
Cossacks, Empire, and the Enlightenment: From Orientalization to Republican Reappropriation*

Volodymyr Sklokin
Ukrainian Catholic University
sklokin@ucu.edu.ua

Abstract:

This article seeks to explore how Enlightenment narratives and categories framed the perception and image of the Zaporozhian Cossacks both in the imperial center and in the south-western periphery of the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century. It demonstrates that Catherine II deployed the discourse of civilizational mission to justify the disbandment of the Zaporozhian Cossack Host and the liquidation of the Zaporozhian Sich. The historical works of Voltaire became an important source of inspiration for Catherine's orientalist image of the Ukrainian Cossacks, which gained wide currency in the Russian Empire and was accepted by some representatives of the Ukrainian Cossack elite. On the other hand, the Enlightenment allowed some Ukrainians to challenge imperial hegemony by going beyond traditional estate and regional particularism and by rethinking the Cossack tradition as a democratic republican one and setting it against the supposed despotism of Imperial Russia.

Keywords:

Enlightenment, Zaporozhian Cossacks, Sloboda Ukraine, Catherine II, Voltaire, orientalization, republicanism

Oh! To what extent the wide-ranging concept of enlightenment, which reigns in various human minds and opinions, might be harmfully abused.

Roman Tsebrikov, "Journey from St. Petersburg to Kharkiv" (1815)

Already in its heyday, intellectuals from Eastern Europe were acutely aware of the ambivalent nature of the Enlightenment, in which the urge for rationalization and emancipation was tightly intertwined with the desire for power and domination. The issues of imperial conquest and domination were frequently present in their reflections on the topic. The following quote from "The Philosophical Proposals" (1768), a treatise by Iakiv Kozelskii, a Ukrainian philosopher, scion of the Cossack *starshyna* family from the Hetmanate, and an alumnus of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, perfectly exemplifies this attitude:

Mr. Rousseau believes that it would be more beneficial for the human race to live naturally and not to know arts and sciences. I agree with this opinion because history shows that when peoples were simpler, they were more virtuous and hence more prosperous [...] [I]t was good to follow this opinion when the whole human race was in natural simplicity. But in the contemporary condition of the scholarly world, if a certain people decided

not to study, other scholarly peoples would eat them up quickly and with a sportsman’s appetite. Then, without doubt, they would be convinced by these enlightened wolves of the harmfulness of their simplicity in these wise and perverted times. America serves as clear proof of this: when European scholarly kites flew there and quickly demonstrated their mastery, prowess, and agility over the local chicks, she lost her natural prosperity. The only option for America now is to search for new, nascent prosperity in arts and only with the help of arts might she hope to ward off the hungry guests.¹

The Enlightenment, which is identified here with the development of arts and sciences, is an inescapable challenge that every nation needs to take up if it does not want to be absorbed by stronger and more Enlightened neighbors. In the case of Ukraine, this was a double challenge because it not only came from “enlightened European kites” but also from St. Petersburg’s enlightened absolutism, which sought institutional, legal, and also, to some extent, the cultural unification of imperial space.

Issues of empire, colonialism, and orientalizing have become some of the main perspectives through which the very concept of the Enlightenment has been challenged and revisited during the last two decades.² The image of Ukraine and Ukrainian Cossacks created by Enlightenment thinkers and travelers has been actively examined in recent historiography.³ Research into the links between the reception of the Enlightenment and the emergence of imperial consciousness in the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century has already begun.⁴ However, not enough attention has been paid to the

* Work on this article was made possible by a visiting fellowship at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna provided by the *Ukraine in European Dialog* program and a research grant provided by the Ukrainian Catholic University. I thank *Vivliofika*’s two anonymous reviewers for their valuable and stimulating comments.

¹ Ia. P. Kozelskii, “Filosoficheskie predlozheniia,” in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia russkikh myslitelei vtoroi poloviny XVIII veka*, ed. I. Ia. Scchepanov (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1952), vol. 1: 414.

