition to the monument continued through petitions and appeals to local and national-level courts. The Union of Cossack Societies, an association representing several non-governmental organisations, raised the claim first, demanding that both the erection of the Monument to the Founders and the move of the previous Potemkin Sailors ensemble be declared illegal. Interestingly, the plaintiff group had made one of its requirements the return of the Soviet monument to the central square, which raises the question of the delicate balance between imperial and USSR memory in the context of Odesa. In September 2012, the Primorsky Court dismissed the lawsuit, which was then brought to the Odesa Administrative Court of Appeal.

<sup>28</sup> "Memorial to Catherine II / Pamyatnik Ekaterine II," [visit.odessa.ua](http://visit.odessa.ua)

<sup>29</sup> Herlihy, Patricia. "How Ukrainian Is Odesa?" *Kennan Institute Occasional Papers* 202: 2006, 19-26.

<sup>30</sup> "Odessa is the Motherland / Odesse - matushku gosudarinyu," *Novorossiyskiy kur'er*, n.6, June 2007. All Cossacks belong to the Ukrainian Registered Cossacks, an all-Ukrainian public organisation registered by the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine since 2002. However, they each have their own administration and relative autonomy

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* "Monument to Catherine II to remain in Odessa," published by *Russkiy Mir Foundation Information Services*, March 31, 2015

<sup>32</sup> 048 City of Odessa website, "Destroyer of the Zaporozhian Sich or founder of Odesa: the history of the monument to Catherine II/ Razrushitel'nitsa Zaporozhskoj Setchi ili osnovatel'nitsa Odyssey: istoriya pamjatnika Ekateriny II," June 14, 2021.

Meanwhile, public opposition to the monument rekindled in 2014 in line with Euromaidan's wave of demonstrations that started in Kyiv in November 2013. By the spring of 2014, the crisis evolved beyond the protest of Ukrainian elites' political entanglement with Russia and reneging on an Association Agreement that would bring Ukraine closer to the European Union. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014 and the subsequent start of military conflict in Donbas in April 2014 turned the domestic division into an international conflict. As the third-largest city in Ukraine, with a largely Russophone population, Odesa witnessed clashes between anti-Maidan and pro-Ukrainian unity activists throughout 2014. This violence culminated in a rampage in the city centre on 2 May 2014, with a fire at the Trade Union House that killed 48 people and injured 200 more.<sup>33</sup> The fire positioned Odesa as a crucial node in the escalating conflict between Russia and Ukraine, portrayed as a city highly divided between pro-Russian forces and ultra-nationalists. The sequence of violent events in 2014 also brought back to the fore a decade-old irredentist proposal passed by some Odessa protestors, threatening the separation of all southern and eastern regions from Ukraine and the creation of an Assembly of Representatives to rule a 'New Russian Territory,' independent from both Ukraine and Russia..<sup>34</sup>

Following the social fracture revived by the brutal clashes, the statue of Catherine II came under renewed scrutiny as a symbol of the Tsarist past. On 4 November 2014, anti-Maidan (or pro-federalists) activists planned a 'Catherine' march from Cathedral (*Sorbonaya*) Square to the monument to coincide with National Unity Day in Russia. To counter what was perceived as a highly provocative and symbolic procession, the bronze monument was covered in green paint by self-called 'Ukrainian patriots' in the early hours of that day..<sup>35</sup> The statue was placed under police protection for a time. Many drew parallels between Catherine II's conquest and annexation of Crimea in 1783 and Vladimir Putin's actions in 2014, arguing that while 'the Maidan has been interpreted by many as a decolonising revolution: the annexation of Crimea was recolonisation for the Crimean Tatars.'<sup>36</sup> Because contemporary Kremlin historical information campaigns draw as much on the Tsarist imperial past as on the Soviet era, the parallel is even more striking – as illustrated by successive speeches and essays by the Russian President between 2014 and 2022..<sup>37</sup> In recalling the imperial past, the

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<sup>33</sup> Vitkine, Benoît, "Odessa, un an après le drame du 2 mai," *Le Monde*, May 2, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Reuters, November 27, 2004, mentioned in Ghervas, Stella. « Odessa et les confins de l'Europe : un éclairage historique » *Lieux d'Europe: Mythes et limites*. Paris : Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2008. 3,000 protestors had adopted the resolution, threatening separation of Odessa and its region from Ukraine if Viktor Yushenko became president. A similar text had been approved in the Russian-speaking Donetsk region, and both resolutions prompted an extraordinary session of the Kyiv Parliament to diffuse the crisis.

