CONTESTED
HISTORIES

MONUMENT TO CATHERINE II / MONUMENT TO

THE FOUNDERS OF ODESSA

Odesa, Ukraine
46.48731, 30.73926

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Executive Summary

The Monuments to the Odessa Founders features prominently Catherine II of Russia and the men who assisted in the creation of the Russian Empire's new southern frontier in Ukraine. The monument was inaugurated in 1894, but the start of communist rule in Ukraine prompted a series of removals and replacements of symbols of the 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. The monument was re-inaugurated in 2007, but it has since been criticized for its commemoration of a monarch who brought serfdom to Ukraine and for the utilization of the imperial past to circumvent national memory laws. This case study explores the entanglements between anti-Soviet narratives and a new understanding of colonial paradigms in Eastern Europe.

Introduction

The Monument to the Odessa Founders, colloquially known as the statue of Catherine II 'the Great', after the Empress of Russia from 1762 to 1796, decorates one of the central squares of the Ukrainian port city of Odessa/Odesa.[1] A symbol of the Russian imperial past, it has been condemned by some parts of the local and national population, who describe it as a tool of Russian influence and propaganda on Ukraine's Black Sea shores. Kremlin propagandists have also drawn heavily upon the period of imperial expansion under Catherine the Great, particularly her annexation of Crimea in 1783.[2] Built in 1900, the statue is not new, but its fortunes have followed that of 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'. She is generally seen as the monarch who extended serfdom into Ukrainian lands and destroyed the independence of the Cossack Zaporozhian Sich.[3] 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. These conquests represented most of modern-day Ukraine, with the exception of Western territories, then at the hands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the extreme South West, still held by the Ottoman Empire. The conquest of south Ukraine from the Ottomans also included the annexation of the separate Crimean Khanate, not part of the Zaporizhian Sich.

The fact that Odessa was founded in 1794 after the Russian conquest of southern Ukraine, is significant and adds a layer of complexity to the debate. Odessa was born a Russian imperial city. The statue of Catherine II was first erected for the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the city, yet it was removed a quarter of a century later, in the early years of the Ukrainian People's Republic. This central site changed both names and focal figures several times and the desire to recover the historic features of old Odessa led to its second inauguration in 2007. It happened in the backdrop of memory wars playing out in Ukraine in the 2000s, with the rapid installation of monuments and memorials to ethnic Ukrainian figures, including *Ukrayins'ka Povstans'ka Armiya*, Ukrainian Insurgent Army leaders.[4] At the same time, many communist statues and memorials were 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 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 were

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[1] 'Odesa' is used when writing about post 1990 Ukraine, and 'Odessa' when referring to historical episodes during the Russian Empire / Soviet era.
[2] Balkanist, "History Revisited: Criminalizing Communist Symbols and Sympathies in Ukraine," *Balkanist*, May 28, 2015.
[3] Patricia, Herlihy, "How Ukrainian Is Odesa?," *Kennan Institute Occasional Papers*, 2006, 19-26.
[4] Translation by author.

unfolding worldwide, the Odessa monument became a target for protests again, this time with the focus on decoloniality and the new understanding of Ukraine as part of a wider history of modern colonization and expansion movements. This feeds into rising scholarship on Eastern Europe as a trans-imperial and semi-colonial space, where techniques of colonial management were redeployed.[5] Petitions to remove the statue were made to the Ukrainian Supreme Court but were declined in 2019.[6]

Background

The history of Odesa is closely linked to the rule of Catherine II because the city itself is a 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 a second conflict in 1787-1792, both of which resulted in extended territorial gains for the Russian Empire, including strategic access to the Black Sea. Odessa was founded in 1794 on the site of the Turkish fortress of Khadjibey, and its first settlers were Cossacks, Jews, and Greek merchants. The Monument to the Founders features four key individuals of the early decades of the city: Prince Grigory Potemkin, the first governor-general of the new territory of *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 in 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 city plan and innovative street grid of Odessa.

