A HISTORY OF RUSSIA
SIXTH EDITION

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THE REIGNS OF CATHERINE THE GREAT, 1762–96, AND PAUL, 1796–1801

Long live the adorable Catherine! 

VOLTAIRE

What interest, therefore, could the young German princess take in that obscure nation, that people, inarticulate, poor, semi-barbarous, which concealed itself in villages, behind the snow, behind bad roads, and only appeared in the streets of St. Petersburg like a foreign outcast, with its persecuted beard, and prohibited dress — tolerated only through contempt.

HERSCHEL

Of the three celebrated "Philosophe Despots" of the eighteenth century Catherine the Great could boast of the most astonishing career.

GOOCH

CATHERINE THE GREAT was thirty-three years old when she ascended the Russian throne. She had acquired considerable education and experience. Born a princess in the petty German principality of Anhalt-Zerbst, the future empress of Russia grew up in modest but cultured surroundings. The court in Anhalt-Zerbst, like many other European courts in the eighteenth century, was strongly influenced by French culture, and Catherine started reading French books in childhood. In 1744, at the age of fifteen, she came to Russia to marry Peter of Holstein-Gottorp and prepare herself to be the wife of a Russian sovereign.

The years from 1744 to 1762 were hard on Catherine. Peter proved to be a miserable husband, while the German princess's position at the imperial court could be fairly described as isolated and even precarious. To add to Catherine's difficulties, her mother was discovered to be Frederick the Great's agent and had to leave Russia. Yet the future empress accomplished much more than merely surviving at court. In addition to becoming Orthodox in order to marry Peter, she proceeded to learn Russian language and literature well and to obtain some knowledge of her new country. Simultaneously she turned to the writings of the philosophes, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and others, for which she had been prepared by her earlier grounding in French literature. As we shall see, Catherine the Great's
interest in the Enlightenment was to constitute an important aspect of her reign. The young princess adapted herself skillfully to the new environment, made friends, and won a measure of affection and popularity in court circles. While simulating innocence and submissiveness, she participated in political intrigues and plots, carefully covering up her tracks, however, until she led the successful coup in mid-summer 1762, which brought deposition and death to her husband and made her Empress Catherine II.

Catherine the Great's personality and character impressed many of her contemporaries as well as later commentators. A woman quite out of the ordinary, the empress possessed high intelligence, a natural ability to administer and govern, a remarkable practical sense, energy to spare, and an iron will. Along with her determination went courage and optimism: Catherine believed that she could prevail over all obstacles, and more often than not events proved her right. Self-control, skill in discussion and propaganda, and a clever handling of men and circumstances to serve her ends were additional assets of that unusual monarch. The empress herself asserted that it was ambition that sustained her. The historian can agree, provided that ambition is understood broadly, that is, not merely as a desire to snatch the crown, or attain glory by success in war, or gain the admiration of the philosophers, but as a constant, urgent drive to excel in everything and bring everything under one's control. For the first time since Peter the Great, Russia acquired a sovereign who worked day and night, paying personal attention to all kinds of matters, great and small.

Yet, together with her formidable virtues, Catherine the Great had certain weaknesses. Indeed the two were intrinsically combined. Determination easily became ruthlessness, ambition fed vanity just as vanity fed ambition, skill in propaganda would not stop short of asserting lies. Above all, the empress was a supreme egoist. As with most true egoists, she had few beliefs or standards of value outside of herself and her own overpowering wishes. Even Catherine II's admirers sometimes noticed that she lacked something, call it charity, mercy, or human sympathy, and, incidentally, that she looked her best in masculine attire. It was also observed that the sovereign took up every issue with the same unflagging drive and earnestness, be it Pugachev's rebellion or correspondence with Voltaire, the partitions of Poland or her latest article for a periodical. Restless ambition served as the only common denominator in her many activities, and, apparently, the only thing that mattered. Similarly, in spite of Catherine's enormous display of enlightened views and sentiments and of her adherence to the principles of the Age of Reason, it remains extremely difficult to tell what the empress actually believed, or whether she believed anything. In fact, the true relationship of Catherine the Great to the Enlightenment constitutes one of the most controversial subjects in the historiography of her reign.

Catherine the Great's notorious love affairs also reflected her peculiar personality: grasping, restless, determined, and somehow, in spite of all passion and sentimentality, essentially cold and unable to establish a happy private life. It has been asserted that her first lover was forced on Catherine, so that she would have a son and Russia an heir, and that Paul resulted from that liaison rather than from the marriage to Peter. In any case, Catherine soon took matters into her own hands. The empress had twenty-one known lovers, the last after she had turned sixty. The favorites included Gregory Orlov, an officer of the guards who proved instrumental in elevating Catherine the Great to the throne and whose brother may have killed Peter III; Stanisław Poniatowski, a Polish nobleman whom the empress made King of Poland; and, most important, Gregory Potemkin. Potemkin came to occupy a unique position both in the Russian government, to the extent that he can be considered the foremost statesman of the reign, and in the empress's private life. Some specialists believe he married her; he certainly continued to be influential with her after the rise of other favorites. One description of the unusual ménage says: "From 1776 to 1789 her favorites succeeded one another almost every year, and they were confirmed in their position, as a court poet would be, by Potemkin himself, who, after he had lost the empress's heart, remained for thirteen years the manager of her male harem."