<sup>35</sup> Balkanist, "History Revisited: Criminalising Communist Symbols and Sympathies in Ukraine," May 28, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Wilson (2021) "Imagining Crimean Tatar History since 2014: Indigenous Rights, Russian Recolonisation and the New Ukrainian Narrative of Cooperation," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:5, 837-868.

<sup>37</sup> President Vladimir Putin repeatedly negated the historical and modern autonomy of Ukraine and Crimea and their prospects for independent rule outside of Russian influence in a speech on 18 March 2018, an extended essay published on the Kremlin's website in July 2021, and another speech made three days before the invasion of Ukraine on 21 February 2022.

Kremlin circumvents a legal vacuum in the memory laws across former Soviet countries, including Ukraine, in which pre-1917 figures and events remain outside the scope of these laws.

In Ukraine, after months of deliberations, two such memory laws came into effect in 2015. The first banned all Soviet symbols and criminalised any questioning of the "criminal nature of the communist totalitarian regime of 1917-1991 in Ukraine," with a 5- to a 10-year prison sentence for breaching it.<sup>38</sup> The second focused on "restoring, preserving, and honouring the national memory about struggle and fighters for Ukraine's independence in the 20th century and establishing responsibility for violation of legislation" of their legal status. The law criminalised the probing of nationalist groups accused of war crimes, such as the OUN (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists) or the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army), committed while Ukraine was fighting for its independence, especially during the Second World War.<sup>39</sup> These two laws were similar to other memory laws promulgated in neighbouring countries, sometimes creating bitter conflict over shared and contested histories.<sup>40</sup> Over 70 academics in Ukraine and scholars studying Ukraine signed an open letter protesting these laws:

Over the past 15 years, Vladimir Putin's Russia has invested enormous resources in the politicisation of history. It would be ruinous if Ukraine went down the same road, however partially or tentatively. Any legal or 'administrative' distortion of history is an assault on the most basic purpose of scholarly inquiry: pursuit of truth. Any official attack on historical memory is unjust. Difficult and contentious issues must remain matters of debate.<sup>41</sup>

In March 2015, after more than three years of proceedings, Odesa's Administrative Court of Appeal ruled against the initiative led by the Union of Cossack Societies on behalf of several NGOs, which continued to demand the removal of the Monument to the Founders from Catherine Square.<sup>42</sup> However, it did concede that the City Council's decisions in some way exceeded their authority. For this reason, the petition was brought forward to the Supreme Administrative Court of Ukraine in Kyiv in August, which questioned the original procedure because it had not involved the public in the process nor taken into account the consequences of having a statue to a Russian Empress in the centre of Odesa.<sup>43</sup> The context of the Donbas War weighed heavily on public and political discourses about the statue, with Russian state-led information campaigns using the Tsarist past to delineate territorial borders and the

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* Also: Law No. 317-VIII of 9 April 2015 - On the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Regimes in Ukraine and Prohibition of Propaganda of Their Symbols [*Pro zasuzhdennya kommunistichnogo ta natsionalistsotsialistichnogo (natsists'kogo) rezhimov v Ukraini ta zaboronu propagandi ikhn'oy simvoliki*].

<sup>39</sup> Law No. 314-VIII of 9 April 2015 - On the Legal Status and Honouring the Memory of Fighters for Ukraine's Independence in the Twentieth Century [*Pro pravovoy status ta vshanuvannya pamyati bortsiv za nezalezhnist' Ukraini u XX stolitti*].

<sup>40</sup> Among these countries, Poland and Estonia have followed a model similar to Ukraine.

<sup>41</sup> Marples, David R., "Open Letter from Scholars and Experts on Ukraine Re: the So-Called 'Anti-Communist Law'," *Krytyka*, April 2015

<sup>42</sup> "Monument to Catherine II to remain in Odessa," *Russkiy Mir Foundation Information Services*, March 31, 2015

<sup>43</sup> 048 City of Odessa website, "Destroyer of the Zaporozhian Sich or founder of Odessa: the history of the monument to Catherine II/ Razrushitel'nitsa Zaporozhskoj Setchi ili osnovatel'nitsa Odyssey: istoriya pamjatnika Ekateriny II," June 14, 2021.