Odesa's history is thus closely linked to the history of Russian expansionism and continental colonization; it is also tied to the history of settler societies. A fishing village in the 1790s, 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, closely following St Petersburg and Moscow. It was a boomtown with growth on par with what could be observed in the nineteenth century in the American West, but its population was also infinitely more diverse, with only half of its population registering Russian as their native language in the first All-Russian Census of 1897. A third indicated Yiddish as their mother tongue and the remaining 20 percent combined Ukrainian, Polish, German, Greek, Tatar, Armenian, French, and Belarusian.[7] In many ways, Odesa's history and population differ both from the history of the Russian Empire and from existing Ukrainian state-led interpretation.

The statue of Catherine II was the result of a competition to design 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

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[5] For example: Mark, James et al., "Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World," *Indiana University Press,* February 2020; Fowkes, James et al., "Decolonizing Eastern Europe: A Global Perspective on 1989 and the World It Made," *International Journal Of Constitutional Law* 17, no. 2 (2019): 497-509.

[6] Odesa Journal, "Odesa, the city of broken statues," *Odesa Journal*, 19 September 2020.

[7] Patricia Herlihy, *Odesa Recollected : The Port and the People* (Academic studies press, 2019).

architect Yuri Meletyevitch Dmitrenko on August 24, 1892 – the projected cost was 57 thousand roubles.[8] 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 city, on August 22 (September 2) 1894.[9] 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 stay in the public space for long. After the 1917 October Revolution, the city council received an official order to remove the monument as it celebrated a monarch from the Tsarist past. Between 1918 and 1920, Odessa witnessed several bolshevik insurgencies, the short-lived Odessa Soviet Republic in 1918, and occupation by French and Greek armies supporting loyalist White Russians. During that time, the monument was covered by a canopy and, in 1920, was saved from destruction by the Petrograd/St Petersburg artistic commission led by M. Gorky. It was preserved merely for its artistic merits and removed to local archaeological and history museums in separate parts. The monument's location – Catherine Square – also changed functions over time. Originally, the square was not meant to host a statue commemorating Catherine II: it was planned as the site of a military church commemorating her religious namesake, Saint Catherine of Alexandria. The church was never completed, but the square kept the name.[10] When Catherine II died soon after the city's founding in 1796, her son, Emperor Paul I, suspended the construction of the church and completely dismantled it in 1821. The square underwent at least seven name changes, first named Elizaventiskaya, after Empress Elizabeth, then *Dyukovskaya*, commemorating the French Duke Richelieu, another international founding figure in Odessa's early history. Under the Soviet Union, from 1920 onward, it was known as Karl Marx Square. After the collapse in 1991, it was named after Catherine II.

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. 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 only for it to be destroyed in a storm. A new statue replaced it, this time in full length, and was nicknamed 'Karl II' by locals. It remained until June 27, 1965, when it was replaced by a monument to the mutineer mariners of the *Potemkin* battleship, a battleship built for the Imperial Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet, on the 60th anniversary of the 1905 uprising. 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. The Potemkin Mariners monument, nicknamed 'the Iron', represented idealized Soviet men. It was generally considered non-aesthetic; its eventual relocation to Tamozhennaya Square did not elicit much protest, and remains unchallenged amidst nationwide demands to remove celebratory symbols of the Soviet past.[11]

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[8] Translation by author, Purely Odesa site, "Екатерининская площадь," *Purely Odesa site*, n.d.
[9] The Gregorian calendar (new style) was introduced in the 16th century to correct the previously used Julian calendar (old style), which had mistakenly calculated the solar year. However, since not all countries adopted it at the same time, 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 new style).
[10] Translation by author, Valentin Koshetavesky,"About the monument of Catherine the Great in Odesa," *Kontinent Media group*, n.d.
[11] Odesa Journal, "Odesa, the city of broken statues," *Odesa Journal*, September 19, 2020.

