



Catherine the Great : Life and Legend

By John T. Alexander

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One of the most colorful characters in modern history, Catherine II of Russia began her life as a minor German princess, until the childless Empress Elizabeth and Catherine's own scheming mother married her off to the Grand Duke Peter of Russia at age sixteen. By thirty-three, she had overthrown her husband in a bloodless coup and established herself as Empress of the multinational Russian Empire, the largest territorial political unit in modern history.

Portrayed both as a political genius who restored to Russia the glory it had known in the days of Peter the Great and as a despotic foreign adventuress who usurped the Russian throne, murdered her rivals, and tyrannized her subjects, she was, by all accounts, an extraordinary woman. *Catherine the Great*, the first popular biography of the empress based on contemporary scholarship, provides a vivid portrait of Catherine as a mother, a lover, and, above all, an extremely savvy ruler. Concentrating on her long reign (1762-96), John Alexander examines all aspects of Catherine's life and career: the brilliant political strategies by which she won the acceptance of a nationalistic elite; her expansive foreign policy; the domestic reforms with which she revamped the Russian military, political structure, and economy; and, of course, her infamous love life.

Beginning with an account of the dramatic palace revolt by which Catherine unseated her husband and a background chapter describing the circumstances of her early childhood and marriage, Alexander then proceeds chronologically through the thirty-four years of her reign. Presenting Catherine in more human terms than previous biographers have, Alexander includes numerous quotations from her reminiscences and notes. We learn, for instance, not only the names and number of her lovers, but her understanding of what many considered a shocking licentiousness. "The trouble is," she wrote, "that my heart would not willingly remain one hour without love."

The result of twenty years' research by one of America's leading narrative historians of modern Russia, this truly impressive work offers a much-needed, balanced reappraisal of one of history's most scandal-ridden figures.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Was Catherine the Great, the German princess who became Empress of All the Russias, a murderer and tyrant, or an enlightened shepherd of Russia's expanded role in Europe? Historian Alexander avoids an either/or approach in this workmanlike, evenhanded yet ultimately frustrating biography. Born Sophia Fredericks, Catherine saw herself as a female Peter the Great without his militarism, yet she subjugated Poland, plunged Russia into war with Turkey and crushed the Pugachev uprising of 1773. During her reign she also abolished state monopolies, codified chaotic laws and encouraged industry in the provinces. Alexander, professor of history at the University of Kansas, paints a sympathetic portrait of a strong-willed woman who had to cope with loneliness, isolation and conspiratorial plots. Arguing that her alleged nymphomania is largely a myth (she had 12 documented lovers over 44 years), he explains her succession of male "favorites" in terms of a need to compartmentalize her life; he also speculates that she may have been secretly married to her adviser Grigori Potemkin. Illustrations.

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Review

"Far outranks the ancient efforts of G.P. Gooch, Zoe Oldenbourg and Gladys Scott Thomson....Good on high-political crises."--History

"A most readable and historically accurate biography of the greatest of the Romanov rulers of Russia."--Frank V. Barchard, East Texas State University

"An extremely well researched, well organized, and judiciously balanced political portrait of Empress Catherine II."--Marc Raeff, Columbia University

"[Alexander] shows his abilities as a storyteller by delving into the psyche of this woman, who lived a life of celebrity, isolation, and loneliness."--The Richmond Times-Dispatch

"Alexander's biography is the best there is and likely to remain so....Factually reliable, informative, lively, and frequently provocative."--Times Literary Supplement

"An intelligent history and an imaginative biography."--Newark Star Ledger

"The best English-language biography of Catherine in some time."--The Dallas Morning News

"Informed, provocative, and, above all, fair....A major achievement. It succeeds in its goal of bridging the gap between popular biographies and scholarly studies."--The Cleveland Plain Dealer

"Alexander's carefully researched political biography at last gives Catherine her due as 'the overburdened ruler of an immense and turbulent Empire.'"--W. Bruce Lincoln, The Chicago Tribune

"Alexander fathoms his subject completely, and he writes a most compelling narrative."--Booklist

From the Back Cover

(An extremely well researched, well organized and judiciously balanced political portrait of Empress Catherine II. Alexander has gone to great pains to read and make good use of all recent scholarship and

historiographic trends to draw a life length portrait of a most remarkable ruler).

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Eric McDonald:

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Debra Riggs:

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Roberto Garcia:

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