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THE LATE-EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN BALANCE OF POWER AND RUSSOPHOBIA IN THE ENGLISH MEDIA: THE OCHAKOV CRISIS (1791)¹

This study intends to show how Russophobia was presented in English visual and written media through the lens of the most important political doctrine of 18th-century foreign policy: the idea of the balance of power. Using the Ochakov crisis (1791) as a case study, it analyses the most relevant satirical prints pertinent to this issue and explains their iconography. Special emphasis is placed on the representation of Russia as a bear, as well as Catherine II's depiction in the guise of a bear or with the features of a bear. In addition to the visual sources mentioned, an interesting segment of the written media is examined to show how Russophobia surfaced in the articles of a popular magazine.

Keywords: balance of power, public opinion, satirical prints, Russophobia, the bear as an allegory of Russia, Ochakov crisis

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INTRODUCTION

In the present study I analyse some English satirical prints on the European balance of power connected with the so-called Ochakov crisis (1791) which marked the “Genesis of Russophobia in Britain” (to borrow the title of John Howes Gleason’s book²), and examine this phenomenon in articles published by the journal *The Gentleman’s and London Magazine*.

I address the following issues:

[1], Russia’s place in eighteenth-century English balance-of-power thinking with a focus on [2], visual representations of this theme, namely, Russia’s allegorical depiction as a bear, and Catherine II’s representation with the features of a bear; [3], the negative figure of the bear in Western animal symbolism and its application in English satirical prints of Catherinian Russia.

The second issue is well-studied in Russian historiography,³ however, Russia’s place in English balance-of-power thinking, with the exception of the last decade of the eighteenth century, has received less attention in English historiography, and the third aspect, the iconographical dimension, has not been raised so far in the literature to the best of my knowledge. The satirical prints connected with the so-called Ochakov crisis are important because they mark the point at which all these elements came together, culminating in the phenomenon of Russophobia. The same theme dominated the article series published in *The Gentleman’s and London Magazine*, giving an overview of Russian history from its beginnings to 1791. The Ochakov crisis took its name from an unimportant port on the northern shore of the Black Sea occupied by Russian troops in 1788 during the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-1792. When William Pitt the Younger unexpectedly demanded its restoration to the Ottoman Empire in the spring of 1791, backed by a threat of naval mobilisation against Russia, a diplomatic crisis developed. The crisis was resolved favourably for Russia thanks to the Russian ambassador to London, Count Vorontsov, whose skilful manipulation of public opinion through the English media,

2 JOHN HOWES GLEASON, *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain: A Study of the Interaction of Policy and Opinion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950). <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674281776>

3 The Russian literature on this issue was very nicely summarised by TÓTH SZERGEJ, “Egy ideológiai metafora története: az orosz medve”, in *Állati jelek, képek és terek*, ed. SZIRMAI ÉVA, TÓTH SZERGEJ, ÚJVÁRI EDIT (Szeged: Szegedi Egyetemi Kiadó, 2018), 277–295.

as well as his cooperation with Pitt's parliamentary opposition, took war mobilisation off the agenda.⁴ Space precludes analysis of all the satirical prints connected to the Ochakov crisis; discussion is limited to those most pertinent to the emergence of Russophobia, and to aspects of iconography essential to understanding a given satirical print.⁵

The idea of "balance of power" was a central theme in British politics in the eighteenth century, not only with regard to inter-state relations but also domestic politics. Regarding the role of the different media concerning foreign policy, Jeremy Black noted that, although "pamphlets continued to be written and published and in some respects revived in the 1790s, the role of pamphlets in the discussion of foreign policy declined, while that of newspapers became more important."⁶ Although the growing impact of newspapers in shaping public opinion has not been questioned, there is no agreement among historians as to the importance of satirical prints or the identity of their intended audience. Eirwen Nicholson, for instance, discarded the view that the satirical prints were addressed to the common folk, and saw the political decision-makers instead as the principal target group, treating satirical prints as a "Westminster-oriented" medium.⁷

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Perhaps it does not come as a surprise that Russia entered into English balance-of-power thinking during the last phase of the Great Northern War (1700–1721), when Russia emerged victorious not only on the battlefield but also at sea. After the decisive Russian victory over Sweden in the sea battles of Hangö (1714) and Grengam (1716), growing concern over her power raised alarm in Britain, clearly indicating that Russia was seen as part of the European states system. Advocating the need to tame Russian expansion in the Baltic, some newspapers invoked the (by then

4 ALEXANDER WORONZOFF-DASHKOFF, "Simon Vorontsov and the Ochakov Crisis of 1791", in *Intellectual and Political Elites of the Enlightenment*, ed. TATIANA V. ARTEMYEVA, MIKHAIL I. MIKESHIN (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2014) *Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 16: 170–183.