Looking more closely at the physical features of the Monument to the Founders, the base is composed of a two-tier basement resembling the embankment of the port it is celebrating. The whole monument is about 35-foot tall; above the base stands a column-shaped pedestal surrounded by four lower pedestals supporting the bronze figures of Catherine's helpers, all represented in full length. Catherine II towers above them, dressed in a royal mantle and trampling an Ottoman flag with her foot. Her left arm is raised, pointing towards the sea – and effectively pointing toward an ancient statue commemorating the Duke of Richelieu in Roman attire.[12] The Empress holds in her left hand a decree linked to the founding of Odesa, a rescript to Count Zubov that reads: 'We command the port and the city to be.' Catherine, though considered one of the founders of Odesa, never visited the city herself.

History of the Contestation

Debates about the restoration of the monument to its central location started in the early 1990s, with the first serious attempt in 1995. The Odesa City Council decided to use the surviving bronze fragments of the original monuments; only the head of the empress had to be remade – most of today's structure is original. However, the 1995 plans were halted by the then-President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005).[13] Twelve years later the city council decision no. 1401-V of 4 July 2007 resulted in the creation of a commission to control and facilitate a 'comprehensive restoration and improvement of the Ekaterininskaya Square in Odessa with the reproduction of its historical appearance.'[14] The ensemble was purposely renamed 'Monument to the Founders' to avoid explicitly singling out the former Empress; the whole project was sponsored by city deputy Ruslan Tarpan. Supporters of the project wanted to highlight the city's Russian and not Soviet past and restore the historic centre in the hopes of obtaining UNESCO heritage site status.[15] In preparation for this restoration, the *Potemkin* Mariners statue was moved to the entrance of the port.

However, the project faced public opposition and the inauguration of the monument initially planned for 22 August 2007, had to be postponed until October of that year. In July, a month before the official installation, some protestors knocked down the fence protecting the empty site and built an Orthodox cross to prevent further building. The opposition was largely composed of Cossacks, self-described Ukrainian patriots and nationalists, but also of public organizations, such as *VO 'Svoboda'*, a political party that was supported by Ukrainian President Yushchenko (2005-2010) himself. All claimed that such a monument was inappropriate in independent Ukraine, as Catherine was characterized as 'an executioner of the Ukrainian people.'[16] These different groups demonstrated against the project during a large summer rally by burning stuffed effigies of the Empress.[17] In response, some defenders of the statue had nicknamed the doll '*Yulka*' in honour of Orange

[12] Ivan Savchuk, "Significance of Main Monuments in Historical Districts of Odesa and St. Petersburg for perception of these cities." *Geography, Environment, Sustainability* 3.3 (2010): 14-31.
[13] Translation by author, Visit.Odesa.ua, "Памятник Екатерине II," *Visit.Odesa.ua*, n.d.
[14] ibid.
[15] Unesco, "Historic Center of the Port City of Odesa," *Unesco*, 6 January 2009.
[16] Translation by author, Koshetavesky, Valentin, "Памятнике Екатерине Великой в Одессе," *Kontinent Media Group*, n.d.
[17] Balkanist, "History Revisited: Criminalizing Communist Symbols and Sympathies in Ukraine," *Balkanist*, May 28, 2015.

Revolution leader Yulia Tymoshenko.[18] Opponents clashed with supporters of the monuments, but also with the police. Yet out of the several hundred protesters, a majority of opponents came from various parts of Ukraine, not from Odesa itself.[19] While the Odesa Cossacks approved of the statue, the main opposition came from groups based in other regions with historical entanglements differing greatly from Odessa's unusual historic ties to the Russian Empire. All Cossacks belong to the Ukrainian Registered Cossacks, an all-Ukrainian public organization registered by the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine since 2002. However, they each have their own administration and relative autonomy.[20] The monument's main adversaries included Ukrainian Cossacks from other regions, in particular Kharkiv, members of the nationalist organisation's *Svoboda*, the Ukrainian People's Party, and Our Ukraine.[21] Other groups petitioned Ukraine's National Security Services not to unveil the monument for fear of triggering further social unrest and interethnic hostility. The Monument to the Founders was eventually unveiled on 27 October 2007 with no mention of Catherine II in its title. On that day, no major protest took place apart from a few individuals shouting.

