

## THE FOREIGN POLICY OF CATHERINE II

Catherine II's personal conquests were almost as remarkable as her accomplishments in foreign relations. Her successes, which were even greater than Peter I's, were partly due to the fact that here, as with men, Catherine knew what she wanted. And what she wanted for Russia was a preeminent position not only in European but world affairs. She was also successful because she had the necessary means to attain that ambition—a powerful army ready to support her schemes regardless of human or material cost—and, most importantly, because the international situation favored her schemes.

### *Prussia and Poland*

One of the basic cornerstones of Catherine II's success abroad during her early reign was her close cooperation with Frederick II of Prussia. The rapprochement with Prussia was supported by Catherine's chief diplomatic adviser, Count Nikita I. Panin, the architect of the so-called Northern Accord that had sought, unsuccessfully, to group Prussia, Sweden, Denmark, England, Poland, and Saxony around Russia. The structure of Catherine's pro-Prussian policy was first apparent in her endorsement of the treaty Peter III had signed with Frederick II on May 2, 1762. It was cemented on April 11, 1764, with the signing of the Treaty of St. Petersburg. By the terms of this document, which with renewals held until March 31, 1788, the two sovereigns pledged mutual military and financial assistance in case Russia were attacked by Turkey, and Prussia by Austria or France. Both bound themselves to coordinate their policies in Sweden in order to keep its weak government in power; both agreed to maintain the state of anarchy and civil war that existed in Poland, by force if necessary, and both resolved to intercede with the Polish Government in order to remove all forms of discrimination



against Protestant and Orthodox dissenters living in Poland. The Treaty of St. Petersburg was more than a simple statement of cordial relations; it was an aggressive alliance against Sweden and Poland, and as such it presaged the subsequent partition of Poland.

The first fruit of Russo-Prussian cooperation was Russian military occupation of Courland, a fief of the Polish crown. There then followed a massive invasion of Poland itself to ensure the election by the Polish *Sejm* (Diet) on September 7, 1764, of Count Stanislaw Poniatowski, an ex-lover of Catherine's, as the new King of Poland. Frederick II, of course, supported Catherine's candidate, and abiding by the terms of their alliance, he also concurred with her subsequent opposition to Polish efforts aimed at introducing constitutional reform and her championing of the cause of the Orthodox communities. The Russian drive in behalf of the Orthodox dissidents in Poland began in earnest in September, 1767, when Russian armies overran Poland, occupied Warsaw, deported leaders of the Catholic opposition to Russia, and compelled the assembled *Sejm* to approve Russian actions. On February 24, 1768, Russian and Polish officials signed a treaty that limited the use of the *liberum veto*—a constitutional practice that allowed a single legislator to kill a legislative proposal—to internal affairs, proclaimed freedom of religious beliefs, conferred upon religious minorities full civil and political rights, and reserved for Russia the right to intervene at will in Poland's internal affairs.

The rough Russian behavior alarmed many Poles. As a result, an anti-Russian and anti-royalist "confederation" was formed in March, 1768, at Bar in the Ukraine under the banner of "liberty and faith." Polish anti-Russian insurgents received sympathetic considerations in Turkey, Austria, France, and Sweden, whose leaders were also alarmed by Russian behavior. They were aroused by Russia's aggression against Poland, but they were overwhelmed by a new Russian military invasion of Poland that advanced as far as Cracow. They were also disturbed by Prussian occupation of West Prussia and by the bloody uprising against the Poles by the Ukrainian *haidamaks*, or restless and oppressed peasants. Encouraged by Russian authorities, the *haidamaks* perpetrated atrocities against Catholics, Uniates, and Jews. They were then massacred by Russian forces—this time with the aid of Polish military units—to prevent the socially and economically oriented violence from spreading into Russia proper.

