

Catherine the Great - Enlightened Empress?

Simon Henderson places a key figure into the context of modern Russian history.



Catherine in her teens with her fiancé Peter Fedorovich. He became Emperor as Peter III in 1762 but died later that year, after Catherine's coup.

the relationship between the Empress and the Enlightenment. In 1847 the historian Wilhelm Roseler coined the term 'enlightened absolutism' to refer to the policies followed by certain European rulers from 1760 to 1790, including administrative centralisation, religious toleration and the subordination of the church to the state. The most prominent of these monarchs, Frederick II of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria and Catherine II of Russia, also held an interest in the philosophy and culture of the Enlightenment, and professed some degree of commitment to its values. The Empress belongs among these enlightened absolutists and, whilst she maintained that the Russian Empire needed autocratic rule in order to keep her strong and safe from external threat, she did not believe this rule had to be despotic.

The 'enlightened', 'republican' image cultivated by Catherine was questioned by few in 18th-century Europe. Nor was the compatibility of this republicanism with absolute monarchy. The term 'republican' did not carry the same democratic connotations as it came to have after the French Revolution. Herein lies the heart of the matter. Catherine's ideals and policies were products of the 18th century; her pretensions to be 'enlightened' were specific to Russia

Isabel de Madariaga, Catherine's greatest biographer, has written, 'Since I first took Catherine seriously as a ruler, some forty years ago, I have grown to like her very much.' Yet many historians have not allowed the Empress to grow on them. She has elicited strong and passionate

condemnation. It is only recently that historians have sought to resurrect her image, replacing contempt with praise and understanding.

Catherine and her Critics

Much of the debate concerning Catherine's reign has revolved around

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at that time. Historians who have concentrated great effort on scrutinising how closely Catherine's words matched her actions, how true she was to the Enlightenment as expressed by the ideas of philosophers such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Montesquieu, have rather missed the point. The Enlightenment was not a political manifesto and did not provide a blueprint for action. In fact Diderot told Catherine that 'he did not like to treat serious matters in a systematic way'.

19th-century Russian liberal historians, such as Alexander Herzen, accused the Empress of seeking merely power, not progress or an improvement in social welfare. They claimed that Catherine's professions of enlightenment were a mere sham, adopted to present an attractive facade to the West. Soviet historians labelled her a hypocrite, proclaiming liberal and enlightened ideals on the one hand but practising oppressive despotism on the other. Her reign was viewed as a defence of the ruling class's interest and an oppression of the peasantry concealed by a profession of concern for progress and enlightenment. It is claimed that the Empress's reign saw the apogee of serfdom, a stinging indictment for a ruler professing to be 'enlightened'. Others have moved away from criticising the gap between the projected image and the policy reality, and argued that in fact her words were not particularly 'enlightened' in the first instance.

Much of this criticism of Catherine belongs to a period when her major internal reforms were viewed from the perspective of liberal, populist or Soviet historians, who were sceptical as to whether any good could have ever come from a Tsar. They were pre-occupied with showing that Catherine was not an 'enlightened' ruler. Yet, rather than viewing Catherine as a hypocrite and analysing the gap between her words and actions from the perspective and ideals of a different era, with different values and

meanings, we should analyse Catherine's intentions and policies and the constraints which she faced. It is to be argued here that Catherine the Great was indeed distinguished. She was a dynamic, energetic, thoughtful monarch, sometimes generous, sometimes cruel, always vain, always tenacious, but with an unswerving commitment to modernising Russia.

Catherine's Coup

Born in 1729, as Princess Sophia of Anhalt Zerbst, Catherine was the daughter of a minor German prince. In 1774 she married the grandson of Peter I. The match was not a good one, and there were problems from the beginning. Peter was a most difficult and boorish man, who once court-martialled a rat caught in his wife's bedchamber and then executed it. It is not surprising that Catherine found comfort in the arms of several lovers, and it is still not known whether her son, the future Tsar Paul, was fathered by Peter or Sergey Saltykov. Peter III ascended the throne following the death of Elizabeth in 1761. He had little of the flair for leadership that would be shown by his wife.

Peter allowed his admiration for Prussian militarism to alienate the Guards Regiment when he snatched an unfavourable peace from the jaws of victory over Prussia in 1762. He then alienated many with his overt disrespect for the Orthodox Church. In the spring of 1762 a whisper of change was heard in the corridors of power, and, led by the Orlov brothers, Catherine was proclaimed Empress and received the support of a group of Guards Officers. Peter, absent at the time of the coup, was arrested on his return and, conveniently, died shortly afterwards.