Opposition to the monument rekindled in 2014 in the context of Euromaidan's wave of demonstrations that had started in Kyiv in November 2013. By the spring of 2014, the crisis evolved beyond the protest of Ukraine's elites' political entanglement with Russia and reneging of 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 the war 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 2 May 2014 rampage of the city centre and the Trade Union House fire that killed 48 people and injured 200 more.[22] Eventually, 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 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-described 'Ukrainian patriots' in the early hours of that day.[23] The statue was placed under police protection for some time. Many drew parallels between Catherine II's conquest and annexation of Crimea in 1783 and Vladimir Putin's actions in 2014. Considering the fact that contemporary Kremlin historical information campaigns draw as much on the Tsarist imperial past as on the Soviet era, the parallel is even more striking. In recalling the imperial past, the Kremlin circumvents memory laws in place across former Soviet countries in which pre-1917 figures and events remain outside the scope.

In Ukraine, after months of deliberations, two such memory laws came into effect in 2015. The first banned all Soviet symbols and criminalized any questioning of the 'criminal nature of the communist totalitarian regime of 1917-1991 in Ukraine', with a 5 to 10-year prison sentence for

[18] Translation by author, Visit.Odesa.ua, "Памятник Екатерине II," *Visit.Odesa.ua*, n.d.
[19] Patricia Herlihy, "How Ukrainian Is Odesa?," *Kennan Institute Occasional Papers* 202: 2006, 19-26.
[20] Novorossiysk Courier, "Одессе - матушку государыню," *Novorossiysk Courier*, no. 6 (2007).
[21] Russkiy Mir Foundation Information Services, "Monument to Catherine II to remain in Odesa," *Russkiy Mir Foundation Information Services*, March 31, 2015.
[22] Translation by author, Benoît Vitkine, "Odesa, un an après le drame du 2 mai," *Le Monde*, May 2, 2015.
[23] Balkanist, "History Revisited: Criminalizing Communist Symbols and Sympathies in Ukraine," *Balkanist*, May 28, 2015.

breach.[24] The second focused on the "restoration, preservation 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. In doing so, the law criminalized the questioning of nationalist groups, such as the OUN, Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, or the UPA, accused of war crimes committed while Ukraine was fighting for its independence, especially during the Second World War.[25] These two laws were similar to other memory laws promulgated in neighbouring countries, sometimes creating bitter conflict over shared and contested histories. Among these countries, Poland and Estonia have followed a model similar to Ukraine. Over 70 academics in Ukraine and scholars studying Ukraine signed an open letter in protest.

Decision-Making Processes

In March 2015, after more than three years of proceedings, a local Odesa court ruled against an initiative led by several NGOs which demanded the removal of the monument from Catherine Square.[26] 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 extent of Russia's sovereignty. Odesa, as well as most Black Sea ports and the east of Ukraine, had been part of the administrative region of 'Novorossiya' in the 19th century. Putin's reference to historical borders of the Russian Empire was used to justify the annexation of Crimea and gave fuel to the fighting in Donbas, putting Odesa on the map of an extended Greater Russia. A 'Nash Krym' or 'Krimnash' narrative (Crimea is ours) remains prevalent in present-day Russia and 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.

