

“ANTIQUISING IMAGINATION” IN THE SERVICE OF POLITICAL EXPANSION: ON THE EVE OF THE “GREAT GREEK PROJECT” OF CATHERINE II¹

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Abstract: KAMENSKIKH, Aleksey. “*Antiquising Imagination*” in the Service of Political Expansion: On the Eve of the “Great Greek Project” of Catherine II. The paper explores the materials of the correspondence of Voltaire and Catherine II for examination the schemes of Enlightenment historical imagination and arguments to history used for conceptualizing and legitimation of current political events and actions during the Russian-Ottoman war of 1768 – 1774. Tropological analysis reveals, among the series of sustained historical arguments having been developed by the “patriarch of the Enlightenment” in his aspirations to persuade the Russian empress to become the “queen of the Greeks” and European countries to support Catherine in her struggle against the Ottoman Empire, an especial type of classicist imaginative schemes (schemes of “antiquising imagination”) which were emerging in the correspondence during the discussion of the Balkan issues. The paper demonstrates how in these schemes, the territories of the Northern Pontic, the Balkans and the Archipelago were imagined and described by the participants of the correspondence in terms of the language which goes back to the texts by Greek classical authors included in the circle of classicist modern European education; analyses the political functions of this language in the texts of the French philosopher and the Russian empress; describes the first outlines of the future “Byzantine idea” in Russian political imagination.

Keywords: *Voltaire, Catherine II, Enlightenment, schemes of historical imagination, political rhetoric, “the Greek project”*

The correspondence between the Russian empress and a famous philosopher lasted for more than fourteen years: it began in October 1763 with Catherine’s thanks for the second volume of *The History of Peter the Great: Emperor of Russia*, and continued almost up to the death of the philosopher in May of 1778. It was most intense during the period of the Ottoman–Russian war of 1768 – 1774. Of 185 letters included in the recent Russian translation of the correspondence by Aleksey Liubzhin (2022)², 141 were written just during six years of the war, from November 1768 to summer of 1774. Only during this period, the participants of the correspondence actively used

¹ The present study is a part of a larger DFG project “Crisis and Transformation of an Old Regime: Circulation of Ideologies and Institutions between Russian and Ottoman Empires, 1768 – 1774” headed by Prof. Dr. Jan Kusber (Historical Institute, Chair for the History of Eastern Europe, Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz). I thank Gerda Henkel Foundation for providing me a grant within the “Temporary Funding Initiative for Threatened and Refugee Researchers” for participation in the project.

² Liubzhin’s translation of the correspondence (Catherine II, Voltaire 2022) is based on the last Paris edition by Alexander Stroev (*Voltaire, Catherine II* 2006), who writes (2017, 214-215) about 74 autographs of Catherine’s letters and copies of 92 of Voltaire’s letters, preserved in Moscow, in the Russian State Archive

the appeals to the historical past for conceptualizing and legitimizing the current political action. Since the outbreak of the war Voltaire assumes the unexpected role of a “generator” of arguments to the main thesis: Catherine is to free Greece of Ottoman Porta, become a Greek queen and make Constantinople the third capital of Russia. The correspondence, originally private, gains (together with Voltaire’s letters to European monarchs, his articles and pamphlets) a public and political significance and became a factor influencing public opinion in Europe and even an instrument of secret diplomacy (Stroev 2017, 200, 208-209).

The correspondence was firstly published by Beaumarchais shortly after Voltaire’s death; it has since undergone a number of critical editions and translations, among which are to be noted the Cambridge edition by William Reddaway (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931), the volumes 115 – 121 of the second Oxford edition of Voltaire’s works by Theodore Besterman (Voltaire 1973 – 1975), and Paris edition of the correspondence by Alexandre Stroev (*Voltaire, Catherine II* 2006).

