A Meeting at the Duc's: On Eighteenth-Century Russian Empire Studies after 2022[1]

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Abstract:
This article examines the stakes of the 2023 renaming of the Eighteenth-Century Russian Studies Association to the Eighteenth-Century Russian Empire Studies Association. It argues that this renaming helps us to re-envision the stakes of the field and to conceptualize the Russian Empire as a conceptual space bigger than and not solely connected to modern-day Russia. It does so by looking at the Duc de Richelieu's role in the history of modern-day Odesa and his reception by Soviet, Ukrainian, and Western scholars, focusing especially on his settler-colonial project.

Keywords: *Russian studies, decolonization, Duc de Richelieu, Odesa, settler colonialism, historiography*

In December 2022, after repeated direct action by local activists, Odesa's monument to Catherine II and other city founders was dismantled.[2] The monument had originally been built in 1900, then removed in 1920, then reinstalled again in 2007. In September 2024, Odesa's city council announced plans to remove 19 more Soviet and Imperial-era monuments throughout the city.[3] One major exception is the monument to the Duc de Richelieu (1766-1822), traditionally considered one of the city's symbolic centers.[4] Instead of demolishing or vandalizing it, loyal Odesans sandbagged the monument to prevent it from being damaged by Russian attacks. Though the monument may yet be removed in the future, it clearly holds a different meaning from the others.

Eighteenth-century historians might find something puzzling about this distinction. Richelieu was a loyal servant of Catherine's empire and certainly more of an exemplar of Russian great-power nationalism—which seeks to claim overlordship over the lands of all the East Slavs, the Eurasian steppe, Siberia, and beyond—than Isaac Babel, whose monument is among those slated for removal. In this brief essay I want to use this differential treatment to explore the stakes of renaming our own Eighteenth-Century Russian Studies Association—of which I served as president (for lack of other volunteers, not because of my own modest stature in the field) between 2021 and 2023—to the Eighteenth-Century Russian Empire Studies Association. Names are

[1] I am grateful for Andrey Ivanov's generous comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

[2] See, for example, Inna Semenova, "Razvenchanie mifov. Skandal'naia istoriia pamiatnika Ekaterine II v Odesse, kotoryi nachinaiut demontirovat'," *NV: New Voice* (December 28, 2022), https://nv.ua/ukraine/events/pamyatnik-ekaterine-ii-v-odesse-gotovyat-k-snosu-foto-chto-s-nim-budet-dalshe-novosti-ukrainy-50282162.html. Here and below, place names are given either in historical or modern form as contextually appropriate.

[3] "Proiekt rishennia Vykonavchoho komitetu Odes'koi mis'koi rady [Normatyvni akty 003788]," *Ofitsiinyi salt mista Odesa* (September 23, 2024), https://omr.gov.ua/ua/acts/projects/committee/206043/.

[4] On Richelieu's life, see Emmanuel de Waresquiel, *Le Duc de Richelieu: 1766-1822* (Paris: Perrin, 1990); Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa: A History, 1794-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), 21–22.

important, as scholars of the *Rossiiskaia Imperiia* (b. 1721) know. Serhii Plokhy has argued that this particular imperial nomenclature was the result of a synthesis between the nation-building impulses of Orthodox elites in the Hetmanate and the statist vision of Peter I.[5] Richelieu's legacy offers a way for us to go farther than this, and to understand that the eighteenth-century Russian Empire was not just eighteenth-century Russia by another name.

It is, of course, essential that this is a conversation that has taken place within the context of "decolonization," about which everyone in Slavic and Eurasian Studies now has an opinion—pro, contra, or some more nuanced location in between. It is therefore tempting to simply conclude: "ECRESA" is pro-decolonization; the old "ECRSA" was implicitly against it. If decolonization reemerged on the agenda of the field after Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, "ECRESA" thus becomes "pro-Ukrainian" while its ancestor remains stubbornly Russocentric.

But it is important to step back from this identification, at least provisionally. If decolonization is simply understood as a form of intellectual Lend-Lease for the Ukrainian cause, it will raise questions that many of its supporters will struggle to answer. Is it indeed about escaping from Russian great-power nationalist historiography toward the equally nationalist but more territorially modest historiographies of its former imperial subjects, as some have argued?[6] Such a shift would surely be unsatisfying to the many adherents of the "imperial turn" of the last three decades, which argued, among other things, for the obsolescence of the Leninist "prison of peoples" view of the Russian Empire.