extent of Russia's sovereignty. Odesa and most Black Sea ports and the east of Ukraine had been part of the administrative region of 'Novorossiia' (New Russia) in the 19th century after the Russian conquest. The renaming of an area that had been known previously as 'Khan Ukraine' (*Khans'ka Ukraina*) or 'Tombasar Mukataasi,' was a conscious semantic process that erased the memory of the previous inhabitants – many of them Tatar – but also plotted Russia's future on the Northern shores of the Black Sea.<sup>44</sup> Putin's reference to the historical borders of the Russian Empire and the toponym 'Novorossiia' soon became a political tool more valuable than references to the Soviet past. This historical discourse was used to justify the annexation of Crimea, gave fuel to the fighting in Donbas and put Odesa on the map of an extended Greater Russia.<sup>45</sup>

Odessa's location on the Black Sea remains a strategic asset, and more than linguistic divides, this seaborne position motivates Russian claims over the city. Historically, the Black Sea has been framed as central to Russia's security since the annexation of Crimea from the Ottoman Empire and Crimean Khanate under Catherine II and the subsequent creation of the Black Sea Fleet stationed in Sebastopol. The maritime space became the theatre of the Crimean War (1853-1856), one of the most geopolitically significant conflicts of the 19th century, which opposed Russia to the Ottomans in the tenth century Russo-Turkish war. The Ottoman Empire was allied with major West European powers, including France and Britain. During that war, Odessa was bombarded in April 1854, and Crimea bore most of the direct military confrontation. In the 20th century, the USSR became the dominant power in the Black Sea, having under its control both the Ukrainian and Georgian Socialist Republics. In 1991, after Ukraine became independent, the Black Sea Fleet was divided between Ukraine and Russia and remained headquartered in Sebastopol, with a Russian lease on the fleet renewed in 2010 (to last until 2042).<sup>46</sup> However, with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Ukrainian Navy moved its headquarters to Odessa.<sup>47</sup> On the 325th anniversary of the founding of the Russian Navy in July 2021, Putin made a speech that emphasised the importance of Russia's new nautical influence on the Black Sea. Two prime concerns were upgrading the Black Sea fleet and continuous claims made to territorial waters adjacent to the annexed Crimean Peninsula. Such a view threatened freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and followed the Black Sea diplomatic incident between Russia and the United Kingdom's *HMS Defender* on 23 June 2021, during a patrol through the disputed waters

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew Wilson (2021) "Imagining Crimean Tatar History since 2014: Indigenous Rights, Russian Recolonisation and the New Ukrainian Narrative of Cooperation," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73:5, 837-868. See also: Sunderland, Willard. *Taming the wild field*. Cornell University Press, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> A 'Nash Krym' or 'Krimnash' narrative ('Crimea is ours') remains prevalent in present-day Russia, and it has been used as a repeated slogan for the "return" of Crimea until 2014, and to justify it after the annexation of that territory from Ukraine.

<sup>46</sup> Kyiv Post, "Ukrainian parliament ratifies agreement extending Russian Black Sea Fleet's presence in Crimea," April 27, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Toucas, Boris, "The Geostrategic Importance of the Black Sea Region: A Brief History," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2017.

around the Crimea Peninsula.<sup>48</sup> The threatening shots also showed how Russia could upend the balance of power in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>49</sup>

In Ukraine's public sphere, the push back against the Kremlin's rhetoric was more complicated since the government could only rely on anti-communist laws, which served as the main legal framework to counter such manipulation of history. The laws themselves were condemned as a state-sponsored rewriting of history because they were not based on existing collective memory. The laws also tried to foster a unified national memory superimposed onto distinct regional and diaspora memory. Some critics also accused the Ukrainian government of using Russian tactics to distinguish itself from Russia.<sup>50</sup> In Odesa, this tension around contested historical memory strengthened a discourse of singularity that was rooted in the city's nineteenth-century history and, more particularly, the legacies of the free port era (1819-1859) that saw Odessa's rise to prominence as a cosmopolitan and commercial centre, outward-looking rather than inward. The 'Odessa myth' continued to fuel local definitions, mixing legacies of privilege, liberalism, and cosmopolitanism; yet, arguably, Odesa displayed the features of a 'European graft onto a Russian land' that only partially took ground, raising the question of whether Odesa was a frontier outpost of Europe or a Bordertown of Russia, both in the past and in the present.<sup>51</sup> This discourse translated into a certain detachment and even disdain towards both Kyiv and Moscow. It also manifested itself in a resistance against a version of history imposed by the centre – whether that centre was the Ukrainian government or Russia. On the other hand, residents of Odesa sought to emphasise secondary ideological affinities which were not mutually exclusive.