As early as Vasily Kliuchevskiy (1993, 509) had suggested the key importance of the correspondence for Catherine’s subsequent “Greek project”; in 2001, Andrei Zorin (2001, 39-45³) devoted a part of his work on political dimension of Russian literature of 18th and 19th centuries to critical evaluation of this hypothesis. Vera Proskurina (2006, 151-156) reflects on political significance of the correspondence in her work on political myths in Russian literature of Catherine’s II time. An insightful analysis of the forms of literary game, personal relations of the participants, ways of constructing by Voltaire the image of the Russian-Ottoman military campaign as a “philosophical crusade” against the barbarians and religious obscurants, the history of the first edition of the correspondence are presented in the work by Alexander Stroev (2017, 193-215, 216-226). Voltaire’s argumentation in favour of Russian diplomatic and military intervention in Poland in 1767 – 1771 and the ways of constructing, for the wide European public, the image of Catherine as an enlightened monarch defending religious freedom and civic order in the neighboring state, were explored by Jacek Kordel (2021).⁴

In a study undertaken in the framework of the project “Crisis and Transformation of an Old Regime: Circulation of Ideologies and Institutions between Russian and Ottoman Empires, 1768 – 1774”, I made an attempt of tropological analysis of the correspondence. In the process of slow reading each form of appellation to the past, each verbal construction implying the work of historical imagination, was consistently marked and analyzed in its discursive and historical contexts, then examined for the degree of frequency of use. Some of these constructions were found to belong to the relatively persistent rhetorical-argumentative complexes which include specific themes, modes, images, tropes, arguments, and types of discourse. The methodological reference point for this work was the principles of narratological analysis proposed for the research of the schemes of historical imagination by Hayden White (1973)⁵. In this paper, the description and analysis of several of these tropes are presented: the complex analysis of the schemes of “antiquising imagination” presenting the current Balkan issues in the terms of classical antiquity; of the trope of “bad” and “good” crusades; and the first outlines of the “Byzantine theme” which would play so important role in future Russian political imagination and practice.

of Ancient Acts, and also about some letters of Voltaire and related documents, preserved in Moscow, in the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire.

³ For English translation of the work see Zorin (2014, 30-36).

⁴ Of other works devoted to the correspondence are of interest: William F. Reddaway (1931, *ix-xxxii*); Inna Gorbatov (2006); Catriona Seth (2010), and Kelsey Rubin-Detlev (2011).

⁵ Surely, among the works highly important for understanding the political dimension of historical imagination are those by Benedict Anderson (1973) and Cornelius Castoriadis (1987).

ANTIQUISING IMAGINATION AND PRODUCTION OF HISTORICAL ARGUMENTS

From its beginning the correspondence is full of allusions to Greek and Roman antiquity: in letters of 1766 Voltaire persuades the empress to renounce the name of the Christian saint in favor of Minerva, Aphrodite or Demeter, or to place her name among the stars, aside with Perseus, Andromeda and Calisto (Catherine wittily and delicately refuses to do so)⁶, compares her with Thalestris in the letter of 26 May of 1767, and so on. Till 15 November 1768 these antique allusions might be interpreted as a tribute to general classicist style of the epoch. With the beginning of the war against Ottoman empire the function of “antiquising allusions” changed. The figures of antiquising imagination acquire the role of arguments to Voltaire’s main thesis: your majesty not only can, but must liberate Greece from the Turkish barbarians because, as an enlightened European sovereign, you *know* its history and, therefore, its true nature. Catherine understands this game perfectly and supports it. It still remains a form of Enlightenment discourse and a classicist style of thinking and writing, but acting here in a very specific role.

Catherine in a letter of 6/17 December of 1768 (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 21-23) hints to the First Archipelago expedition sent to Mediterranean and to revolt of Paoli in Corsica, and replays to Voltaire’s new call to meet next year in Constantinople: “On your entry into Constantinople I shall endeavour to send you *a most elegant Greek dress, lined with the richest Siberian furs*. Such a dress is *far more comfortable than any disfigured European dress*, with which no sculptor would or could clothe his statues.” Already Andrei Zorin (2014, 31) saw in these lines a project of some kind of “Greek-Russian” synthesis. We would add to this remark on *the projective function* of historical imagination that such a “Greek-Siberian synthesis” claims to become a more organic form of reception of Greek cultural heritage than “European”.

