

Catherine the Great was not always named Catherine nor was she Russian. Her reign as Grand Duchess was a very interesting part of her life in her memoirs she indicated numerous affairs with men on the court. She overthrew her husband when he was Tsar of Russia and took over the country herself. Her time of rule was also marked with affairs as well as accomplishments that had never been seen by the Russia or Europe before. She was a very active ruler and wanted very much to be involved in the running of the country. She was a patron of the arts and tried to pass social reforms. These social reforms failed because of lack of funding. This paper will explore these and other topics directly involving Catherine the Great of Russia.

She was born Sophia-Augusta to a minor prince family in the Baltic region of Prussia. She was a German princess whose mother, Princess Joanna, sought the advancement of the family through the marrying of her children into the royal houses of Europe. In 1743 Empress Elizabeth went in search for a wife for her nephew and heir to the throne Grand Duke Peter. She decided on Sophia-Augusta. Sophia-Augusta was then converted to Russian Orthodoxy and received the name that she is known by in history, Catherine. Catherine entered into the Russian dynasty by marrying future tsar Peter III when she was seventeen years old.¹ After marriage she received the title Grand Duchess. She then embraced her new country with her whole heart.²

Her marriage was not a pleasant one and Grand Duke Peter left her to find her own place on the court. Peter made no attempts to learn or accept the traditions of the Russian court. He was still dedicated to his Holstein heritage and refused to change.³ Catherine accepted the Russian culture. She learned the Russian language to show the court her good will. She also

¹ Olivia, L. Jay. Great Lives Observed: Catherine the Great. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971.), 2

² Lawrence, John. A History of Russia: A Brilliant Chronicle of Russian History from Its Ancient Beginnings to the Present Day: 7th Revised Edition. (New York: Meridian, 1993.), 170

³ Olivia, 2-3

studied the rituals of Russian Orthodoxy and the manners of the Russian society as to not offend any members of the court.⁴

When Empress Elizabeth died December 25, 1761⁵ Grand Duke Peter took the throne with little opposition. According to Catherine, Empress Elizabeth waited for death with fear and horror. Elizabeth did not want Peter to become Tsar because she knew that he did not love the Russian people.⁶ Empress Elizabeth was in the process of changing the inheritance of the throne but died before the new instructions were completed.⁷ Catherine admits to crying bitterly at the loss of the Empress, because of the kindness that she had always shown to Catherine.⁸

When Peter took the throne he also took the name Tsar Peter III. By June of 1762 Catherine had carried out, with some help, coups d'état of her very own and became Empress Catherine. Her early reign was a time of testing. Catherine realized that she knew very little about the empire she had taken over. She then began to study and take a more active role in the government. She examined the financial situation of the empire and began to rule as only she knew how by using her own education. She was a very well educated and a believer in the Enlightenment. She wanted Russia to have an autocratic government because she viewed that a country ruled by one was better than a country ruled by many.⁹

It was not until the French Revolution that Catherine realized that the ideas of the Enlightenment that she had brought to the empire could cause a revolution in her own country and possibly remove her from the throne.¹⁰ In response to the French Revolution in 1789

⁴ Olivia, 2

⁵ Maroger, Dominique. The Memoirs of Catherine the Great. (New York: Collier Books, 1961.), 262

⁶ Maroger, 261

⁷ Maroger, 262

⁸ Maroger, 263

⁹ Olivia, 6

¹⁰ Lawrence, 170

Catherine cut her ties with the liberal philosophies of the French culture.¹¹ Catherine worked hard to modernize her beloved country and she did not want to upset the serf class. Since she was placed in power by a palace revolution she did not want to run the risk of upsetting the serfs to the point that they would want to remove her from power.¹²

Catherine did not have to only worry about the serfs rising up against her. Intellectual critics could have also threatened her and removed her from her throne. Alexander Radischev was arrested and then sentenced death but that was changed to ten years of exile in eastern Siberia for criticizing the “Russian evils of autocracy and serfdom” in his writing *Journey From St. Petersburg to Moscow* which was published in 1790. There was also a satirical writer Nikolai Novikov. He was suspected by Catherine of vile crimes and in 1791 his writings were suspended and he was condemned to fifteen years in prison in 1792 with out a trial.¹³

Catherine did many great things for the empire thus, giving her the title of “The Great”. She abolished tax farming, monopolies and export duties. She also built and repaired bridges and roads. She did what she could to help the Russian economy become dynamic. She laid out foundations for social reforms and programs.¹⁴ She also tried to help create a Russian middle class by providing education for the lower class; she did this with education reform in 1786¹⁵. Sadly, because of the wars going on to acquire more territory, in particular the Black Sea region from the Turks, these foundations were not carried out to their full potential.¹⁶

