

What lessons did Catherine the Great learn from the Pugachev rebellion, and how far had she acted on these by her death?

For much of the time of Pugachev's rebellion, the government of Catherine in St Petersburg seemed to take no real interest in affairs in her southern domains. Indeed, when Voltaire carefully broached the subject, he felt able to say 'Your majesty does not appear too bothered with the army of M. Pugatschef...'¹. In reply to this, Catherine cheerily dismissed the matter before continuing to question him about hypothetical situations. Indeed, by the end of 1773 there seemed to be no reason to suppose that Pugachev's rebellion would prove to be anything more than yet another isolated outbreak of *jaquerie* in an area which had only just been partially pacified after an insurrection the year beforehand.

However, the success of Pugachev's revolt in holding out against all the attempts made to suppress it for over a year proved an extremely powerful incentive for future reforms. It made apparent to the government several problems with their treatment of the provinces which had for a long time left them weakly controlled and susceptible to periodic outbreaks of peasant violence. The most crucial lesson which was drawn from the Pugachev rebellion was that there needed to be a firmer military grasp on all parts of the Empire, not simply the external frontiers. For instance, when the governor of the Kazan *guberniya* called for assistance against the approaching Pugachev, there simply was no force available to relieve him. Admittedly they revolt occurred at a delicate point in time for the Russian government in that the pick of their soldiers and generals were already engaged in a difficult war on the southern borders with Ottoman Turkey. However, the professional army available outside the gates of Kazan to counter the Cossack-based 'army' of Pugachev was only 800 strong.²

Pugachev's army itself was composed of a heterogeneous mixture of disaffected elements in southern Russian society, most notably Cossacks, Bashkirs, Tartars, religious dissidents such as Old Believers and later industrial and agricultural serfs. Emelyan Pugachev himself was a Don Cossack by birth and was very much in touch with the local population's needs and attitudes. It is noticeable that the route taken by his armies always reflected the very regional and indeed local concerns of the groups who made them up. For example after the very first attack on Yaitsk, he turned not towards the interior and Samara - towns on the way to the centres of power. Instead, he turned east towards Orenburg which for most Cossacks was the most direct symbol of Russian oppression. The Bashkir elements in Pugachev's army mostly returned to the Kazakh border regions after the siege of Kazan, in order to continue the fight against the Russian state there: even though 'Peter III' was in some respects their only method of achieving their ends legitimately, even Peter III remained the tsar of a Russia they wanted to expel from their lands altogether. The main army after Kazan did not continue westwards towards Nizhniy Novgorod and a terrified Russian heartland, but wheeled back south into Cossack areas.

The causes of these non-Russian peoples joining the rebel cause must be judged from the manifestos put out by Pugachev exhorting people to join in the Tsar's campaign. Firstly, the popular mythology of Peter III linked him with the Emancipation Manifesto of 1762 and the expectation of further liberalisations had he ruled any longer. Thus Pugachev's offer of freedom from the poll-tax and the recruit-levy could be made to appear within the mould of the emperor he attempted to become. Yet to other groups, the appeals were very different, and show the different pre-occupations of his supporters. Bashkirs, for example, were promised their traditional ways of life, freedom of their lands, water and woods, their faith & laws, their food,

¹ Reddaway: *Documents of Catherine the Great* p.194

² de Madariaga: *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* p.250

clothing, salaries, weapons and freedom from enslavement. Cossacks were similarly promised their old ways of life, the rights to the river Yaik from source to sea, tax-free pasturage, free salt, twelve *chetvi* of corn and 12 roubles per Cossack per year. The activities of the army in new areas also served to reinforce the prejudices of peoples who were semi-integrated into the Russian way of life. One of Pugachev's last manifestos complained that the 'Christian law of the old tradition of our holy fathers has been completely destroyed, and instead of it, a new law, of evil intent and German habits has been introduced into Russia, and the most disgusting shaving of the beard, and other outrages against the Christian faith and cross.'³ The result of this in Kazan was that 'those in German dress and without a beard were killed.'⁴

