

Catherine II, Evdokim Shcherbinin, and the Abolition of Sloboda Ukraine's Autonomy¹

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Ivan Ostroz'kyi-Lokhvyts'kyi (1750–1825), the son of the captain of the Slonovka company of the Ostrohoz'k regiment Iosyp Ostroz'kyi-Lokhvyts'kyi, left the following account of the events of 1763 in his memoir:

Then a very terrible thunderclap of God's anger crashed over all the Sloboda regiments in 1763, during the reign of Empress Ekaterina Alekseevna, and a special commission was appointed to the city of Ostrohoz'k over all the officers, of regimental and company rank. Nor did my father, captain Iosyp, escape that thundering stormcloud at that time; those under his command rebelled then and began to write false petitions, and especially at the instigation of the junior ensign Ivan Korets'kyi (who tried to return evil for good, because that captain often saved him from serious troubles, especially bootlegging, and from death itself...). Now [he was] dismissed from command, ordered not to absent himself from the commission, without making any excuses to compensate with many for grievance, even though false, since anything that anyone had given as a gift was regarded as bribery. And thus not waiting for the return of their captain from Ostrohoz'k, the common people began to rob horses from his farmstead, chop down forest acquired by first possession (*zaimanshchynnyi*), devastate the orchards, beat peasants in the streets for no reason, [and] curse his wife and children to their faces. There was no end to the abuse and insults that he suffered from those under his command, and especially from the relatives of the Korets'kyis, whom he, when they were still poor, provided with everything he had, and also supplied with bread, but they all forgot this and returned evil for good, especially in those evil days, and in all these actions they were the ringleaders and instigators of the common people to evil.²

These events also radically changed the life of Ivan, then a young student at the Kharkiv College. The losses caused by the Cossack looting, as well as the flood that same year, which took

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² "Zapiski novo-oskol'skago dvorianina I. O. Ostrozhs'kago-Lokhvits'kago (1771–1846)," *Kievskaiia starina* 2 (1886): 360–61.

the lives of the Slonovka captain's subject peasants and a large number of livestock, forced his father to remove Ivan from the college in May 1763 and set him to performing "menial labor, such as hauling hay, straw, and lumber, and grain to the mills, which his poor young boy, unused to such work, performed with great difficulty: having left his studies, he began to forget them and became used to working, suffering the cold and heat with great patience..."³

The "very terrible thunderclap of God's anger," which signaled the beginning of the "evil days" for the Ostroz'kyi-Lokhvyts'kyi family, was the activity of the investigative commission under the direction of Second Major Ievdokim Shcherbinin, which the new empress, Catherine II (1762–1796), sent to the region. The apocalyptic feeling, clearly present in Ivan Ostroz'kyi-Lokhvyts'kyi's account, is not accidental. As a result of the investigations of the commission, the entire Cossack military-administrative system, which had existed in Sloboda Ukraine for over a hundred years, found itself under threat of elimination. In 1765, the empress did in fact abolish the autonomy of the Sloboda regiments, initiating a lengthy process of political, social, and cultural integration of the region into the Russian Empire. The political changes of 1763–1765 became one of the turning points in the history of Sloboda Ukraine, which had a profound effect not only on little Slonovka but on hundreds of other cities, towns, and villages (*slobody*) in the region and their inhabitants.

The Abolition of Autonomy (1762–1765)

The legal and institutional constructs, which are known in historiography as Sloboda autonomy, formed during the final decades of the seventeenth to the beginning of the eighteenth

³ Ibid., 361. For greater detail about Ivan and the Ostroz'kyi-Lokhvyts'kyi family, see Svitlana Potapenko, "Slobids'ka sviashchennyts'ko-starshyns'ka rodyna Ostroz'ko-Lokhvyts'kykh ta ikhnia khronika (pro heroïv odniieï publikatsii u 'Kyïvs'kii Starovyni')," *Kyïvs'ka starovyna* 5–6 (2012):156–66.

centuries and were legally formalized in the so-called “charters of privilege” (*zhalovani hramoty*) that the Russian monarchs granted to each of the five Sloboda regiments. This autonomy consisted of two main elements: the Cossack military-administrative system of regiments and companies, or “Cherkasy customs” (*cherkas’ki obyknosti*), and “liberties” (*slobody*)—a number of mostly economic privileges of the Cossack estate, such as the free use of isolated arable land acquired by first possession (*zaimanshchyni zemli*), free trade and craft activity, free alcohol distillation. The first to fall “victim” to the reform initiatives of the St. Petersburg government was the Cossack military-administrative system, which was eliminated by 1765. On the other hand, Catherine II confirmed most of the estate privileges of the Cossacks, and their gradual abridgement, which took place during the last decades of the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, were primarily an indirect consequence of the political and institutional integration of the region into the empire.

The abolition of the autonomy of Sloboda regiments generally fitted in well with the unification and centralization policy characteristic of the “enlightened absolutism” of Catherine II. As Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov, Marina Mogilner, and Aleksander Semyonov note, it was during the reign of this empress that the most conscious attempt was made to replace the old “technical” task of preserving the unity of conquered or annexed territories with a new and “creative” undertaking—the reduction of these territories to a “common denominator.” In other words, the question of imperial policy was being formulated, which, together with the element of the unification and integration of the state, contained another important component—Enlightenment reforms and development.⁴

⁴ For a more detailed analysis, see Il’ia Gerasimov, Marina Mogil’ner, and Sergei Glebov, “Dolgi XVIII vek i stanovlenie modernisatsionnoi imperii,” in *Novaia imperskaia istoriia Severnoi Evrazii*, ed. Il’ia Gerasimov, vol. 2: *Balansirovanie imperskoi situatsii XVIII–XX vekov* (Kazan, 2017), 13–74.

I will now attempt to reconstruct the formation and evolution of imperial policy with regard to Sloboda Ukraine during the first years of the reign of Catherine II and analyze its rhetorical justification. It will be shown that the abolition of the Cossack military-administrative system in the region in the first half of the 1760s was largely the result of a concatenation of circumstances, which the St. Petersburg government successfully took advantage of. To achieve its goal, the government used anti-elitist populist rhetoric, which invoked the protection of the “people” from oppression and abuses and strived to present integrationist changes as a reform initiative and compromise between the interests of the imperial center and key groups of local population. Contrary to the widespread stereotypes in historiography, during the abolition of autonomy, the government appealed primarily to the common Cossacks, who were rhetorically identified with the “people,” and the co-optation of the local elite—the Cossack *starshyna* (officer class)—played a key role in the later stages of the integrationist transformations. As part of a positive program of reforms, Catherine II offered the rule of law as an alternative to the “tyranny” and abuses of the Cossack elite, the regularization of military service, and economic development, which together were to bring the local population “prosperity and peace.” In practice, however, the specific features of imperial policy in the region depended to a large extent on the decisions and activity of the first Sloboda governor, Evdokim Shcherbinin, who focused primarily on regularization and vigorously conducted a “despotic modernization” in the spirit of Peter I.⁵

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It is worth beginning the discussion of the causes and circumstances of the abolition of Sloboda autonomy by asking why the Sloboda regiments were the first of the “western borderlands” to lose their autonomous status and why this happened as early as in the first years

⁵ See the discussion of the concept of the “reformist tsar” and “despotism” with regard to Peter I in Cynthia H. Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy: Eighteenth-Century Rulers and Writers in Political Dialogue* (Dekalb, 2003), 33–58.

of the new empress's reign. As authoritative studies of Catherinian policies show, the empress came to power with already formed political views and an overall vision of the desired direction of the development of the Russian Empire, and this vision was largely defined by the ideals of "enlightened absolutism."⁶

In this case, enlightened absolutism should be understood to mean a new type of governance, focused on reforms in the interests of society as a whole, whose goal was "to provide better government and to improve the material conditions and advance the prosperity of the subjects."⁷ It is worth noting that the adjective "enlightened" did not mean that all of Catherine II's reforms were inspired by Enlightenment ideas. All that it meant was that the Enlightenment in the broad sense served as the intellectual context in which her reform programs were formulated.⁸ No less important is the fact that the concept of enlightened absolutism cannot explain all the changes of the period under study. As Hamish Marshall Scott notes, in eighteenth-century Europe, enlightened absolutism was like a new "additional layer of statecraft," which did not cancel the traditional fiscal, military, or geopolitical interests of governments and monarchs.⁹

