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## CATHERINE THE GREAT: EMPRESS OF ALL THE RUSSIAS

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|         |   |
|---------|---|
| 1729    | Born  |
| 1744    | Betrothed to Grand Duke Peter of Russia   |
| 1762    | Succession of Peter as Peter III, his deposition, and Catherine's succession as empress |
| 1767    | Constitutional commission   |
| 1768–74 | War with Turkey   |
| 1792–95 | Partition of Poland   |
| 1796    | Died  |

Catherine the Great of Russia was not a Russian at all. She was a German princess of the small and obscure house of Anhalt-Zerbst, born in 1729 and christened Sophie Friederike Auguste. When she was only fourteen, Catherine was selected by the Russian Empress Elisabeth, the daughter and successor of Peter the Great, to be the wife of the Russian heir apparent, Elisabeth's nephew the Grand Duke Peter. The marriage took place the following year.

Peter was as fully German as Catherine; in fact, they were cousins. His father, the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, had also been a minor German prince, and Peter never lost his fondness for things German. His interests—including his political interests—as well as his tastes were German. Indeed, he despised everything Russian. Even after his accession to the Russian throne, Peter's ideal was Frederick the Great of Prussia.

Catherine, on the other hand, had readily given up her German name, at the insistence of the Empress Elisabeth, and had taken the Russian name Yekaterina—Catherine. She gave up her Lutheran religion just as readily and received instruction in the traditional Russian Orthodox faith. And she plunged into the task of learning the Russian language, as well as everything she could about Russian history and government.

The early years of Catherine's marriage were a nightmare. Peter hated her, lived apart from her, and openly flaunted his mistresses. He was crude and violent, drunken, and probably impotent. Their son Paul, born in 1754, may well have been fathered by one of the lovers Catherine had begun to take, albeit somewhat more discreetly than her husband.

On the death of the Empress Elisabeth in January 1762, Peter succeeded to the Russian throne as Peter III. His abuse of Catherine continued, and he began planning to set her aside in favor of his current mistress. But this behavior was overshadowed by Peter's abuse of his nation. Abandoning himself entirely to his German tastes and interests, he demanded that Russian icons be removed from the churches and that Russian priests adopt the dress of Lutheran pastors. His admiration for Frederick the Great led him to attempt a series of unpopular reforms of the military based on Prussian practices. He also withdrew Russia from the Seven Years' War, in which Russia had been allied with Austria and France against Prussia, and forged a new alliance with the Prussian king. These events and the widespread antipathy to Peter III brought about a military coup against him.

In St. Petersburg, the rebellious regiments appealed to Catherine. It was clearly no coincidence that among the leaders of the coup were Grigory Orlov, Catherine's lover, and his brothers. She promptly set herself at the head of the rebellious troops and, with their support, had herself proclaimed empress. Peter was deposed and murdered. He had reigned for only six months.

## Catherine's Own Story

### THE MEMOIRS OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

All her life Catherine was a compulsive writer, and much of what she wrote was about herself, her plans, her ambitions and aspirations, and her views of history and politics. She also wrote abundant letters to her family, her ministers, her friends, her favorites, and her lovers. This mass of material contains, among other things, the elements of an autobiography, including several accounts of the events leading up to Catherine's accession to the Russian throne. All the accounts break off at this point.

The following excerpt is taken from two sources. One was written shortly after the events described; the other, from a letter to one of her former lovers, Count Poniatowski, was also written within weeks of her accession. Together they form a vigorous, fast-moving narrative of her succession and of the rebellion that brought an end to the reign of her hated husband Peter III. Although it was widely believed that Catherine had some complicity not only in the rebellion but in the death of her husband as well, perhaps even ordering his murder, her account clearly states that Peter died of natural causes.

The account begins with the death of the Empress Elisabeth.

The death of the Empress Elisabeth plunged all Russians into deep mourning, especially all good patriots, because they saw in her successor a ruler of violent character and narrow intellect, who hated and despised the Russians, did not know his country, was incompetent to do hard work, avaricious and wasteful, and gave himself up wholly to his desires and to those who slavishly flattered him.

After he was master, he left his business to two or three favorites and gave himself up to every kind of extravagance. First he took from the clergy their possessions in land, and introduced a thousand useless innovations, for the most part in the army. He despised the laws, and to put it briefly, justice was for him who offered the most. Dissatisfaction spread everywhere and the poor opinion they had of him made them finally misinterpret the little good that he did. His more or less considered plans were: to start a war with Denmark on account of Schleswig, to change the religion, to divorce his wife and marry his

mistress, and to ally himself with the king of Prussia, whom he called his master and to whom he insisted he had sworn the oath of allegiance. He wished to surrender to him a part of his troops. Scarcely any of his plans did he keep secret.

After the death of the Empress, his aunt, various proposals were made secretly to Empress Catherine. But she never wished to listen to them, hoping always that time and circumstances would somehow alter her unhappy situation, all the more as she knew for certain that they could not attack her position or her person without great danger. The nation was completely devoted to her and saw in her their only hope. Various groups had been formed to put a stop to the suffering of their Fatherland. Each of these groups separately turned to her; the one knew nothing of the other.

She listened to them and did not take from them all hope, but always bade them wait, because she believed that things would not come to the worst and because she believed that every change of that kind was a misfortune. She regarded her duties and her reputation as a strong barrier against ambition. Even the danger that she ran was a new luster whose worth she recognized. Peter III was a permanent patch on a very beautiful face.

Catherine's attitude toward the nation has always been irreproachable. She has never wanted, wished, or desired anything but the success of this nation, and her whole life will be employed for the sole purpose of furthering the welfare and happiness of the Russian people.