### *The Last Years of the Contestations, from 2017 to 2022*

On December 4, 2017, a roundtable hosted by Ukraine's Institute of History and the National Academy of Sciences debated the 'Monumental Heritage of the Russian Empire in Ukraine,' bringing together academics from leading national institutions. One of their recommendations was to appeal to the city council of Odesa with a proposal to execute court decisions that would frame the erection of a monument featuring Catherine II in Odesa as illegal.<sup>52</sup> The Institute of National Memory also proposed to dismantle the monument, following a decision by the Primorsky District Court that overturned the original decision of the Odesa City Council to erect the monument. Nonetheless, in February 2018, the Odesa Administrative Court of

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<sup>48</sup> Giles, Keir, "Black Sea incident is Russia telling the same old story," Chatham House, June 24, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Stent, Angela, "Russia's Battle for the Black Sea," *Foreign Affairs*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> "In an effort to demonstrate its distinctiveness from its neighbour in history and culture, Ukraine may have ended up resembling Russia more closely than it did before." In Balkanist, "History Revisited: Criminalising Communist Symbols and Sympathies in Ukraine," May 28, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Ghervas, Stella. « Odessa et les confins de l'Europe : un éclairage historique » *Lieux d'Europe: Mythes et limites*. Paris : Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2008.

<sup>52</sup> Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, 'Historians suggested ways of conducting imperial heritage/ 'Istoriki Zaproponovali Shlyakhi Dekonstrukcii Impers'koi Spadshchini.'

Appeal refused to order the local authorities to move the monument, which prompted a new petition presented by Sergiy Chopik and supported by Ukrainian deputy Serhiy Kivalov. This time, the petition directly addressed the President of Ukraine, but it received only 43 votes and was framed as an attempt to destabilise the political situation in the region. Ultimately, the Supreme Court of Ukraine recognised the legality of the installation in 2019 and declined the public petition to remove the monument. A lawsuit ensued between the local authorities (at their head Odesa Mayor Gennady Trukhanov) and the Sich Public organisation.

The latest protests of the Monument to the Founders and especially of its feature statue occurred in November 2020, bringing together 50 protestors from several organisations (among others, the Foundation of the Future Odessa, the Young Nationalist Congress, the Black Sea Cossack Army, Odessa 600 Years, and the Association of Cossack Societies' Sich'), represented by the public initiative 'Decolonisation Ukraine.' This time, the lens of colonialism and imperialism was used more explicitly than in 2007 and 2014, referring to the Tsarist era as Ukraine's colonial period.<sup>53</sup> One of the organisers, Anastasia Ryzhkovich, explained that the initiative aimed 'to get rid of all manifestations of Russian influence [remaining] after the colonial period in [Ukraine's] history.'<sup>54</sup> This framework was not entirely new but helped tie in the protests against Russian influence to broader global movements demanding the decolonisation of public spaces and state curricula and a record less focused on elites and more on diversifying and complexifying historical narratives. Some of the posters read 'This is our history,' 'Stop the Empire,' 'Katya – the executioner,' or again, 'Blood of Ukraine on the hands of Catherine.' Protesters also argued that Catherine II was not the real founder of Odesa and that the monument had been erected illegally. Following this demonstration, a member of the Institute of National Memory, Serhiy Hutsalyuk, suggested the placing of a plaque on the monument that would explain that it is, in fact, a restored monument – an ensemble that did not celebrate the founders of Odesa, but rather a historical 'myth.'<sup>55</sup>

In February 2022, the Odessa city council announced that the costs devoted to protecting the Monument to the Founders would increase by 600,000 UAH. This would bring the total expenditure to 2,170,000 UAH, upward from 1,539,500 UAH in 2020 and 1,303,440 UAH in 2019.<sup>56</sup> The cost would cover the provision of services for the armed protection of the sculptural group – indicating the continuing tension surrounding the monument, especially as

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<sup>53</sup> Korrespondent.net, "In Odessa, activists demand the demolition of the monument to Catherine II/ V Odesi aktivisti vimagayut' znesti pam'yatnik Katerini II," 9 November 2020; Russia Today (RT.com) "Protesters in Odessa call for statue of Catherine the Great to be toppled in attempt 'to get rid of Russian influence'," November 9, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Zhuravel, Dmitry, "Blood of Ukraine on Catherine's hands." In Odessa, protested against the monument to the Russian Empress / 'Krov Ukraïni na rukakh Katerini.' V Odesi protestuvali proti pam'yatnika rosiys'kiy imperatritsi" Suspilne Media, 8 November 2020. Several reports were written against the participants based on Art. 152 of the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offences because of the placement of a poster with demands on the monument.

<sup>55</sup> Others have argued that the protest unfolded on a backdrop of local Mayoral elections, with the hope of increasing the voter turnout.