Thus, upon coming to power, Catherine II had a certain general vision of the direction of the future development of the Russian Empire, but in 1762–1763, she did not yet have a general

⁶ On the phenomenon of "enlightened absolutism" in Western historiography, see H. M. Scott, "Introduction: The Problem of Enlightened Absolutism," in H. M. Scott, ed., *Enlightened Absolutism: Reform and Reformers in Later Eighteenth Century Europe* (Houndsmills-London, 1990), 1-36. For a more detailed discussion of the interpretations of the reign of Catherine II as an example of enlightened absolutism, see Isabel de Madariaga, "Catherine the Great," in H. M. Scott, ed., *Enlightened Absolutism: Reform and Reformers in Later Eighteenth Century Europe* (Houndsmills-London, 1990), 289–311; Robert E. Jones, *Provincial Development in Russia: Catherine II and Jakob Sievers* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1984), 1–44; David M. Griffiths, "Catherine II: The Republican Empress," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 21, no. 3 (1973): 323–344. On the pre-Enlightenment absolutist unification in Ukraine and Eastern Europe during the 17th through the early 18th cent., see: Orest Subtelny, *Domination of Eastern Europe: Native Nobilities and Foreign Absolutism, 1500–1715* (Kingston and Montreal, 1986).

⁷ Scott, "Introduction: The Problem of Enlightened Absolutism," 20.

⁸ Moreover, in the case of Catherine II, the sources of inspiration were quite diverse and included German cameralism, theories of natural law, and also select ideas of French, British, and Italian Enlightenment philosophers. The eclectic nature of Catherine II's reform program is a particular focus of Robert Jones in Jones, *Provincial Development in Russia*, 7–24.

⁹ Scott, "Introduction: The Problem of Enlightened Absolutism," 15–16.

program of reforms, although she believed that serious transformations in the regions of the empire were possible only after the government had collected enough information about the condition they were in. As Robert Jones observes, during the first years of Catherine II's rule, "the government's most pressing concerns would be to stabilize its own position, put its affairs in order, and sort out its problems. During that time it preferred to take only those steps that it considered inescapable, inexpensive, or relatively easy to supervise and control."¹⁰

Rapid integration into the empire of the Sloboda regiments—as well as other autonomous regions—was not on the empress's agenda in 1762. But we can assume that her attention to this region was attracted by the case involving Prokip Konevyts'kyi, a captain of a company in the Sloboda Ostrohoz'k regiment, who came to St. Petersburg in October of 1762 with complaints against abuses by the officers of this regiment and against the military command of all the Sloboda regiments. In response to Konevyts'kyi's charges, a commission headed by Evdokim Shcherbinin was dispatched to Sloboda Ukraine to investigate the abuses, and the result of its two-year activity was the abolition of the Cossack military-administrative system and the creation of the Sloboda Ukrainian gubernia (*Slobids'ko-Ukrains'ka gubernia*).

The activity of the Shcherbinin commission has been described in considerable detail by Volodymyr Masliichuk.¹¹ Next I will briefly review the story of Konevyts'kyi and the work of the Shcherbinin commission, relying primarily on Masliichuk's research, and then I will attempt to place the Sloboda case in the broader context of the imperial policy with regard to the "western borderlands."

¹⁰ Jones, *Provincial Development in Russia*, 24.

¹¹ Volodymyr Masliichuk, "Shcherbinins'ka komisiia ta skasuvannia slobids'kykh polkiv 1762-1764," in idem, *Provintsii na perekhresti kul'tur (doslidzhennia z istorii Slobids'koï Ukraïny XVII-XIX st.)* (Kharkiv, 2007), 141–56.

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Prokip Konevyts'kyi began his service as a common Cossack in the Kharkiv regiment, eventually obtained the rank of junior ensign, and then, in 1749, that of captain. Owing to a lack of vacant posts in the Kharkiv regiment, he was transferred to the Ostrohoz'k regiment and appointed captain of the Kalachiv [*Kalachivs'ka*] company. But he was unable to establish good relations with the Ostrohoz'k *starshyna*, became embroiled in disputes and lawsuits, both with the local common Cossacks and the officers, and the whole affair culminated in the looting of his estate and his arrest and imprisonment in the Belgorod gubernia chancellery.¹² Konevyts'kyi succeeded in escaping from there and in 1762 appeared in St. Petersburg and made a complaint to the Senate. The Kalachiv captain insisted that he was innocent of abuses and, instead, accused the officers of the Ostrohoz'k regiment of excesses, in particular captains Petro Pushkovs'kyi, Andrii Tev'iashov, Ivan Kukulevs'kyi, and Colonel Stepan Tev'iashov, as well as the military commander of the Sloboda regiments, Lieutenant-General Prince Kostiantyn Kantemir. Konevyts'kyi exposed what we today call corruption: the imposition of illegal levies on the population and the appropriation of government land, as well as persecution of those who opposed the abuses of Tev'iashov and Kantemir.¹³

Catherine II, who was present at the review of the Konevyts'kyi case in the Senate on October 23, 1762, ordered that a special investigative commission consisting of four army officers, headed by the second-major of the Izmail regiment Evdokim Shcherbinin, be sent to Ostrohoz'k. The commission was given unusually great powers: it could investigate abuses by officers not only

¹² Ibid., 144–45.

¹³ “Senatskii ukaz o naznachenii leib-gvardii sek. maiora E. Shcherbinina dlia izsledovaniia neporiadkov v ostrohozskom i drugikh slobodskikh polkakh 1762 g.,” in D. I. Bagalei, ed., *Materialy dlia istorii kolonizatsii i byta stepnoi okrainy Moskovskogo gosudarstva (Khar'kovskoi i otchasti Kurskoi i Voronezhskoi gub.) v XVI–XVIII st.* (Kharkiv, 1886), 325–26.

in Ostrohoz'k but also in all the other Sloboda regiments, and it also had the right to remove from office all officers who were under investigation. In fact, the highest authority in the region ended up in Evdokim Shcherbinin's hands, as evidenced by his activity in 1763–1764.¹⁴

Upon arrival in Ostrohoz'k, the commission not only began investigating Konevyts'kyi's charges but announced that it was collecting information about the abuses by officers in all five regiments. As a result, “the commission was inundated with complaints from [common] Cossacks, village communities, low-ranking officers, and Cossack helpers (*pidpomichnyky*) against the captains and regimental officers.”¹⁵ The complaints numbered in the hundreds, causing the majority of the officers holding administrative posts, especially in the Ostrohoz'k, Kharkiv, and Iziium regiments, to find themselves under investigation. This gave Shcherbinin the formal basis for removing the majority of officers from office and subsequently stripping the *starshyna* of control over the financial and judicial spheres.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 327; *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* (hereafter *PSZ*), vol. 16 (Saint Petersburg), 113, no. 11711. Little is known about Shcherbinin before his appearance in Sloboda Ukraine. We know only that he was born in 1720 in a noble family of Pskov. After receiving an education at home, at fifteen years old he began service in the Life Guard Izmail regiment. He was married to Princess Aleksandra Bariatinskaia, had two daughters, Elena and Katerina, and also two sons, Sergei and Andrei. Both sons pursued military careers, and the latter was married to the daughter of Princess Ekaterina Dashkova, an important figure in the Catherinian age. Shcherbinin was a wealthy man: he owned close to 2,000 serfs and also a distillery in Viatka gubernia. Shcherbinin's political career began after the coming to power of Catherine II. His promotion was probably due to the active part played by the Izmail regiment in the Catherinian coup d'état. Just a month after the coronation of the new empress, he was appointed head of the investigative commission to the Sloboda regiments, and in 1765, the first Sloboda governor. On Shcherbinin's biography, see “Evdokim Alekseevich Shcherbinin,” in *Russkii biograficheskii slovar'* (St. Petersburg, 1912) 24: 145; S. I. Posokhov and A. N. Iarmysh, *Gubernatory i general-gubernatory* (Kharkiv, 1997), 31–32; A. N. Akin'shin, “Namestnik Shcherbinin Evdokim Alekseevich, 1779–1782,” in A. N. Akin'shin, ed., *Voronezhskie gubernatory i vitse-gubernatory, 1710–1917. Istoriko-biograficheskie ocherki* (Voronezh, 2000), 113–15; Mikhail Radin, *Davydovy, Venevskie i drugie* (<http://www.veneva.ru/lib/davidov.html>). These encyclopedic entries, especially the entry in the *Russkii biograficheskii slovar'*, contain some inaccurate claims, in particular the claim that Shcherbinin was in charge of the changes in the New Serbia (Novoserbs'kyi) and Slavo-Serbia (Slov'ianoserbs'kyi) regiments, as well as the construction of the Dnipro Line of fortifications. The date of his birth remains open to question: *Russkii biograficheskii slovar'* lists it as 1728, while the Voronezh historian Akin'shin gives it as 1720. Surprisingly, Shcherbinin has so far not attracted the attention of the numerous students of Catherine's reign. One exception is the article by Volodymyr Masliichuk devoted to the activity of Shcherbinin in Sloboda Ukraine in 1762–1764, see Masliichuk, “Shcherbinins'ka komisiia,” 141–56.

