Catherine the Great

Catherine the Great (1729-1796), was an empress of Russia (1762-1796), who expanded her vast country's borders south to the Black Sea and west into Europe while continuing the Westernization begun by Peter the Great.

Originally named Sophie Fredericke Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst, Catherine was born in Stettin, Prussia (now Szczecin, Poland). The daughter of a German prince, she moved to Russia in 1744 and married Grand Duke Peter of Holstein, a grandson of Peter the Great and heir to the Russian throne, in 1745. The marriage was an unhappy one, but the precocious, intelligent, and extremely ambitious grand duchess managed to learn much in her adopted country, surviving court intrigues (as well as, apparently, successfully engaging in some). Required to convert from the Lutheran faith to Russian Orthodoxy before marrying Peter, Catherine displayed devotion to her new religion and nation. Peter became Emperor Peter III of Russia upon the death of Empress Elizabeth in 1762, but lasted only a few months. Unstable and in effect impossible in personal relations, he immediately antagonized the court, the Orthodox Church, and the leading elements in the army. He also indicated plans to rid himself of Catherine. In July 1762 Catherine and the imperial guard led by her lover Count Grigory Orlov overthrew Peter in a palace coup, and Catherine was declared empress as Catherine II. Orlov's brother killed Peter days later, perhaps inadvertently during a drunken argument. Catherine proceeded to rule Russia for 34 years.

Catherine II made her mark in history by her foreign policy as well as by her continuation of the process of Westernization in the footsteps of Peter the Great. Two victorious wars against the Ottoman Empire (1768-1774, 1787-1792) extended Russia to the Black Sea. Agreements with Prussia and Austria led to three partitions of Poland, in 1772, 1793, and 1795, after which that major country disappeared from the map, and Russia's territory extended well into central Europe. Catherine supported the Westernization of Russia not only as an autocrat, but also as a writer, a journalist, and as its loudest propagandist. Russia, the empress insisted, attained new heights of civilization during her reign. Court poets glorified Peter the Great who created new Russians and Catherine the Great who gave them their souls, and the French writer Voltaire wrote of Peter the Great and Catherine the Greater.

In contrast with Peter the Great, a coarse man without formal education who tried desperately to catch up with everything, Catherine already had an excellent German education, and developed into an accomplished intellectual. The *Spirit of Laws* (1748), by French political theorist Montesquieu, became her avowed book. She used the book,
which preached that a wise ruler who favored reason over passion could best ensure the welfare of his or her subjects, to bolster her autocratic system of government.

In an attempt at political reform, Catherine convened the Legislative Commission in 1767 to codify the laws of the realm, and in the process rationalize and modernize Russian law and life. The commission consisted of deputies, some appointed from state institutions and some elected. Of the elected deputies, some came from the landed gentry, some from the townspeople, some from the peasants, and some from the Cossacks and national minorities. The serfs (agricultural laborers bound to an estate and its owner) and clergy were excluded. As the basis for its work, the commission received Catherine's “Instruction”, a strikingly liberal document that presented the empress's vision of the ideal government, from the form of its laws to its education and social structure. The “Instruction” was still careful to preserve such a pillar of the Russian system as autocracy - justified, however, in utilitarian terms rather than as a divine dispensation. The commission met for a year and a half, but it produced no results. Instead, the members of the commission split along class lines. Gentry delegates argued with merchant representatives over the rights to own serfs and to engage in trade and industry, and the gentry deputies clashed with those of the peasants on the crucial issue of serfdom. The outbreak of war against the Ottoman Empire in 1768 provided a good occasion for disbanding the Legislative Commission.

Whereas class antagonism had found a measure of verbal expression in the commission, it covered much of central and southeastern European Russia with blood in the great Pugachev rebellion (1773-1774). An illiterate Cossack, Pugachev took advantage of grievances among Cossacks of the Ural Mountains and the fact that the bulk of the army was away fighting the Ottomans to raise the banner of revolt. The local uprising of the Ural cossacks soon became a mass rebellion, as crowds of serfs, workers in the Ural mines and factories, and certain other minority peoples joined Pugachev's original following. At its height the rebellion encompassed a huge territory in eastern European Russia, posing a threat to Moscow itself. Pugachev promised the extermination of officials and landlords, and freedom from serfdom, taxation, and military service for the people. Although the rebels showed considerable organization, including elections for a new administration in the territory they occupied and systematic propaganda, their efforts could not match those of the imperial government. In particular, Pugachev's motley troops could not compete with the regular army, once it arrived in considerable numbers. Defeated, the rebellion dissolved as quickly as it had arisen. Pugachev himself was handed over by his own men, taken to Moscow, tried, and executed.