Having reached the opinion, however, that things were growing worse, Catherine let the different groups know that the time had come for them to combine and consider ways and means. An insult which her husband offered her in public gave an excellent excuse.<sup>1</sup> So it was agreed that after his return from the country he should be arrested in his apartment and declared incompetent to reign. His mind was really no longer just right and certainly he did not have in the whole kingdom a worse enemy than himself. Not all were of the same opinion. Some wished that it should happen in favor of his son; others, in favor of his wife.

Three days before the arrival of the time set, Lieutenant Passek, one of the principals in the plot, was arrested in consequence of the imprudent talk of a soldier. Three brothers Orlov, the eldest of whom was a captain of artillery, began to act at once. The Hetman<sup>2</sup> and the

<sup>1</sup>At a public banquet celebrating his peace with Prussia, Peter shouted abusively at Catherine, "Silly woman!"—ED.

<sup>2</sup>The leader of the Cossacks.—ED.

Privy Counsellor Panin thought it was too early. But the former sent of their own accord to the second brother with a coach to Peterhof to fetch the Empress.

Alexei Orlov appeared at six o'clock in the morning on June 28 (Old Style), and awakened her from her sleep. When she heard that Passek was arrested and that for the sake of her own safety there was no more time to lose, she arose and drove to the city. She was received on her arrival by the elder Orlov and Prince Bariatinsky and conducted to the barracks of the Izmailovsky Regiment, where on her arrival only twelve men were present and a petty officer and everything seemed quiet. The soldiers knew all about it but remained in their rooms; but when they came they hailed her as Autocrat and Empress.

The joy of the soldiers and the people was indescribable. She was conducted from here to the Semyonovsky Regiment; the people came to meet her dancing and shouting for joy. Thus escorted, she repaired to the Kazan Cathedral, where the Horse Guard made their appearance in transports of joy. The grenadiers of the Preobrashensky Regiment also came. The people asked pardon because they were the last to arrive; their officers had wished to hold them back, otherwise they would certainly have been the first. After them came the artillery and Villebois, Master of Ordnance. Amid the shouts of numberless people the Empress reached the Winter Palace, where the Synod, the Senate, and all the high dignitaries were assembled. The manifesto and the oath were drawn up and everyone recognized her as sovereign. . . . Count Vorontsov, the Chancellor, came as envoy from the deposed Emperor to reproach the Empress for her flight and ask her for her reasons. She told him to enter, and when he had very earnestly presented the purpose of his mission, she told him she would let him know her answer. He went, and in another room he was generally advised to take the new oath of allegiance. He said that to relieve his conscience he would like to write a letter and make a report on the success of his mission; then he would take the oath. This was permitted him.

After him came Prince Troubetsky and Field Marshal Shuvalov. They had been sent to hold back the first two regiments of which they were the chiefs and to kill the Empress. They cast themselves at her feet and informed her of their mission. Thereupon they went away to take the oath.

When all this had been dispatched, the Grand Duke and several divisions which were to guard the city were left in the care of the senate. The Empress, however, in the uniform of the guards (she had had herself appointed a Colonel of the Guards) departed on horseback at the head of the regiments. They marched the whole night and

towards morning arrived at a small monastery two versts<sup>3</sup> from Peterhof. Hither the Vice-Chancellor, Prince Golitsin, brought a letter from the deposed Emperor to the Empress. A little later General Izmailov came with a similar commission.

The following circumstance gave the occasion for this. On the 28th, the Emperor was to come from Oranienbaum where he was staying to Peterhof for dinner. When he learned that the Empress had driven away from there he was disturbed and sent several persons to the city. Since however all the streets leading thither were guarded at the order of the Empress, none of them came back. He knew that there were two regiments about thirty versts from the city and had sent for them to come to his defense. But these regiments had attached themselves to the Empress. . . .

The following day he wrote . . . two letters. . . . In the first he requested that he might be allowed to return to Holstein with his mistress and his favorites; in the second he offered to renounce the throne and begged only for his life. He had about 1,500 armed men, Holstein troops, more than a hundred cannon, and several Russian divisions with him. The Empress sent General Izmailov back with a letter, in which she demanded this resignation. Peter III quietly wrote this document and then came with General Izmailov, his mistress, and his favorite Gudovich to Peterhof. To protect him from being torn to pieces by the soldiers, he was given a reliable guard with four officers under the command of Alexei Orlov.

While preparations were being made for his departure to Ropsha, a very pleasant but quite unfortified country palace, the soldiers began to grumble. They said that for three hours they had not seen the Empress. Prince Troubetsky was frankly trying to make peace between the monarch and her husband. It must be made clear to her that she must resist; she would certainly be betrayed and hurl herself and all those with her to destruction. When Catherine heard of this talk she went to Prince Troubetsky and bade him enter his carriage and drive to the city, while she would make the round of the troops on foot.

As soon as the soldiers saw her, the shouts of joy and jubilation began again; Peter III was sent to his destination.

With the arrival of nightfall the Empress was advised to return to the city, because for two days she had not slept and had scarcely eaten anything. But the troops begged her not to leave them, and she agreed with pleasure when she saw their great enthusiasm for her. Half-way there, they rested for three hours, and towards 10 o'clock in

the morning of June 30th (Old Style), 1762, the Empress, at the head of the troops and the artillery and amid the indescribable jubilation of the multitude, rode into Petersburg. A more beautiful sight can not be imagined. Her court went ahead and the troops had oak-leaves in their hats and caps. They had stamped under their feet all the new articles of clothing they had received from Peter III.<sup>4</sup>

Thus she arrived in triumph at the Summer Palace, where all the people of rank and importance were assembled to wait for her. The Grand Duke came to meet her in the middle of the court. When the Empress caught sight of him, she dismounted and kissed him.