### *Again the Turks*

Russian intervention to terminate the *haidamak* movement tightened Catherine's control over Poland, but it also signaled the beginning of the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774. The pretext for the start of hostilities was the alleged intrusion by a band of the *haidamaks* into Turkish territory. The war was really triggered, however, by the Turks'



consternation over Russia's occupation of Poland and by the Russians' belief, generated in part by their successes in Poland, that the time had come to resolve the "Eastern Question" to their satisfaction. The Russians moved against the Turks on three levels simultaneously. They sent agents among the Balkan Slavs and Orthodox Christians to incite them to rise against the Turks; they dispatched a naval expedition in July, 1769, from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, and in the fall of 1769 they advanced by land. The anticipated insurrection proved to be a myth, but the naval and land expeditions were tangible successes in spite of the deplorable state of Russian equipment. Early in July, 1770, the Russian naval squadron annihilated a Turkish fleet at Scio and Chesme, and Russian armies occupied Azov, Izmail, Akkerman, Bucharest, and several points in Crimea. These successes, coupled with rumors about Russian designs on Turkey, upset the European powers, and because they were also costly in human lives for victor and vanquished alike, the belligerents decided to talk peace. The outbreak of the great peasant disturbance in Russia accelerated these negotiations, and on July 21, 1774, in the village of Kuchuk-Kainardzhi, Russia and Turkey signed a peace treaty.

In this notable document both parties pledged to live in eternal and inviolable peace and friendship. They recognized the Crimean khanate as an independent state, agreed to withdraw their forces from Crimea and its vicinity, and promised never to intervene in the internal affairs of the new state. For their part the Russians agreed to evacuate their forces from Bulgaria, Bessarabia, Wallachia, Moldavia, the coastal islands, Georgia, and Mingrelia on condition the Turks agree not to mistreat persons who may have collaborated with Russian occupation forces. The Russians retained "for eternity" Azov, Kerch, part of the Kuban and Terek districts, and the territory between the Dnieper and Bug rivers. For their part the Turks granted the Russians the right to protect all interests of the Orthodox Church in Turkey. They gave Russia full and free transit rights for Russian Orthodox pilgrims to and from Jerusalem, allowed free navigation for Russian merchant vessels on the Black Sea and through the Straits, and pledged to assist the Russians in gaining commercial access to Tripoli, Tunis, and Algeria. The Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainardzhi accomplished for Russia in the Black Sea what that of Nystadt had done in the Baltic. It did not destroy the Ottoman Empire—although it made it the "sick man of Europe." What it did do was make Russia a Black Sea power.

Meanwhile, to allay Austrian and Prussian concerns about these spectacular gains, and thereby prevent a hostile coalition against Russia, Catherine II reluctantly consented to a scheme conceived by Frederick II to partition Poland. Her consent was contrary to the letter and spirit of the Russo-Polish treaty of February 24, 1768, guaranteeing the Polish constitution. Nevertheless, on February 5, 1772, Russia, Prussia, and Austria signed the first partition agreement, occupied their respective portions, and induced Poniatowski and the Polish Sejm by bribes and



by force to approve the *fait accompli*. Through this action Russia gained the Polotsk, Vitebsk, and Mogilev districts and a portion of Livonia; Prussia secured West Prussia and all of Pomerania except Danzig, and Austria annexed all of Galicia except Cracow. For Poland the partitioning meant the loss of about one-third of its territory and more than one-third of its population. Because Poniatowski continued as King of Poland, Russia retained its predominant position in the country.

Catherine II's territorial gains in Poland and the exceptionally favorable terms of the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainardzhi thrust Russia's prestige to new heights. She raised that prestige even higher in 1778 and 1779 when she was asked to arbitrate the War of Bavarian Succession between Prussia and Austria. In the process she secured for Russia vague protective rights over the Holy Roman Empire. In 1780, during the American War of Independence, Catherine advanced Russian interests still further when she sponsored the Armed Neutrality Act, which sought to bring the continental maritime powers together to resist English domination of the seas and to establish the principle that neutral ships were free to travel the oceans as they pleased. At about the same time Catherine launched her greatest ambition, the Greek Project. Her plan was to expel the Turks from Europe, restore the Byzantine Empire under Russian tutelage, and create an independent kingdom of Dacia (present-day Rumania) with Potemkin as its king.