5 The satirical prints cited in this study are readily available on the internet.

6 JEREMY BLACK, *Debating Foreign Policy in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 28.

7 EIRWEN NICHOLSON, "Consumers and Spectators: The Public of the Political Print in Eighteenth-Century England", *History* 81, no. 261 (January, 1996): 5–21. here 14, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-229X.1996.tb01683.x>

commonplace) concept of balance of power in 1719. The *Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer* stated that “from the earliest period of our naval power, Britain...lookt upon a just Balance between the northern powers to be a fundamental interest of her state;” while the *Weekly Packet*, making the same claim, asserted that in case of the Russian conquest of Sweden “the Balance of Europe will certainly be destroy’d on that side.”⁸ By mid-century Russia’s place as a great power in the European balance of power was beyond doubt. In 1744, during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), the British Minister Plenipotentiary, Thomas Robinson, spoke of the “just and necessary influence which the court of Russia ought to have, and will have, in the affairs of Europe.”⁹ And when in 1756, in the year marking the beginning of the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), a book written by Richard Rolt and called “A new Dictionary of Trade and Commerce, Compiled From the Information of the Most Eminent Merchants, and From the Works of the Best Writers on Commercial Subjects, in all Languages” was published in London, it contained a two-page entry on the “Ballance of power”. It gave a detailed definition of the concept, and after tracing its history addressed the problem of balance in its mid-eighteenth-century context, stating that the preservation of the existing balance of power in Europe depended on the maintenance of three regional balances: “The first (...) is the ballance of the north, where the potency of Russia is principally to be apprehended. (...) The second ballance of power is in Germany. (...) The third ballance is in Italy; (...)”.¹⁰ This assessment clearly shows an awareness of Russia’s position.

Despite Russia’s ever growing importance in European affairs after 1763,¹¹ “serious Anglo-Russian hostility” began only in 1791: “The notion that Russian expansion might be a serious threat to British interests surprised both parliament and the nation when in that year the government presided over by the younger Pitt requested supply for a naval mobilization.”¹² Up to

8 Quoted from JEREMY BLACK, “The Theory of the Balance of Power in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century: A Note on Sources”, *Review of International Studies* 9, no.1 (1983): 55–61, here 58. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500115736>

9 Quoted from BLACK, “The Theory of the Balance of Power,” 61. e.n.17.

10 RICHARD ROLT, *A new Dictionary of Trade and Commerce, Compiled From the Information of the Most Eminent Merchants, and From the Works of the Best Writers on Commercial Subjects, in all Languages*. (London, 1756), entry: “Ballance of power”

11 For this issue see, JEREMY BLACK, “Britain’s Foreign Alliances in the Eighteenth Century”, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 573–602. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4050198>

12 GLEASON, *The Genesis of Russophobia*, 9.

this time Russia had been treated more as a commercial partner than a rival to Britain, but from 1791 Russian expansion towards the warm seas at the expense of the Ottomans was seen as a threat to British interests in the East. This newly perceived Russian danger led to the publication of a series of articles in *The Gentleman's and London Magazine* presenting Russian History from Kievan Rus' to 1791, and their tone was clearly interventionist in the name of the balance of power. Concerning Russia's place in Europe, the very first paragraph of the sixth part of the series declared:

“We now reach that aera [sic] in which Russia assumes a new and extraordinary character. We have seen with philosophic satisfaction, her noble struggles to shake off the ignominious fetters of barbarism; we have witnessed, with applause, her attempt to gain a name in the scale of nations; and have generously admitted her modest claims to protection and support. We have now to view her, not only as a Great Empire, successfully urging her right to competition with the proudest Potentates, but arrogantly acting as the imperious DICTATRESS of EUROPE.”¹³