¹⁵ Masliichuk, “Shcherbinins'ka komisiia,” 149.

¹⁶ Ibid., 147–48.

Volodymyr Masliichuk underscores that:

[...] the Shcherbinin commission, like all earlier “investigative actions” by the Russian government, did not shy away from social demagoguery, maintaining that its aim was to protect the lower strata of the population [...] The tsarist government played on the social antagonism in the Sloboda regiments, pitting the masses [*nyzy*] against the officers and officers against officers—a method that had been successfully implemented even earlier in Sloboda Ukraine and the Hetmanate.¹⁷

At the same time, to legitimize the transformations in the region, the government had to secure the support of the local elite—that is, the *starshyna*. This gave rise to the idea of writing so-called “petitions of contrition” (*pokaianni cholobytni*) to Catherine II. In these petitions, written at the end of 1763, the Sloboda officers expressed regret for their abuses and asked for the monarch’s mercy. For all that, the officers tended not to assume the blame themselves but, rather, to lay it on the ineffective system, that is, on “our ingrained Cherkasy customs,” which included the disordered state of the local financial system, the absence of regular service, and legislation that regulated relations between the *starshyna* and the Cossacks, and also the practice of “gifts” in Sloboda courts.¹⁸

The empress “mercifully” forgave the *starshyna*, but the “Cherkasy customs” that constituted an important basis of the local autonomy were abolished.¹⁹ On December 16, 1764, a special Senate commission considered the Shcherbinin commission’s report, which dealt with both the abuses of the *starshyna* and the ineffectiveness of the Sloboda military-administrative system, and approved the decision to abolish the Sloboda Cossack regiments and instead create five regular hussar regiments and the Sloboda Ukrainian gubernia with its center in Kharkiv.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 146, 149.

¹⁸ *RGADA*, f. 16, op. 1, d. 938, ll. 119–25.

¹⁹ Ibid., ll. 283–84.

²⁰ *PSZ*, 16: 1003–7, no. 12293.

Masliichuk places special emphasis on the “demoralization and apathy” of the Sloboda *starshyna*, which was in no hurry to defend either its rule or regional autonomy. The only exception was the Iziium colonel Fedir Krasnokuts’kyi, who, residing in 1762–1764 in St. Petersburg, wrote letters to the Sloboda *starshyna*, scolding it for its lack of concern and urging it to come to the capital of the empire to defend its rights.²¹ Masliichuk notes that the officers’ indifference was due to the “lengthy investigations and intimidation, [their] immersion in economic affairs (there was much to lose in case of failure), absence of a suitable political culture, founded on the defense of one’s political rights.”²²

Although I generally agree with the description of these events offered by Volodymyr Masliichuk, I would like to elaborate on two important elements in this story: the specific features of the policy implemented by the government in the abolition of autonomy, and the role of the Sloboda *starshyna* in these events. This, in turn, requires an examination of the Sloboda case in the broader context of imperial policy with regard to the “western borderlands” in the first half of the 1760s.

Existing sources allow us to assert that at this stage (1762–1765), Catherine II and her inner circle did not yet have a coherent program of the political integration of the autonomous regions into the empire. At any rate, however, Catherine was certain of the need for such an integration and imagined its direction in broad outlines: it involved extending uniform laws and administrative institution throughout the whole empire. Achieving this required the coming to power in the autonomous regions of people prepared to implement the policies of the imperial center, which

²¹ On Krasnokuts’kyi, see Volodymyr Masliichuk, “Fedir Khomych Krasnokuts’kyi—predstavnyk starshyns’koho prosharku slobids’kykh polkiv XVIII st.” in idem, *Provintsiia na perekhresti kul’tur*, 244–56; Ivan Telichenko, “Protest Slobodskoï Ukraïny protiv reform 1765,” *Kievskaia starina* 1–3 (1888): 251–61.

²² Masliichuk, “Shcherbinins’ka komisiia,” 151.

automatically meant the removal from power of “unreliable” local elites.²³ At least such was the vision presented in the empress’s secret instruction to the new procurator general, Prince Aleksandr Viazemskii, in February 1764:

Little Russia, Livonia, and Finland are provinces that are governed by their confirmed privileges, whose violation by their sudden removal would be highly improper; however, calling them foreign countries and dealing with them on that basis is more than a mistake, and can be accurately called an absurdity. These provinces, and also Smolensk, should be brought by easy means to the point that they become Russianized [*obruseli*] and stop being once a wolf always a wolf.²⁴ This approach is very easy if wise people are appointed to head those provinces; when there is no longer a hetman in Little Russia, it is necessary to make certain that the period and names of the hetmans also disappear, not only that no person be promoted to that office.²⁵

This instruction also dealt with the need to unify legislation: “Our laws need to be improved: first, to incorporate everything into one system and adhere to it; second, to remove those who repudiate it; third, to separate the temporary and individual from the eternal and indispensable...”²⁶

The Sloboda regiments are not mentioned directly here, since in the empress’s mind they probably merged with Little Russia. But in later legislation, which we will deal with in this section, the imperial government treated Sloboda Ukraine as in the same category as Livonia, Estonia, and

²³ For a more detailed analysis, see Zenon E. Kohut, *Russian Centralism and Ukrainian Autonomy: Imperial Absorption of the Hetmanate, 1760s–1830s* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 65–81. Zenon Kohut focuses primarily on the cameralist dimension of the imperial integrationist policy of the final third of the eighteenth century—the desire to introduce uniform laws and create a well-managed state. Brian Davis, on the other hand, in his recent study, draws attention to the imperial government’s military and geopolitical considerations involving the subjugation of the Northern Black Sea region and Crimea, which served as the impetus for the regularization of the Cossack Host and the abolition of the autonomy of the Sloboda regiments and the Hetmanate: Brian L. Davis, *The Russo-Turkish War, 1768–1774: Catherine II and the Ottoman Empire* (London, 2016).

²⁴ In this case, the term “Russianization” (*obrusenie*) was understood to mean not forcible assimilation but the “administrative Russification” and acculturation of the local elites into the high imperial culture. On the specific features of using the term “Russification” in the studies of history of the Russian Empire, see Edward Thaden, “Introduction,” in idem, ed., *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland* (Princeton, 1981), 8–9; Theodore R. Weeks, “Managing Empire: Tsarist Nationalities Policy,” in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 2: Imperial Russia, 1689–1917, ed. Dominic Lieven (Cambridge, 2006), 27–44; Aleksei Miller, “Rusifikatsiia ili rusifikatsii?,” in idem *Imperiia Romanovykh i natsionalizm: esse po metodologii istoricheskogo issledovaniia* (Moscow, 2006), 54–77.

²⁵ *Sbornik Imperatorskogo Russkogo Istoricheskogo Obshchestva* (hereinafter – *SIRIO*) 7 (St. Petersburg, 1871): 348.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Finland, that is, the western autonomous regions.²⁷ However it may be, but the policy outlined in the instruction, which was aimed at removing the local elite from political power and replacing it with “reliable” imperial officials, was the policy that was implemented in the Sloboda regiments in 1762–1765.