This was certainly a murky episode, yet it is characteristic of the politics of St Petersburg in the 18th century. Peter the Great's decree in 1722 that the Emperor was entitled to name his successor, led to a series of coups

supported by the Guards Regiment. Catherine was certainly relieved when, in 1764, she heard of the assassination of Ivan VI, who had been deposed as an infant in 1741. It is not surprising, given this context, that Catherine actively cultivated a forceful image of power; she needed to deflect attention from her questionable legitimacy. Yes, the Empress was vain, but she was also very skilful. Her correspondence with Voltaire, Diderot, Grimm and others was part of a public relations offensive in Europe. She consciously crafted the image of an enlightened mother of Russia. She cruised down the Volga in 1767, constructed awe-inspiring celebrations following victory in war with the Turks, and emerged from crowds in towns on her way to the Crimea in 1787 with rouge covered cheeks from kissing the bourgeois ladies.

Catherine the Great was a keen student of the presentations of power. Her policies were wholly understandable and were consistent with the projection of power in the Russian court. Peter the Great had used Roman imagery extensively during his reign and replaced Tsar with the title 'imperator'. She used very deliberate and powerful symbolism in displaying a move towards greater westernisation, the most visual and striking example being St Petersburg. Catherine's accession to power and her deliberate cultivation of a powerful and distinct imagery of rule can be seen as examples of continuity. In her 1762 coup she trod in the footsteps of many predecessors, painting herself as the enlightened matriarch, just as Peter had been the dynamic westerniser.

Instructing the Nobility

Given this context, Catherine's *Great Instruction* of 1767 emerges more clearly. It should be viewed as part of an attempt by the Empress to cement her power; it was the product of her impressive reading and literary expression, but also a statement of

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This portrait illustrates Catherine writing the *Instruction*, in which she set out her principles for governing Russia.

modernising intent. Deputies were to be elected to the Legislative Commission, which would be composed of over 600 men drawn from the nobility, state peasantry and other social groups. The *Instruction* spells out Catherine's views on the social, political, judicial and economic issues in Russia and starts by proclaiming that the nation is a European state. There was certainly considerable vanity and self-indulgence in the *Instruction* and Catherine's contact with the *philosophes* was central to the image of power which she consciously projected, but her commitment to study and to intellectual debate was genuine. Unlike Frederick II, Catherine did her own writing, and she was prolific. She also encouraged others to read and think. Annual expenditure on books during Catherine's reign was 80,000 roubles, and she established a library for her palace staff. It must be

recognised, therefore, that the *Instruction* grew out of Catherine's love of literature, and it was stylistically indebted to Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois*. The Empress had no concrete plan of action, but she did have a reforming impulse, and she loved to read, write and inspire debate. She was also conscious of the need to solidify her position by distancing herself from her dead husband, by instigating a move towards her own ideas for reform. But what grew out of this reforming impulse?

Since at least the 16th century, the constellation of power in Russia revolved around the interlocking relationship between the Tsar, the church (until the late seventeenth century), the nobility, and the peasantry. Any attempt at reform would necessarily be played out within this complex socio-political construct, and it is with reference to these power relationships that historians have criticised Catherine most severely. It has been argued that after 1762 the Russian monarchy became the virtual prisoner of the nobility. According to Richard Pipes, 'The trappings of imperial omnipotence served merely

to conceal its desperate weakness' as well as to camouflage the actual power wielded by the nobles. For some historians, the reign of Catherine saw both a 'golden age' for the nobility and, consequently, the apogee of serfdom. It has been argued that the nobles erased what they pleased from Catherine's *Instruction*. Certainly the Empress's advisors recommended she remove some of her observations on serfdom. In 1907 the suppressed sections of Chapter XI were discovered, and revealed that Catherine had suggested that serfs should be entitled to purchase their freedom, or that servitude should be limited to a period of six years. Some have interpreted this omission as early evidence of the Empress's reliance on the nobility. After all, here was a ruler who had come to power largely as a result of a conspiracy headed by leading noble families. Powerful nobles, already relieved of the obligation to serve the monarch by Peter III, were in no mood to surrender their privileged place in the social order. The Charter of the Nobility of 1785 has been seen as a veritable 'Bill of Rights' for the nobles, and, coming ten years after the Provincial Reforms, completed the handover of power in the provinces to the landed nobility.