Historical allusions can function as a *substitutive analogy*: the Don downstream is named *Tanais*; Greeks of Peloponnese are for Voltaire and Catherine the “Lacedemonians” and “Spartans”; Russian naval forces joined up with the rebellious Greeks to form the Eastern and Northern “*Spartan legions*” (Catherine, May 16/27, 1770); first of them “took possession of Porsava, Berdonia and Misistro, *the former ancient country*”⁷. Classical past shines through the present and, moreover, tends to substitute it⁸.

So, historical imagination allows the participants of the correspondence to make “leaps” of two and a half thousand years, as if neither the Roman conquest of Greece nor the thousand-year-old Byzantium had existed. Why? – Perhaps, Catherine’s same letter of May 16/27, 1770 provides a meaningful indication of the working mechanism of the antiquising historical imagination: “Greece [AK: not Byzantium!] [...] is still very far from the state in which it was once; however, *it is pleasure to hear the names of these places, by which our ears were silenced in our childhood*” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 56). So, the working principle of this kind of historical imagination may be linked with the peculiarities of the Western European (beginning from the Renaissance) *tradition of education*, forming the image of European culture as based on

⁶ See: Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 8-12.

⁷ Cf. also Voltaire’s letter of May 18, 1770: the philosopher welcomes the anti-Turkish movement in the “land of the pyramids”, calls for the Black Sea to be covered with “seagulls”, to attack the Ottoman Empire “from Colchis to Memphis”, insists on using the “Cyrus’ chariots”. Historical allusion functions here as an argument: “I wish that [...] you had finished your *Instruction*, which is incomparably better than Justinian’s, in the very city where he signed his own” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 53-54).

⁸ An extreme form of the work of Voltaire’s historical allusion as a “substitutive analogy” can be seen in Voltaire’s project of *military chariots* appearing in his letters of 1769 and 1770 as a kind of idee-fixe. See on the issue: Cazes, 405-414; Hemerdinger, 587-607.

the classical tradition of ancient Greece and texts by Herodotus, Plato, Euripides, Aristoteles and Plutarch. And we see again that historical imagination engages *a substitutive historical analogy*, as in Catherine's letter from October 7/18, 1770: "They assure that count Orlov has taken possession of Lemnos. *We are now entirely living in lands of legendary* (le pays des fables)" (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 80).

The same mechanism of historical imagination is obvious in other letters:

Voltaire, July 4, 1770: "Your enterprise in relation to Greece is the most admirable of all *in two thousand years*" (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 58). We can observe here the same imaginative "leap": Catherine ought to expulse or exterminate Ottomans, to be crowned as a Greek queen, and – to revive the classical Greek civilization, as Voltaire imagines it. In the next Voltaire's letter, of 13 July 1770, this "leap" to the pre-Christian Greek antiquity takes the most radical form – perhaps, it is not accident that the letter was excluded from 1803 Russian translation of the correspondence (Catherine II, Voltaire 1803) and from W. F. Reddaway's edition: "Return to the unhappy Greeks their Jupiter, Mars and Venera⁹; they enjoyed a good reputation only under the rule of these gods. I don't know what fate has made them so rude since they became Christians"¹⁰.