To make this policy successful, the government, on the one hand, had to invoke the common good and, on the other hand, use populist rhetoric directed against the local officer elite and promise the common Cossacks and Cossack helpers to fight against the “people’s overburdening,” to protect the “aggrieved” and give satisfaction “[of the demand for] justice.” The Senate decree appointing Shcherbinin head of the investigative commission for the Sloboda regiments of November 4, 1762 expressed this as follows:

And if after the arrival of Shcherbinin anyone tells him about those and other similar things resulting in the people’s overburdening and devastation, disorder in those Sloboda regiments, accepting the pertinent reports, he will immediately begin an investigation [...] with true justice and without the slightest allowances for anybody, in order to, on the one hand, reveal the disarray existing there and expose the guilty [...] and, on the other hand, protect the aggrieved and give satisfaction with justice.²⁸

As has already been noted, this strategy was successful, and the St. Petersburg government obtained powerful compromising materials that ultimately forced the *starshyna* to agree to the changes initiated in St. Petersburg.²⁹ But earlier researchers failed to take note of another important aspect of this story—namely, the fact that the government tried to secure at least the symbolic consent for the transformations not only of the *starshyna* but also of the common Cossacks and

²⁷ *PSZ*, 16: 1004, no. 12293.

²⁸ “Senatskii ukaz o naznachenii leib-gvardii sek. Maiora E. Shcherbinina dlia izsledovaniia neporiadkov v ostrogozhskom i drugikh polkakh 1762 g.,” *Materialy dlia istorii kolonizatsii i byta stepnoi okrainy Moskovskogo gosudarstva (Khar’kovskoi i otchasti Kurskoi i Voronezhskoi gub.) v XVI-XVIII st.*, ed. D. I. Bagalei (Kharkov, 1886), 327.

²⁹ Retired Izium colonel Mykhailo Myloradovych stressed that the majority of officers consented to the changes in the region with the expectation of being forgiven for their abuses, which was what Shcherbinin had promised them: *RGADA*, f. 16, op. 1, d. 938, l. 24.

Cossack helpers, who made up the majority of the population of the region. The consent of the common Cossacks, who were rhetorically identified with the “people,” made it possible to present the integrationist reforms as the demand of society itself.³⁰

However, the situation involving this “consent” is not clear-cut. We learn about it from Shcherbinin’s report to Catherine II of September 30, 1763, in which he informed her that the Cossacks agreed to pay an annual tax of one ruble per each male if the Cossack regiments were transformed into regular regiments, and also if levies for the maintenance of the cuirassier stud farm and the dragoon regiment were abolished. In view of this, he proposed conducting a census that would make it possible to establish the exact number of people and taxpayers, and asked the empress what method was best to use to conduct this census: “by persons, by homesteads and houses, by land holdings, or by estates?”³¹ Catherine II approved the news and Shcherbinin’s initiative and ordered a census to be conducted “by persons,” on the grounds that a poll tax was the most efficient collection method and offered the fewest opportunities for evading payment.³²

Other sources, however, allow us to doubt the voluntary nature of this consent, or even that it happened at all. The most informative document from this standpoint is the appeal to Catherine II of the former Iziium colonel Mykhailo Myloradovych, dated May 14, 1764, in which he criticizes the work of the Shcherbinin commission.³³ Myloradovych, who earlier had himself proposed transforming the Cossack regiments into regular regiments, opposed Shcherbinin’s initiatives and believed that the latter was misinforming the empress about the real situation in the region and the

³⁰ Subject peasants and the clergy were traditionally not taken into account by Catherine’s government, and thus, passed over in silence, seemingly existed outside the confines of the empire’s society.

³¹ *RGADA*, f. 16, op. 1, d. 938, ll. 7–8.

³² *Ibid.*, ll. 9–10.

³³ *Ibid.*, f. 16, op. 1, d. 938, ll. 23–28. Mykhailo Myloradovych, an immigrant from the Balkans, was the quartermaster of the Iziium Cossack regiment from 1737 to 1758, and from 1759 to 1761, colonel of the same regiment. See *Materiial dlia istorii Iziiumskogo Slobodskogo kazach’iago polka: Mikhail Aleksandrovich Miloradovich* (Kharkiv, 1858), 1–2.

sentiments of the local population. In the Iziium colonel's interpretation, Shcherbinin's invoking the protection of the "people" and its interests was just empty talk.

According to Myloradovych, upon arriving in Ostrohoz'k, Shcherbinin "published decrees to the people that all who have any grievances" against the *starshyna* should send lists [of these] with authorized representatives from whole cities and free villages (*slobodas*). When the first representatives arrived in Ostrohoz'k, Shcherbinin began to deliver "redress of grievances" by means of "verbal reviews" and face-to-face confrontations between the representatives and the officers: "And other elders of the people were paid up to a thousand and more rubles, and this major employed great harshness, in that he held other officers chained with shackles in the commission and flogged the common people."³⁴

It is not difficult to imagine the effect that this beginning had on both the common Cossacks and Cossack helpers and the *starshyna*. It is worth nothing that there were cases in which the common Cossacks did not wait for the commission's verdict and began to "repair injustices" at their own discretion, robbing the estates of officers, as happened in Slonovka in the case of Captain Iosyp Ostroz'kyi-Lokhvyts'kyi.³⁵ In Myloradych's opinion, Shcherbinin "with this discord, brought to the people... and the *starshyna* to eternal quarrels and enmity, great despondency and fear."³⁶

But soon the review of cases in Ostrohoz'k ended, and it was ordered that the remainder of the complaints be submitted to the regimental chancelleries. Instead, Shcherbinin, together with other officers in the commission, set out to collect complaints in other Sloboda regiments, seeking primarily to exploit the Cossacks' dissatisfaction for support of his program of reforms:

³⁴ RGADA, f. 16, op. 1, d. 938, l. 23ob.

³⁵ Masliichuk, "Shcherbinins'ka komissiiia," 151.

³⁶RGADA, f. 16, op. 1, d. 938, l. 24.

Traveling to all the regiments, he gathered all the aforementioned representatives in the regimental cities and, holding them there for three or four days without letting them leave, brought them around to submitting statements that they wanted to be taxed at one ruble per head annually, regarding which they took statements from some of the authorized representatives, even though they did not have authority for this from the people and did not want it, but seeing strict enforcement and because of their simpleness, [they] could not avoid it, however some did not do it; but to YOUR MAJESTY he reported as if the whole people wanted this, and after that no matter how many objections and reports that [the proposed tax] was unwelcome the people submitted, he rejected them and sent them away.³⁷

Following this, a part of the inhabitants (*obyvateli*) allegedly decided to send an authorized representative to Catherine II with a complaint against Shcherbinin's activity, but the secretary of Balakliia, Lazar Velychko, who was to carry the complaint, was detained and brought to the commission in Ostrohoz'k, where he was held for two months under guard, "threatened and starved," and then sent to the Iziium regimental chancellery.³⁸

Myloradovych most likely exaggerated the unambiguously repressive nature of Shcherbinin's policy. The latter probably attempted to convince the people's authorized representatives of the need and benefit of these changes, and he may have had some success in this, although the probability of the use of pressure and force remains high, at least in view of the fact that the subsequent introduction of the poll tax and abolition of Cossackdom provoked dissatisfaction and opposition, especially in the Iziium regiment.

It is also worth underscoring that both Shcherbinin and Catherine II sought to present the planned transformation as the result of a kind of consensus, and not only within the local "people" but also more broadly—as a compromise between the needs of the imperial center and Sloboda society.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., l. 24 ob.

³⁹ During the first years of her reign, Catherine II, who had come to power as a result of a coup d'état, was concerned about the question of her own legitimacy and, in an attempt to avoid any kind of associations with despotism, put

For example, in the aforementioned report to the empress of September 30, 1763, Shcherbinin noted that the planned changes would be “very good for both the treasury and the inhabitants.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, Catherine II in her instruction to the Sloboda governor and in her manifesto of July 28, 1765 “On the Establishment in the Sloboda Regiments of Proper Civilian Order” wrote that “with these instruments the benefit not only to the public but also to the State” must be gained with “the best order and success,” and also that the “insecure” Cossack service will be transformed into regular service, “into a better and more useful for the State” service, which, in turn, will exempt the local population from “taxes and burdens” and “firmly establish the general well-being and peace of all local residents.”⁴¹

From the government’s standpoint, the main compromise consisted in the fact that despite the abolition of the “Cherkasy customs,” the local society retained the second pillar of its autonomy—its liberties and privileges. This is most clearly expressed in the report of the Senate commission, consisting of Petr Panin, Iakov Shakhovskii, and Adam Olsuf’ev, which was approved by the empress on December 16, 1764:

This Sloboda Ukrainian gubernia to retain, without the slightest violation, the previously confirmed and to this day not revoked privileges and charters of privilege; however, everything that this new institution does not violate in these privileges and charters is to be governed by the Gubernia and Voivodes’ chancelleries in accordance with Your Imperial Excellency’s laws, Regulations, instructions, and decrees, just as Estonia, Livonia, and Finland are governed today by their Gubernia Chancelleries without violating their privileges.⁴²

Thus from the government’s standpoint, even after the creation of the province (*gubernia*), Sloboda Ukraine continued to retain its special status and was similar in this respect to other

special emphasis on the idea of a “legal monarchy” and a policy aimed at obtaining consensus: Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 99–119.