A serious warning came in the conclusion of the next article in the series: “It is, perhaps, the very country of all others, in which an ambitious Monarch might best indulge prospects of success, the dangerous and alluring projects of foreign conquest, and universal dominion.”¹⁴ The phrase, “universal dominion” (or “universal empire” and “universal monarchy”) was a well-known cliché in European balance-of-power thinking at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when it was associated with the expansionist policies of Louis XIV, who was accused of striving for “universal monarchy.”¹⁵ The remedy to this threat was seen in the principle of a European balance of power, and it was precisely this balance that was thought to be threatened in 1791 by Russia due to her supposed design to

13 *The Gentleman's and London Magazine*, “Chapter VI. Conduct of Russia towards Britain in the last War. Policy of Britain to counteract his Views.” <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=LPORAAAAYAAJ&pg=GBS.PA588-IA2&hl=en> (Accessed December 6, 2021), 523.

14 “Chapter VII. The Present State of Russia. Its National Character, Resources and Power.” *The Gentleman's and London Magazine*, 590.

15 Recently, BRIGITTA SCHVÉD, “The Concepts of Universal Monarchy and Balance of Power in Charles Davenant's *An Essay Upon The Ballance of Power* (1701)”, *Specimina nova. Pars Prima: Sectio Mediaevalis* (Pécs, 2019), 251–263.

take Constantinople – a theme also prominent in satirical prints – and partition the Ottoman Empire. As “universal monarchy” was conceived as tyranny, rulers who were striving for it were treated as ‘bad rulers.’

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The bear as an *attribute* but not as a *symbol of Russia* was widespread in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries in European written and visual sources, and the most important genres of this latter category were engravings and maps: the figure of the bear in these images had no ideological meaning whatsoever but served simply “as an illustration or ornament, as the characteristic animal of a far and exotic country.”¹⁶ The association of the bear with Russia became quite common by the early eighteenth century in English imagery too, but it had not yet become Russia’s symbol or allegory. Considered specifically within a political context, the bear enters English satirical prints clearly from the 1730s onwards, reflecting the growing importance of Russia in European affairs: “already from the 1730s the first engraved sheets make their appearance in London where Russian empresses are depicted in the guise of crowned bears.”¹⁷ And it was in English satirical prints of 1739–1740 on the European balance of power in which the participant states in the “race” were identified in the guise of animals (e.g., France as a fox, the Ottoman Empire as an elephant, etc.) that Russia was depicted as a bear. In a satirical print of 1739 (entitled *The European Race. Heat III.*) the bear, standing on his back feet, fights with the elephant, while in a 1740 satirical print (entitled *The European State Jockies. Running a Heat for the Ballance of Power*) the bear kicks the ‘nether regions’ of the elephant with his back legs, symbolising thereby the outcome of Russia’s War with the Ottoman Empire (1735–1739). Therefore, it can be stated that satirical political iconography closely followed the growing awareness of Russia’s being a great power. “But the bear as the image of Russia became traditionally used in political graphics from the beginning of the last third of the eighteenth century.”¹⁸ Concomitant to

16 Тóтн, “Egy ideológiai metafora története”, 282.

17 АНДРЕЙ АНДРЕЕВИЧ РОССОМАХИН - ДЕНИС ГРИГОРЬЕВИЧ ХРУСТАЛЁВ, Россия как Медведь: Истоки визуализации (XVI-XVIII века) <http://cens.ivanovo.ac.ru/almanach/rossomahin-khrustalev-2008.htm>, <http://cens.ivanovo.ac.ru/almanach/rossomahin-khrustalev-2008.htm> (Accessed November 20, 2018).

18 РОССОМАХИН- ХРУСТАЛЁВ, Россия как Медведь,

this phenomenon was the increasingly negative depiction of the bear, personified by Catherine as the embodiment of vices associated with the bear. These tendencies are especially clearly recognisable in satirical prints of the Ochakov crisis.