² Damien Tricoire, “Introduction,” in *Enlightened Colonialism: Civilization Narratives and Imperial Politics in the Age of Reason*, ed. Damien Tricoire (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1-22; *The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

³ Andreas Kappeler, *Vom Land der Kosaken zum Land der Bauern: Die Ukraine im Horizont des Westens vom 16. bis 19. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2020); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Ievhen Luniak, *Kozats’ka Ukraina XVI-XVIII st. u frantsuz’kykh istorychnykh doslidzhenniakh* (Kyiv-Nizhyn: Vydavets’ P.P. Lysenko, 2012); Dmytro Nalyvaiko, *Ochyma Zakhodu: Retseptsiiia Ukrainy v Zakhidnii Evropi XI-XVIII st.* (Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo KNU im. T. Shevchenka, 1998); Vadym Adadurov, “Napoleonida” na skhodi Ievropy: uivlennia, proekty ta diial’nist’ uriadu Frantsii shchodo pivdenno-zakhidnykh okrain Rossiiskoi imperii na pochatku XIX st. (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo UKU, 2018), 211-229.

⁴ Ricarda Vulpius, “Vesternizatsiia Rossii i formirovanie rossiskoi tsivilizatorskoi missii v XVIII veke,” in *Imperium inter pares: Rol’ transferov v istorii Rossiiskoi imperii (1700-1917)*, eds. Martin Aust, Ricarda Vulpius, Alexei Miller (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2010), 15; *eadem*, “Civilizing Strategies and the Beginning of Colonial Policy in the Eighteenth-Century Russian Empire,” in *Enlightened Colonialism*, ed.

instrumentalization of Enlightenment ideas and narratives by the Russian imperial authorities in their policies aimed at the abolition of Cossack Ukrainian autonomies—and more importantly—to their reception in eighteenth-century Ukraine.⁵ This article seeks to explore how Enlightenment narratives and categories framed the perception and image of the Zaporozhian Cossacks both in the imperial center and in Ukraine in the late eighteenth century. It demonstrates that the Enlightenment provided intellectual resources for both orientalizing/self-orientalizing of the Ukrainian Cossacks and for the reclaiming of their legacy by the republican tradition.

Kozelskii wrote “The Philosophical Proposals” in the late 1760s, at a time when a new wave of Russian empire building had just begun. The eighteenth-century became a crucial period in the long process of turning Russia into an empire. Russia was formally proclaimed an empire in 1721, after the victory in the Northern War, but by the mid-eighteenth century, both Russian rulers and the elites in the capitals developed an imperial consciousness and started to perceive their country as an important part of the “civilized” family of European nations. There is no agreement in contemporary historiography as to whether sixteenth and seventeenth-century Muscovy can be called an empire in a modern sense. What is clear, however, is that Muscovite elites did not think in the colonial and civilizational categories of their eighteenth-century successors. Instead, they “understood the whole state with all its heterogeneous population as the single patrimony of the tsars.”⁶ The westernization initiated by tsars Aleksei Mikhailovich and Peter I, together with the military competition with dominant European powers, contributed to the emergence of an imperial consciousness and identity among Russian rulers and elites. In the mid-eighteenth century one can already find instances of the employment of the discourse of the civilizing mission and colonial policies on the empire’s frontiers, such as Siberia and Central Asia.⁷ This trend gathered momentum during the reign of Empress Catherine II, who, among other eighteenth-century Russian rulers, undertook the most consistent attempts to reduce the diverse peripheries of the empire to a common denominator.

In particular, the age of enlightened absolutism in the Russian Empire marked the end of a century-long tradition of autonomy and corporate privileges among Ukrainian Cossacks. Driven by the ideas of enlightened rationalization and Cameralist administrative unification, Catherine II abolished the autonomy of the so-called “western borderlands” of the empire, including the three Ukrainian Cossack autonomous regions that had existed in

Tricoire, 113-132; *eadem*, *Die Geburt des Russländischen Imperiums. Herrschaftskonzepte und -praktiken im 18. Jahrhundert* (Cologne-Weimar-Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2020).