<sup>56</sup> The 2022 budget is equivalent to about 68,000 euros, against 48,000 in 2020 and 41,000 in 2019.

Russian pressure has been mounting on Ukrainian borders since December 2021. After the start of the invasion on February 24, 2022, widely circulated pictures of Odessa's city centre show iconic monuments of the 'Pearl of the Black Sea' protected by sandbags, including the sea-facing statue of the Duke of Richelieu, covered to the head. However, the Monument to the Founders did not receive the same protection despite the recently announced budget increase. Devoid of sandbags, only a yellow-and-blue flag of Ukraine was planted below the statue Russian Empress.<sup>57</sup>



**Figure 5:** Twitter post by Eastern European media Nexta on 9 March 2022 showing the protective measures around the Duke of Richelieu's statue

## Decision-Making Process

| Monument to the Odesa Founders: Chronology of the Decision-Making Process |  |
|---|--|
| 1894  | 22 August (2 September) 1894: plinth of the moment constructed. Design selected in a public competition (1892-1894 to commemorate the centenary of Odessa. |
| 1900  | First inauguration of the monument.  |
| 1917  | Fate of the monument on hold for three years – covered in a canopy.  |

<sup>57</sup> Recker, Jane, Inside the Efforts to Preserve Ukraine's Cultural Heritage, *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 30, 2022.

A picture of the Monument to Founders dated March 17, 2022, can be seen at: 'A girl plays on a monument in downtown Odessa on March 17 2022,' AFP\_326D292, by Bulent Kilic.

|      |  |
|------|--|
| 1920 | 1 May: Monument relocated to a local museum and replaced by a bust of Karl Marx in 1921.   |
| 1965 | New monument to the Potemkin Mariners, celebrating the 60th anniversary of the 1905 uprising, replaces the bust and subsequent statue of Karl Marx (the original being destroyed during a storm).  |
| 1995 | Odesa City Council starts discussing the possibility of rebuilding the monument using surviving bronze fragments from the original.  |
| 2007 | 4 July: City council decision no. 1401-V results in the creation of a commission to manage and facilitate a 'comprehensive restoration and improvement of the Ekaterininskaya Square in Odesa with the reproduction of its historical appearance.' |
|      | ca. 22 July: One month before the original unveiling date (August 22) large protests and attacks on the monument break out.  |
|      | 27 October: Unveiling of the new monument; mild protests follow.   |
| 2014 | February-April: Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the start of the war in Donbas. Renewed protests around the monument.   |
|      | 2 May: Related riots in Odesa leave 48 dead and over 200 injured.  |
|      | 4 November: Planned 'Catherine march' towards the statue on Russia's National Unity Day.   |
| 2015 | March: Odesa Administrative Court of Appeal rules against an NGO initiative to remove the monument.  |
|      | Ukraine passes two new memory laws, primarily centring on the Second World War and Soviet era.   |
| 2019 | The Supreme Court of Ukraine rejects a petition to remove the monument.  |
|      | November: Protests erupt again, this time through the lens of colonialism and decolonisation to contest Russian imperial legacies.   |
| 2020 | September: New statues of Catherine II built in neighbouring Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria).   |
|      | November: Renewed protests in front of the statue of Catherine II.   |
|      | February: increase in funds to protect the statue ensemble.  |



|      |  |
|------|--|
| 2022 | Start of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia: some monuments are protected early on but it does not seem to be the case of the Monument to the Founders. |
|------|--|

Despite the 2019 Supreme Court decision, the destiny of the Monument to the Founders (and more particularly, the statue of Catherine II) is still undecided. Its return to the central streets of Odesa was part of a general movement to reconstruct the historical centre of the city. This movement also included recovering the original street names and restoring historical buildings close to their nineteenth-century original form. As part of this process, one of the oldest religious buildings of the city, Sobornaya Cathedral (Holy Transfiguration, f. 1795), was entirely rebuilt in 2003, after having been blown up by the Soviet regime in 1936. A legacy of Odesa's foundational years, it is also a building dedicated during the imperial era, hosting the graves of several Russian officials, including the governor-general of New Russia and conqueror of the Caucasus, Mikhail Vorontsov. Similarly, Odesa's opera house, an admired example of nineteenth-century theatre architecture built in the 1870s, was fully renovated in 2007.