Yet the advocates of decolonization are also right that there was more going on in eighteenth-century "northern Eurasia" (to borrow one of many possible cumbersome substitutes) than is comprehended within the ethnic-national-linguistic-dynastic discourse of Russianness, however hybrid and complex it might be, and that as a field we have often struggled to see this. Ukrainian historians have criticized the "new imperial history" as an attempt to conjure up a kinder, gentler empire, and there is perhaps some justice in seeing endless talk of accommodation and hybridity as a kind of apologetics.[7]

This issue is exacerbated by the fact that the imperial field, especially its eighteenth-century portion, seems to involve two lines of inquiry that are only glancingly in dialogue with one another: the formation of the Russian Empire as a multiethnic state through processes of conquest and cooptation, on the one hand, and on the other, the older questions surrounding

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[5] Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations : Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[6] Alexander Herbert and Bryan Gigantino, "The Poverty of Cultural History: Decolonization, Race, and Politics In Post-Socialist Studies," *LeftEast* (January 1, 2024), https://lefteast.org/the-poverty-of-cultural-history-decolonization-race-and-politics-in-post-socialist-studies/.

[7] Віктор Горобець, "Як російські історики відшукали "добру імперію": ліквідація Гетьманщини у світлі "нової" імперської історіографії (2014—2022 рр.)," *Український історичний журнал*, no. 1 (2024): 130–50, https://doi.org/10.15407/uhj2024.01.130. (Viktor Horobets', "Iak rosiis'ki istoryky vidshukaly 'dobru imperiiu': likvidatsiia Het'manshchyny u svitli 'novoi' impers'koi istoriohrafii (2014-2022 rr.)," *Ukrainsk'kyi istorychnyi zhurnal* 1 (2024), 130-150). For a similar viewpoint, see Botakoz Kassymbekova and Aminat Chokobaeva, "On Writing Soviet History of Central Asia: Frameworks, Challenges, Prospects," *Central Asian Survey* 40:4 (December 2021): 483–503, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2021.1976728.

Westernization, elite formation, the emergence of the intelligentsia, and so forth. The view from St. Petersburg is dominated by its window on Europe, while the view from the periphery has the distant capital as its vanishing point. In fact, of course, the residents of the eighteenth-century Russian Empire experienced both processes as interwoven. Thus, for instance, profits from lands seized in the Polish partitions funded a great deal of cultural Westernization even for those elites who did not directly serve in the conquered territory.

Richelieu himself, who served as mayor of Odessa between 1804 and 1814 and (from 1805) governor of Novorossiia as well, exemplifies this ambiguous entanglement between Westernization, elite formation, and colonialism. He was an aristocratic French émigré from the distinguished family line that had produced the seventeenth-century Cardinal Richelieu. The Duc came to Russia as the French Revolution was beginning, though he formally avoided the label of émigré by framing his trip as a form of study abroad.[8] The Russian Empire attracted him as it had many other European adventurers, as a place that combined the glittering luxury of the imperial court with the dangers and opportunities of a frontier military career. Catherine's vision of a loyal elite committed to monarchical and aristocratic values but tempered by cultivation and small-"e" enlightenment ideally suited young conservatives like Richelieu (though he was more skeptical of the "big-E" Enlightenment than even Catherine in her later years). His cohort of fellow French émigrés became his closest allies and most reliable subordinates when he took up his position in Novorossiia, making this region yet another area of deployment for the empire's famously multiethnic ruling class.

His first assignment in the Russian Empire was at the 1790 siege of the Ottoman fortress of Izmail, near the future site of Odessa. It was an experience he found deeply scarring, not only because of the loss of civilian life but because of the sight of common Imperial Russian soldiers running amok without any effective control from their superiors. Just as in France, it seemed to Richelieu, the unchecked passions of the lowborn could only lead to chaos unless they were kept in line by an educated and rational elite composed of people like himself.[9]

Richelieu bore this understanding with him throughout his later career, although Paul I's reign did not give him much of an opportunity to put it into practice. He was thirty-seven when Alexander I appointed him as Odessa's mayor (*gradonachal'nik*). At the beginning of the nineteenth century the city was a struggling backwater, and while Paul had invested considerable funds into its expansion, these had yet to bear fruit. The Russian Empire's southward and westward expansion at the expense of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Ottoman Empire in the Catherinian era had created a vast agricultural production zone tilled by a combination of enserfed peasants and foreign colonists; this region, however, was weakly integrated into the commercial networks of the northern part of the empire.[10] Since the Treaty of Küçük-Kaynarca

[8] Waresquiel, *Le Duc de Richelieu*, 49–105.