⁵ The first steps in this direction have already been made. See, Vladyslav Hrybov’skyi, “G. F. Miller i likvidatsia Zapoz’koi Sichi, abo do pytannia pro rol’ osobystosti istoryka v istorii,” *Sicheslavs’kii al’manakh* 6 (2011), 39-65; Volodymyr Sklokin, “Catherine II, Evdokim Shcherbinin and the Abolition of Sloboda Ukraine’s Autonomy,” in *Eighteenth-Century Ukraine: New Perspectives on Social, Cultural, and Intellectual History*, eds. Zenon Kohut, Volodymyr Sklokin, and Frank Sysyn with Larysa Bilous (Montreal & Kingston-London-Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023), 115-143; *idem*, “Sloboda Ukraine, Imperial Unification, and Enlightened Absolutism: Some Afterthoughts,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2020), 249-262; *idem*, *Rosiis’ka imperiia i Slobids’ka Ukraïna u druhii polovyni XVIII stolittia: prosvichenyi absolutyzm, impers’ka intehratsia, lokalne suspil’stvo* (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo UKU, 2019).

⁶ Vulpius, “Vesternizatsiia Rossii i formirovanie rossiskoi tsivilizatorskoi missii v XVIII veke,” 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-37; and Vulpius, *Die Geburt des Russländischen Imperiums*.

the Russian Empire since the mid-seventeenth century: Sloboda Ukraine (1765), the Zaporozhian Cossacks (1775), and the Hetmanate (1764-1783).⁸

Catherine II held a negative view of the Ukrainian Cossacks and their political and military system from the beginning of her reign. She emphasized their anarchism, ineffective political institutions that combined military and civil authority, the corruption of elites, and idleness and the lack of a civic spirit among the common people.⁹ Catherine's attitude towards the Cossacks was shaped by many people. An important part was undoubtedly played by imperial officials responsible for the management of Ukrainian territories, such as Evdokim Shcherbinin, Petr Rumiantsev, and Grigorii Potemkin, as well as scholars, such as the court historiographer Gerhard Friedrich Müller, who produced expert knowledge on Ukraine. Finally, the Empress was well acquainted with the last Cossack Hetman, Kyrylo Rozumosky, his brother Oleksii, as well some other representatives of the so-called "Ukrainian party" in St. Petersburg. However, in Catherine's prejudice against the Cossacks one can also detect the impact of the French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire, who produced probably the most well-known eighteenth-century orientalist image of Ukrainian Cossacks.

Catherine had been fascinated by Voltaire since her childhood. She called him her "teacher" and "thinking instructor" and corresponded with him from 1763 until the philosopher's death in 1778. Even though Voltaire never visited Catherine in Russia, both benefited from this remote friendship, and Voltaire did a lot to promote and justify Catherine's reforms and wars in Western Europe.¹⁰

Voltaire's views on Ukraine and the Cossacks have received extensive treatment in the historiography.¹¹ There was an evolution of his views from a neutral and even sympathetic account of the Ukrainian Cossacks as a nation that has "always aspired to be free," in the first edition of *History of Charles XII, the King of Sweden* (1731), but had been unjustly enslaved by Poland and Russia, to a more negative view in *History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great* (2 vol., 1759-1763). In the latter work, which was commissioned by Empress Elizabeth, Ukraine is depicted as a barbarous periphery that was opposing the civilizing reforms of the imperial center. Voltaire called Ukrainian Cossacks "the strangest people who are on the earth" and refers to them as "barbarians." The most orientaling image was reserved for the Zaporozhian Cossacks, who are presented as descendants of ancient Scythians and are attributed as possessing several astounding characteristics that mixed reality with the bizarre fantasy of the French philosopher who never visited Ukraine or Russia.¹²

⁸ Zenon Kohut, *Russian Centralism and Ukrainian Autonomy: Imperial Absorption of the Hetmanate, 1760s-1830s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Sklokin, *Rosiis'ka imperiia i Slobids'ka Ukraïna*.

⁹ Sklokin, "Catherine II, Evdokim Shcherbinin and the Abolition of Sloboda Ukraine's Autonomy," 115-143.