Paradoxically, constructing the image of the "restored Greece" Voltaire's antiquising imagination anticipates *the image of a modern national state* of the Kingdom of Greece and the authors of "Ἡ Μεγάλη Ἰδέα"¹¹. Thus, he suggests in the letter of 14 September 1770: "as soon as you would have been made possessor in Constantinople, you would certainly have pleased to set up a good Greek Academy. Then we should have had the poem *The Catherineides*; Zeuxis and Phidias would have covered the whole universe with your likenesses; the fall of the Ottoman empire would have been celebrated in Greek; Athens would have become your capital. The Greek language would have become universal; all merchants sailing to the Aegean Sea would have asked your imperial majesty for passports in Greek" (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 70)¹². Surely, the main condition of such revival of Greece is, for Voltaire, a military presence of Russia in the Balkans, as he postulates in his letter of July 20, 1770: "But how can this resolution be enforced in all its power without leaving a [Russian, AK] army in Greece?" (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 59-60).

The tireless search for patterns from classical history for current events – for example, comparisons between the expedition to the Archipelago with Hannibal's maritime expedition in Voltaire's letters of 30 October 1769 ((Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 38-39) and 2 June 1770 (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 56) – demonstrates an important function of historical analogy: it helps *to conceptualise* the present events, to acquire them with historical significance. An event that can be described in the terms of comparison with an event of the classical history of Greece and Rome is *a truly* historical event. A cloud of historical allusions creates a kind of *reflective context*. A strong tendency (general classicist?) to compare the present with the past as

⁹ Latin names of the "Greek" gods in this claim for radical antiquising reveal the specific westernized, Latinized "design" of image of the classical Greece in Voltaire's imagination. Sergei Ivanov notes (2021, 675) a partial "delatinization" of the Catherine's image of the Second Rome in 1780s, during her work upon the play *The Early Reign of Oleg*: "Mars" and "Hercules" of the play's drafts are transmitted into "Ares" and "Irakli" of the finished variant of the text.

¹⁰ The text is cited as follows: Stroev (2017, 203).

¹¹ Moreover, in the relation of the future Greek national movement, with the replacement of traditional *Χριστιανοί* and *Ρωμαίοι* with an ancient/modern *Ἕλληνες* as a politonym, and with atticized *καθαρεύουσα*, which pretends to replace the Byzantine-like *δημοτική*, we can say about the work of similar schemes of historical and political imagination.

¹² Cf. in the next letter from September 21, 1770: "Now is the time for them [the "Spartans", AK] to have my patroness over them, or at least to enjoy freedom under her banners" (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 73).

a model and to make an assessment on the base of this comparison reveals itself equally in the mode of meet expectations¹³, in the mode of statement of “modern decay” compared to ancient greatness¹⁴, and, finally, in the mode of disillusionment with the very model of the classicist imagination, as in Voltaire’s letter of September 1772: “If the Greeks were worthy of all that you have done for them, Greek could be made universal; but Russian can also replace it” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 169). The last trope of the antique past devaluation is repeated in Voltaire’s letter of 11 December 1772: after a praise to Catherine for establishing educational institutions for children of both sexes, he claims: “I do not know why one still dares to speak of Lycurgus and his Lacedaemonians, who never did anything famous; who left behind no monument; who did not exercise any artistic skill at all; who from very ancient times have been in slavery to barbarians, whom you defeated for four years in succession” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 176). The primordialist notion that the present inhabitants of the Peloponnese and the ancient Spartans are identical persists. However, the argument now works in reverse: if the present-day Greeks are “unworthy”, so were their ancient predecessors.

VOLTAIRE’S CRUSADE(S)

Andrei Zorin, in his analysis of the correspondence, emphasizes the anticlerical sayings of Voltaire and decisively denies any religious motivation of the philosopher¹⁵. However, logic of historical imagination makes the patriarch of enlightenment to develop most unexpected tropes, including those closely linked with religious language and imagery. *The trope of two Crusades* is central in the correspondence. This trope, along with the trope of “*the only vindicator for Europe*”, originates in the beginning of the war against Ottoman empire from Voltaire’s appellations to former European anti-Turkish solidarity and lamentations on reluctance of current European powers to stand with Russia against the traditional enemy of Europe, as in his letter to Catherine of February 1769: “Should not all the kings of Europe avenge the rights of nations, which the Ottoman Porte violates every day with such gross arrogance?” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 25).