⁴⁰ *RGADA*, f. 16, op. 1, d. 938, ll. 7–8.

⁴¹ *PSZ*, 17: 194–95, no. 12440.

⁴² *PSZ*, 16: 1004, no. 12293.

“western borderlands.” In Catherine II’s view, this was an undesirable, albeit a necessary, compromise with local conditions.

The second important element that requires elaboration is the thesis about the “demoralization and apathy” of the *starshyna*, which was in no hurry to defend either its own powers or regional autonomy. As we already saw in the example of the Iziium colonel Myloradovych, Fedir Krasnokuts’kyi was not the only one who dared to oppose Shcherbinin’s changes. But a much more important aspect, which researchers have ignored, was that a part of the *starshyna* supported the reforms initiated by Shcherbinin, since these reforms sought to resolve the crisis in the region and to a large extent implemented the plan of transformations formulated by the *starshyna* itself at the end of the 1750s and the beginning of the 1760s.

This was a plan for reforming the Sloboda regiments put forward in 1760 by a group of officers, headed by the Ostrohoz’k colonel Stepan Tev’iashov. A detailed description of this proposed reform program is contained, notably, in a work composed by a group of officers of the Ostrohoz’k regiment, headed by quartermaster Ivan Hozlubin in 1762.⁴³

The Ostrohoz’k *starshyna* acknowledged the existence of a crisis in the Sloboda regiments and saw its causes in the unfortunate combination of a number of shortcomings in the “Cherkasy customs” (ineffective legal regulation of relations between the *starshyna* and the Cossacks, the ambiguous status of Cossack lands, and so forth) with the imperial government’s semi-reforms of the 1730s–1750s (partial implementation, with the subsequent abolition of regular military squadrons; changes in the military subordination of the Sloboda regiments; appointment of

⁴³ This work of nearly 80 pages, which was signed by quartermaster Ivan Hozlubin, two chancellors, and sixteen captains of the Ostrohoz’k regiment, has been preserved among the documents of the Shcherbinin commission in fund 16 (Internal Department) of RGADA. The work has no title and no date, but the text allows us to conclude that it was written after the commission had begun its work, but before the decision was approved to abolish the autonomy, most likely in 1763. To the best of my knowledge, this work has not been previously mentioned in historiography and so far has not been put into academic circulation: *RGADA*, f. 16, op. 1, d. 938, ll. 180–213.

foreigners to top posts) and the excessive obligations and levies attended by violations of Cossackdom's traditional rights and liberties. All this led, on the one hand, to the impoverishment of the common Cossacks, who left service and sometimes also the region, and, on the other hand, undermined the status of the *starshyna*, to whom the offices listed in the Table of Ranks did not extend, and who received neither “rank lands” (*ranhovi zemli*) nor payment for their service.

The Ostrohoz'k *starshyna* envisaged the solution to the crisis in a new “institution”—the creation of a regular corps consisting of three dragoon and two infantry regiments to be funded by an annual tax of 55 kopeks. The dragoons and officers were to receive a salary, while the weapons, horses, provisions, and fodder were to be supplied by the government. The new regulations would award ranks to the officers and legislatively define relations between the *starshyna* and their subjects, which would make it possible to avoid abuses in the future.

The text also speaks of a “main chancellery” responsible for collecting and distributing the tax but provides no details, so it remains unclear how the authors envisioned the political future of the region. The only important point in this context was emphasis on the provision that all foreign officers, including Russian ones, were to be removed from the Sloboda regiments and assigned to military units outside the region. Given also the constant emphasis on local liberties and on the crucial and exclusively positive role of the *starshyna* in the colonization and development of the region, we can assume that the authors of this work presumed that both the military command of the new regular corps and control over the “main chancellery” would remain in the hands of the local Little Russian *starshyna*; this would mean the preservation of Sloboda autonomy, albeit in somewhat modified form.

This reform program, approved by seventy officers mainly from the Ostrohoz'k, Sumy, and Okhtyrka regiments, was presented in St. Petersburg by Colonel Tev'iashov in 1760 and won

support from the generals, especially Field Marshal General Aleksander Buturlin, who justified the need for these transformations to Empress Elizabeth. The matter was close to being positively resolved but was brought to a halt by a petition from Brigadier Dmytrii Bancheskul, who opposed the reform, claiming that the Cossack light cavalry troops were better than the regular infantry forces and best suited to this region, and also that the officers did not want regular service. However, in the opinion of the Ostrohoz'k officers, the real reason for Bancheskul's opposition was that he, as a Balkan immigrant, feared that the reform would deprive him of his post as brigadier of the Sloboda regiments.⁴⁴ Whatever the case, the matter was turned over for review to the Military Commission of the Senate, where it lay when the complaints from Konevyts'kyi appeared and the investigatory commission headed by Shcherbinin was dispatched to the region.

Thus the transformations initiated by Shcherbinin and subsequently approved by the Senate and Catherine II were to a large extent similar to Tev'iashov's program of reforms. At the same time, there were two important differences: in the Shcherbinin plan the tax that was to be collected from the local population was higher and ultimately assumed the form of a poll tax, and key administrative and military posts ended up in the hands of natives of internal Russian gubernias and not the local *starshyna*. But having compromising material in the form of numerous complaints from common Cossacks and freemen, Shcherbinin easily convinced the *starshyna* to accept these changes. That Shcherbinin used Tev'iashov's reform program and relied on the latter's support in the course of his activity in the region is further confirmed by the fact that the Ostrohoz'k colonel was cleared of all charges by the commission and after the creation of the Sloboda Ukrainian province, at the end of the 1760s through the beginning of the 1770s, held the post of deputy of

⁴⁴ Tev'iashov's plan was also opposed by another representative of the Balkan emigration, the aforementioned former Iziium colonel Mykhailo Myloradovych, who claimed that Tev'iashov had in fact appropriated his idea of transforming the Sloboda regiments into hussar regiments, which he had proposed as early as 1756. See *Material dlia istorii Iziiumskogo Slobodskogo kozach'ego polka: Mikhail Aleksandrovich Miloradovich* (Kharkiv, 1858), 26–35.

the newly appointed governor, the very same Evdokim Shcherbinin. In contrast, Bancheskul, Myloradovych, and Krasnokuts'kyi, who opposed these reforms, were punished in various ways: the first was removed from his post of brigadier of the Sloboda regiments in 1763, the second was demoted to the rank of captain and exiled to Tobolsk, and the third was exiled to Kazan.⁴⁵ The fate of Captain Prokip Konevyts'kyi, whose charges against Tev'iashov and other officers resulted in the creation of Shcherbinin's commission, also proved tragic: for his "false" testimony and escape from prison, he was stripped of his posts and made to serve as a common soldier.⁴⁶

Finally, it is worth noting that although the thrust of the changes envisioned by the plan of the Ostrohoz'k officers coincided in large measure with the subsequently implemented government reform program, the sources of inspiration in the two cases were different. While the *starshyna* plan was a typical early-modern-period attempt to "repair" the unsatisfactory state of affairs, precipitated by practical needs and based on common sense, the Catherinian program of the administrative and legislative universalization of the empire and regularization of military service was inspired by Enlightenment and cameralistic ideals, as well as a comparison of the situation in the empire with the state of affairs in the more "developed" countries of Europe. The abolition of the autonomy of the Sloboda regiments can thus be regarded as an element of the imperial policy of "enlightened absolutism" at the end of the eighteenth century. In view of this, it is worth taking a closer look at the plans for integrationist transformations in Sloboda Ukraine that were being worked out in St. Petersburg in 1764–1765.