¹⁰ Inna Gorbatov, "Voltaire and Russia in the Age of Enlightenment," *Orbis Litterarum* 62:5 (2007), 384-385, 389-390.

¹¹ Thomas M. Prymak, "Voltaire on Mazepa and Early Eighteenth-Century Ukraine," *Canadian Journal of History* XLVII:3 (2012): 259-283; Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 89-94; Kappeler, *Vom Land der Kosaken zum Land der Bauern*, 148-154; Luniak, *Kozats'ka Ukraina*, 226-254.

¹² Prymak, "Voltaire on Mazepa and Early Eighteenth-Century Ukraine," 262-266, 272-275; Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 91-94.

Historians continue to argue about the sources of Voltaire's knowledge of Ukraine and the reasons for the U-turn in his attitude towards the Cossacks.¹³ Was it a sincere rethinking of the meaning of historical events or a pragmatic decision to meet the expectations of the Russian government that commissioned the work? Regardless of Voltaire's real intentions, his depiction of the Zaporozhian Cossacks as "the strangest people who are on the earth" and an embodiment of primitive military anarchism might be regarded as the western European Enlightenment orientalizing of the Ukrainian Cossack political system, which gained wide currency in Western Europe and especially in the Russian Empire, where *History of the Russian Empire Under Peter the Great* had already been translated into Russian in the early 1760s.

Catherine II herself was a careful reader of Voltaire.¹⁴ In justifying the abolition of the autonomy of the Hetmanate and Sloboda Ukraine, she employed elements of civilizational discourse introduced by Voltaire, pointing to the outdated Cossack political institutions that combined military and civil authority, elite corruption, as well as the idleness of the common people.¹⁵ However, a full-fledged orientalist discourse of civilizational superiority and civilizational mission, as well as an explicit colonial policy justified by them, were reserved for the Zaporozhian Cossacks, who were disbanded in 1775 and whose territory was included in the province of New Russia.

The disbandment of the Zaporozhian Host was made possible by the Russian victory in the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774, which in turn made the Crimean Khanate dependent on Russia and virtually eliminated any Tatar threat for the southern frontier of the Russian Empire. The new geopolitical configuration made the Zaporozhians redundant in the eyes of the imperial government. Additionally, after the suppression of the Pugachev Rebellion in late 1774, the government embarked on the reorganization of the Cossack hosts on the imperial frontiers. In St. Petersburg, the Zaporozhian Cossacks were perceived as troublemakers and potential traitors. Grigorii Potemkin, who by that time was in charge of New Russia, decided not to bother himself with the reform of the Zaporozhians and suggested that Catherine simply disband the Zaporozhian Host altogether.¹⁶

In her manifesto of August 3, 1775, on the liquidation of the Zaporozhian Sich, which referred to "authors who wrote about the ancient history of the Fatherland," Catherine explicitly called the Zaporozhians "wild" and lacking "civil condition." She blamed them for breaking Russian and natural law, brigandage, and the intention to create an independent country under "their own violent rule." Similar to Voltaire, real facts and bizarre fantasies were mixed in her account.¹⁷ In Catherine's view, the political order of the Zaporozhians

¹³ Prymak, "Voltaire on Mazepa and Early Eighteenth-Century Ukraine," 266-272, 275-278; see also Jean Breuillard's review of the critical edition of *History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great*, which was published in 1999. See Jean Breuillard, "Voltaire, *Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand; Histoire de l'empire de Russie...*," *Revue des études slaves*, 74:4 (2002), 877-883.

¹⁴ Voltaire sent Catherine several personal copies of his *History of the Russian Empire* and Catherine wrote a letter confirming its receipt and expressing her gratitude. See Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 336.

¹⁵ Sklokin, "Catherine II, Evdokim Shcherbinin and the Abolition of Sloboda Ukraine's Autonomy," 115-143.

¹⁶ Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, 359-361.