The applause was endless. They went to church, where a *Te Deum* was sung to the thunder of cannon. The exultation of the people went on the whole day but no kind of disorder occurred.

The Empress had gone to bed and had scarcely fallen asleep, when Lieutenant Passek came to awaken her and bade her to get up. For the fatigue, the long wakefulness, and the wine had helped to make hotter heads than usual, and loyalty to her had aroused in the Izmailovsky Regiment fears for her safety. Without a moment's delay the people had set forth to defend her. When they were told that there was nothing to fear and that she was asleep, they declared that in this matter they could and would only believe their own eyes.

So the Empress arose at two o'clock in the morning, and came out to them. When the soldiers saw her they raised a shout of joy. But in a serious tone she bade them go to bed and allow her to sleep. They should have confidence in her officers, and she urged them strongly to obey them. This they promised, while they begged her pardon and reproached each other because they had been persuaded to waken her in this way. They went home quite peacefully, often looking back to see her as long as it was possible. (Incidentally, in Petersburg there is scarcely any night in summer.)

For the two following days the jubilee held on the entire day, but there were no excesses and no disorders. This is certainly remarkable with such great excitement. . . .

Then I sent the deposed Emperor, under the command of Alexei Orlov with four officers and a division of peaceful chosen people, to a remote and very pleasant place called Ropsha, 25 versts from Petersburg, while decent and suitable quarters were fitted up in Schluesselburg, and so had time to provide relays of horses for him.

But the good God arranged it otherwise! The anxiety had caused him to have a diarrhoea, which lasted for three days and still continued on the fourth. On this day he drank immoderately, for he had

<sup>3</sup>A *verst* is about two-thirds of a mile.—Ed.

<sup>4</sup>These were their hated Prussian-style uniforms.—Ed.

everything he wanted except his freedom. (He had incidentally asked for his mistress, his dog, his negro, and his violin; but in order to avoid a scandal and prevent increasing the excitement of his guards I had only sent him the last three.) He was attacked by a hæmorrhoidal colic and fever phantasies. For two days he was in this condition; this was followed by great weakness and in spite of all that medical aid could do he breathed his last, after he had asked for a Lutheran pastor.

I feared the officers might have poisoned him. Therefore I had the body dissected; but it was completely proved that not the least trace of poison existed. His stomach was quite healthy, but an inflammation of the intestines and a fit of apoplexy had carried him off. His heart was unusually small and quite shrunken. . . .

## Catherine in Her Own Time

### PRINCE M. M. SHCHERBATOV

Although Catherine did not belong to the lineage of Peter the Great, she was, in most respects, the heir to his policies and ambitions and is rightly called Catherine the Great. Her reign, which was to last for thirty-four years, began with the coup that deposed her husband. The enemies he had made, most notably the military and the more liberal elements of the aristocracy, supported Catherine. She could not afford the risk of foreign hostility, so she sought friendly relations not only with Russia's traditional allies, France and Austria, but with Prussia as well. She also had to deal with a nearly empty treasury. To do this she completed the secularization of the enormous properties of the church, a move wholly in line with the reforms of Peter the Great. Although she was personally opposed to serfdom, she reorganized and strengthened that hateful system as a concession to the nobility, whose support for her was essential.

She hoped to frame a liberal constitution for her country, and in 1767 she convened a commission to that end, wrote a *Nakaz* (an instruction) to the commission, and prepared a draft of the constitution she favored and a proposal for a law code. She had drawn her constitutional principles from contemporary English and French liberal philosophers, many of whom she corresponded with, including Voltaire, d'Alembert, and Diderot; Diderot even came to Russia to visit with the empress. She enjoyed a great reputation in the circles

of the European intelligentsia. But at home her liberal political schemes failed completely.

In foreign affairs she turned to a war with Turkey in 1768 that lasted until 1774 and brought Russia the territories of the Khanate of Crimea and domination of the entire northern shore of the Black Sea. In 1792 Catherine intervened in the affairs of Poland and annexed most of the Ukraine, while Prussia annexed most of western Poland. In response to an uprising led by the Polish patriot Tadeusz Kosciuszko in 1794, Catherine and her allies Prussia and Austria annexed the rest of Poland, and that nation disappeared from the map of Europe.

In addition to adding immense territories to Russia, Catherine fostered urbanism, trade, and communication, and the Russian economy burgeoned in her reign. In her private life, she continued to have a string of lovers—more than twenty in all—but only one of them, Grigory Potemkin, enjoyed any measure of political influence and that because of his abilities rather than because of his status as the empress's favorite. She was and remained an autocrat, and she could no more than her contemporaries Frederick the Great of Prussia or Joseph II of Austria conceive of government except in terms of absolutism.

Catherine the Great was admired abroad and loved at home, but not by all her subjects. While she had brought an end to open opposition, many, especially of the conservative old nobility, continued to deplore her, if not to oppose her. One of these was Prince M. M. Shcherbatov. Shcherbatov belonged to one of the oldest and proudest families of the Russian traditional nobility, and throughout his life he was preoccupied with the status and condition of this class. He was also a scholar and historian and a minor functionary of the government under Catherine. His appraisal of her is contained in his tract *On the Corruption of Morals in Russia*, a work of his old age and a summation of his reflections on the direction of Russian history in his age. It was not published until the end of the nineteenth century.

A woman not born of the blood of our sovereigns, who deposed her husband by an armed insurrection, she received, in return for so virtuous a deed, the crown and sceptre of Russia, together with the title of "Devout Sovereign," in the words of the prayer recited in church on behalf of our monarchs.