Catherine mostly earned her title through the accomplishments she made in foreign affairs. She when compared to other monarchs of her time she acquired more land and had more

¹¹ Olivia, 57

¹² Lawrence, 170

¹³ Olivia, 10

¹⁴ Lawrence, 170

¹⁵ Olivia, 9

¹⁶ Olivia, 8

military victories.¹⁷ The Russian and Polish conflict had existed from the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725). Catherine had intentions of establishing Poland as a satellite state but was still to be under direct control of Russia. She wanted to do this to secure the Russian boarder to the west.¹⁸ To the south Catherine was successful in gaining control of the Black Sea region and the fertile farm land that surrounded it. This was a great success because for nearly a century before Catherine's triumph the rulers of Russia had been trying to gain access to this land. This triumph was not one just of military proportions but one of economic as well. This created more colonies for Russia and provided them with land that was suitable for agriculture.¹⁹

Catherine, however, issued decrees that would harden the lives of the serfs and the owners of the serfs. In 1765 she issued a decree that if any land owner wanted their serfs to be better trained in hard labor they may turn them over to the state. The state would then train them in hard labor and when the owner wished to have them back he may have them. The clothes and shoes of the serfs if they were not worn out were to be collected by the treasury again.²⁰ She was seen as a liberal thinker by Western Europe but her actions tended to prove other wise.

“Her own education and disposition made her a prime figure of the cultural environment of the eighteenth century.”²¹ Catherine was also a patron of the arts and sciences. In her court she developed academies of the sciences and of the arts with help from close friends. With the help of Princess Dashkova she established the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of the Arts was established with the help of her advisor and friend Ivan Betskoi.²² Because of her patronage of the Arts it shows that Catherine was not just concerned with military victories.

¹⁷ Olivia, 8

¹⁸ Olivia, 8

¹⁹ Olivia, 9

²⁰ Olivia, 62

²¹ Olivia, 9

²² Olivia, 10

Catherine the Great also had other interests beyond politics, arts, and military advancements. Her love life has always been an interesting part for historians to examine. Her marriage was a complete loss. She admits that she and Grand Duke Peter never got along well in her memoirs.²³ Catherine said this not long after her marriage

I would have been ready to like my new husband had he been capable of affection or willing to show any. But in the very first days of our marriage I came to a sad conclusion about him. I said to myself: 'If you allow yourself to love that man, you will be the unhappiest creature on this earth...' ²⁴

It is believed that her son Grand Duke Paul was not even the son of Grand Duke Peter. This was questioned by Catherine, Grand Duke Peter, and even Empress Elizabeth. None of the three ever came out and said whether he, Grand Duke Paul, was the son of Grand Duke Peter or not. It was said that Grand Duke Paul looked amazingly like Grand Duke Peter, thus leading the court and the Russian people to believe he was the natural heir to the throne.²⁵

Grand Duke Peter had his mistresses and even while still a Grand Duchess, Catherine had her favorites among the court. In many of her memoirs she admits to affairs before becoming Empress.²⁶ As Empress, Catherine, no longer had a reason to hide these affairs, she even created a role for her favorites in the Russian court. Throughout her reign there were ten men that served in this role in the court. These men "enjoyed the attentions, affection, and beneficence of the Empress Catherine"²⁷ Even while in her sixties at the end of her reign this position was filled by a man in his early twenties, Platon Zubov. He remained in this role the longest from 1789-1796 when the Empress passed away.

²³ Maroger, 108-120 "The Disunited Couple"

²⁴ Maroger, 79

²⁵ Olivia, 3

²⁶ Olivia, 27 "The Affair with Serge Soltikoff"

²⁷ Olivia, 11

Catherine the Great passed away November 6, 1796 and was succeeded by her son Grand Duke Paul. Catherine left behind numerous memoirs telling her story since she liked to write. In one of her writings she says

I was instructed in various womanly tasks, but took as little interest in them as I did in reading. I wanted to write and draw—but I learnt little of drawing for want of a good teacher.²⁸

She was a very well educated woman for the time that she lived. She was an exceptional woman not only because of her position of power but also because she was well educated and continued to educate herself throughout the Enlightenment by being a patron to the arts and sciences. She had many victories on the military front and on the foreign affairs front. Her biggest flaw was not preparing her son to be an affective ruler, he was well educated but he had very few experiences leading a country.²⁹ Thus upon Catherine's death Russia was left without a strong leader. Catherine had ruled for nearly a generation, since 1762 she had been the autocratic voice of Russia.

²⁸ Maroger, 23

²⁹ Olivia, 13

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