¹⁷ The real facts dealt mostly with the territorial conflict between the Zaporozhians and the newly established New Russian and Sloboda Ukrainian provinces, which became the main formal pretext for the liquidation of

was so outdated that there was no way to improve it. The only available solution was to liquidate the Zaporozhian Sich, disband the Cossack Host, and assimilate former Cossacks into the administrative and social structures of the empire:

The Zaporozhian Cossacks became wild in their canyons and rapids [...] and created a very special and strange political community that runs contrary to the Creator's intentions in the procreation of humanity [...] Such a diverse and foolish (*iurodivyi*) composition of this political community could not be beneficial to the Fatherland. They live almost completely disregarding the world and rules of natural societal coexistence, [they live] mostly from brigandage among neighboring peoples [...] in temples they often offer sacrifices to Almighty God by their hands full of falsehood and blood, and He shuns them. When they are prevented from brigandage, they live in complete idleness, abominable drunkenness, and despicable ignorance.¹⁸

How were these Orientalist narratives received and responded to in the former Ukrainian Cossack autonomous regions of the empire? We do not know, because no systematic research into this issue has yet been undertaken. My hypothesis, which I hope to sketch out in the remaining part of the article, is that during the last decades of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth century, options of acceptance *and* of ignoring/rejecting the orientalist narratives were on the table. The latter response could be accompanied by attempts to reformulate the Cossack legacy in the categories of Enlightenment political thought as a part of the republican tradition. In what follows, I would like to illustrate this hypothesis through two case studies of individuals from Ukraine who came into contact with Zaporozhian Cossacks during the 1770s and 1780s and who left interesting reflections about their encounters—reflections that shed some light on how Enlightenment narratives and categories framed the perception and image of the Zaporozhian Cossacks in the region. Both of my protagonists, Vasiliï Abaza (1760-1827) and Roman Tsebrikov (1763-1817), were natives of Sloboda Ukraine, another Cossack autonomous region adjacent to Zaporizhzhia.¹⁹

the Zaporozhian Sich and the disbandment of the Zaporozhian Cossack Host. The court historiographer Gerhard Friedrich Müller, who produced a report on the historical roots of the conflict, rightly proved that charters (from the Polish kings and Hetman Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyï) to which the Zaporozhians appealed in this dispute were forgeries. Some historians argued that Müller was the real author of Catherine's manifesto. However, his report and other writings on the Zaporozhians tend to avoid orientalist and colonial discourse. For more details on Müller and his role, see Hrybov'skyï, "G. F. Miller i likvidatsia Zapoz'koi Sichi," 39-65.

¹⁸ *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, 1-aia seriia (St. Petersburg: 1830-1916), vol. 20: 190-193 (no. 13354).

¹⁹ The autonomy of Sloboda Ukraine was abolished in 1765, when it was turned into the Sloboda Ukrainian Province (*gubernia*), with the capital in Kharkiv. The Cossack elite of the region traditionally built its identity on three key pillars: traditional Cossacks rights and liberties, a courageous struggle against the Tatar infidels who were portrayed as the main "Other," and loyal service to Russian monarchs. Since the late seventeenth century, in their communications with the Russian government, the Cossack elite of Sloboda Ukraine often contrasted this loyalty with the infidelity of Ukrainian Cossacks from the Hetmanate and Zaporizhzhia. This trend survived into the 1760s, at least partly, as is apparent in the "instruction" to the Catherinian Legislative

Let us start with Abaza, who represents the attitude of acceptance of the orientalist Enlightenment narrative. Vasilii Abaza was a scion of an Orthodox, ethnically mixed noble family from the Kharkiv region. His father emigrated from Moldavia to the Russian Empire and gained estates in Sloboda Ukraine, whereas his mother belonged to the family of a local Ukrainian Cossack officer. However, neither he nor his father served in local Cossack regiments. Abaza received only a home education. During the 1770s, he served in the imperial army. After his retirement and brief service in the local civil administration, he ran his family estate in the vicinity of Kharkiv. Several years before his death, he wrote a memoir depicting his life and the history of his family. The detailed narrative of the section dealing with the 1770s-1790s allows us to suppose that the memoir was based on memoranda or diary entries written in that period.²⁰