### *The Greek Project*

Catherine could not carry out this scheme without Austrian co-operation. She therefore signed a secret alliance with Emperor Joseph II in May, 1781, under which the two monarchs agreed to maintain the status quo in Poland and to partition the European portion of the Ottoman Empire. Austria's share was to be the western half of the Balkan Peninsula (roughly present-day Yugoslavia); Russia was to have the rest. In pursuit of that "historic mission," Russia annexed Crimea in April, 1783—an action that made the native Tatars unhappy, outraged the Turks, and made Russia's west European adversaries suspicious. Turkish apprehensions were further increased that same year when Russia extended its protection over Georgia, and in 1787 their fears turned to panic when, on her way to inspect Crimea, Catherine II met Joseph II and Poniatowski to coordinate their anti-Turkish crusade.

The Turks responded to Russia's provocations with a demand for the evacuation of Crimea. When the Russians refused, a new Russo-Turkish war (1787–1791) began. Bound by his alliance with Russia, Joseph II declared war on the Ottoman Empire in January, 1788. Russian strategy was similar to that of the war of 1768–1774. It envisaged an anti-Turkish uprising in the Balkans, a naval campaign in the Black and the Mediterranean seas, and a land drive toward the Caucasus and, with the Austrians, across the Danube. Allied performance suffered at



first from bitter rivalries among top Russian military men and from quarrels between Russian and Austrian commanders. Even so, they were able to seize such strategic fortresses as Khotin, Iassy, and Ochakov; Ochakov at an exceptionally heavy cost in men and matériel.

Russian military plans against the Turks were upset, however, by the Swedish declaration of war against Russia in July, 1788. The sudden Swedish land and naval invasion, which was supported by England and Prussia, of an inadequately defended region of Russian Finland had its effect on Russia's moves against the Turks. It canceled the planned expedition by the Russian Baltic Fleet to the eastern Mediterranean to promote rebellion among Christians in the Ottoman Empire. Swedish action also forced the Russians to withdraw some forces from the Turkish campaign to defend their unprotected capital. Although both sides had their share of victories and defeats in the ensuing campaign, the Russians again performed rather well against the Swedes. They were aided by discontent among some Swedish officers who refused to recognize the legality of the war because it had not been formally approved by the Swedish Parliament. The Russians were also helped by the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 because it diverted English attention to developments closer to home. On August 14, 1790, the Swedes and the Russians terminated their conflict with the Treaty of Verela. In return for the territorial status quo ante bellum, the Russians abdicated their claims to control of Swedish constitutional arrangements.

In spite of waging war on two fronts, the Russians, and their Austrian allies, continued to do well against the Turks, and in the course of 1789 they occupied Belgrade and Bucharest. The year of 1790, however, was full of surprises. In January, the Austrian Netherlands rebelled successfully, and unrest in Hungary and Galicia threatened the existence of the Hapsburg monarchy. Alarmed by the sharp upswing in Russian and Austrian might in southeastern Europe, Prussia concluded a defensive alliance with the Ottoman Turks in January, 1790, and an anti-Russian, anti-Austrian alliance with Poland two months later. Meanwhile, Catherine II's trusted ally Joseph II died in February, 1790; he was succeeded by his brother Leopold II, who immediately entered into peace negotiations with the Ottoman Turks and Prussians.

