

Odessa, the City of Catherine

Description

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Ukrainian workers dismantle the “Monument to Empress Catherine II of Russia and her companions” in Ekaterininskaya Square, Odessa, on December 28, 2022.

They came in the middle of the night, a handful of municipal employees manning a crane which they used to dismantle the bronze statue of Empress Catherine II, known as “Catherine the Great.” The statue was part of an assembly of bronze figures collectively known as the “Monument of the Founders of Odessa.” One of these figures was of José de Ribas, a Spanish naval officer who joined the Russian Imperial Army in 1772, leading it to victory against the Ottoman forces. Ribas led the assault that captured the territory which would be, in 1794, under an imperial edict issued by Catherine, Odessa. Ribas was the first administrator of the city. Another figure depicted François Sainte de Wollant, a Flemish engineer who was the first architect of Odessa. Platon Zubov was a Russian nobleman and believed to be Catherine’s closest advisor (and secret lover), while Grigory Potemkin, another Russian nobleman, was Catherine’s most influential advisor (and secret lover), who was the first Governor of the territories of New Russia, including Odessa, that were captured from the Ottomans.

These figures were all removed, and placed in storage, as part of an effort overseen by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to “de-Russify” Ukraine by eliminating all symbols of Ukraine’s Russian heritage.

Zelensky’s efforts, however, have not dampened Russia’s emotional and historic ties to Odessa. This point was driven home by Russian President Vladimir Putin during his annual end of the year question and answer event on December 14. “I have always said and as I am saying today,” Putin declared, “that despite the current tragic developments, Russians and Ukrainians are essentially one people.”

Putin likened the current conflict to a “civil war” between two fraternal peoples. But he made clear that parts of Ukraine were more Russian than Ukrainian. “The southeastern part of Ukraine has always been pro-Russian because it is historically a Russian territory,” Putin said. “Neither Crimea nor the Black Sea region has any connection to Ukraine,” he continued, before concluding, “Odessa is a Russian city. We know this. Everyone knows this.”

The original Monument to Empress Catherine II of Russia and her companions was built in 1900, the belated byproduct of patriotic fervor that had gripped Odessa in 1894—Odessa’s centennial. It was toppled by the Bolsheviks in 1920, with Catherine’s bust dismantled, and the statues of the four founders removed to a warehouse. In 2007 a pro-Russian member of the Odessa City Council, Ruslan Tarpan, raised funds to restore the monument of Catherine and her four subjects. On October 27, 2007, the new monument was unveiled in a lavish ceremony that featured fireworks and a philharmonic orchestra.

But not everyone was thrilled with the idea of celebrating a Russian Empress; then-President Viktor Yushchenko, who had elevated the pro-Nazi Ukrainian nationalist leader, Stepan Bandera, to “hero” status in Ukraine, condemned the monument, and police had to be called in to separate those who participated in the unveiling ceremony from crowds of Ukrainian nationalists who had traveled to Odessa to disrupt the proceedings.

These Ukrainian nationalists eventually succeeded in forcing Tarpan to flee to exile in the United Emirates to escape charges of embezzlement; these same nationalists later flocked to Odessa in May 2014, where they set fire to a building where pro-Russian demonstrators had gathered, leading to the deaths of 48 persons. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 provided the final impetus for the Ukrainian nationalists to remove the monument.

The marble plinth that held the monument is now empty, save for a Ukrainian flag. Despite the passage of a law by President Zelensky in April 2023 forbidding Russian names to be used for public places, the square that was home to the monument is still known as Katerynynska Square. Nearby are the Potemkin Steps, made famous in Sergei Eisenstein’s 1925 classic silent movie, [*Battleship Potemkin*](#), which tells the story of the revolt of the sailors of that warship during the 1905 Revolution.

While the Soviet authorities sought to depict Odessa first as a revolutionary city, and later as a “Hero City” (the city was besieged by German and Romanian forces from August-October 1941, before falling), the reality of Odessa was perhaps most closely captured by the Jewish-Russian writer, Isaak Babel, who, in his *Odessa Tales*, depicts a city defined by hedonism and lawlessness. Alexander Pushkin, the Russian poet, spent 13 months in exile in Odessa; his observations of life in that city, circa 1823-24, is said to have influenced his famous novel, *Eugene Onegin*. The culture of Odessa,

whether told through the eyes of Babel or Pushkin—or any other Russian writer—was defined by its geography, positioned as it was on the Black Sea, serving as the gateway to the Bosphorus and eastern Mediterranean Sea. Odessa was always more Levantine than European in terms of its culture, its port city status linking it to the rich mercantile heritage of the region.

While Ukrainian nationalists emphasize that, based upon the 2001 census, a little over 60% of Odessa's population of 1.1 million persons identifies as Ukrainian (Russians comprised just under 30%), the reality is that Odessa has always had an air of Russophone cosmopolitanism, with its inhabitants speaking in uniquely accented-Russian. This diversity of cultures grounded in Russian reality is what defines much of the Russian Federation today, a definition that held true during Soviet and Imperial Russian rule as well. The fact that Odessa and the pro-Russian regions of southeastern Ukraine (or New Russia, as it was known during the time of Catherine the Great) fell under Ukrainian rule following the dissolution of the Soviet Union is, as Russian President Putin noted, an accident of history.

It looks as if the “accident” is about to be rectified. Putin's reference to Odessa as a “Russian city” provides a critical insight into the thinking of the Russian leadership. But this thinking is not shaped by nostalgia alone—the fact that the Ukrainian government has transformed Odessa into a base where NATO, using Ukrainian forces as its proxy, is able to threaten the Black Sea Fleet's Sevastopol base, sealed Odessa's fate. Simply put, Russia cannot permit whatever Ukrainian entity that emerges from the current conflict to ever again be able to use Odessa as a sword pressed into Russia's side.

Odessa will be Russian again. This is a fact driven by geopolitical reality as well as historical precedence. Odessa will be Russian because it always has been Russian. No matter how much Ukrainian nationalism, manifested in the ideology of Stepan Bandera as interpreted by the deeds and actions of Volodymyr Zelensky, seeks to argue otherwise, the simple fact of the matter is that the Banderist ideology of the Zelensky government is completely out of step with the reality of Odessa which, even today, still retains the characteristic rogue charm as described by Babel in the 13 short stories that comprise his [Odessa Tales](#).

Isaac Babel was [executed](#) by the NKVD in 1940, his post-revolutionary writing considered counter-revolutionary by Stalin and his ilk. But his words live on in the daily beat of life in a city which came to life under the multi-cultured guidance of Catherine the Great and her four associates—half of whom were not Russian. And let there be no doubt—someday in the not-so-distant future, Catherine's visage, and those of her four advisors, will once again grace the plinth in the center of Katerynynska square, a Russian leader once again looming large over a Russian city.