In other places, not so distant from Odesa, new statues of Catherine II are being inaugurated, a sign of the continuing influence of the Tsarist imperial past on contemporary political discourses. In Tiraspol, the capital of the neighbouring *de facto* republic of Transnistria (Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic), a monument to Catherine II was unveiled in September 2020, commemorating how the city and its fortress were built by order of the Empress.<sup>58</sup> Transnistria, a rebel region within Moldova supported by Russian money and Russian troops, remains a post-Soviet sphere of influence. Located less than 100 km away from Odesa, it is also a strategic place in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The renewed interest in figures of the imperial era suggests a realignment of previous discourses that focused on the Soviet past while serving similar interests. That the debate has become politicised beyond the borders of Ukraine is indisputable, as can be seen in articles by Russia Today or in the recently launched Russian 'Ukraina.ru' website, which published an article in May 2020 celebrating the 120th anniversary of the monument's unveiling and the 100-year since its initial destruction at the hands of the Soviets.<sup>59</sup> Later again, in November 2020, Russian TV journalist Vladimir Soloviev brought forward an appeal to wealthy Russians to make donations for the purchase of Odesa from Ukraine.<sup>60</sup> This appeal was made in response to the latest protest of the Catherine II statue and Monument to the Founders earlier that

<sup>58</sup> Novosti Pridnestrovyia, "Monument to Catherine the Great unveiled in Tiraspol," September 1, 2020. Another statue was unveiled on 29 October 2020 in Grigoriopol.

<sup>59</sup> Vasiliev Alexander, "'Monument to the founders of Odessa' Who installed and demolished Catherine the Great, and why?/ 'Pamyatnik osnovatel'nitse goroda Odessy.' Kto i potchemu ustanavlival i snosil Ekaterinu Velikuyu." Ukraine.ru, May 5, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Delovaya Gazeta Vzgl'yad, 'How much will the Purchase of Odessa cost Russia? / Vo tchto oboydetsya Rossii pokupka Odessy?,' 10 November 2020. Soloviev also referred to the Russian 'purchase' of Kyiv from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1686 to justify this move, reinterpreting the terms of an ancient treaty for modern purposes.

same month. Konstantin Zatulin, the First Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee of CIS Affairs, supported the call for purchase as a challenge against 'demands to deprive Odessa of its Russian appearance.' However, he did not believe it was a real possibility. He also reiterated the widely disseminated settler narrative, through which Odesa's history could only start with Russian presence, and any previous settlement or culture was therefore negligible. Senator for Crimea Sergei Tsekov also used this founder narrative to suggest that the Ukrainian government was ungrateful and that if they were so adamant about demolishing 'the monument to Catherine II, then they should abandon the southern regions in favour of Russia.' All commentators insisted that Odesa's strategic position in the Black Sea region, as the largest port and naval base, was why the port-city was important. Odesa's commercial activities were also crucial to Ukraine's sovereignty – as, without this port, Kyiv would 'have to coordinate all its shipping with Moscow.'<sup>61</sup> In an accompanying opinion poll asking whether Russia should buy Odesa from Ukraine, 29,23% found that it would be a good idea 'if the price was reasonable.'

| Should Russia buy Odessa from Ukraine? <sup>62</sup>                | %      |
|---|--------|
| Yes, if the price is reasonable                                     | 29.23% |
| No, you should get Odessa by political means                        | 46.11% |
| No, it is enough to restore good-neighbourly relations with Ukraine | 10.83% |
| No, let everything remain as it is                                  | 13.83% |

Locally, the case of the Catherine statue in Odesa highlights more than a Ukrainian / Russian divide in the historical past and a political contest in the present. Locally, some Odesa residents have felt that the monument was 'Ukrainophobic' and incited 'interethnic animosity rather than peaceful co-existence.'<sup>63</sup> Some Odesa Cossack leaders have offered as a compromise to remove the Catherine statue - and with it the entire monument - and to rebuild the originally planned church dedicated to Saint Catherine, thus preserving the historical character of the city's old centre.<sup>64</sup> Academics from the University of Odesa's History Faculty and the National Institute of History also complained that bureaucrats did not

<sup>61</sup> All similarly assumed that because of the Russian-language majority among Odesa residents, it was the weakest, most vulnerable place in Ukraine, a view that has been contradicted since the start of the 2022 invasion.

<sup>62</sup> Delovaya Gazeta Vzgl'yad, 'How much will the Purchase of Odessa cost Russia? / *Vo tchto oboydetsya Rossii pokupka Odessy?*,' November 10, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> "A monument to Ukrainian serfdom - Catherine II as a mirror of Ukrainian statehood," published by the *Day / День* weekly digest, 30 October 2007

<sup>64</sup> "No Cossack Love for Cathy," SRB Podcast, September 4, 2007.

consult experts before 'unleashing a war of monuments.'<sup>65</sup> More specifically, local decision-makers did not conduct preliminary research on the role of Catherine II in the history of Odesa.