[9] *Sbornik Imperatorskago Russkago istoricheskago obshchestva*, 136 volumes (St. Petersburg: Obshchestvo, 1874-1916), (hereafter SIRIO), 54: 183-190.

[10] See Robert E. Jones, *Bread upon the Waters: The St. Petersburg Grain Trade and the Russian Economy, 1703-1811* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013). On colonization in the Ponto-Caspian Steppe generally, see, for example, Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field : Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

had guaranteed access to the Mediterranean for commercial shipping, a major new southern port was needed to convert all this grain into wealth. So far, however, all the leading candidates (including Kherson and Feodosiia) were struggling due to poor infrastructure and maritime navigation.

By the time Richelieu completed his term in 1814 and returned to France to serve as the right-hand man of the Restoration monarch Louis XVIII, he had solved these problems and acquired a legendary reputation that would endure to the present. Its elements were fully in place by the time his monument was erected in 1826. Everyone, "of all classes of society," appreciated his "wise and paternal leadership" and the "solid foundation to the prosperity New Russia currently enjoys" he had established. This was because he had "peopled countries that were once deserts" and placed "the city of Odessa, which 23 years ago was nothing but a miserable hamlet, in the ranks of the most beautiful and flourishing of the Empire."[11]

It is unremarkable that a powerful imperial statesman would receive such encomia, but what is more surprising is their univocality. Since the nineteenth century, almost everyone, each from their own ideological standpoint, has found something nice to say about Richelieu. If in the 1950s the Soviet historian Vasilii Zagoruiko still fulminated against monarchist pro-Richelieu "apologia" and "slavish adulation," only grudgingly giving him credit for facilitating "the development of capitalist relations" (which in terms of serf-owning feudalism were progressive),[12] by 1970 Elena Druzhinina was warning against excessive criticism and decisively positioning the "gifted" governor as a champion of bourgeois development among the progressive faction of the Russian noble elite.[13]

Ukrainian scholars, too, have celebrated the duc's legacy. In the collective monograph *Istoria Odesy,* a definitive work with contributions from a dozen prominent local historians, V. P. Vashchenko recounts the "fond memories" Odesans retain of Richelieu's role in the region.[14] The contemporary Odesan journalist and local historian Anatoliy Gorbatiuk, author of a book on "the phenomenon of the great mayor," upholds him as an exemplar of multiculturalism and Europeanness in an essay in a volume celebrating Odesa's European connections.[15] Western historians have hardly been any more critical. The American historian Patricia Herlihy praises his "superb administrative abilities" and adds further gloss to his "extraordinary reputation for statesmanship and sense," celebrating him as a truly Enlightened leader.[16] The duc's "egalitarianism" and "daring" offer Charles King more opportunities for praise.[17] With such an

[11] *Journal d'Odessa* (April 17, 1826).
[12] V. Zagoruiko, *Po stranitsam istorii Odessy* (Odessa: Odesskoe oblastnoe izd-vo, 1957), 8–9.
[13] E. I. Druzhinina, *Iuzhnaia Ukraina v 1800-1825 gg.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1970), 14, 187ff.
[14] V. P. Vashchenko, "Ekonomichnyi rozvitok mista," in *Istoria Odesy*, ed. V. N. Stanko (Odesa: Druk, 2002), 87–101.
[15] Anatolii Gorbatiuk, *V Odesse ego nazyvali "Diuk", ili Fenomen velikogo gradonachal'nika* (Odessa: Optimum, 2017); idem, "Odessa: ot rozhdeniia do vozrozhdeniia," in *Odessa i Odeshchina v evropeiskom izmerenii*, ed. A. S. Trepaliuk and N. V. Mishina (Odesa: Litsom k litsu, 2010), 5–18. For more on Odesa as a cosmopolitan city, see Roshanna P. Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa: Crime and Civility in a City of Thieves*, 1st ed. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005); Tanya Richardson, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and Place in Contemporary Ukraine*, Anthropological Horizons 35 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).
[16] Herlihy, *Odessa*, 21–48.
[17] Charles King, *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012) , 57-70.

array of friends, it is no wonder that his monument has so far survived the ideological purge that swept away that of his former patron Catherine II. Ironically, similar praise of Catherine herself could easily be found from many of these quarters, but her overall significance as the overseer of Russian colonial expansion in Eastern Europe has dampened her appeal in recent years. Richelieu, at first glance, seems less controversial.