These changes forced the Russians to rely on their own strength in the war against the Turks, and they demonstrated that they had plenty of it. In September, 1790, they captured Izmail, the strongest fortress on the Danube, and crossed the river early in 1791. Rejecting all mediation offers, even threats, from England and Prussia, they finally compelled the Turks to accept their peace terms on January 9, 1792, in the town of Iassy. The Turks acquiesced in the Russian annexation of Kuban, Crimea, and the territory between the Bug and the Dniester rivers; they pledged to stop raids against Russian possessions in the northern Caucasus; and they again agreed to assist Russian commercial interests in Tripoli, Tunis, and Algeria. The Russians returned Wal-



lachia, Moldavia, and Bessarabia, which they had occupied during the war, to Ottoman rule on condition that the Turks not abuse the population. The Treaty of Iassy did not bring the complete realization of Catherine's Greek Project but it did dislodge the Turks from large and rich areas whose annexation by the Russians enormously strengthened their foothold on the Black Sea region.

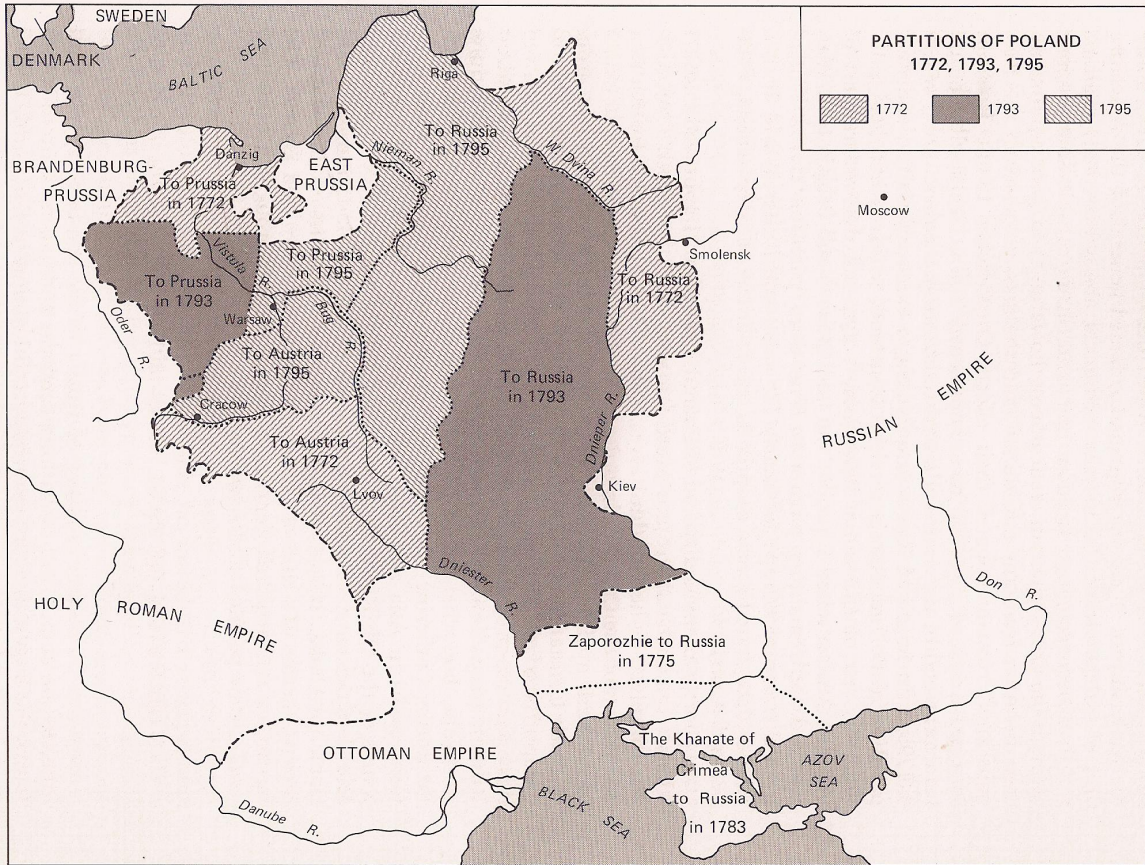
Freed from the conflict with the Ottoman Empire, Catherine turned her attention to disturbing developments in Poland aimed at terminating Russian domination. Since 1787, that effort, which manifested itself in the removal of many old abuses and in the introduction of reforms, had been inspired by the revival of nationalistic feeling, by Russian preoccupation with Turkey and Sweden, by the ideas of the American and French revolutions, and by Prussian promises of military assistance. On May 3, 1791, the Poles adopted a new constitution that abolished the three principal causes of Poland's past troubles: the liberum veto, the "confederation system," and the elective monarchy. The new "revolutionary" system, which was endorsed by the Prussian and Austrian monarchs, stunned Catherine II. There was little she could do about it, however, as long as Russia was at war with the Turks and as long as Prussia and Austria were free to assist Poland militarily. The following year conditions changed in Catherine's favor: the Treaty of Iassy released Russian armies for deployment in Poland, and Prussia and Austria became involved in war with revolutionary France.