On the ground and in the public sphere, the pushback was more complicated, since, in Ukraine, anti-communist laws served as the main legal framework to counter such manipulation of history. The laws 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 regional and diaspora memory. In Odesa, this tension around contested historical memory strengthened a discourse of singularity that was rooted in the city's nineteenth-century history and 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. This discourse translated into a certain detachment and even disdain toward both Kyiv and Moscow. It also manifested itself in a resistance against a version of history imposed from the centre – whether that was the Ukrainian government or Russia. On the other hand, residents of Odesa sought to emphasize secondary ideological affinities that were not mutually exclusive.

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[24] Ibid., 6. See Also: Comission Opinion 823/2015 of 28 October 2015 On the Condemntation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Regimes in Ukraine and Prohibition of Propaganda of Their Symbols [2015].

[25] *Law of Ukraine.* On the legal status and honoring the memory of fighters for Ukraine's independence in the twentieth century [2015] 314-VIII, [2015].

[26] Russkiy Mir Foundation Information Services, "Monument to Catherine II to remain in Odesa," *Russkiy Mir Foundation Information Services*, March 31, 2015.

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.[27] However, in 2019, the Supreme Court of Ukraine declined the petition to remove the monument. In November 2020, the statue of Catherine was protested once again. This time, the lens of colonialism and decolonization was used more explicitly than in 2007 and 2014, referring to the Tsarist era as Ukraine's colonial period.[28] This framework was not entirely new but helped tie in the protests against Russian influence to wider global movements demanding the decolonization of public spaces and state curricula and a record less focused on elites and more on diversifying historical narratives.

Despite the 2019 Supreme Court decision, the destiny of the monument is still undecided. Its return to the central streets of Odesa was part of a movement to reconstruct the historical centre of the city. This movement also included the recovery of original street names and the restoration of historical buildings close to their nineteenth-century original form. As part of this process, one of the oldest religious buildings of the city, the Transfiguration Cathedral, founded in 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 nonetheless 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' Michaïl Vorontsov.

In 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. Another statue was unveiled on 29 October 2020 in Grigoriopol. [29] Transnistria, a rebel region within Moldova supported by Russian money and troops, remains a post-Soviet sphere of influence. The renewed interest for figures of the imperial past suggests a realignment of previous discourses that focused on the Soviet past while serving similar interests. That the debate has become politicized beyond the borders of Ukraine is indisputable, as can be seen in articles by RT 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 100th year since its initial destruction by the Soviets.[30] However, the case of the Catherine statue in Odesa highlights more than a Ukrainian-Russian divide about the historical past and a political contest in the present.

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[27] Translation by author, Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, "Historians suggested ways of conducting imperial heritage/ Історики Запропонували Шляхи Деконструкції Імперської Спадщини," *Ukrainian Institute of National Memory*, accessed January 2021.

[28] Korrespondent.net, "In Odesa, activists demand the demolition of the monument to Catherine II/ В Одесі активісти вимагають знести пам'ятник Катерині II," *Korrespondent.net,* November 9, 2020; Russia Today, "Protesters in Odesa call for statue of Catherine the Great to be toppled in attempt 'to get rid of Russian influence,'" *Russia Today*, November 9, 2020.

[29] Novosti Pridnestrovya, "Monument to Catherine the Great unveiled in Tiraspol," *Novosti Pridnestrovya,* September 1, 2020.

[30] Translation by author, Vasiliev Alexander, "'Monument to the founders of Odesa' Who installed and demolished Catherine the Great, and why?"/ "'Памятник основательнице города Одессы'. Кто и почему устанавливал и сносил Екатерину Великую", *Ukraine.ru*, May 5, 2020.