Richelieu's effectiveness as an administrator is not in dispute, at least not here; by the standards of Imperial Russian officialdom he certainly left a remarkable legacy. But to whom does this legacy belong? For imperial Russian historians, it worked to create the third great city of the Empire, a testament both to its modernity and to the beneficent rule of its elite class. For Soviet historians, it was a contribution to the growth of productive forces in the Russian Empire and hence of the subsequent emergence of the socialist movement that would give rise to the USSR. For Ukrainian historians, it was a key moment in the creation of modern Ukraine as a region with a distinctive, European-oriented path of development.

All of these achievements were not to any significant extent the result of Richelieu's efforts as mayor, no matter how attractive the façades and thoroughfares of the city may have looked after his departure. Instead, they resulted from his successful extension of Catherine's drive to populate the southern Ukrainian steppe with colonists, making it into an agricultural powerhouse. Novorossiia's skyrocketing agricultural surpluses could then be exported to an industrializing Europe hungry for cheap grain.[18] The wealth that flowed into Odessa and made it a modern metropolis began as wheat on the fields of Novorossiia. Those fields had been the territories of other peoples, who were displaced, killed, or forced to give up their way of life to promote Richelieu's colonizing project.

Posthumous testimonies, and the works of historians who have drawn upon them, are somewhat embarrassed about this fact. One biographer stresses the "personal friendship" between Richelieu and Circassian leaders, the way he "pampered them, in a manner of speaking, with a particular kindness, combatted their natural apathy, encouraged them toward agriculture [...] worked to regularize the space and the limits of their territorial properties, which, having been unlimited under their previous government, had caused endless uncertainties and contestations." The Nogais, "weak remnants of an ancient and declining Asiatic people," were so grateful for Richelieu's paternal guidance that "Europe's last nomadic horde became agriculturalists by persuasion and, one might say essentially, by deference to the duc." Equally appreciative, on this account, were the Tatars, who "respected and cherished" him "as a chief and father."[19] It is likely that in this context "Tatars" is a term that also refers to the Nogais, whose Yedisan and Budjak hordes fell within Richelieu's domain, although a large community of emigrant Crimean Tatars had settled southwest of Odessa after Catherine's annexation. Imperial administrators frequently elided the distinctions between these groups.[20]

[18] Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Oceans of Grain: How American Wheat Remade the World*, First edition. (New York: Basic Books, 2022).
[19] *SIRIO*, 54:43-44.
[20] I am grateful to Andrey Ivanov for this clarification.

Those of a decolonizing scholarly disposition might already be beginning to smell something off here. And, indeed, the same volume of the *Sbornik Imperatorskago Russkago* (not *Rossiiskago*, incidentally) *istoricheskago obshchestva*—which has formed the central source base for Richelieu's life despite its obvious selectivity and overall frame designed to shed only the most flattering light on his activities—offers us reason to doubt this glowing account. In 1811, Richelieu undertook an expedition against "the only Circassian people who did not want to submit." He was puzzled, as he wrote to his sister: "since we ask nothing more from them than to remain calm, it would seem that peace would not have been difficult to make between us, and yet, rather than renouncing their brigandage, they preferred to expose themselves to ravage twice a year." He elaborated in a letter to Alexander I: "we bivouacked for 19 days in their mountains, we fought a lot, and we did them enormous damage, burning their villages, their harvests, and their forage. Nothing could bring these madmen to peace." The Comte de Rochechouart, one of Richelieu's staunchest allies, recounted an episode from this campaign in even more detail:

> After a march of five hours, [the Russian troops] fell upon the *aul* of Emir-Ahmet, author of a large part of the pillages committed against the Cossacks. In an instant the whole village was in flames, there was no resistance; only the cries of women being slaughtered, of infants terrified by the fire, responded to the *Hourras* of the Cossacks; all the men were absent with their chief [...] My brother, noting the absence of men, wanted to stop the massacre of women [...] the Cossacks, drunk on blood, would no longer obey.[21]

Such was the other side of Richelieu's paternal solicitude—a link in the chain that would lead to the arrival of the even more brutal Aleksei Ermolov in the Caucasus six years later and ultimately to the genocidal ethnic cleansing of the region, which was only completed in the 1860s.