The First Years of the Reign. The Legislative Commission

Catherine II had to behave carefully during her first years on the throne. Brought to power by a palace revolution and without a legal title to the crown, the empress had the enthusiastic support of guardsmen such as the Orlov brothers, but otherwise little backing. Elder statesmen looked at her with some suspicion. There persisted the possibility that another turn of fortune would make her son Paul sovereign and dethrone Catherine to the position of regent or even eliminate her altogether. A different danger struck in July 1764, when a young officer, Basil Mirovich, tried to liberate Ivan VI from his confinement in the Schlüsselburg fortress. The attempt failed, and in the course of it Ivan VI — who, apparently, because of isolation since early childhood, had never grown up mentally and emotionally but remained virtually subhuman — was killed by his guards, who carried out emergency instructions of long standing. The depressing impact of the incident on Russian society was heightened by the execution of Mirovich, an event all the more striking because Elizabeth had avoided executions. Catherine also ran into a certain amount of trouble when, in
1763–64, she completed the long process of divesting the Church of its huge real estate by secularizing Church lands. This reform, which we shall discuss briefly in a later chapter, evoked a violent protest on the part of Metropolitan Arseni of Rostov, who did not stop short of excommunicating those connected with the new policy. Fortunately for the empress, other hierarchs failed to support Metropolitan Arseni, and, after two trials, the empress had him defrocked and imprisoned for life.

Gradually Catherine II consolidated her position. She distributed honors and rewards on a large scale, in particular state lands with peasants, who thus became serfs. She traveled widely all over Russia, reviving Peter the Great’s practice, both to learn more about the country and to win popularity. She selected her advisers carefully and well. Time itself worked for the empress: with the passage of years memories of the coup of 1762 faded, and the very fact that Catherine II continued to occupy the throne gave the reign a certain legitimacy. In late 1766 she felt ready to introduce into Russia important changes based on the precepts of the Enlightenment, and for that purpose she called the Legislative Commission.

The aim of the Commission was to codify laws, a task last accomplished in 1649, before the Westernization of the country. Moreover, Catherine the Great believed that the work of the Commission would go a long way toward rationalizing and modernizing Russian law and life. Although the empress had certainly no desire to grant her subjects a constitution, and although her propaganda greatly exaggerated the radical nature of her intentions, the Nakaz, or Instruction, which she prepared for the Legislative Commission, was in fact, even in its final attainted version, a strikingly liberal document. Composed by Catherine the Great herself over a period of eighteen months, the Instruction found its inspiration in the thought of the Enlightenment, particularly in the writings of Montesquieu and the jurist Boccardia. Montesquieu, whose Spirit of the Laws the empress referred to as her prayer book, served as the chief guide in political theory. Yet it should be noted that the willful sovereign adapted rather than copied the French philosopher: she paid lip service to his ideas, but either left them conveniently vague or changed them drastically in application to Russian reality; for example, Montesquieu’s celebrated admiration of the division of powers in England into the executive, the legislative, and the judicial became an administrative arrangement meant to improve the functioning of Russian autocracy. The empress continued to believe that autocracy was the only feasible form of government for holding enormous Russia together. And in fairness it should be added that here, too, she had some support in the thought of the Enlightenment. Serfdom, on the other hand, she was willing to condemn in theory, although again she largely avoided the issue: the final draft of the Instruction contained merely a pious wish that masters would not abuse their serfs. As to the influence of Becardia, Catherine the Great could afford to follow his views more closely, as they were expressed in his treatise Crimes and Punishments, and she did. Thus the Instruction denounced capital punishment—which had already been stopped in Russia by Elizabeth—as well as torture, argued for crime prevention, and in general was abreast of advanced Western thought in criminology. On the whole, the liberalism of the Instruction produced a strong impression in a number of European countries, and led to its being banned in France.

The Legislative Commission, which opened deliberations in the summer of 1767, consisted of 564 deputies, 28 appointed and 536 elected. The appointees represented the state institutions, such as the Senate. The elected deputies comprised delegates from different segments of the population of the empire: 161 from the landed gentry, 208 from the townspeople, 79 from the state peasants, and 88 from the cossacks and national minorities. Yet this numerous gathering—an “all-Russian ethnographic exhibition,” to quote Kluchevsky—excluded large bodies of the Russian people: the serfs, obviously, but also, in line with the secular tendency of the Enlightenment, the clerical class, although the Holy Synod was represented by a single appointed deputy. Delegates received written instructions or mandates from their electorates, including the state peasants, who, together with the cossacks and national minorities, supplied over a thousand such sets of instructions. Taken together, the instructions of 1767 offer the historian insight into the Russian society of the second half of the eighteenth century comparable to that obtainable for France in the famous cahiers of 1789. Klotsvoter and other scholars have emphasized the following well-nigh universal characteristics of the instructions: a practical character; a definite acceptance of the existing regime; a desire for decentralization; complaints of unbearable financial demands and, in particular, requests to lower the taxes; and a wish to delineate clearly the rights and the obligations of all the classes of society.