The discourse of Crusades develops in the correspondence in two modes: 1) ironically, mockingly, as the “crusade” of Papacy and some French politicians who provoked the revolt of the Bar confederation – and became the allies of the Muslims, against whom all “the traditional”, “normal” crusades were intended¹⁶; and 2) in the mode of nostalgia and desire – retrospective and prospective at once, – as the alliance of European powers against their traditional enemy. Since nostalgic imagery of the crusades with the necessity involves religious discourses into ideas of (the current!) European powers’ solidarity in the struggle against the traditional opponents, Voltaire’s discourse itself becomes quasi-religious and – sometimes – transforms even into a discourse

¹³ Cf.: “your beloved Greeks have on many occasions shown *their ancient courage*, and they are not lacking in intelligence”, in Catherine’s letter of July 22/August 2, 1770 (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 62).

¹⁴ Cf. in Catherine’s letter from Sept. 28 / Oct. 9, 1770: “The Greeks and Spartans have been degraded; they are more concerned with plunder than with freedom” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 78).

¹⁵ Cf.: “Quite clearly he was not only ignorant of and indifferent to the religious motivation of the Russian mission in Constantinople, but also openly hostile to it” (Zorin 2014, 34).

¹⁶ See, for example, Voltaire, February 26, 1769: “Beat the Turks, despite the fact that the papal nuncio residing in Poland is committed to them [...] Triumph over the mufti and the pope!” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 25) or Catherine’s letter of July 3/14 1769: “it seems to me they would have done better if they had armed themselves against *the Turks, the current defenders of the Crusades*, rather than against one who never thought of offending the Roman confession of faith” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 31–32).

of the *holy war*, extermination of the “infidels”¹⁷. (What could be more surprising than hearing Voltaire preach jihad?).

Since February 1769 to the November of 1773 this theme sounds in Voltaire’s letters as a refrain. For the first time, the trope of a “good”, enlightened Crusade, distinguished from medieval military campaigns, which were inspired by religious fanaticism, emerged in Voltaire’s letter of 27 May 1769:

“I do not wish to militate all the Christian sovereigns against the Turks; for the Crusades have been so ridiculous that there is no possibility of starting them again. But I confess that if I were a Venetian, I would plot to send an army to Candia at a time when your majesty would be beating the Turks near Iasi, or elsewhere; and if I were a young emperor of Rome, I would soon be seen in Bosnia and Serbia, and then I would ask you for dinner at Sofia, or at Philippopolis in Romania, and finally we divide the territories amicably” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 29).

This claim to the Venetians and the Austrian emperor (with adding of religious connotations and already without distantiation from “the classical” crusades) is repeated in the letter of 17 October 1769: “Go, heir of the Caesars, head of the Holy Roman Empire, intercessor of the Latin Church; go, here is a fit occasion! Seek your glory in Bosnia, Serbia, and Bulgaria; go also you, Venetians! Arm your ships, and aid the European Heroine!” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 37).

Almost at the same time Voltaire writes to Friedrich, king of Prussia on 31 October 1769, combining in several lines four tropes we find in the correspondence with Catherine: “I [...] wish with all my passion that the Turkish barbarians were driven out of *the country of Xenophon, Socrates, Plato, Sophocles and Euripides* [antiquising imagination]. If this were wished, it would be done soon; but *seven crusades have once been undertaken for superstition* [“the bad crusade” trope], and never a *crusade for honour* will be undertaken [“the right crusade” trope]. *The whole burden will fall on Catherine II*” [the trope “Catherine is the only revenger for all Europe” that will be discussed later] (Catherine II, Voltaire 2022, 146).