It cannot be said that she is unqualified to rule so great an Empire, if indeed a woman can support this yoke, and if human qualities alone are sufficient for this supreme office. She is endowed with considerable beauty, clever, affable, magnanimous and compassion-

ate on principle. She loves glory, and is assiduous in her pursuit of it. She is prudent, enterprising, and quite well-read. However, her moral outlook is based on the modern philosophers, that is to say, it is not fixed on the firm rock of God's Law; and hence, being based on arbitrary worldly principles, it is liable to change with them.

In addition, her faults are as follows: she is licentious; and trusts herself entirely to her favourites; she is full of ostentation in all things, infinitely selfish, and incapable of forcing herself to attend to any matters which may bore her. She takes everything on herself and takes no care to see it carried out, and finally she is so capricious, that she rarely keeps the same system of government even for a month.

For all that, once on the throne, she refrained from taking cruel vengeance on those who had previously vexed her. She had with her her favourite, Grigory Grigor'evich Orlov, who had helped her to accede to the throne. He was a man who had grown up in alehouses and houses of ill-repute. He had no education, and had hitherto led the life of a young reprobate, though he was kind and good-hearted.

This was the man who reached the highest step which it is possible for a subject to attain. . . .

The Empress herself, selfish woman that she is, wishes, it seems, to increase the power of vice, not only by her own example, but by her actual encouragement of it. Fond of glory and ostentation, she loves flattery and servility. . . .

Flattery having reached such a peak at Court among men employed in affairs of state, people have begun to flatter in other ways. If anyone builds a house with money partly given by her or that he has stolen, he invites her to the housewarming, where he writes the following words in illuminations: "A Gift to You from Your Subjects"; or else he inscribes on the house: "By the Generosity of Catherine the Great," forgetting to add: "But to the Ruination of Russia." Or else, festivals are given in her honour, gardens are built, with impromptu spectacles and decorations, everywhere showing flattery and servility.

To add to the corruption of women's morals and of all decency, she has set other women the example of the possession of a long and frequent succession of lovers, each equally honoured and enriched, thus advertising the cause of their ascendancy. Seeing a shrine erected to this vice in the heart of the Empress, women scarcely think it a vice in themselves to copy her; rather, I suppose, each thinks it a virtue in herself that she has not yet had so many lovers!

Although she is in her declining years, although grey hair now covers her head and time has marked her brow with the indelible signs of age, yet her licentiousness still does not diminish. She now realizes that her lovers cannot find in her the attractions of youth, and

that neither rewards, nor power, nor gain can replace for them the effect which youthfulness can produce on a lover.

Trying to conceal the ravages of time, she has abandoned her former simplicity in dress, and though in her youth she disliked cloth-of-gold, and criticized the Empress Elisabeth Petrovna for leaving a wardrobe large enough to clothe a whole army, she herself has started to show a passion of her own for inventing suitable dresses and rich adornments for them, and has thus given rise to the same luxury, not only in women but also in men.

I remember, when I entered the Court in 1768 there was only one coat in the whole Court that was embroidered in gold—a red cloth coat, belonging to Vasily Il'ich Bibikov. In April 1769, the Empress was angry with Count Ivan Grigor'evich Chernyshov for arriving at Czarskoe Selo on her birthday in an embroidered coat; but in 1777 when I retired from Court, everyone wore clothes of cloth-of-gold with embroidery even on ordinary days, and were now almost ashamed to have embroidery only on the edge of their garments. . . .

Generally speaking, women are more prone to despotism than men; and as far as she is concerned, it can justly be averred that she is in this particular a woman among women. Nothing can irritate her more than that when making some report to her, men quote the Laws in opposition to her will. Immediately the retort flies from her lips: "Can I then not do this irrespective of the laws?"

But she has found no one with the courage to answer that she can indeed, but only as a despot, and to the detriment of her glory and the nation's confidence. . . .

The whole reign of this monarch has been marked by events relating to her love of glory. The many institutions founded by her apparently exist for the good of the nation. In fact they are simply symbols of her love of glory, for if she really had the nation's interest at heart, she would, after founding them, have also paid attention to their progress. But she has been content simply with their establishment and with the assurance that she will be eternally revered by posterity as their founder; she has cared nothing for their progress, and though she sees their abuses she has not put a stop to them. . . .

The wars that have been started attest to this still more. Poniatowski<sup>5</sup> was raised to the Polish throne out of favouritism; it was wished to provide him with an autocratic form of government, contrary to the

<sup>5</sup>A Polish émigré nobleman and one of Catherine's lovers whom she did indeed install as king of Poland in 1764.—Ed.

Polish liberties. The protection of the Dissidents was undertaken; and instead of striving to invite these victims of religious persecution to join their co-religionists in Russia, and thereby to weaken Poland and strengthen Russia, occasion was given for a war with Turkey, fortunate in its events, but costing Russia more than any previous war. The Fleet was sent to Greece and under God's protection won a victory; but the only motive behind this expedition was love of glory. Poland has been partitioned, thereby strengthening the houses of Austria and Brandenburg, and losing Russia her powerful influence over Poland. The Crimea has been acquired, or rather, stolen, a country which, because of its difference of climate, has proved a graveyard for Russians. . . .

My conscience assures me that all my descriptions, however black they may be, are unbiased; truth alone and the corruption into which all my fellow-subjects have fallen and from which my country groans, have compelled me to commit them to paper. And so, from a fair description of the morals of the Empress, it is quite possible to see the disposition of her heart and soul.

True friendship has never resided in her heart, and she is ready to betray her best friend and servant in order to please her lover. She has no maternal instincts for her son, and her rule with everyone is to cajole a man beyond measure and respect him as long as he is needed, and then in her own phrase "to throw away a squeezed-out lemon." . . .