Abaza is an especially interesting case because he encountered the Zaporozhian Cossacks in 1775, when he (as a sergeant in the Kozlovskii infantry regiment) spent half a year in Zaporizhzhia, participating in the disbandment of the Zaporozhian Host, as ordered by Catherine II. His account offers several interesting details about the Zaporozhians and their way of life. However, in general, it closely follows the orientaling Enlightenment image of the Cossacks described above. The Zaporozhians might be strange, sometimes even amusing, but they are described as unambiguously negative characters. In his diary, Abaza looks at the Zaporozhian Cossacks through the western orientalist prism and sees them as an uncivilized, anarchic, and politically unreliable military formation. It is unclear whether he had read Voltaire, but a close analysis of the wording of his memoirs allows us to assume that he was familiar with Catherine's 1775 manifesto on the liquidation of the Zaporizhian Sich. Thus, according to Abaza:

[The Zaporozhians] from time to time visited the main settlement of the Zaporozhian Sich [...] for their own needs or to respond to the call of their chiefs, living mostly from cattle breeding, fishing, and permanent brigandage. They traveled in groups to Poland and Russian regions: Poltava, Kyiv, local Sloboda Ukraine, and even into Kursk and Voronezh provinces, plundering and murdering landlords and other residents. They lived in terrible ignorance, and they were always drunk, they almost did not have any law; however, there were also enlightened persons among them, both Russians and French people, Englishmen, Germans, who joined them looking for an escape from punishments for crimes in their own countries or seeking freedom and idleness that existed in this Sich, [where] they were leading a very carefree and dissolute life. All who joined them seemed to enjoy such a

Commission submitted by the former Cossack *starshyna* of Ostrohozk regiment, who underscored their political loyalty to the Romanov dynasty by specifically juxtaposing it against the treasonous behavior of Hetmans Mazepa, Briukhovets'kyi, and others. See Volodymyr Kravchenko, *Kharkov/Kharkiv: stolitsa pogranychia* (Vilnius: EGU, 2010), 39-47.

²⁰ On Abaza and his memoirs, see Volodymyr Kravchenko, "Nove dzherelo z i storii Zaporoz'koi Sichi," *Kozatstvo XV-XXI st.*, accessed May 7, 2022, http://www.cossackdom.com/doc/kravchenko_zapsich.htm.

corrupt condition [...] They did not have private property, considered everything [they possessed] as shared, and found pleasure only in alcohol.²¹

It should be emphasized that even though Abaza was a scion of an ethnically mixed Moldavian-Ukrainian family, his self-identification apparently did not have any Ukrainian dimension. On the ethnic level, he perceived himself as a Moldavian, and on the political – as an imperial Russian. Because he did not identify himself with the Ukrainian Cossack tradition, acceptance of the orientalist Enlightenment narrative of the Zaporozhian Cossacks did not provoke any change in his identity.

The situation was different for many ethnic Ukrainians. No accounts have yet been written that highlight this issue regarding the former Zaporozhian Cossacks. However, recent research into the abolition of Sloboda Ukraine’s autonomy shows that those Cossack officers who accepted the orientalizing account promoted by the imperial center experienced self-orientalization, which could have been quite a psychologically traumatic process.²² But Enlightenment discourse could not only be used for orientalizing, but also for empowering Cossacks, as the case of Roman Tsebrikov perfectly demonstrates. Tsebrikov was a scion of a Kharkiv Cossack *starshyna* family and studied in Supplementary Classes of Kharkiv College and at Leipzig University. After returning to the Russian Empire in 1784, he served mostly as a translator at the College of Foreign Affairs in St. Petersburg and as Alexander I’s personal translator. Tsebrikov left a diary, several translations of political, philosophical, and historical works from German, French, and Latin, as well as several original philosophic and political essays, which remained mostly unpublished due to their critical attitude to Russian political and social realities.²³

Tsebrikov’s encounter with the Zaporozhian Cossacks occurred in 1788, during the Russian siege of the Turkish fortress of Ochakiv—one of the key events of the Russian-Turkish War of 1787-1791.²⁴ Tsebrikov (who at that time served as a translator in the headquarters of the Russian imperial army) happened to observe a dialog between a Zaporozhian chief (*koshovyi*) and his detachment. This provoked him to leave the following long reflection in his diary:

²¹ “Vek dvorianstva Vasiliia Abazy,” *Instytut rukopysu Natsional’noi biblioteky Ukrainy im. V. I. Vernadskoho*, fond. 12, spr. 702, 132-134.