The same complex of the four tropes is developed by Voltaire in a poem written in the name of Jean Plokov and attached to the letter to Catherine of 14 April 1770 (Voltaire 1879, 365-368). The poem begins with the claim to all Christians to raise arms against the enemies of Europe, “usurpers of Constantine’s throne”, “Sardanapalus of Istanbul”, and to join Russia in its struggle (Voltaire 1879, 365). It includes a special call to “Sarmatia”¹⁸, mentions Serbia that extends her hands to the “young Roman emperor”, recalls Turkish sieges of Vienna and devastations of Hungary (the “offences of Europe” to be avenged), claims to the “Lion of St. Marcus”¹⁹ etc. The trope of the “bad

¹⁷ Voltaire in the letter of August 11, 1770 (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 64) uses a theological argument as if a joke supporting a new proposal to use chariots in the war against the Ottomans. Remarkably, this project of European anti-Turkish political alliance, so important for Voltaire, was partly realized in 1780-81 when Catherine formed an anti-Ottoman alliance with Austria. The expression of the “war against infidels” becomes one of the main in Russian diplomacy of 1780-s, and, as the Comte de Ségur, the French ambassador at the Russian court, admits in his memoirs, this expression was very close to his sentiments and personal (but not expressed in an official manner) opinion. See Ragsdale (1988, 106).

¹⁸ Further, in February 1772, this call to Poland (“Sarmatia”) will be developed by Voltaire in especial poem, *Ode. To Polish confederates*, written from the name of some “poète courlandais”. The central theme of the *Ode* is the remembrance of Crusades and the former anti-Muslim European solidarity. See Stroev (2017, 216-226).

¹⁹ Calls to Venice are repeated in numerous Voltaire’s letters of 1769 – 1774. Cf., for example, the letters of 4 July 1770 (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 57-58), 14 September 1770 (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 71), 2 November 1771. In the semi-nostalgic discourse of Voltaire and Catherine, Venice is a mighty state, whose naval power is comparable only to the land army of the “young Roman emperor”.

crusade” once inspired by the Latin Church in Europe is contrasted with the political pragmatism of a pan-European campaign against the “barbarians” threatening Europe. However, the anti-Islamic rhetoric of the poem and the appeal to Christians at its beginning make this opposition not very convincing.

Gradually, the opposition between “the old” and “new” crusades tends to disappear and only one, that is between “true” (a campaign of all European powers against the traditional enemy) and “false” (a struggle of Polish Catholics and Turks supported by France against Russia) persists – as in Voltaire’s letter of 20 November 1770: “What should have been expected from the French, who were once the initiators of the Crusades? What would Godefroy de Bouillon say?” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 84)²⁰. By the end of 1770, Voltaire appears ready to see even the new Pope Clement XIV (Lorenzo Ganganelli) as an ally in his “crusade” against the Ottomans (26 November 1770): “Surely he feels how it is a shame to leave the city of Constantine in the hands of barbarians, enemies of all sciences, and that Greeks, even if they are schismatics, should be preferred to Mohammedans” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 85-86).

With the development of this theme of the “anti-Ottoman Christian powers’ alliance” two special tropes emerge in the correspondence. These are the trope of *Catherine as (the only) vindicator for all Europe* and the *Byzantine theme* that begins to be articulated at the last stage of the correspondence.

CATHERINE AS (THE ONLY) VINDICATOR FOR ALL EUROPE

Since the end of October 1769, the trope of former European solidarity against the Ottomans (and of Catherine as “*the European Heroine*”) turns into the trope of *Catherine as (the only) vindicator for all Europe*. Russia, represented by Catherine, turns out to be the sole executor of a previously pan-European mission to liberate Constantinople. France and Poland (under the influence of the Pope) renounced this mission and betrayed it by concluding an alliance with Europe’s enemies. The other European powers remain passive.