The choice facing Catherine's government after the suppression of the revolt was therefore one of either fully integrating the Cossacks into Russian society or persecuting them ruthlessly. Given Catherine's enlightened sentiments, the former was always likely to be a more appealing policy. She noticeably ordered Bibikov in his investigations to 'Please be cautious in deciding which punishments to inflict. For 12 years the Secret Expedition under my own eyes has not flogged a single person under interrogation, and every single affair has been properly sorted out.'⁵ Certainly the results of this were remarkably lenient in that of the 9,164 people dealt with by the Kazan commission, only 38 were executed, and 8,342 released with no further punishment.⁶ To add to that were several concrete measures intended to fully integrate the Cossack populations into Russian civil society. An example of this is the Statute for Don Cossacks which was delivered on 15 February 1775, after being drafted by Potemkin. Don Cossacks therefore lost the autonomy of the Host while retaining their own separate status in military matters. The results of this reform could be seen in that the Cossack troops remained consistently the most loyal sections of the Russian army throughout the course of the Napoleonic wars, and indeed throughout the next century. This assimilation process was aided by the vigorous programmes of immigration proposed by the government, which led to 35,000 non-Muslims living in the Crimea by 1800. Corresponding with this influx of foreign Christians was an emigration of the local Muslim Tartar population despite official toleration of Islam as well as other religious beliefs. In this way, the non-Russian population was gradually drawn into the Russian state, and even where there was discrimination - for example the destruction of the Zaporozhian Host - the authorities still managed to create a special 'Black Sea' Cossack fighting force.

The second main lesson of the *Pugachevshchina* was that the provincial government from a civil perspective was extremely understaffed, inefficient and incompetent. As Catherine said 'I consider the weak conduct of civil and military officials in various localities to be as injurious to the public welfare as Pugachev and the rabble he has collected.'⁷ Certainly the weakness of conduct was in many cases entirely not the fault of the officials concerned. The governor of Kazan could count only 80 civil officials for the whole of his *guberniya* of 2.5m inhabitants. Throughout the whole of the Russian Empire there were in 1763 only 16,000 civil servants. For comparison, Prussia - with a land area of around 1% that size - had 14,000.⁸ Even from a central governmental level, by the time of the rebellion, only six years had passed in which the government was able to say whether the Crown had made a surplus or deficit at all. Analyses of the role of the provincial administration in the Pugachev rebellion concentrated most closely on the fact that the bureaucracy was too remote and too inefficient to adequately deal with even the most basic administrative matters. The army for example was still needed to collect taxes - the

³ de Madariaga: *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* p.254

⁴ de Madariaga: *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* p.250

⁵ de Madariaga: *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* p.247

⁶ de Madariaga: *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* p.265

⁷ Jones: *The Emancipation of the Russian nobility* p.207

⁸ Jones: *The Emancipation of the Russian nobility* p.181

Crown's most pressing interest. If this was to be rectified then the organisation of authority at *guberniya* level would need to be reviewed, and Mershchersky, the new Governor of Kazan, along with Volkonsky in Moscow, were one of many officials who wrote their recommendations for a wholesale reform of provincial administration. The decision-making structure remained far too bulky, with too little staff covering too large an area. Kazan for example contained 2.5m inhabitants, which for a poorly-staffed area meant that out of hundreds of petitions each year, only a handful could ever be dealt with. The recommendation of Volkonsky along with Sievers in Novgorod was to limit the size of the *guberniya* to between 300-400,000. However, logistically, this would require an enormous increase in personnel and expenditure, a factor which would throw the reforms onto the goodwill of the nobility.