Locally, some Odesa residents have seen the monument as 'Ukrainophobic' and inciting 'interethnic animosity' rather than peaceful co-existence.[31] Some of the 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.[32] Academics from the University of Odesa's History Faculty and from the National Institute of History also complained that bureaucrats did not consult experts before 'unleashing a war of monuments.'[33] 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 [changing] the Soviet names of 179 streets', while also agreeing to the restoration and installation of the Monument to the Founders.[34] At a broader level, what was happening in Odesa was not an isolated event and was unfolding in the backdrop of other monuments and statues being built that related to a locally embedded yet controversial past, such as Stepan Bandera's statue in Lviv.[35] Ultimately, in Odesa, the contrast between the removal of monuments linked to the Soviet era, geographic ties to Russia, and the rebuilding of memorials commemorating the Russian Empire were received as a prompt to reflect on ways that narratives about the city 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 *Khadjibey,* the Tatar fortress in Odesa, first mentioned in Jan Długosz's *Historiae Polonicae,* The History of Poland, a chronicle of historic events in Eastern Europe, in 1415. Whilst the Greek past is considered too distant, with the settlement of the land being interrupted for long periods of time, its early modern history is more consistent and reframes Odesa's origins around a different geography. Rather than starting as a colonial extension of the Russian Empire named *Novorossiya*, New Russia, Odesa could tie its origins to the Crimean *Khanate*, a political entity, and 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 organizations pushed for an 'Odesa-600' anniversary in 2015, which would enlarge the chronological boundaries of Odesa's narrative, removing it from Russo-centric patterns.

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, has created a tension between an attempt to frame the Russian imperial past positively and a political desire to remove Russian influence from Ukrainian public spaces. In Odesa, the monument also participated in a nostalgic approach to the built environment, with an

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[31] День weekly digest, "A monument to Ukrainian serfdom - Catherine II as a mirror of Ukrainian statehood," *День weekly digest*, October 30, 2007.
[32] SRB Podcast, "No Cossack Love for Cathy," SRB Podcast, September 4, 2007.
[33] День weekly digest, "A monument to Ukrainian serfdom - Catherine II as a mirror of Ukrainian statehood," *День weekly digest*, October 30, 2007.
[34] Piotr Smolar, "Homo Ukrainus: An Emerging Species," *Le Monde*, September 28, 2007.
[35] День weekly digest, "A monument to Ukrainian serfdom - Catherine II as a mirror of Ukrainian statehood," *День weekly digest*, October 30, 2007.

emphasis on 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 memorialization. In Odesa, but also more widely in former parts of the Soviet Union, the recourse to the commemoration of the 18th and 19th centuries can be seen as a strategic response to some 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 'civilizing' effects of the Empire.

In the Monument to the Founders, two aspects are particularly important – that of class, with the representation of a ruling elite, and the symbolic reordering of the political order the elites represent. That the monument does not represent only Russian nationals nor ethnic Russians does not matter, because it nonetheless established a historical claim to the Black Sea shores. The presence of the ensemble in the centre of Odesa contrasts with contemporary Ukrainian realities. The desire for UNESCO heritage site status creates an additional obstacle in the debate because of potential economic benefits. While some see in the monument a display of nostalgia that exists in most preservation and restoration movements of ancient city centres, its emotional appeal overlaps with contested historical memory.

As of January 2021, the Monument to the Founders was protested numerous times (2007, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020) but to little effect. While legal authorities have denied petitions raised against it, no conciliatory measure seems to have been undertaken, whether in the form of a plaque or educational events. No records of community consultation were found either, 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 has nonetheless prompted renewed historical research into Odesa's past, especially into the centuries before the territory was named 'Odessa.'

Research contributed by Olivia Durand

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Annex

Timeline	
1894	22 August (2 September) 1894: plinth of the moment constructed. Design selected in a public competition (1892-1894 to commemorate the centenary of Odesa.
1900	First inauguration of the monument.
1917	Fate of the monument on hold for three years – covered in a canopy.
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 was 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: Local Odesa court rules again an NGO initiative to remove the monument.
	Ukraine passes two new memory laws centering on the Second World War and Soviet era.
2019	The Supreme Court of Ukraine rejects a petition to remove the monument.
2020	November: Protests erupt again, this time through the lens of colonialism and decolonisation to contest Russian imperial legacies.
	New statues of Catherine II built in neighbouring Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria).

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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