### *Poland Partitioned*

A year to the month after the Poles adopted their new constitution, Catherine sponsored a Polish anticonstitutional and antirevolutionary "confederation" in the Ukraine. Its selected pro-Russian members promptly appealed to her for military aid to restore old Polish liberties. A few days later a 100,000-man army invaded Poland, forced Poniatowski to renounce the 1791 constitution, and restored Russian domination. Confronted with these developments the Prussians demanded their share—which the Russians agreed to in the Treaty of St. Petersburg (1793); it provided for the second partition of Poland. Russia's share in this territorial aggrandizement included an area of some 90,000 square miles stretching from the Dvina to the Dniester River and from Dnieper to Pinsk, an area inhabited by Lithuanians, Belorussians, Ukrainians, and Jews as well as Poles. Prussia's share was about 23,000 square miles and included Danzig, Great Poland, Poznan, and other districts inhabited primarily by Poles. This time the partition meant that Poland lost more than half of both its territory and population. At the point of Russian bayonets, the Polish Sejm ratified the territorial dismemberment on July 22, 1793, and placed the remaining territories of Poland under Russian protection.

Predictably, the Russo-Prussian dismemberment provoked an up-







rising against Russia and Prussia, which began in March, 1794, under the leadership of Thadeusz Kosciuszko, famed general of the American War of Independence. At first the insurgents, abetted by many peasants who had been promised freedom and land, made considerable progress through the use of partisan tactics. Soon, however, their poor equipment, their isolation from any outside aid, and the massive power of the Russians and Prussians doomed their efforts. On October 10 the Russians whipped Kosciuszko's main force, imprisoned him at Schlüsselburg, and before the end of the year eradicated resistance everywhere. On January 3, 1795, Austria joined Russia and Prussia to execute the third and final partition of Poland. Russia received Courland, which it had held since 1763, the rest of Lithuania, Belorussia, Volyn and the western part of Podolie; Austria seized Little Poland and Cracow, and Prussia took Warsaw and the remaining territories. The third partition erased Poland from the map of Europe for nearly 125 years—until after World War I. It also inaugurated a new chapter in the relations between Russia, Prussia, and Austria.

Shortly after she disposed of Poland, Catherine II approved another scheme, the Oriental Project. More fantastic than the Greek Project, it was conceived by her youthful lover, Zubov. The plan called for Russian occupation of the Caucasus in order to attack Persia to the east, in efforts to establish a direct link with India, and Turkey to the west, in order to reach Constantinople. During her lifetime the Russians were able to occupy Baku and Derbent. Catherine's son and successor, Paul, shelved this grandiose project and to save Russia from probable defeat withdrew Russian troops from the Caucasus. The Oriental Project did not quite work out, but what might be called the Asian-American Project did, for during Catherine II's reign the Russians made extremely large territorial gains in Asia and America. In the 1760s they secured the headwaters of the Ob River, they later subdued the Chukchi Peninsula, and at about the same time they conquered the Aleutian Islands and laid claim to Alaska. If successful aggression be the hallmark of greatness, then Catherine II's title of "the Great" was certainly well earned. The territories she acquired for her adopted empire brought Russia new wealth, new peoples—and new problems.