Tropological analysis reveals in Voltaire’s texts on *the only vindicator for Europe* a persistent imaginative schema, variants of which developed long before Voltaire and continue to function in the fields of historical imagination until the present day. This is the idea of (Western) Europe as a (Western-) Christian (or enlightened, in the secular version of the scheme) world, and the related idea that a certain people becomes a part of Europe through the acceptance of Christianity or, in the secular version of the scheme, through perception of the values of rational science, law etc. (That is why, say, for Voltaire Peter the Great is the creator of Russia: before his reign the country led a kind of extra-historical existence). The trope of *the only vindicator for Europe* is a particular sub-variant of the “communion with Europe through baptism/enlightenment” scheme. This is the idea of a nation on the geographical margins of Europe which once accepted European values and has remained faithful to them even after the “old Europe” has rejected these values. Two hundred and fifty years later, this trope is reproduced almost exactly by so different public speakers as Andrzej Duda, president of Poland, in his speech at the Church Convention in Gniezno, 11. 03. 2016 (Poland is the last custodian of the Christian, really European values; her duty and historical destiny is to return these treasures to Europe), and by Mikhail Piotrovsky,

²⁰ Cf. Voltaire’s letter from 22 January 1771: “The Crusades began in France, and now we have become the best friends of the infidels” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 92). Catherine supports this theme: “the French are descendants of the first Knights of the Cross, but have now lost their dignity”, which becomes a steady trope in the correspondence. Cf. her letter of March 3/14, 1771 (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 98).

director of the Hermitage, in his propagandist interview to *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*: Russia (unlike the current EU) is the real Europe because it has an ancient heritage (Kerch, Chersoneses, Taman), “and whoever has an ancient heritage is Europe” (Piotrovskii 2022).

- *Voltaire, September 14, 1770*: The whole world despises those who have wished your imperial majesty misfortune. “And who could wish your misfortune at a time when *you are avenging the whole of Europe?*” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 71).

- *Voltaire, December 16, 1771*: Catherine is “the Heroine who, against the will of some parts of Europe, *takes revenge on the Turks for the arrogance they inflict on Europe*” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 147).

“BELONGING TO THE EASTERN EMPIRE, THAT IS YOURS”, OR VOLTAIRE’S THE THIRD ROME

In his study of the correspondence Andrei Zorin writes about Voltaire’s lack of interest in Byzantine themes and about substitution of Constantinople with Athens and Greek antiquity (Zorin 2014, 34-36). This is partly true, and we have already observed the abundance of materials demonstrating this imaginative “slipping” to antiquity. Nevertheless, as the war draws to a close, the “Byzantine theme” begins to be articulated in the correspondence – but mainly as a kind of an *empty form*, a “place” for political pretensions to be applied. This articulation of the Byzantine theme is closely linked with the discourse of the “anti-Ottoman Christian powers’ alliance”. Thus, in Voltaire’s letter of 2 November 1771, in the passage with discussion on passivity of the Venetians, the cowardice of the modern Athenians and success of Aleksey Orlov, we read: “Ragusa²¹, which called [...] in ancient times Epidauria and so long belonged to the Eastern Empire, *that is yours*, is now given over to the patronage of the Western Empire”²². So, in this passage the Russian Empire is imagined either as an heir to Byzantium or simply *identical* to it. Two ways of reconstructing the logic of Voltaire’s historical imagination seem possible. The first: everything Greek (and Ragusa was called once Epidauria) should be part of the new Greek state (the discourse of the future Greek “Great Idea”), which Catherine should lead. The second: Byzantium was an Orthodox empire, which should be restored and led by Catherine; that’s why Voltaire is annoyed that Dubrovnik comes under the patronage of Vienna. If this second variant of interpretation is correct, we deal with an imaginative scheme in which Russian empire substitutes Byzantium (“the Eastern empire”) *in the same way* as Austrian monarchy which gains control of Dubrovnik substitutes the Western Rome.