Having painted this sad picture, I do not think I need to state whether she has faith in God's Law, for if she had, then God's Law itself might improve her heart and set her steps on the path of truth. But no: carried away by her indiscriminate reading of modern writers, she thinks nothing of the Christian religion, though she pretends to be quite devout.

## A Modern Appraisal of Catherine the Great

ISABEL DE MADARIAGA

From Shcherbatov's sour and critical contemporary appraisal of the empress as well as from Catherine's own carefully shaped and self-serving account of the beginning of her reign, we pass to a

more balanced, modern account. It is taken from the best recent biography of her, *Catherine the Great: A Short History* by Isabel de Madariaga. Madariaga rejects the traditional view that Catherine was a hypocrite for such things as her policies on serfdom and her abandonment of liberal politics in favor of absolutism or that she was slavishly beholden to the nobility. Instead, she argues that Catherine's reign is best understood in terms of the goals and limits of an eighteenth-century reformer, not a revolutionary like Peter I.

Catherine ruled Russia from 1762 to 1796. "In an absolute monarchy, everything depends on the disposition and character of the Sovereign," the British Envoy to Russia, Sir James Harris, observed in 1778. The ruler sets the tone in every field far more than in a limited monarchy, as Great Britain was at the time, or in a democracy, as the United Kingdom is today. Peace or war, prosperity or poverty, a free and easy intellectual and social life, or a society isolated from outside influences and dragooned into conformity, all this depended to a great extent on the character of the individual ruler.

The personality of Catherine thus merits some attention. Inevitably it changed a good deal over the thirty-four years of her reign. Yet some features of her character remained present throughout. She was to begin with a woman of an optimistic and cheerful temperament, looking on the bright side of things, not easily depressed or downhearted. This shows clearly in her letters to Potemkin, who, on the contrary, was subject to formidable bouts of despondency, for instance at the beginning of the second Turkish war in 1787, when after the loss of his precious fleet in a storm on the Black Sea he was prepared to throw up his command and evacuate the Crimea. Catherine wrote letters to him full of encouragement, urging him to believe that a bold spirit would overcome failures, advising him about his indigestion, which she was sure contributed to his depression. "Good-bye, my friend," she concluded one letter in 1788, "neither time, nor distance, nor anyone on earth will change my thoughts of you and about you."

It was this same positive temper which enabled her to steer her way through the shoals at the Russian court while she was still grand duchess and gave her the courage to embark on the *coup d'état* which brought her to the throne. Its success should not conceal from one how dangerous failure might have been. Imprisonment in a convent would have been the mildest penalty she might have had to suffer. Throughout her life Catherine showed very strong and steady nerves at moments of crisis: during the early plots against her; during the Pugachev

Revolt,<sup>6</sup> when she had to be dissuaded by her ministers from going herself to Kazan to restore morale after the sacking of the city by Pugachev. But her health did not remain unaffected by these crises and she suffered from frequent headaches and digestive disorders.

By the standards of her time Catherine was a well-read woman of considerable breadth of interest and intellectual curiosity. She was interested in politics, history, education, literature, linguistics, architecture, painting. In her literary as in her legislative production she was pragmatic in her approach, pedantic in her execution, and eclectic as regards her sources. She seemed to feel that if the law described down to the last detail precisely how its provisions were to be implemented, better results would be achieved. In the Russian context, no doubt she was right to think that the careful drafting of laws would prevent misinterpretation. In her Instruction of 1767, she had quoted Montesquieu's dictum that you cannot change customs by means of laws but only by means of other customs; but her faith in the power of law to change conduct survived and shows through in her major legislative innovations.

A hard-working woman, Catherine rose early, lit her fire, made her black coffee and settled down at her desk to indulge in her "scribbling." A blank sheet of paper made her fingers itch to start writing. After a few hours devoted to her literary or political activities, she would see her secretaries and ministers, withdraw to perform her toilette in private and only appear in her dressing room for her hair to be dressed. She did not go in for the elaborate court ritual of the *lever* and the *coucher* (receptions on getting up and going to bed) still practised at the French court. In private Catherine dressed simply in a loose silk gown, but on state occasions she was richly dressed and wore splendid jewels. Dinner was usually at 2 p.m. and, since the Empress was not interested in food, it was notoriously bad. Catherine was also very abstemious, and did not drink even wine unless her Scottish physician, Dr. Rogerson, prescribed it.

The afternoon was devoted to reading or working, or seeing specially invited guests, such as Diderot or Grimm. The Empress would then play for a while with her grandchildren, and adjourn to spend the evening at the theatre or at her private parties in the Hermitage. These were completely informal. It was forbidden to rise when the Empress stood up, and those who had the right to attend talked, gambled, played paper games or went in for theatricals until about 10

<sup>6</sup>An uprising led by a former Cossack officer, Yemelyan Pugachev, which broke out during the first Turkish war and lasted until 1775, the most serious rebellion in Russian imperial history.—Ed.

p.m. when the Empress, who never took any supper, withdrew attended by her current favourite, and the guests dispersed in search of a well-provided table and a better cook than Catherine's.

All those who ever attended the court bear witness to the grace and dignity with which Catherine conducted herself, to the ease and charm of her manners. Claude Carloman de Rulhière, who was attached to the French Embassy in St. Petersburg at the time of Catherine's *coup d'état*, described her appearance in 1762:

She has a noble and agreeable figure; her gait is majestic, her person and deportment is full of graces. Her air is that of a sovereign. All her features proclaim a superior character. . . . Her brow is broad and open, her nose almost aquiline. . . . Her hair is chestnut coloured and very beautiful, her eyebrows brown, her eyes brown [they were in fact blue] and very beautiful, acquiring a bluish tint in certain lights; her complexion is dazzling. Pride is the principal feature of her physiognomy. The pleasantness and kindness of her expression are, to the eye of a keen observer, rather the consequence of a great desire to please. . . .