⁴⁵ In Krasnokuts'kyi's case, who, judging from Myloradovych's complaint, enjoyed the favor of Shcherbinin, the sentence did not enter into force. In 1766 Krasnokuts'kyi returned from St. Petersburg to Sloboda Ukraine, where he soon died. See Masliichuk, "Fedir Khomych Krasnokuts'kyi," 253–54. Nor can we be certain whether Myloradovych was actually exiled to Tobolsk. In February 1766, the Sloboda gubernia chancellery, which sought to carry out the verdict, was unable to find him: *TsDIAUK*, f. 1710, op. 2, spr. 93, ark. 1.

⁴⁶ Masliichuk, "Shcherbinins'ka komisiia," 145.

Petersburgian Integrationist Plans (1764–1765)

The main vectors of the political and social integration of Sloboda Ukraine into the empire were defined at the end of 1764 through the first half of 1765 by Catherine II on the basis of the recommendations of the Senate's special commission, which, in turn, was guided by the conclusions of Evdokim Shcherbinin's commission.

Instead of the “disorders” that were associated with the Cossack military-administrative system,⁴⁷ the empress promised the Sloboda society “order,” that is, regular military service, universal imperial laws and administrative institutions, which would give protection from oppression and abuse by representatives of the Cossack *starshyna*, and, as a result, ensure “prosperity and peace.” Thusly, the idea of establishing a “legal monarchy” (which was regarded as a safeguard against despotism and tyranny), which was proclaimed to be the key goal of Catherine's government, was successfully used to legitimize the abolition of the autonomy of Sloboda Ukraine, and subsequently also of the Hetmanate.⁴⁸ But here it was adapted to local conditions and was accompanied by a populist anti-elitist policy, which saw the main threat to tyranny not in a despotic monarch on the throne but in a corrupt *starshyna* that sought to usurp power and use it not for the common good but for personal gain.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ In response to Shcherbinin's report about the abuses of the *starshyna* of the Sloboda regiments, the empress in her letter of May 19, 1763 wrote him that she “... had not counted on seeing such a peculiar kind of disorder and rapacity: because, it seems to me, no one has ever heard before of such illegal requisitions being collected and due payments being in arrears to the treasury.” See “Tri pis'ma Ekateriny Velikoi k Evdokimu Alekseevichu Shcherbininu,” *Russkii arkhiv* (hereafter—*RA*) 6 (1896): 186.

⁴⁸ On the “legal monarchy” in greater detail, see Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 99–118; Griffiths, “Catherine II: The Republican Empress,” 323–344.

⁴⁹ It is worth emphasizing that what is meant in this case is premodern populism, or “populism before nationalism.” But this populism had a great deal in common with its modern analogue: anti-elitism, an attempt to speak on behalf of the real “people,” and anti-pluralism. At the same time, in Catherine II's interpretation, populism was clearly combined with Enlightenment paternalism. On populism as an ideology and political practice, see Jan Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia, 2016).

The plan of integrationist transformations for Sloboda Ukraine was developed by a Senate commission composed of the representative of the general officers (*heneralitet*), General-in-Chief Petr Panin, Senator Iakov Shakhovskoi, and the former diplomat and Catherine II's secretary of state Adam Olsuf'iev. In January 1765, the future Sloboda governor Evdokim Shcherbinin joined the commission on orders from the empress.

The Senate commission wrote two reports: dated December 16, 1764 and May 20, 1765, which were approved by Catherine II.⁵⁰ These reports defined the main parameters of reforms in the military, administrative, and social spheres. In particular, they dealt with the creation of the Sloboda Ukrainian gubernia, which was to consist of five provinces that corresponded to the five Sloboda regiments. Accordingly, provincial chancelleries headed by voivodes were established in Sumy, Okhtyrka, Ostrohoz'k, and Iziium, and a gubernial chancellery headed by the governor, in Kharkiv. Former companies were transformed into commissariats (*komisarstva*), which were to be administered by commissariat boards headed by commissioners (*komisary*). Instead of five Cossack and one hussar regiments, five regular hussar regiments were created. The service Cossacks (*kozaky-kompaniitsi*) and Cossack helpers (*kozaky-pidpomichnyky*), who constituted nearly 60 percent of the region's population, were renamed military inhabitants (*viis'kovi obyvateli*) and were charged a poll tax of 95 kopeks per year. In addition, they were to supply recruits for the new Sloboda hussar regiments, and universal imperial recruitment did not extend to this region for the time being. Instead, the Sloboda subject peasants who lived on *starshyna* landholdings in the Sloboda Ukraine gubernia and the landholdings of Russian landowners in neighboring gubernias were to pay a poll tax of 60 kopeks per year. The former *starshyna* and the clergy were not subject to the poll tax or any other levies.

⁵⁰ *PSZ*, 16: 1003-7, no. 12293; *ibid.*, 17: 133-36, no. 12397.

The newly formed administrative institutions were to function based on universal imperial legislation outside the spheres where this legislation was in contradiction with the charters of privilege of the Sloboda regiments and economic liberties of the former Cossack estates. Another important nuance was that the key posts—governor, voivode, and gubernial prosecutor—were to be filled by “people capable of this kind of governance, first of all Great Russians,” while the posts of the governors’ and voivodes’ deputies could be filled by members of the former *starshyna*.⁵¹

They tried to adhere to this principle. As shown in the study by Svitlana Potapenko, who analyzed the personnel and structure of the administrative institutions of the Sloboda Ukrainian gubernia during the first years of its existence, all the highest levels of the bureaucratic apparatus were in fact filled by natives of internal Russian gubernias: Evdokim Shcherbinin became governor; Luka Mikhailov, gubernial prosecutor; and Marko Losev, Leontii L’vov, Prokhor Bavykin, and Mikhail Kriukov, the voivodes in Sumy, Okhtyrka, Iziium, and Ostrohoz’k. At the same time, the absolute majority of the posts of voivodes’ deputies and commissioners were assigned to members of the former Sloboda *starshyna*.⁵² The case of the governors’ deputies, who after the establishment of vicereencies in 1780 were renamed vice-governors, was less clear-cut. Natives of internal Russian gubernias continued to dominate in this office, even though Shcherbinin did try to appoint former Sloboda colonels to these posts.⁵³

⁵¹ PSZ, 16: 1004, no. 12283.

⁵² Svitlana Potapenko, “Kantseliars’ki ustanovy Slobids’koï Ukraïny druhoï polovyny 60-kh rr. XVIII st.: osoblyvosti funktsionuvannia ta personal’nyi sklad sluzhbovtziv,” in *Naukovi zapysky. Zbirnyk prats’ molodykh vchenykh ta aspirantiv* 18 (Kyiv, 2009): 8–15.

⁵³ Thus, in September 1765, immediately after the creation of the Sloboda Ukrainian gubernia, one of the two governors’ deputies was former Okhtyrka colonel Mykhailo Boiars’kyi. But as soon as in October of the same year, Boiars’kyi resigned from this post and continued his service as lieutenant-colonel in the Okhtyrka hussar regiment: Potapenko, “Kantseliars’ki ustanovy Slobids’koï Ukraïny,” 8. Later, in 1769–1771, the post of governor’s deputy was held by the aforementioned former Ostrohoz’k colonel, Stepan Tev’iashov: *TsDIAUK*, f. 1710, op. 2, spr. 549, ark. 1; *ibid.*, f. 1710, op. 2, spr. 797, ark. 7. But the next representative of the *starshyna* did not appear in this office until 1791. This person was the collegiate councillor (*kolez’kyi radnyk*) Hryhorii Shydlovs’kyi, a member of an influential Kharkiv officer family, who in 1791–1796 occupied the post of vice-governor under Kharkiv vicegerent Fedor Kishens’kyi. After Kishens’kyi’s dismissal in 1796, Shydlovs’kyi even performed the duties of the head of the Kharkiv viceregency for a period of time: *TsDIAUK*, f. 1709, op. 2, spr. 1612, ark. 1; *ibid.*, f. 1959, op. 1, spr. 425, ark. 1. The

Catherine II did not confine herself to just approving both reports of the Senate commission; she issued two more important documents that cast light on what she saw as the goal of the abolition of autonomy and the key objectives of the transformations that were to be implemented in the region. These were the empress's instruction to the Sloboda governor of July 6, 1765 and her manifesto "On the Establishment in the Sloboda Regiments of Proper Civilian Order and on the Location of the Gubernial and Provincial Chancelleries" of July 28, 1765.⁵⁴