III

How did the iconographical change come about which turned the image of the bear from neutral or even exotic into highly negative? And what were the iconographical factors/traditions which made it relatively easy to apply the negative image of the bear to Russia/Catherine? The answer to the second question lies, in my view, in the negative image of the bear long present in western animal symbolism: "In the Bible the bear symbolized divine anger. From the early medieval period it was conceived primarily as *diabolic*, often conceived as the *devil* himself. As an *exemplum of sin*, in late medieval and early Renaissance sources the bear was associated with *Gluttony* due to his famous love of honey, with *Lust* due to his supposed libidinous tendencies, and occasionally with *Anger*."¹⁹ These negative features (*Gluttony*, *Lust*, *Anger*, and also *Malice*) are strikingly apparent in satirical prints of the 1790s mocking Catherine II in connection with various political events (the Ochakov crisis of 1791, the third partition of Poland, 1795²⁰), and due to Catherine's expansive foreign policy and the contemporary image of her sexual behaviour (*Lust*).

I contend that the answer to the first question might be found in the most popular emblem book of early modern Europe, that is, in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, called the Bible of early modern emblematicism. It is well-known that the English translation of *Iconologia*, published as *Iconologia or Morall Emblems* (London, 1709), which was a very simplified version of Cesare Ripa's work, was used as a handbook by cartoonists. Therefore, it is plausible to suppose that it was a possible source of iconographical panels for the representation of vices associated with the bear, and

19 SIMONA COHEN, *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 220. The emphasis is mine E. S. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004171015.i-319>

20 A satirical print of 1794, for instance, called *Queen Catherine's Dream*, depicts the empress as seated on a throne and looking at the Devil, who is offering her Warsaw, holding it in his left hand, and Constantinople (held higher) in his right hand. Although the Devil had been present in balance-of-power satirical prints as early as 1739–1740, it was not connected to Russia before the 1790s.

hence contributed to shaping the visual image of Catherine in the satirical prints. In the 1709 edition of *Iconologia* we find the following allegorical description of vices associated with the bear which are most pertinent to the iconographies of satirical prints to be discussed below.

*Fig. 170. (Ira) Anger: "A young Man, round shoulder'd, his Face bloated, sparkling Eyes, a round Brow, a sharp Nose, wide Nostrils ; he is arm'd, his Creft is a Boar's [i.e., Bear's] Head; from which issues Fire and Smoak; a drawn Sword, in one Hand, and a lighted Torch in the other, all in red. Young, subject to Anger. The Bear is an Animal much inclined to Wrath; The Sword shews that Anger presently lays hold on it. The puft Cheeks, that Anger often alters the Face, by the Boiling of the Blood; and inflames the Eyes."*²¹

*Fig. 220. (Malicia) Malice: "An old Hag, very ugly...Peacock on one side, and a raging Bear on the other."*²²

Iconographic panels such as *ugly old Hag, round Brows, sharp Nose, wide Nostrils, puft Cheeks* are recurrent in the satirical prints of Catherine, who is depicted either *as a bear, or with a bear, or else, in a dress decorated with bear fur*.

One of the satirical prints best depicting Catherine's quest (Gluttony) for imperial expansion is entitled *An Imperial Stride*.²³ The scheme of the satirical print (as the author of the description in the catalogue writes) may well have been derived from the following paragraph from an article published in March 1791 in *The Bon Ton Magazine*: "The Empress of Russia is said to be intent placing one *foot* upon Petersburg, and the *other* upon Constantinople. What a delight must the Imperial stride afford to the curious inhabitants of the intermediate countries."²⁴ And Sir W. Young, in a parliamentary speech concerning the Ochakov crisis, pictured Catherine as a "female colossus, standing with one foot on the banks of the Black Sea, and the other on the coast of the Baltic."²⁵ This graphic expression

21 *Iconologia or Morall Emblems by Caesar Ripa* (London: Benj. Motte, 1709), 43. <https://resources.warburg.sas.ac.uk/pdf/noh390b2714105.pdf>. The emphasis is mine: E.S. Anger is erroneously depicted here in the figure of a male, as the *female* allegorical personification is the correct form in Ripa's original.

22 *Iconologia or Morall Emblems*, 55. The emphasis is mine: E.S.