The desire to impress, not only by her physical presence but by her intellectual qualities, is noted by many observers of Catherine, beginning with the adventurer Count Casanova, and it explains the well-merited reputation she had for vanity. . . . The Chevalier de Corberon, who was not admitted to Catherine's small court circle and was therefore somewhat jaundiced, regarded Catherine as a "comédienne," always acting a part.

Whether she was acting a part or not, Catherine throughout her life showed her ability to get on with people in all ranks of life. Her servants adored her and remained with her for years; her secretaries were well treated, and the diary kept by A.V. Khrapovitsky, himself a poet and writer, who was her private secretary in the years 1782 to 1793 and also helped her with her literary works, illustrates her kindness, her consideration for his health and welfare. She was always well received by the common people on her various travels throughout Russia, and it was the aristocracy, not the people, who cold-shouldered her in Moscow. Of course personal access to the palace and to the presence of the Empress was much easier in those days than it is today to the presence of kings, presidents and ministers, for she did not have to be protected against terrorists, journalists or photographers. Catherine drove about the streets of St. Petersburg in an open sledge at night, with just a few attendants, in perfect security. The public—decently dressed—was admitted to the imperial parks, and wherever she travelled Catherine gave receptions to which the local nobility and townspeople were invited. The French Ambassador, Ségur, describes how after one such lengthy



reception the Empress emerged with her cheeks coloured bright pink with rouge from having kissed so many of the painted faces of the merchants' ladies.

Life was also made easier for her ministers by her commonsensical and unpretentious approach to work. Ministers did not have to stand in her presence like Disraeli or Gladstone before Queen Victoria. The letters and notes she wrote asking for advice, and the letters she received with advice, reflect a genuine partnership in the search for a solution to a particular legislative or administrative problem. Where her correspondence over a particular legislative project can be followed, as with Count Sievers over the Statute of Local Administration of 1775, it is clear that her advisers and ministers had no hesitation in countering her ideas and expressing their own. The minutes of the meetings of the Council of State frequently reflect the vigorous debate which took place. On the other hand Catherine could also write stinging rebukes to officials who failed her.

Within the mental climate of her time and of her position as ruler, Catherine also showed more originality than any previous ruler of Russia and than most rulers at the time in Europe, except perhaps the Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany, in her thoughts about changing the nature and the structure of Russian central government by altering the relationship of the central power and the corporate forces in Russian society, forces to which she had herself given legal form. It is here that the influence of William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (in a French translation) is so noteworthy. Catherine made over 700 pages of notes from Blackstone and wrote various drafts at different times of the changes in the constitutional structure she proposed to introduce.

In a manner typical of her industrious nature, she hoped to begin to draw up her final plans in the course of her journey to the Crimea in 1787, and ordered her secretary to collect all her notes on Blackstone to take with her, as well as a copy of her Instruction, which she wished to compare with her notes on Blackstone. Familiar with her plans and never at a loss for a compliment, Khrapovitsky exclaimed that one day Russians would treasure her work as the English treasured their Magna Carta. Throughout her journey Catherine continued to work on her plans for constitutional reform. From what one can tell of her intentions, she viewed her project as a means of consolidating absolute government in Russia by making it more responsive to the various estates and more efficient. The most novel feature she drew from her reading of Blackstone was her plan for a high court, which seemed to have some of the legislative features of the British Parliament and some of its judicial elements. The separate chambers into which the proposed High Court was to be divided would have

appointed councillors, but also assessors, elected by the local nobles, townspeople and state peasants.

Though Catherine never completed even a draft law, these papers show that as late as 1787 she could still contemplate fundamental reform, which associated elected representatives of the free estates with the machinery of central government in a way which was not even to be thought of again until the reign of Alexander II (1856–81). It is not possible to tell what inspired her to think such institutions necessary or advisable in Russia. Did something remain of her lengthy conversations with Diderot in 1774, who had urged her to keep the Legislative Commission in being and who had warned her, "All arbitrary government is bad, even the arbitrary government of a good, strong, just and wise master. . . . He deprives the nation of the right to deliberate, to wish, or not to wish to oppose, to oppose even that which is good. In a society of men, the right of opposition seems to me a natural right, inalienable and sacred." The best of despots "is a good shepherd who reduces his subjects to the condition of animals; he makes them lose the sense of liberty. . . ."

It is unfortunately also not possible to tell on the evidence available at present whether Catherine abandoned her projects because of the outbreak of war with Turkey in 1787, or because she was feeling old and discouraged, or because of her dismay at the use made of their power by elected "representatives" of the people in the French Revolution. . . .

It was Catherine's private life which really exercised the gossip-mongers of the time (and later). By twentieth-century standards there was nothing abnormal about it until her breach with Grigory Orlov in 1772—he had been her lover for twelve years and was the father of her son, A. Bobrinskoy, never legitimized, but known to be hers, and recognized as his brother by Paul I. (The rumour that she had five daughters by Orlov is quite unsubstantiated.) During their liaison Orlov seems to have conducted himself in such a way as not to arouse violent hostility. He was brave, lazy, good-natured, neither very intelligent nor very cultured. He played a prominent part in court functions and festivities. But he was a liberal-minded man and he should be remembered for two initiatives: he invited the Genevese philosopher Rousseau, who quarrelled with everybody, to settle in Russia (presumably with Catherine's consent);<sup>7</sup> and he sponsored a number of projects on his estates to find an alternative to serfdom for the establishment of peasants on the land, also with Catherine's knowledge and approval.

