

Russia in the Era of Catherine the Great

The fact that Catherine II, Empress of all the Russias (1729-96), was the most powerful woman in the eighteenth century goes without saying. She was an intellectual, deeply influenced by ancient Rome and her contemporaries among the French *philosophes*. A reformer at the beginning of her reign and a life-long patroness of the arts, Catherine maintained the facade of an enlightened ruler while promoting territorial aggression and autocracy. Whether she deserved the appellation “the Great” is a question for historians.

Catherine was born a German princess. Her father was the nominal ruler of the tiny principality of Anhalt-Zebst. The Prussian king Frederick, in order to solidify his interests at the court in St. Petersburg, promoted her marriage at age sixteen to the heir to the Russian throne. Peter, a sickly and ill-tempered young man, became emperor as Peter III in 1761. It quickly became clear that he was incompetent to rule his vast empire. A coup d’état engineered by the circle around Catherine, including her close friend Princess Ekaterina Dashkova, put her on the throne six months later.

Peter the Great (1672-1725) is often credited with bringing Russia into the modern world. In creating his capital at St. Petersburg, with all-important access to the Baltic Sea, he made Russia into an Eastern European power that benefited from increasing commercial contacts and intellectual exchanges with the West. Catherine too was a modernizer and visionary who acted quickly to institute changes in government and society based on her study of Enlightenment ideals. In 1767, she organized what was, by eighteenth-century standards, a remarkably representative Legislative Commission—an elected committee of nobles, townsmen, free peasants and deputies from all over Russia—that was charged with creating a complete new code of laws. She presented them with a lengthy hand-written “Instruction” designed to guide their debates. It was drawn largely from Montesquieu and filled with ideas on law, finance, justice and humane and civic behavior new to Russia. Although the unwieldy and fractious body adopted only partial codes and failed to discuss a limit on the absolute power of the Empress, it was the high water mark of political reform.

The arts, music, literature and education thrived under Catherine’s patronage. Her support for the foremost artists and architects of her time continued Peter’s transformation of St. Petersburg into a “European” city of grand avenues, sweeping vistas and memorable monuments. And her art collection would become the great State Hermitage Museum. In Catherine’s court, intellectual pursuits became fashionable. At the Academy of Sciences and the newly-founded Imperial Academy of the Russian Language, Princess Dashkova—appointed by the Empress—energized the study of science, oversaw the translation into Russian of the best classical and European contemporary history and literature, and codified the rules of Russian grammar and spelling. Catherine’s exquisite taste, varied interests and bottomless purse set the stage for the emergence of a unique Russian national culture that thrived for over 100 years.