Catherine and the Serfs

Clearly this interpretation of the power relations in Russia under Catherine did not bode well for the peasantry. Blum has argued that the Empress turned over 800,000 peasants to private proprietors. The 1763 law limiting freedom of movement by requiring the peasant to get a permit from the landlord before he could leave the property has been cited as evidence that Catherine enserfed peasants in the name of fiscal expediency. The state, it is argued, abandoned the peasant to supervision by the nobility, so that the Russian serf became barely distinguishable from a chattel slave. The death penalty was meted out by

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serf owners under the guise of punishment: if the serf was not able to withstand the blows of the lash, that was not the master's fault.

Certainly Catherine had to rely on the nobility to aid her in ruling Russia and in supervising the provinces. This was especially so following the Pugachev revolt of 1773-4. Claiming to be Peter III, Pugachev led the largest upheaval in Russia prior to the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, and left a 'spectre to haunt future generations of landlords and officials'. The revolt engulfed the whole basin of the middle Volga, together with the Yaik Valley and the southern and central Urals. The insurgence was part of the conflict between the rise of serfdom and autocracy, but was also a sectional conflict between the expanding centre and the receding frontier. Certainly the Pugachev revolt emphasised the symbiotic relationship between Catherine and the nobility. The nobles looked to Catherine for protection against the raging rebellion, whilst Catherine declared herself the 'first landowner' of Russia and relied on the nobility to keep order.

Those who seek to defend Catherine from her critics cite the Pugachev revolt as evidence of the great constraints faced by the Empress, and show the mutual reliance between Catherine and the nobility as reason for her tentative approach to social reform. Rather than seeing her as insincere in her concern for the peasantry, historians have recently highlighted what Catherine did achieve, and what she might have achieved had circumstances been different. Catherine has been accused of making grants of settled estates as rewards to servitors or favourites, thus converting many state peasants into private serfs. In fact, her land grants were from territories annexed from Poland after the three partitions, and she made very few grants from Russian state peasants.

Catherine was well aware of, and criticised, the harsh conditions faced by serfs. Throughout her reign the

Empress eroded the methods by which people could be enserfed (though the extension of the poll tax to the Ukraine in 1783 did result in the expansion of serfdom). Catherine's memoirs show her deep concern over the treatment of the serfs and her disappointment at the lack of support her initiatives received at the Legislative Commission. In 1767 it was forbidden for foster parents to enserf illegitimate children. In 1781 enserfment of prisoners of war was prohibited and a law passed that saw marriage of a free man to a serf woman emancipate the woman. Catherine is known to have investigated and then bought out landowners who were reported to ill-treat their serfs. Furthermore, taken as a percentage of the population, the proportion of the peasantry that were serfs remained the same between the beginning and end of her reign, and the number of legally free state peasants increased.

Crossroads of Change

In terms of the socio-political development of Russia, Catherine's reign is a crossroads of change. From the vantage point of Catherinian Russia we can look back to the solidification of the service state, and forward to the rise of the bureaucracy. The reign of the Empress both saw the apogee of serfdom and set in motion the process that led to its destruction.

Following the Pugachev revolt, Catherine set about reforming the provinces. The provincial reforms of 1775 were a calculated attempt to bring greater co-ordination and efficiency to the Russian provinces. By setting up local councils and assemblies and giving nobles who served the state a place in them, Catherine bound the nobility to each other and the state. In some respects the 1762 decision by Peter III to abolish compulsory state service saw the state emancipating itself from the nobility. The local assemblies ensured the nobles served a useful purpose rather than loafing around in the

countryside. Catherine attempted to bring the rule of law to the provinces, with boards of welfare and education, courts and police offices that were partly staffed by elected members of the local nobility and urban population. Of course, much of the day-to-day administration of the provinces was left to the nobility, and their own interpretations of Catherine's edicts. However, there was a tentative move towards the creation of an educated bureaucracy.

The Empress herself worried about the lack of competent officials, but some did exist, and they brought new ideas of legality to the provinces. Catherine therefore was keen to foster greater education. Not only did she love literature, she was a great sponsor of the theatre and collector of art. She moved to bring greater education to her people. In 1786 the Russian Statute of National Education was promulgated and attempted to set up a national school system. Catherine was ahead of her time in decreeing that corporal punishment was not to be used in the schools, though brutality to children continued. Importing an Austrian system implemented by Jankovic, she did choose a school structure which was non-disruptive to empire and built on authority. However, by the standards of the 1780s Russian schools were undeniably modern and advanced when compared with the rest of Europe. Catherine was also the founder of the first girls' school in Russia, for the daughters of the nobility and bourgeoisie. Catherine was, therefore, responsible for the emergence of a provincial government structure committed to efficiency and the rule of law, which was cemented by the genesis of a new education system. These reforms had a slow but significant impact upon socio-political relations in Russia.