<sup>7</sup>Rousseau, unlike Diderot, did not avail himself of this invitation.—ED.

Catherine was induced to dismiss Orlov in 1772 because of his unfaithfulness, and she chose a new lover, whom she did not love and who was given no governmental post, simply because she could not live alone. Something of her emotional life at this time is known, for she described it in moving terms in a letter to Grigory Potemkin with whom the great love affair of her life began in December 1773. Potemkin was already a lieutenant-general in the army, and had distinguished himself in the war against the Turks. He was probably thirty-four years old—ten years younger than Catherine and a bold, enterprising, imaginative, moody, arrogant, witty and intelligent man. He ceased to be Catherine's lover in 1776, but he kept his official positions to the surprise of many at court, who expected him to be dismissed when Catherine took a new lover, P. V. Zavadovsky. But he remained the most powerful figure at court, and continued as Catherine's principal adviser and confidant. It is possible that he was her husband—there were rumours that a religious ceremony had taken place—at any rate she trusted him absolutely. His role at her side can be compared to that of Leicester beside Elizabeth I of England. A woman ruler, however able, needs someone very reliable indeed to command her armies, someone who will not turn against her (as Essex did against Elizabeth). Catherine found her helpmate in Potemkin, who continued to dominate the scene at her side until his death in 1791. . . .

But the favourites who followed Zavadovsky (who was dismissed in 1778) did nothing to increase Catherine's reputation. She needed their companionship both as lovers and as partners in her intellectual and cultural activities, but only two of them, A. D. Lanskoj (1780–4) and A. Dmitriyev Mamonov (1786–9), seem to have been reasonably well educated and capable of providing Catherine the woman with the affection and friendship she craved for. . . .

Later, A. Dmitriyev Mamonov betrayed Catherine's affection in a different way, by falling in love with one of her maids of honour. Deeply hurt, Catherine dismissed him and arranged his marriage. As the Empress grew older, her favourites became younger, and though they were not given prominent political positions, their closeness to Catherine meant that they were the channel by which private and even corrupt influence could be brought to bear. Catherine was now beginning to feel her age. She had grown very stout, though according to the French painter, Mme Vigée Lebrun, she remained very charming, with her white hair framing a noble face, and beautiful, very white hands. . . .

The great Russian historian N. M. Karamzin, though critical particularly of the corruption and neglect of the public interest in the last years of Catherine II, nevertheless wrote in a memorandum he drew up for Alexander I in 1811 that "should we compare all the known

epochs of Russian history, virtually all would agree that Catherine's epoch was the happiest for Russian citizens; virtually all would prefer to have lived then than at any other time." . . .

It is essential to realize how little opposition there was to the form of government, absolutism, in Russia. The bulk of the population accepted the legitimacy of the regime however much some people might disagree with some policies. Government operated largely as a partnership between the nobility, the townspeople and the Crown, and the political class in a largely illiterate and materially still very primitive country was minute. Individuals might criticize specific policies, but the Russian political system provided no channels for groups to form with common programmes. There were only small patronage and clientele circles around specific magnates. This explains the importance of the favourites and of high-ranking ministers like Prince A. A. Vyazemsky or Alexander Vorontsov. They all became rich (or richer) and Catherine's favourites were given high rank. Nobles anxious for promotion gravitated towards one or other of the magnates as long as their favour lasted. . . .

On the other hand the rising of the assigned peasants in the Urals in 1763–4 and the rising led by Pugachev in 1773–4 are clear indications of popular dissatisfaction with specific government policies among Cossacks, state peasants, industrial serfs and privately owned serfs. But the discontented did not normally coalesce into one single, massive opposition; they usually formed single-issue groups among the peasantry, anxious to escape from the tyranny of a particular landowner. Moreover the dissatisfaction felt by the peasants was part of a widespread, formless hatred of and revolt against the modern state, which taxed them, called them up to serve in the army (or, worse, the navy), instead of leaving them in peaceful occupation of all the land, without any officials, officers or landowners intervening between them and a benevolent tsar.

There is one aspect of the opposition to Catherine which has so far been much less well documented. The example which the Empress so glaringly provided of total disregard for the rules of domestic morality—acceptable at that time in a man, totally unforgivable in a woman—turned many of the Church hierarchy, such as Metropolitan Platon of Moscow, and of the more straitlaced nobles, of which there were many, and the Moscow freemasons against her. Catherine's private life was contrasted with the apparent domestic happiness of Paul (he was more discreet). She was accused of corrupting young people and family life by her example, and the Russian court, particularly in its later years, rivalled French society, or the grand Whig society of England, in its dissoluteness, though high standards of decorum were always maintained in public.

Lower down the social scale, there was considerable opposition to Catherine's secularization of Church lands, to the widespread closure of monasteries and convents, and the concentration of monks and nuns in a smaller number of larger establishments. Local minor nobles and townspeople appealed to be allowed to keep open at their own expense small convents which they had often endowed in the past and which acted as refuges for their wives and sisters—requests which were sometimes granted. Unofficially, women's groups in provincial towns set up self-supporting "women's communities," in which women could live a disciplined and religious life, and undertake good works without being officially rated as nuns. What one might call the conservative opposition to Catherine's "enlightenment policies" needs further study.

It is still too early to make a considered judgment on the impact of Catherine's reign in Russia, and to interpret her policies with any certainty. . . .