It is worth beginning our analysis of these documents with the manifesto, which was meant to explain concisely to Sloboda society the content and goal of the planned transformations. Speaking of the reasons for the changes, Catherine II briefly mentioned "many problems of a mixed military and civilian rule, the burdensome maintenance and uselessness of Cossack service there, and other forms of oppression of the people stemming from this."⁵⁵ Noting the regularization of "unreliable" Cossack service and the creation of a gubernia, the empress formulated the goal of these transformation as follows:

We are not satisfied with the mere elimination of these harmfulness, and wanting to express Our Motherly mercy to the people there, and taking into account both the common good and their own benefit, we had to resolve... to institute proper order and thereby not only establish the prosperity and peace of all the inhabitants there but by this means lead them out of their earlier stagnation and give them a way to obtain, with services to Us and the fatherland, the same enjoyment of the ranks and services graciously assigned by Us to each position as Our other loyal subjects.⁵⁶

At the end of the manifesto, Catherine II repeated that these "new, more useful institutions" were a sign "of Our goodwill to all the people there." She expected that the Sloboda "people,"

weak interest on the part of the representatives of the most influential Sloboda officer families in the office of vice-governor is mostly likely explained by the traditionally more prestigious occupation of military service, as well as lack of trust in the first Sloboda governor.

⁵⁴ *PSZ*, 17: 181–89, no.12430; *ibid.*, 17: 194–95, no. 12440.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 17: 194, no. 12440.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*,194–95.

finding “themselves free of taxes and burdens,” would demonstrate “appropriate gratitude” and would continue to perform their “loyal duty, since everybody in general and each individually is expressly obligated by duty, oath, honor, and true commitment to Us and the fatherland.”⁵⁷

It is worth noting that the abolition of autonomy was presented as a civilizing act that was to bring order and prosperity to Sloboda society, which, according to Catherine II, was in a state of “stagnancy” (*zakosnenie*), that is, was, at best, closed to development and reforms.

What in the empress’s opinion were to be the first steps in establishing “order” and “prosperity and peace” in the region? Help in finding the answer to this question can be found in Catherine II’s instruction to Sloboda governor Shcherbinin, published three weeks before the manifesto cited above. The instruction consisted of twenty-eight items, of which six (the most!) were devoted to the introduction of a poll tax and control over the movement of the population in order to ensure tax collection. Tax evasion carried serious penalties, including exile to Nerchinsk. The free movement of Cossack helpers, landless peasants who worked for neighbors with land (*pidsusidky*), as well as subject peasants, which was part of the “Cherkasy customs,” was restricted even before the decree: first, by a decision of the Shcherbinin commission, and later, by the report of the Senate commission of December 16, 1764, which Catherine II approved.⁵⁸ The instruction to the Sloboda governor introduced in Sloboda Ukraine the passport system that existed in the internal Russian gubernias, which prescribed that a long-term absence from the place of residence required a passport obtained for a fee from the nearest commissariat.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 195.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 16: 1006, no. 12293. This restriction remained “temporary” until May 3, 1783, at which time free movement was finally prohibited by a decree of Catherine II, which de facto transformed the Sloboda subject peasants into serfs of landowners.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 17: 183, no. 12430.

It is worth noting that in the conditions of the eighteenth-century Russian Empire the poll tax was not only a fiscal instrument but also an important social marker. This tax was not paid individually, but by the community, which potentially hampered individual initiative and strengthened collectivist principles. In addition, to be subject to the poll tax meant that the payer belonged to one of the unprivileged categories of the population; these categories had a number of obligations, but, most important, their vertical social mobility, at least at the legislative level, was strictly restricted.⁶⁰ The preservation of the Cossack estate's privileges during the first decades after the abolition of autonomy mitigated the radical nature of these innovations, but in the long term, Catherine II's decision to impose the poll tax on nearly 95 percent of the region's population had very important far-reaching consequences, because it created grounds for treating subject peasants as serfs of the nobility, and military inhabitants and burghers, as serfs of the state.

Two items in the instruction dealt with the judicial system, in particular permission to conduct oral, simplified trials in cases involving less than 12 rubles, and also stressed the impermissibility of bribery in courts. Next, the empress ordered the creation of an estate department in the gubernial chancellery, which was to carry out preparations for a future general land survey in order to establish order in land matters and put an end to disputes.

The instruction also elaborated populist slogans that had been advanced by the Shcherbinin commission. In particular, it contained a rather declarative item "On Protecting Freemen from Harm," which dealt with the need to protect military inhabitants from abuses during the billeting of military units. On the other hand, more concrete items in the instruction prohibited military and

⁶⁰ Alison K. Smith, *For the Common Good and Their Own Well-Being: Social Estates in Imperial Russia* (Oxford, 2014), 17–23. At the same time, it is worth noting that military freemen were not subject to quitrent (*obrok*), that is, a tax paid in money in the amount of 3 rubles, similarly to state and economic peasants, and also smallholders (*odnodvitsi*) in internal Russian gubernias. From the time of Peter I, quitrent for these categories of the population was regarded as equivalent to corvée or cash rent from serfs. Thus the government tended to view them as "state serfs."

civilian senior officials from buying land and fixed property from freemen, ordered that land-poor and landless freemen be allotted—wherever possible—plots of land from the public regimental land fund, and envisaged the creation of “public storage facilities,” in which the grain collected from the population would be stored in the event of a poor harvest. The document also envisaged the introduction in cities and towns of “police regulations” based on the Police Chief Instruction; the details of these “regulations” were to be specified in instructions to commissioners, which the Sloboda gubernial chancellery was ordered to prepare.

The only item in the instruction related to the humanitarian sphere dealt with the opening of additional classes of mathematics, geometry, painting, “engineering,” artillery science, and geodesy, as well as the French and German languages at Kharkiv College, for which three thousand rubles were allocated from untaxed revenue. This measure was motivated not by the need to spread education among the “people,” as could have been expected, but by the “revival and dissemination of sciences.” This rhetorical justification indicates that for Catherine II this initiative was part of her policy of cultural patronage and yet another step in strengthening her image of an enlightened monarch, who promotes the development of the sciences and arts.⁶¹

On the other hand, current studies show that the creation of additional classes—a de facto independent secular educational institution—became a powerful means of secularization, which initially had a very pragmatic goal: to train specialists for the newly created administrative institutions and educated officers for the imperial army.⁶² The emphasis in the educational program

⁶¹ Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 104.

⁶² The experiment with the additional classes proved successful in no small part owing to the personal involvement of Governor Shcherbinin, who, in particular, saw to the supply of books and furniture and attended to engaging teachers from Moscow. For Shcherbinin, the creation of a secular educational institution primarily for the nobility, modeled on the Noble Land Cadet Corps in St. Petersburg, became a key element in his program of “regularization” of life in the region. At the same time, as Volodymyr Masliichuk shows, here, too, life made adjustments—the institution ultimately turned out to be oriented primarily to orphan children from various estates (except for subject peasants and serfs) and was a mixture of various educational models: Volodymyr Masliichuk, “‘Novopribavochnye klassy’: sprobna svits’koho navchal’noho zakladu u Kharkovi 1765–1775 rr.,” in *Kyivs’ka akademiia* 11 (Kyiv, 2013): 137–53; Idem,

on mathematics, as well as on such practical disciplines as geodesy, “engineering,” and artillery science, indicates that Catherine II was continuing the pragmatic policy of Peter I, aimed at “regularizing” and technologizing the society of the empire.⁶³

The manifesto and instruction to the Sloboda governor are important direct evidence on the basis of which we can reconstruct the views of the empress on the situation in Sloboda Ukraine and her view of the direction of future changes as of 1765. But if we want to better understand the intentions and expectations of Catherine II, we also need to take into account her general “Instruction to the Governors,” which she wrote a year earlier, on April 21, 1764.⁶⁴

This document placed special emphasis on the empress’s “vigilant care” “to increase the well-being of the subjects... and bring the whole... Empire the desired prosperity.”⁶⁵ Accordingly, it was envisaged that the governor as the “head and master of the whole Gubernia placed under his watch” was not only to be in charge of the proper execution of the laws and directives of the imperial government and the effective functioning of administrative and judicial institutions but also to stimulate the development and flourishing of the region. In particular, Catherine II urged the governors to care “about agriculture as the source of all the treasures and wealth of the State and about multiplying by each Gubernia of its particular... products exported abroad, encouraging the people with wise counsel.”⁶⁶ This meant that the governors were to be the regional counterparts of the reformer empress and “by their diligent execution of their prescribed duties, and with

“Vid ‘dodatkovykh klasiv’ do ‘narodnoho uchylyshcha.’ Svits’kyi osvithnii zaklad u Kharkovi 1775–1789 rr.,” *Kyivs’ka akademiia* 13 (Kyiv, 2016), 228–47; Idem, *Zdobutky ta iliuzii: osvithni initsiatyvy na Livoberezhnii ta Slobids’kii Ukraïni druhoï polovyny XVIII–pochatku XIX st.* (Kharkiv, 2018), 171–95.