Ever since the Emancipation Manifesto of the genuine Peter III in 1762, this latter recommendation had not been a workable prospect. As Sievers, the Governor of Novgorod put it 'the provincial nobles have been loafing since 1762 and have all but lost interest in the public good and their duty to the their country.'⁹ Since the nobility was no longer required to serve, it had been viewed with considerable suspicion by the central government and vice versa. Why should the nobility continue to hold its many privileges in return for less service? Likewise, what did the lesser nobility have to gain from co-operating with a government which had as recently as 1764 secularised church lands & serfs? Likewise the new professionalisation of the civil services which was a result of the 1762 also drove a hitherto unimaginable division between the governing classes and the hereditary nobility. What the Pugachev rebellion served to do was to allay the fears of both nobility and Crown over each other in the face of the common threat in the shape of the peasants and Cossacks. The death toll of the rebellion - 15,72 nobles, 237 clerics and 1,037 officials - served as well as any other reminder of the fact that the nobles and Crown were all targets of the rebels as being the establishment, and as such they had common cause in trying to maintain the existing social structure. Nobles had at least as much interest in clamping down on the endemic problem of peasant brigandage as did the government. In some parts of the country, the nobles even paid for this to take place, such as in Kazan where the nobles promised Bibikov to provide and equip a cavalry force of some three hundred.

If the nobles could be persuaded to co-operate with the central government in furthering the activities of the state into provincial life, then this was only to Catherine's advantage. However, no such furtherance could ever hope to come about without the co-operation of the nobility for the simple fact that they remained class with the best - if not the only - education in most of provincial Russia. The great expansion of the civil service which Catherine envisaged - and this was first announced in her Fundamental Law the year after the quelling of the rebellion - was utterly reliant on the nobility to voluntarily give their service though they could not be compelled. Mershchersky, as the new governor in Kazan, was the first to suggest the possible creation of land kommissars 'elected by the nobles from among themselves or chosen in some appropriate manner.'¹⁰ In the Fundamental Law this principle was adopted, and the posts which were available for election were specified in great detail. It was as a result of the elective procedure alone that we can account for the hugely increased numbers of civil servants in the two decades surrounding Pugachev's revolt. The number of provincial civil servants in 1763 was 12,712; by 1781 the figure has over doubled at 27,000.¹¹ Of these 10,608 were elected to serve for 3-year terms. Expenditure on provincial government also increased extremely rapidly, if one compares the 1.71m roubles spent in 1774 with the 5.61m in 1785.¹²

⁹ Jones: *The Emancipation of the Russian nobility* p.191

¹⁰ Jones: *The Emancipation of the Russian nobility* p.205

¹¹ Jones: *The Emancipation of the Russian nobility* p.184

¹² Jones: *The Emancipation of the Russian nobility* p.225

This would not have happened had it not been for a vigorous campaign by Catherine and her provincial officials to encourage nobles to view state service in the provinces as not so much of a burden as it had appeared previously. 216 new towns were planned and constructed in the middle of each *guberniya* primarily to house the government offices, but also to provide a focus for a more vibrant local social and business life. For example, each town was required to have a doctor and two druggists. Government funds were also used to attract nobles from the surrounding countryside to vote in elections by means of encouraging social occasions. The first elections in 1775 in Tver for instance included a banquet and masked ball at state expense; though private functions soon complemented these.

In conclusion, the re-establishment of provincial administration on a more thorough model after the Pugachev revolt served both the Crown and nobility well. The bond between the two had been fostered by the peasant insurrection, which was a timely reminder that the institution of serfdom existed since the machinery of the State remained incapable of dealing directly with individuals. Noble involvement in government was essential if instructions were to be carried through to the lowest levels. The influx of new and more junior elected officials also allowed those appointed by the Crown to leave such matters as land disputes and brigandage, and to concentrate on matters of government to which their education made them more suited, such as tax collection. However, if one scratches beneath the surface, one finds that the reforms of 1775 and 1785 did not fundamentally change the relationship of Crown and nobility. What they did create was a new sense of co-operation after the tensions of previous years.