The traditional view for a long time has been that Catherine was so badly in need of noble support to keep the throne that she deliberately increased the power of the nobles over their serfs, and governed in such a way as to consolidate noble domination and exploitation of the human and material resources of the country. This theory is still found in some modern histories of her policies, but it no longer commands general agreement. In the light of the work that has been done mainly by British and American historians it is now more possible to see both what the Empress tried to achieve and what obstacles faced her. By temperament, as well as because she was aware that she had no legitimate claim to the throne, Catherine wished to prove herself a reformer, in the spirit of German cameralism as modified by the enlightenment. Her policies were presented to the Russian (and to the European) public clothed in the language of the enlightenment. But there was a considerable discrepancy between her aims and her achievements. It is this discrepancy between the rhetoric in which she expressed her aims and hopes and the actual performance of the institutions she created which has left her open to the charge of hypocrisy. But she was no hypocrite. She believed in her reforms, but she had to use the human tools to hand, and there is no doubt that, while she found many great administrators, most of the officials on whom she had to rely did not live up to her expectations. Was she informed of these inadequacies? Did she turn a blind eye? We cannot tell at this stage. What remains true however is that Catherine was the first ruler of Russia to conceive of drawing up legislation setting out the corporate rights of the nobles and the townspeople, and the civil rights of the free population of the country. The nobility, the townspeople and the free peasants were given a legal framework within

which these rights could be pressed. She was also the first ruler ever to establish special courts to which the state peasants had access and in which they could and did sue merchants and nobles. During her reign the individual—other than the serf or the soldier—was allowed more space, more responsibility, more security, more dignity. For a while an increasingly diversified Russian society escaped from the overwhelming pressure of the militarization imposed on it by Peter I and restored by Paul I.

Catherine did not increase the power of the nobles over the serfs, nor did she turn large numbers of Russian state peasants into private serfs. She did not, as we know, free the serfs, or even attempt to regulate relations between serfs and landowners by law. Her hold on the throne was not strong enough to enable her to put through a policy which would have been opposed by the whole of the Russian political elite, both the nobility and the townspeople. She did not have the power of coercion necessary to enforce a policy which would have to be put through by the very people who benefited from the *status quo*. But that should not be the sole criterion by which she is judged.

Catherine was not a revolutionary like Peter I, who forced his policies on a reluctant society without counting the human cost. She paid attention to public opinion; as she said to Diderot, "what I despair of overthrowing I undermine." Her absolute authority rested, as she well knew, on her sensitivity to the possible.

## Review and Study Questions

1. How did Catherine succeed to the throne of Russia?
2. What were Catherine's weaknesses and strengths as a ruler? Discuss.
3. What are the main features of Prince Shcherbatov's characterization of the Empress Catherine? Discuss what may have accounted for his views.
4. In what respects do you consider Catherine an eighteenth-century reformer, as Isabel de Madariaga argues she was?

## Suggestions for Further Reading

There are a substantial number of Catherine the Great's own writings. These include two collections of letters: *The Correspondence of Catherine the Great When Grand-Duchess, with Sir Charles Hanbury-Williams, and Letters from Count Poniatowski*, ed. and tr. the Earl of

Ilchester and Mrs. Longford-Brooke (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1928), and *Voltaire and Catherine the Great: Selected Correspondence*, ed. and tr. A. Lentin (Cambridge, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1974). Catherine's published works also include two editions of her memoirs: *The Memoirs of Catherine the Great*, ed. Dominique Maroger (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), and *The Memoirs of Catherine the Great*, tr. Katherine Anthony (New York: Knopf, 1927), excerpted for this chapter. Two related collections of sources are *Memoirs of Catherine II and the Court of St. Petersburg, during Her Reign and That of Paul I, by One of Her Courtiers* (Paris: Grolier Society, c. 1930) and a series of documents, *Russia under Catherine the Great*, 2 vols. (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1977–1978).

There are dozens of biographies of Catherine, many of them by professional biographers and popular writers who tend to fall back on the malicious gossip and salacious rumor of Catherine's own time. A few of them, however, can be recommended; the best is probably Henri Troyat, *Catherine the Great*, tr. Joan Pinkham (New York: Dutton, 1980), by a distinguished French literary man and experienced biographer of several notable Russian figures. Ian Grey, *Catherine the Great: Autocrat and Empress of All Russia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961) and Vincent Cronin, *Catherine: Empress of All the Russias* (New York: William Morrow, 1978) are both competent professional biographies. Zoé Oldenbourg, *Catherine the Great*, tr. Anne Carter (New York: Random House, 1965), is an appealing book by a great historical novelist, dealing mainly with Catherine's early years; it is sympathetic, extremely readable, but not entirely reliable. Much to be preferred is J. T. Alexander, *Catherine the Great—Life and Legend* (London: Oxford University Press, 1989), a recent work on the young Catherine by a competent professional Russian historian. The best modern biographer of Catherine is Isabel de Madariaga, *Catherine the Great: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), excerpted for this chapter. J. T. Alexander, *Autocratic Politics in a National Crisis: The Imperial Government and Pugachev's Revolt* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1969) is a detailed study of Pugachev's rebellion. Another special study, of the serfdom problem, is J. Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961). Still another special study is Marc Raeff, *The Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth-Century Nobility* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966). Another, dealing with economic history, is A. Kahan, *The Plow, the Hammer and the Knout: An Economic History of Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

On "the world of Catherine the Great," two international confer-

ence proceedings are useful: *Russia and the West in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. A. G. Cross (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1983) and *Russia and the World of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. R. P. Bartlett, A. G. Cross, and Karen Rasmussen (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1988). Also of this type is Miriam Kochan, *Life in Russia under Catherine the Great* (London: Batsford and Putnam, 1969), a small book dealing with such topics as the nobility, serfs, industry and trade, and enlightened despotism, by a popular writer on Russian history; it makes no claim to distinguished scholarship. A really distinguished book of this sort is Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

For larger-scale historical background, two among many general Russian histories that can be recommended are Michael T. Florinsky, *Russia: A Short History*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1969) and Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).