On the other hand, Edward Gurvits, the mayor of Odesa between 2005 and 2010 (and earlier in 1994-8), had directly overseen the removal of '148 Soviet monuments, 104 of which were of Lenin, and [the changing of] the Soviet names of 179 streets,' while also agreeing to the restoration and installation of the Monument to the Founders.<sup>66</sup> At a broader level, what was happening in Odesa was not an isolated event and was unfolding in the backdrop of other memorials and statues being built that related to a locally-embedded yet controversial past, such as Stepan Bandera's monument in Lviv, in western Ukraine.<sup>67</sup> As the case to remove the Monument to the Founders from Odesa's city centre moved from local tribunals to Ukraine's Supreme Court, an opinion poll asked Odesa residents what monument should Catherine II be replaced with should the petition succeed. Through a majority of respondents (77%) did not want the removal of the Monument to the Founders, 19.2% would have liked to see it replaced by a monument to Cossack leader Bogdan Khmelnytsky, 16.3% to Soviet General Ivan Petrov, and close to 10% wished to see the money donated to charity instead.<sup>68</sup>

| [2017] How do you feel about the proposal received by the Odessa City Council to demolish the monument to Catherine II and the Founders of Odessa? <sup>69</sup> | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Positively   | 15%       |
| Neutral  | 5%        |
| Negative   | 77%       |
| Difficult to answer  | 3%        |

<sup>65</sup> Day / День weekly digest, "A monument to Ukrainian serfdom - Catherine II as a mirror of Ukrainian statehood," October 30, 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Smolar, Piotr, "Homo Ukrainus: An Emerging Species," *Le Monde*, September 28, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Day / День weekly digest, "A monument to Ukrainian serfdom - Catherine II as a mirror of Ukrainian statehood," October 30, 2007.

<sup>68</sup> "The monument to Catherine II in Odessa interferes with the lives of only 43 who signed the petition to the president/ Pamyatnik Ekaterine II v Odesse medhaet zhit' vsego 43 podpisavshim peticiyu k prezidentu" *Slovo / The Word*, July 9, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

| [2017] What monument, in your opinion, should replace the monument to Catherine II if it were removed? <sup>70</sup> | Reponses |
|--|----------|
| Bogdan Khmelnitsky   | 19.2%    |
| General Ivan Petrov  | 16.3%    |
| Vladimir Lenin   | 15.2%    |
| Stepan Bandera   | 13.7%    |
| Joseph De Ribas  | 7.2%     |
| Vladimir II Monomakh   | 4.8%     |
| Joseph Stalin  | 4.8%     |
| Georgy Zhukov  | 2.4%     |
| Adolf Hitler   | 2.4%     |
| Petro Poroshenko   | 2.4%     |
| Karl Marx  | 2.4%     |
| Donate money to Charity  | 9.2%     |

Many in Odesa see the practical advantages in preserving the sculptural ensemble, as Ekaterininskaya Square has become one of the iconic and most touristic places of Odesa since the monument was erected in 2007. Historian Alexander Babich tried to nuance aesthetical priorities with geopolitical concerns: while he agreed that 'the monument once fitted well into the ensemble of this square, [reflecting] the then attitude to the figure of Catherine, to the Russian monarchy, to the empire... now we have to decide for ourselves how important it is for us to preserve this imperial ideal.'<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, in Odesa, the evident contrast in treatment between monuments linked to the Soviet era, which were systematically removed, and the rebuilding of memorials commemorating the Russian Empire was received as a prompt to reflect on the ways that historical narratives about the city itself have developed over time.

New historical research no longer takes 1794 as Odesa's founding date but rather looks at the site's older history, from an ancient Greek settlement to the Turco-Tatar fortress of

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Sudarenko, Anastasia, "Action against the monument to Catherine II in Odessa: the UINP offered a compromise / Akciya proti pam'yatnika Katerini II v Odesi: v UINP zaproponuvali kompromis" Suspilne Media, November 9, 2020.