²² Sklokin, *Rosiis’ka imperiia i Slobids’ka Ukraïna*, 208-215; *idem*, “Skasuvannia avtonomii i transformatsiia identychnosti u Slobidskii Ukraini druhoi polovyny XVIII st.,” in Vadym Adadurov, Volodymyr Sklokin, eds., *Impers’ki identychnosti v ukrains’kii istorii XVIII – pershoi polovyny XIX st.* (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo UKU, 2020), 75-114.

²³ On Tsebrikov’s biography and works, see Sergei Kozlov, “Mir i voina, dolg i svoboda v vospriatii pisatel’ia i perevodchika Romana Tsebrikova,” in *Ot Leipziga do Ochakova: dnevnikovye zapiski R. M. Tsebrikova*, ed. Sergei Kozlov (St. Petersburg: Istoricheskaia illustratsiia 2009), 6-55; Viktoriia Ivashchenko, “O Romane Maksimoviche Tsebrikove i ego puteshestvii,” in Roman Tsebrikov, *Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Kharkov* (Kharkiv: Kharkivskii natsionalnyi universytet im. V. N. Karazina, 2013), 3-28; Sklokin, *Rosiis’ka imperiia i Slobids’ka Ukraïna*, 215-223; Sklokin, “Sloboda Ukraine, Imperial Unification, and Enlightened Absolutism,” 259-260.

²⁴ The Zaporozhian Cossack Host, which had been disbanded in 1775, was reestablished under the name Black Sea Cossack Host in 1787, after the beginning of the Russo-Turkish war.

This is a picture of primordial democratic rule (*narodnoe pravlenie*), where everyone has a voice in enterprises dangerous to life. The liberty of everyone is secured here and everyone says what he thinks. Truth exists more fully here than in regimes limited by autocracy. Everything which is done here is done not under constraint of unfreedom but out of zeal, on one's initiative, backed by conviction in the truthfulness and justness of the enterprise. Everyone is a gentleman (*gospodin*) and enjoys liberty, and nobody is a slave and cannot be oppressed because of the nature of this regime. Equality rules here, and everyone feels that he is a member of society, and he can with his voice, rights, and with his personality influence the well-being of everybody. He knows that to oppress one person means to undermine the foundation of this regime, where the good of all members and each one in particular depends on securing the freedom of one person. They do not feel here the despicable meanness and humiliation that exists in autocratic regimes, where there is [only] a peasant (*muzhyk*) and a general. What a great distance! Sovereign, first-person, who solely decides on war and peace, execution and pardon, reward, and punishment. In such regimes, a word cannot be pronounced without awe and extreme passion, and abasement. He is imbued with sanctity, and if anyone dared to criticize him, he would be cruelly executed, even if it was absolute truth. He shines, whereas the peasant, who is the same creature, crawls on the earth like a groveling worm. He is rich with broad knowledge, whereas that one hardly knows about the village in which he was born. He lives in abundance, whereas that one hardly has a piece of bread to eat. Why is there such a difference between humans born free and with talents [...] Was there not a democratic regime earlier? Did it not, after several hundred years, bring about aristocratic rule? Did that not lead to autocratic and later to a violent or tyrannic rule?²⁵

As can be seen, Tsebrikov did not address the Zaporozhian way of life, manners, or their loyalty to the Russian Empire—issues that were central to Voltaire's orientalist description of the Cossacks. Instead, he focused on the Zaporozhian political order, which he contrasted with supposed Russian despotism. Tsebrikov's reaction is important because he expressed no inclination to defend either the centuries-long tradition of Cossack estate and regional particularism or the autonomy of Sloboda Ukraine, Zaporozhian Sich, and the Hetmanate. Instead, he rendered the Cossack tradition in terms of the democratic-republican ideal, which was more conducive to the protection of basic human natural rights and civil liberties than the one that informed the Russian autocratic regime.