What we see in the reign of Catherine is the beginning of the crumbling of the Petrine state, a process which was accelerated in the first half of the 19th century. In the

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Catherinian period, and after, the nobles' importance to the state infrastructure was declining, and an ever more powerful bureaucracy achieved dominance. In 1861 the serfs were emancipated. The professionalised, 'enlightened' bureaucrats were the driving force behind emancipation; the role of Alexander II was to give them their head, by denying serfdom a stay of execution. When we look beyond the distraction of weighing up how genuine Catherine was in her approach to the relationship between lord and peasant, we see a more subtle phenomenon emerging. The Empress' reign was witness to the crossroads of a significant shift in this relationship, as the Petrine state began to dissolve.

Again, in foreign relations, we can locate the Catherinian era on a line of

continuity and gradual change for Russia. The Empress herself played an active role in foreign affairs, just as she did in all other spheres of government. Indeed, despite reliance on a close group of advisers, she insisted on seeing every dispatch. Furthermore, the impressive image of authority that Catherine projected made a memorable and significant impact on visiting foreign envoys. She furthered the extent to which Russia was involved in European affairs, and rivals were increasingly unable to deny this influence. Even the French eventually accepted Catherine's imperial title in 1772.

The Empress operated within the traditional constraints of foreign relations, attempting to protect Russia's interests in the Baltic, Poland and the Crimea. Intervention in Poland in 1768 led to war with the Turks, and

the peace of Kuchuk Kainardzhi of 1774 brought with it not only the success of the independence of Crimea but further Austrian and Prussian interference in Poland.

It is in her dealings with Poland and in her response to the French Revolution that many historians have criticised Catherine. Those who wish to show the limits of Catherine's 'enlightened' stance point to her condemnation of the French Revolution and to the partitions of Poland. It is worth stating, however, that Russia was the last of the European powers to go to war with France. While the other powers were indeed fighting the French (unsuccessfully at this point) Catherine attempted to take advantage in Poland. By 1795, the year before her death, the third partition of Poland had been concluded. Catherine strengthened Russia's position at the expense of her traditional enemies, profiting in Poland whilst the Western powers played out their rivalries - rivalries which Catherine kept Russia out of.

Conclusion

With the issue of Poland, we return to where we began, with the assessment of Catherine's great biographer. De Madariaga states that she finds the treatment of Poland and Stanislas Poniatowski unforgivable. 'The destruction of Poland was carried out with ruthlessness and an undercurrent of raillery which is extremely unpleasant and Catherine's bullying of Stanislas himself was downright cruel.'

'The Cake of Kings': this cartoon illustrates the plans being cooked up by Catherine and the monarchs of Austria (Joseph II) and Prussia (Frederick II) to partition Poland in 1772.



From the Catherinian era we can look back to the Petrine state and forward to its crumbling at the onslaught of bureaucratisation - and what is most interesting is the role played by Catherine in this process.

Yet what seems 'enlightened' in one epoch may not in another, and questions of how 'enlightened' Catherine was are futile. Catherine herself believed that politics was founded on three words: 'circumstance, conjecture and conjuncture'. It has been argued above that we must see Catherine primarily in the context of developments in Russian history in the 18th and 19th centuries. Her patronage of the arts and sponsorship of education saw a continuing process of westernisation, and her relationship with the nobility saw the acceleration of the unravelling of the service state. From the Catherinian era we can look back to the Petrine state and forward to its crumbling at the onslaught of bureaucratisation - and what is most interesting is the role played by Catherine in this process.

Further Reading

- J. Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia* (Princeton University Press, 1961)
S. Dixon, *Catherine the Great* (Longman, 2001)
A. Lentin, *Enlightened Absolutism, 1760-1790* (Avero, 1985)
I. de Madariaga, 'Catherine the Great - A Personal View,' *History Today*, 51(11) (November 2001) and *Catherine the Great: A Short History* (Yale University Press, 2nd edn, 2002)
M. Raeff (ed.) *Catherine the Great - A Profile* (Macmillan, 1972)
R. Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (Penguin, 2nd edn., 1995)

A portrait of an ageing Catherine the Great. She died in 1796, at the age of 67.

Issues to Debate

- o Was Catherine the Great's 'enlightenment' a sham?
- o What roles did the nobility play during Catherine's rule?
- o How important a figure was Catherine the Great in modern Russian history?

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