23 Descriptions of the satirical prints used, except for one, are contained in the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*. Vol. VI. (1784-1792): <https://archive.org/details/catalogueofprint06brituoft/page/n8/mode/1up>

24 *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, No. 7843 (777)

25 *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, No. 7843 (777)

seems to reinforce Nicholson's statement on the main target group of political satirical prints, namely that they were, first of all, addressed to those who were sitting in the British Houses of Parliament. The satirical print in question depicts Catherine as a colossal figure with one foot in Russia and the toe of the other planted on the top of the crescent moon atop the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. She is represented as an old woman with a prominent nose, in a dress decorated with bear fur. Below her skirt there are European crowned heads (including the pope) identified by their symbols of power and dress. They utter sentences which have a frivolous secondary meaning due to the fact that they are looking upward, i.e., under Catherine's skirt – the Turkish Sultan being the only exception, whose words ("The whole Turkish Army wouldn't satisfy her") are directly loaded with a sexual content.

Russophobia, although in a humorous manner, is best illustrated in the satirical print called *The Russian bear and her invincible rider encountering the British legion*,²⁶ which also carries a frivolous sexual message. The rider is Catherine's lover, Potemkin, while the bear is depicted with the crowned head of Catherine. Catherine utters the following words: "Shiver their lances into a thousand pieces, my dear Potemkin! I always vanquish when ridden by you!" Potemkin is ready to strike at Catherine's opponents with his sabre raised above his head. Catherine's face, looking at their opponents standing with levelled spears (some of them broken), shows anger, and one of the bear's legs is raised to attack. The opponents are King George III, Salisbury (Lord Chamberlain), followed by Edward Thurlow (Lord Chancellor) and William Pitt behind them; after them come two bishops wearing mitres, and one of them says: "From Russian Bears, good Lord, deliver me!"

Russophobia is also strong in the satirical print called *The Northern Bugga Bo* [bugaboo].²⁷ Catherine is represented here as an ugly old woman (again in a frivolous context) standing with one foot on the northern shore



26 *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, No. 7844 (778)

27 *The Northern Bugga Bo* [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Northern_Bugga_Bo_\(BM_1990,0623.19\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Northern_Bugga_Bo_(BM_1990,0623.19).jpg), (Accessed December 6, 2021)

of the Black Sea and the other on the southern shore, while leaning down to embrace the Baltic with her hands. Catherine is depicted as urinating liquid with the inscription *Black C.* on it into a chamber pot, while expelling the Sultan (called the *Grand Turk*) explosively from her anus through a cannon-like object that bears the name of *Potemkin*. The accompanying texts refer to her imperial ambitions (aiming to seize even Constantinople) which would be difficult to halt, as the inscription under the title of the satirical print summarises the utterances of the people depicted:

“The Empress only wants to secure her Back frontiers, and then she will Stretch over the Black Sea, embrace with her arms the Baltic, and deluge the Ottoman Empire.”

In the fourth satirical print, *The Balance of Power. Or the Posterity of Immortal Chatham Turn'd Posture Master*,²⁸ Pitt stands on a rope and holds a long balancing pole in both hands with the Sultan sitting on one end and Catherine on the other. Again, this is a sexually loaded satirical print, and this content becomes apparent in reading the utterances of the two male persons, employed to ridicule Catherine's image as a lusty woman. The balancing pole, in fact, has the secondary meaning of representing the male organ. The sultan says: “My dear Billy, do help me to make another push, and I will give you half of my Seraglio.” Catherine is depicted as an old woman, with round brows, an image reinforced by Pitt's saying: “The Old Hag cannot move me, and Seraglios cannot bribe me. I have nothing to do with these matters. My Pole will always remain level.”



CONCLUSION

Russophobia is clearly present in both the written and the visual sources analysed here, but in the satirical prints, not surprisingly, it is

²⁸ *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, No. 7846 (780)

expressed in a humorous manner. One even has the impression that this phenomenon is presented in the satirical prints as an idea to be ridiculed, which reflects the oppositional standpoint of these prints. (It is known, for instance, that James Gillray, the author of the last visual image, at that time produced cartoons for the Opposition.) The message of the articles in *The Gentleman's and London Magazine*, on the other hand, is clearly interventionist and reflects the government view.

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