Tsebrikov believed that the Cossack community, which he equated with "democratic rule," was more just than the autocratic one because it privileged ideas of liberty, dignity, and political participation. "Freedom" is understood here not as destructive anarchy but as civil liberty. It is valued positively as the right of a person to be heard and to determine one's own and common future, that is, "to influence the well-being of everybody."

²⁵ *Ot Leipziga do Ochakova: dnevnikovye zapiski R. M. Tsebrikova*, 147-148.

"Autocratic rule," which is closely akin to both "violent" and "tyrannical" ones, is associated primarily with the humiliation of human dignity and despotism. This is conveyed with the help of a metaphorical comparison between the "peasant" and the "general." Tsebrikov desacralized the figure of the monarch, stating that all humans are naturally free and equal. He proposed to search for the sources of social and cultural inequality in the history of changes in different types of political regimes. In this way, he openly set Cossack republicanism against Catherinian "despotism" and highlighted the hypocrisy of that monarch's supposedly enlightened reforms, which promoted serfdom and suppressed human dignity. Tsebrikov addressed this issue not only in his diary but also in other essays, such as "The Hellish Politics of Rulers and Tyrants and A Warning to Them from a Lover of Humanity" (1796).

It should be stressed that the treatment of the Muscovite political regime as a despotism was the dominant interpretation in early modern European political and travel writing. Such respected authors as Sigismund von Herberstein, Jean Bodin, Walter Raleigh, and Herman Conring laid a firm foundation for it during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Eighteenth-century Enlightenment authors, such as Montesquieu or Rousseau, were only elaborating on this already established tradition.²⁶ This current of thought had also figured prominently in early modern Ukrainian Cossack political discourse, represented, among others, by Hetmans Ivan Mazepa and Pylyp Orlyk. In his treatment of the Russian regime as a despotism, Tsebrikov could rely on this pre-Enlightenment current. On the other hand, the conceptualization of the Zaporozhian political order as an example of democratic or military republicanism was an explicitly Enlightenment phenomenon, represented by such authors as Jean-Benoit Scherer in his "Annals of Little Russia and the Zaporozhian Cossacks" (1788) and Johann Christian von Engel in "History of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Cossacks" (1796). Certainly, more research is needed into both the sources of Tsebrikov's political ideas and the currency of such views among former Ukrainian Cossack *starshyna*. Most likely he was an exception, but he nevertheless exemplifies an important discursive shift that the Enlightenment brought to this milieu and that would gain momentum in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In recapitulation, the eighteenth century became a turning point in the history of Russia's empire-building. The westernization of Peter I together with the military competition with dominant European powers contributed to the emergence of an imperial consciousness and identity among Russian rulers and elites. Civilizational discourse and colonial policies were initially directed at the non-Christian and nomadic populations of the empire. However, in the 1760s-1770s they were for the first time applied to Orthodox East Slavic subjects. Catherine II relied on them to justify her large-scale imperial unification, in particular the disbandment of the Zaporozhian Cossack Host and the liquidation of the Zaporozhian Sich. The historical works of Voltaire became an important source of inspiration for Catherine's orientalist image of the Ukrainian Cossacks, which

²⁶ Marshall T. Poe, "A People Born to Slavery": *Russia in Early Modern European Ethnography, 1476-1748* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

gained wide currency in the Russian Empire and was accepted by some representatives of the Ukrainian Cossack elite.

Enlightenment-inspired Russian imperial unification sought to rationalize, dominate, and discipline, but it was little concerned with emancipation—another basic ideal of the Enlightenment. However, the Enlightenment allowed some representatives of the Ukrainian Cossack elite to challenge imperial hegemony by going beyond traditional estate and regional particularism and by rethinking the Cossack tradition as a democratic republican one and setting it against the supposed Russian despotism.