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After the Pugachev rebellion, Catherine's alliance with the gentry became quite explicit. The empress referred to herself as the “first landlord of the realm.” The new system of local self-government, which she introduced in 1775 and which lasted until 1864, was related to the Pugachev rebellion and the resulting panic and collapse of all local authority. To remedy the situation, the empress emphasized decentralization, a clear distribution of power and functions, and the participation of the local gentry. She subdivided some fifteen major administrative units, through which the country was governed at the time, to make a total of fifty units by the end of her reign. Each of these provinces was subdivided into some ten districts. Every province contained about 300,000 inhabitants and every district about 30,000, with historical and regional considerations completely disregarded in the drawing of the boundaries. The appointed governor of each province was assisted by a complicated network of institutions and officials. Local gentry participated in local administration and were urged to display initiative and energy in supporting the new system. Catherine the Great tried - not very successfully - to separate the legislative, executive, and judicial functions, without impairing her ultimate control from Saint Petersburg. She organized the judicial branch with different courts and procedures for different classes.

While the administrative reorganization of 1775 had given the gentry some voice in local government, the Charter to the Nobility of 1785 gave them still more power. Under the charter, the gentry of each province were allowed to form a general assembly headed by an elected marshal. Thus incorporated, the gentry could petition the empress about their concerns, a right denied the rest of the population. Moreover, the charter confirmed that the gentry did not have to serve the state in any capacity, a lifetime obligation for them until Peter III's brief reign. The property rights of the landlords reached a new high as they were recognized as full owners of their estates, with no restrictions on the sale or exploitation of their land, forests, or mineral resources.

Serfdom became stronger than ever in Russia under Catherine. It spread to new areas, in particular to Ukraine, which Russia had obtained in the partitions of Poland. Although Catherine's government in essence confirmed an already-existing system in that land, it bears the responsibility for helping legalize serfdom in Ukraine and for standardizing it throughout the empire. A series of laws, fiscal in nature and issued from 1763 to 1783, forbade Ukrainian peasants to leave an estate without the landlord's permission and in general directed them “to remain in their place and calling.” Catherine the Great also personally extended serfdom on a large scale by her frequent and huge grants of state lands and peasants to her favorites, beginning with the leaders of the coup in 1762. The census of 1794 to 1796 demonstrated the growth of serfdom, with serfs constituting 53.1 percent of all peasants and 49 percent of the entire population of the country. The
landlords could sentence their serfs to hard labor in Siberia, and they were authorized to fetch the serfs back at will. The serfs were forbidden, under a threat of harsh punishment, to petition the empress or the government for redress against the landlords. Other government measures in regard to land and people included the institution of firmer control over the cossacks, when imperial troops overran their independent community on the Dnieper River in 1775; a huge survey of boundaries and titles confirming landholding; the transfer of most church property to the state; and a vast program of colonization bringing Germans to the Volga River region and a variety of colonists to southern Russia. Catherine the Great's main interest, however, was in education and culture. Indeed, she considered it her mission to civilize Russia. The empress's educational undertakings included the establishment of exclusive boarding schools, most notably the Smolny Institute for girls, and later, in 1783, the Russian Academy of Letters, a teachers' college. Catherine also established the beginnings of a more general educational system for Russia, although on a very small scale considering the needs of the country. Publishing in Russia grew by leaps and bounds, aided by the edict of 1783 licensing private publishing houses. Journalism, in which the empress participated personally, flourished. Catherine also established a Medical Collegium in 1763, founded hospitals, led the way in the struggle against infectious diseases, and decreed that Russia be equipped to produce its own medicines and surgical equipment.

Extremely successful in foreign policy and prominent in European culture, Catherine the Great was surprised by the French Revolution that overthrew the monarchy in France. She had welcomed the convening of the Estates-General (the French representative body) in 1789 as part of the progress she sponsored. But she realized quickly that things were going too far.

Catherine the Great's many abilities included that of selecting able and effective assistants, both civilian and military. The frequent emphasis on the empress's twenty-one known lovers is largely misplaced, for most of them were of no consequence in state affairs. The few who left their mark in Russian history, notably Potemkin (connected with the abortive "Greek project" of reestablishing an Orthodox empire in Constantinople, with the development of southern Russia, and with much else), earned their prominence.

For historians, there are two main treatments of the course of Catherine II's reign. One group of scholars, including Soviet academics, considers her liberalism all facade and pretense. They argue that the empress's thirty-four-year performance on the throne was a single-minded affirmation of autocracy and of the overwhelmingly dominant position of the Russian gentry. They claim the last brutal years, which followed the outbreak of

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the French Revolution, merely more openly revealed the essence of the regime. The other group of scholars, however, allows for real Catherinian liberalism, especially in the early years, to be renounced only after the failure of the Legislative Commission and the Pugachev rebellion. In either case, the Legislative Commission was clearly a major turning-point in her career. In religion, as in politics, Catherine was also pulled in two directions: the human warmth of Christianity (Lutheranism and Russian Orthodoxy), and the mechanistic view of humans found in some varieties of Enlightenment thought.