The second – “Byzantine” – interpretation is supported by the trope of two empresses, Catherine II and Maria Theresia, who are called by Voltaire “your imperial majesty of the Greek Church” and “her imperial majesty of the Church of Rome”, which emerges in the correspondence in the end of 1772 and stays until the last letters. Catherine gladly accepts this “title”: in the letter of 20 February / 3 March 1773 she writes about herself and Maria Theresia as “the Imperial Majesties of Greek and Roman Churches” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 179). In the letter of 15/26 September 1773 she again says of herself as the “head of the Greek Church”, “Greek Catholic Ecumenical Church, the one Orthodox, founded in the East” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 188); and in the letter of December 27, 1773 / January 7, 1774 she, as the “head of the Greek Church”, gives

²¹ Not a city in Sicily, but a Croatian Dubrovnik.

²² “Raguse, l’ancienne Épidaure (à ce qu’on dit), laquelle appartient si long-temps à l’empire d’orient, c’est-à-dire au vôtre, se metelle sous la protection de l’empire d’occident” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 139).

to Voltaire some explanations referred to the procedures for converting to Orthodoxy from other Christian confessions (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 193).

Along with this relatively late, feministically and ecclesiologically coloured form of the “Byzantine theme” in the correspondence, we may notice a very unexpected use by Voltaire of the trope of *the Third Rome*. In the letter of 2 September 1769, he writes: “It is truth that your majesty has two great enemies, the Papa and the padishah of the Turks. Constantin did not imagine that once his city of Rome would belong to the Priest, nor that he would build his city of Constantinople for the Tartars; but neither did he foresee that at some time near the river Moscow and the Neva an empire *as vast as his own* would be established” (Catherine the Great, Voltaire 1931, 33-34). So, Russia in some relation is an heir of the majesty of empire of Constantine. First and second “Romes” became the enemies of the “third” (and of all enlightened humankind): the first due to its religious obscurantism, the second – being captured by the “barbarians”. Along with religious obscurantism and barbarism, hostility to empire of Catherine are the markers of their “apostacy”, decline, signs that they are unworthy to be heirs of Constantine’s empire. So, if we assume that Voltaire really knew and deliberately used the concept of the “Third Rome”, we are dealing here with a secularized version of this model: the fall into heresy (Filioque and Florentine union, in the original Russian sixteenth-century version of the trope) is replaced here by a fall into religious obscurantism and barbarism. Naturally, the trope in this secularized version is deprived of the original version’s eschatological dimension (“the fourth Rome shall not be”). It is difficult to say, which version of the trope about the *Third Rome* was taken by Voltaire for this secularized modification. But in the second half of the 1750-s, while working on his monograph on Peter the Great, the French philosopher received through Count I. Shuvalov numerous materials on the pre-Petrine history of Russia, prepared by Mikhail Lomonosov, among other scholars (Priima 1958, 170-186). So, Voltaire could be aware of the sixteenth-century Russian version of the trope.

Byzantine theme is a sub-variant in the discursive field of “antiquising classicist imagination” and intends to prove the only thesis: Russia can claim – along with “Roman” (Austrian) empire – its own antique heritage and the share of territories in the division of the Ottoman Empire. As Sergei Ivanov shows in his article, even later, in the period of efforts to realise the “Greek project”, no professional historian was invited to join the project, and the “Byzantine theme” remained for Catherine an empty form which was filled with “a bizarre mixture of Greek Antiquity, Russian modernity and Ancient Russia” (Ivanov 2021, 674). Nevertheless, we can state that the correspondence between Voltaire and Catherine demonstrates that already in the late sixties of the eighteenth century an image of Byzantium as a still vaguely defined political and historical “heritage” begins to take shape in the field of the Russian historical imagination. And what is more, the patriarch of the Enlightenment was an active creator of such an image.

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“ANTIQUISING IMAGINATION” IN THE SERVICE OF POLITICAL EXPANSION:
ON THE EVE OF THE “GREAT GREEK PROJECT” OF CATHERINE II.

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