Neither Rochechouart nor Richelieu attributed the violence of counterinsurgency to imperial policy. Instead, they ethnicized it. The Cossacks who were the Circassians' main rivals in the Kuban were former residents of the Zaporozhian Sich who Potemkin had resettled there two decades earlier. Richelieu felt even more contempt for them than he did for the Circassians: "These men, because of their lifestyle which is not suited for softening their mores, bear themselves whenever they find occasion to all the excesses of cruelty and the most ferocious barbarism [...] it is important to avoid confusing these barbarians who usurp the name of Cossacks with the true Cossacks of the Don."[22] Ethnic origin, religion, or even political loyalty was not Richelieu's main concern: it was the line between barbarism and civilization, which had to be enforced at all costs. In this respect, he was a loyal follower of Catherine, who also regarded the Cossacks as "wild" and without "civil condition."[23]

In 1810, Richelieu wrote for the tsar's benefit a "Memoir on the Administration of Odessa," containing what would be one of many capsule histories of his administration. "The lands that

[21] Rochechouart, *Souvenirs sur la Révolution, l'Empire et la Restauration* (Paris: Plon, 1889), 124.
[22] *SIRIO*, 54:155.
[23] Volodymyr Sklokin, "Cossacks, Empire, and the Enlightenment: From Orientalization to Republican Reappropriation," *ВИВЛІОθИКА* 10 (December 15, 2022): 102–12, https://doi.org/10.21900/j.vivliofika.v10.1146.

make up New Russia have not been inhabited for more than thirty years, at least by Russians," he wrote. It was a bleak scene:

> Only the Crimea had a numerous population, while the neighboring countries were either deserts or inhabited by some hordes of Tartars, or by Zaporozhians, among whom civilization had made no progress and who even tried to destroy it among their neighbors [...] The successive annexation of all the provinces up to the Dniester brought a new order of things: not only were the provinces of Little Russia and Kharkov delivered from the fear of invasion and Tartar attack, but they perceived, in the near future, all the advantages that must await shipping through the ports of the Black Sea; their numerous population, formerly too confined, spread across the fertile plains of New Russia, and its Russian [sic] population began to establish itself on solid bases.[24]

However beneficent his paternalism might have been to those Tatars and Circassians who chose to submit, fundamentally Richelieu's understanding of his own role was to shepherd the manifest destiny of Russian settler colonialism to its natural outlet on the Black Sea, vigilantly guarding against the ever-present threat of resurgent barbarism. This was a political project, meant to ensure the creation of an orderly agricultural society free of revolutionary infection, as much as an economic one.

But as attentive readers will notice, Richelieu's "Russians" were, in modern terms, Ukrainians: while he may have believed he was promoting the *rasselenie* of the Russian population, he and his predominantly non-Russian allies in the administration of Novorossiia were in fact creating the demographics of today's southern Ukraine. When Richelieu today helps inspire the citizens of Odesa as they resist Russian attacks themselves motivated by a vision of reclaiming Novorossiia, they are not deluding themselves about his true historical significance. Richelieu's legacy—with all its victims and beneficiaries—belongs to Ukraine as much as it does to Russia, in the same sense that British colonization in the Americas gave rise to Jamaica and Canada just as it produced the United States. That shared experience has not prevented those countries from incubating a variety of local anticolonialisms based on particular configurations of nineteenth century nationalist, indigenous, and Cold War ideologies. But just as the US has often sought to speak for and represent the New World as a whole, so Putin now seeks to identify the Russian Empire's legacy with Russia alone. No matter how ambivalent we may be about this legacy, this move is not the only possible one.

Which is where the Eighteenth-Century Russian Empire Studies Association comes in. At least in theory, it could serve to bring together scholars working in a variety of geographical fields, those for whom St. Petersburg is central as well as those for whom it is not. In practice, we have a long way to go: the active members of the association are overwhelmingly Russianists,[25] and the

[24] *SIRIO*, 54:306-307.
[25] For a list of ECRESA members, see "Members," *Eighteenth-Century Russian Empire Studies Association*, accessed December 18, 2024, https://www.ecrsa.org/members.html.

limited hiring possibilities for specialists in the eighteenth-century history of the region clearly impedes its potential for growth. Abroad, we have much stronger contacts with German, French, and British academics than we do with anyone based in the region itself (many of those Russian scholars most heavily represented in the association's panels, meetings, and publications have now found themselves in exile). Yet there are many scholars working on the region and the period who could be active participants if there were more of an effort to include them; one way to do so might be to partner with the recently founded Ukrainian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Before ECRESA can truly represent the empire—whose study it is called upon to "facilitate and expand"—, it will need to embrace a larger community.