Khadzhibey, first mentioned in Jan Długosz's *Historiae Polonicae* in 1415. The most ancient ruins located on the site of modern Odesa date back to a Greek colony named Istria, paired with the port of Skolepi in the 6th century BCE, followed by a Gavan-Istrian settlement in the 2nd century CE, at the time of the Roman Emperor Hadrian. Whilst the Greek past is considered too distant, with the settlement of the land being interrupted for long periods, the site's early modern history is more consistent. It reframes Odesa's origins around different geography. Rather than starting in a colonial extension of the Russian Empire named 'Novorossiia,' Odesa could tie its origins to the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire. The port would thus predate the city, the Russian rule significantly contributing to its expansion without claiming its creation. Echoing this historical research, several public organisations pushed for an 'Odesa-600' anniversary of the 1415 mention of Kadzhibey in 2015, which would enlarge the chronological boundaries of Odesa's narrative, removing it from Russian-centric patterns.<sup>72</sup> Historian Sergiy Gutsalyuk thus said:

The imperial history of the city of Odessa is as much a component of history as the Polish-Lithuanian period, the Ottoman period, the Crimean Tatar, the Cossack period, the Soviet era, and now the age of independent Ukraine.<sup>73</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

The recent restoration of the Monument to the Founders of Odesa, featuring Catherine II of Russia, in the centre of the city, prompted divisions locally and nationally between an attempt to frame the Russian imperial past positively and a political desire to remove Russian influence from the Ukrainian public space. In Odesa, the monument also participated in a nostalgic approach to the built environment, emphasising an Odesan golden age devoid of references to the Soviet past. The contested restoration and the ongoing debates surrounding the monument offer new perspectives on the question of memorialisation. In Odesa, as in other former parts of the Soviet Union, the recourse to the commemoration of the 18th and 19th centuries can provide a strategic response to national memory laws. On the other hand, references to the imperial past contribute to an affirmative story of Russian influence, which goes beyond Soviet history and re-utilises the lexicon of colonialism by insisting on the benefits and 'civilising' effects of the Empire.

In the Monument to the Founders, two aspects are crucial – first, the question of class, the representation of a ruling elite, and secondly, the symbolic redrawing of the political order

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<sup>72</sup> A 1613 Mercator map also mentioned the ruins of a settlement on this site, and so did the Guillaume Le Vasseur de Beauplan's 1651 'Inventory of Ukraine.'

<sup>73</sup> Wagner, Alexandra, "Not Novorossiia: In Odessa, people do not agree that the city was founded by Catherine II." / "Ne Novorossiia. V Odesse ne soglasny, tcho gorod osnovala Ekaterina II," *Radio Svoboda / Radio Liberty*, January 31, 2021.



and its borders through the memorialisation of these elites. That the monument does not represent a coherent group of Russian nationals or ethnic Russians do not matter. The sculpture ensemble nonetheless establishes a historical claim to the Black Sea shores by celebrating the city's foundation. The ensemble's presence in the centre of Odesa contrasts with contemporary Ukrainian realities, especially after having been removed from the public gaze for over eighty years. The wish for a UNESCO heritage site status creates a further impediment in the debate because of its potential economic benefits – yet it is a status that is still to be achieved. While some see a special display of nostalgia in the monument, which exists in most preservation and restoration movements of ancient city centres, its emotional appeal overlaps with contested historical memory.

As of March 2022, the Monument to the Founders had been protested several times over the last fifteen years (2007, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020) but to little effect. While legal authorities have ultimately denied petitions raised against it, the local government did not seem to have proposed any compromise, whether in the form of a plaque or educational events. No records of official community consultation were found before 2017, yet at a practical level, defenders of the monument's prominent location often insist that it contributes to the city's tourism economy. Although no political action was undertaken, the controversy had nonetheless prompted renewed historical research into Odesa's past, especially into the centuries before the territory was named 'Odessa.' With the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022, Odesa has faced several military attacks and prepares for more destruction, which could prove costly in lives and heritage. The fate of a prominent monument featuring Catherine II is now of little concern to the residents of Odesa, as pictures of the city centre show the Russian Empress with a Ukrainian flag for only protection.<sup>74</sup>

## About the Author

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<sup>74</sup> As of 26 April 2022, a Kyiv statue ensemble celebrating the friendship between Ukraine and Russia was pulled apart. It is quite likely that similar acts of symbolic retaliation might develop in other parts of Ukraine. With an already-contested present, the Monument to the Odesa Founders might be challenged once again. Lyubysh-Kirdey, Ivan, "Kyiv pulls down Soviet-era monument symbolising Russian-Ukrainian friendship," *Reuters*, 27 April 2022.

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# About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter- ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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Published by IHJR-EuroClio in June 2020

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### To cite this publication:

Olivia Durand, "The Statue of Catherine II 'the Great' or the Monument to the Odessa Founders" A Contested Histories Occasional Paper X (May 2022), retrieved from [link].

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The Contested Histories Initiative receives support from the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



**CONTESTED  
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Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
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