⁶³ As Alfred Rieber notes, the reforms of Peter I in the Russian Empire were inspired by a vision of a society “dominated by technique,” that is, a society in which “technology and social organization are combined to maximize production.” See Alfred J. Rieber, *The Imperial Russian Project: Autocratic Politics, Economic Development, and Social Fragmentation* (Toronto–Buffalo–London, 2017), 17, 390.

⁶⁴ *PSZ*, 16: 716–20, no. 12137.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 716.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 719–20.

impartial loyalty, [they should] complement the tireless labors for the happiness of the fatherland” of Catherine II herself.⁶⁷

However, this “Instruction,” too, reveals to us only the part of the picture that the empress regarded as possible and necessary to be made public. What would help us to see what remained behind the declarations addressed to the general public would be Catherine II’s secret instruction to Governor Shcherbinin, issued most likely in 1765. Unfortunately, so far this document has not been found in either Ukrainian or Russian archives. But it can be assumed with a high degree of probability that it existed, since, at least at the beginning of her reign, the empress actively engaged in the practice of writing secret instructions to governors of both internal Russian gubernias and the “western borderlands.” We know for certain that in 1764 she issued secret instructions to the newly appointed governor of Novgorod Jacob von Sievers and the governor-general of Little Russia Petr Rumiantsev. Based on the contents of these two documents, it is worth attempting to reconstruct the likely content of the secret instruction to Shcherbinin.

The instruction to Sievers detailed and strengthened the image of the reformer governor represented in the “Instruction.” Among other things, the empress stressed that positive changes had to be based on a good knowledge of local conditions and circumstances, and therefore encouraged Sievers to collect detailed statistics regarding all aspects of the life of the local society and to prepare new maps of the gubernia and individual counties.⁶⁸

The secret instruction to Rumiantsev also emphasized the image of a reformer governor, but it is much more interesting to us in that its second main topic was the integration of the society of the Hetmanate into the empire and the role of the Little Russian governor-general in achieving

⁶⁷ Ibid., 717.

⁶⁸ Jones, *Provincial Development*, 52.

this goal. Here the focus was on relations with the Cossack *starshyna*, which was depicted as the main obstacle both to the integration of the region and to its successful internal development.

As in the case with the Sloboda regiments, the instruction spoke of “countless disorders” caused by the combination of “military and civilian rule,” as well as “the arrogance of those in charge, choosing their own self-interest over the people’s interests and direct service to the fatherland.”⁶⁹ The empress regarded hatred of the Little Russians for the Great Russians as a “political” problem, regarding which she noted:

And since that hatred is found especially among the local officers, who, fearing to see the limits of their lawless and greedy self-will, impart it more to the common people, warning them with first imperceptible and eventually with complete loss of rights and liberties, so that there is no doubt that they with the current changes in their rule... did not make worse their underhanded deceit that the suppression of the previous disorder and the establishment of the best institutions would not be consistent with their whims and self-interest. In this consideration, do not leave off diligently monitoring, but not explicitly and without publicity, the behavior of the officers there...⁷⁰

Catherine II was equally distrustful of the clergy of the Hetmanate, which under the influence of Catholic educational and theological practices ostensibly aspired not only to spiritual but also to secular power:

You must also diligently keep an eye on them... so that they not exceed the boundaries of their proper rank with their various wiles of deep-rooted love of power, sometimes extending their spiritual authority over secular matters, and sometimes sowing chaff among the simple and superstitious people that is useful for their purposes but bad for general peace, under the guise of the love of God and piety... And, besides, it is no secret that students of theology, both in Polish schools abroad and those in Little Russia, who establish themselves here in spiritual offices, according to the depraved rules of Roman clergy, are infected by many principles of insatiable love of power, whose harmful consequences fill European history of past years.⁷¹

⁶⁹ “Nastavlenie, dannoe grafu P. Rumiantsevu pri naznachenie ego general-gubernatorom, s sobstvennoruchnymi pravkami Ekateriny II,” in *SIRIO* 7 (St. Petersburg, 1871): 381.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 378.

While the *starshyna* and clergy were viewed by the empress as possessing subjectivity, even if negative, the rest of the region's population—common Cossacks, burghers, and subject peasants, who merged into a single mass of the “common people”—seems to have been lacking in political subjectivity altogether. In Catherine II's secret instruction, the “people” were merely the object of the subversive propaganda of the officers and clergy and had no political consciousness and aspirations of their own, and their general image was clearly Orientalist. The empress viewed the movement of peasants from place to place as “the foolhardiness of the people's obduracy... and the sole dream of liberty.” The “people” were also characterized by “depraved notions,” a proclivity for drunkenness, “indolence,” and “indifference” to agriculture.⁷²

At the same time, in keeping with the cameralistic attitude, the Orientalization of the “common people” was harmoniously combined with paternalism. In accord with the populist rhetoric already successfully tested in the Sloboda regiments, the imperial government sought to protect the “people” from the abuses of the *starshyna*, who were openly called “little tyrants” in the instruction to Rumiantsev, and it was the “people” that were ultimately to feel the benevolent influence of the changes planned in St. Petersburg:

And although time itself will open the people's eyes and show them how much they will be unburdened and prosper, when, through the establishment of the best practices, they find themselves suddenly freed from the many little tyrants tormenting them, you can even now, assisted by various means [such as] fairness, unselfishness, leniency, and kindness, destroy their unfounded fears and win their love and trust.⁷³

The ending of the quotation indicates how the empress envisaged that the goals set before Rumiantsev should be achieved. This involved primarily reaching consensus or the agreement of

⁷² Ibid., 381-82. The “people” were “backward” inasmuch as they supposedly lived in accordance with their natural instincts and customs rather than according to rational laws and regulations, created by the enlightened monarch and his officials. Such an Orientalist view of the “people” became established in the Russian Empire when the process of westernization began during the reign of Peter I. Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 42–45.

⁷³ Ibid., 390.

the local population to the planned transformations. Inasmuch as consensus could not be reached exclusively by coercive means, the governor had to combine coercion with persuasion, “leniency and kindness,” and even cunning and hypocrisy:

In the case of many excesses requiring correction and other, better institutions, we can imagine the work that the performance of your job involves, but never more so than in any new undertaking, and [so] given the common people’s sometimes fallacious notions about it, and the passionate and insidious interpretations of the officials, you should be using not always the power of the authority vested in you but [such] diverse means as kindness and leniency, and others, depending on the case, the time, and the person. And thus it can be said that in such cases it is necessary to have wolves’ teeth and a fox’s tail.⁷⁴

We cannot assert with absolute certainty that all the items listed above in the secret instruction to Rumiantsev appeared in the confidential instructions that the empress gave in oral or written form to the first Sloboda governor. But in view of the similarity of Sloboda and Little Russian societies and the tasks facing both governors, as well as the nature of Shcherbinin’s activity in Sloboda Ukraine in 1765–75, we can assume with a high degree of probability that most of them were included there. We can even risk the claim that the instruction to Rumiantsev was composed under the influence of, *inter alia*, the experience of Shcherbinin as the head of the investigative commission sent to the Sloboda regiments in 1762–1764. At the same time, the feasibility of all these integrationist projects had to be tested by a confrontation with Sloboda reality. But the key role at this stage no longer belonged to the empress but to the first Sloboda governor Evdokim Shcherbinin, who was in charge of the integration of the region into the empire during the first decade following the abolition of autonomy.

Translated from the Ukrainian by Marta Skorupsky

⁷⁴ Ibid., 382.