The Legislative Commission met for a year and a half, holding 203 sessions; in addition, special committees were set up to prepare the ground for dealing with particular issues. But all this effort came to naught. The commission proved unbearably, not enough preliminary work had been done, often there seemed to be little connection between the French philosophy of the emperor’s Instruction and Russian reality. Most important, however, the members of the commission split along class lines. For example, gentry delegates argued with merchant representatives over serf ownership and rights to engage in trade and industry. More ominously, gentry deputies clashed with those of the peasant class on the crucial issue of serfdom. No doubt Catherine the Great quickly realized the potential
danger of such confrontations. The outbreak of war against Turkey in 1768 provided a good occasion for disbANDING the Legislative Commission. Some committees continued to meet for several more years until the Pugachev rebellion, but again without producing any practical results. Still, the abortive convocation of the Commission served some purpose: it gave Catherine the Great considerable information about the country and influenced both the general course of her subsequent policy and certain particular reforms.

Pugachev's Rebellion

Social antagonisms which simmered in the Legislative Commission exploded in the Pugachev rebellion. That great uprising followed the pattern of earlier lower-class insurrections, such as the ones led by Bolotnikov, Razin, and Bolshin, which strove to destroy the established order. A simple Don cossack, a veteran of several wars and a deserter, Emelian Pugachev capitalized on the grievances of the Ural cossacks to lead them in revolt against the authorities in the autumn of 1773. Before long the movement spread up and down the Ural river and also westward to the Volga basin. At its height the rebellion encompassed a huge territory in eastern European Russia, engulfing such important cities as Kazan and posing a threat to Moscow itself.

Pugachev profited from the fact that Russia was engaged at the time in a major war against Turkey, that few troops were stationed in the eastern part of the country, and that many local officials, as well as, to some extent, the central government itself, panicked when they belatedly realized the immediacy and extent of the danger. Yet his most important advantages stemmed from the nature and the injustice of the Russian social system. The local uprising of the Ural cossacks became a mass rebellion. Crowds of serfs, workers in the Ural mines and factories, Old Believers, Bashkirs, Tartars, and certain other minority peoples, joined Pugachev's original cossack following. Indeed, some specialists believe that Pugachev should have shown more daring and marched directly on Moscow in the heart of the serf area. As Pushkin's A Captain's Daughter illustrates, few, except officials, officers, and landlords, tried to stem the tide.

Pugachev acted in the grand manner. He proclaimed himself Emperor Peter III, alleging that he had fortunately escaped the plot of his wife Catherine; and he established a kind of imperial court in imitation of the one in St. Petersburg. He announced the extermination of officials and landlords, and freedom from serfdom, taxation, and military service for the people. Pugachev and his followers organized an active chancery and engaged in systematic propaganda. Also, the leaders of the rebellion arranged elections for a new administration in the territory that they held, and they tried to form a semblance of a regular army with a central staff and an artillery, for which Ural metal workers supplied some of the guns. Although the extent and organization of the Pugachev uprising deservedly attract attention, it still suffered from the usual defects of such movements: a lack of preparation, co-ordination, and leadership. Small army detachments, when well commanded, could defeat peasant hordes. After government victories and severe reprisals, the raging sea of rebellion would vanish almost as rapidly as it had appeared. In late 1774, following the defeat of his troops and his escape back to the Ural area, Pugachev was handed over by his own men to the government forces. He was brought to Moscow, tried, and executed in an especially cruel manner.

The great uprising had run its course.

The Pugachev rebellion served to point out again, forcefully and tragically, the chasm between French philosophy and Russian reality. Catherine the Great had in any case allied herself with the gentry from the time of the palace coup which gave her the throne, and it is highly doubtful that she had ever seriously intended to act against any essential interests of the landlords. The sharp division of her reign into the early liberal years and a later period of conservatism and reaction appears none too convincing. Still, the enormous shock of the revolt, following the milder one of the collapse of the work of the Legislative Commission because of social antagonisms, made the alliance between the crown and the gentry very close, explicit, and even militant. In the conditions of eighteenth-century Russia and as a logical result of the policies followed by the Russian government, the two had to sink or swim together. Yet Catherine the Great was too intelligent to become simply a reactionary. She intended instead to combine oppression and coercion with a measure of reform and a great deal of propaganda.

Reforms. The Gentry and the Serfs

The new system of local government introduced by Catherine the Great in 1775 was closely related to the Pugachev rebellion, although it also represented an attempt to bolster this perennially weak aspect of the administration and organization of Russia. Frightened by the collapse of authority at the time of the revolt, the empress meant to strengthen government in the provinces by means of decentralization, a clear distribution of powers and functions, and local gentry participation. She divided 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 gubernii — "governments" or "provinces" — was subdivided into some ten uyezdi, or districts. Every province contained about 300,000 inhabitants and every district about 30,000, while historical and regional
considerations were completely disregarded in the drawing of the boundaries.

An appointed governor at the head of the administration of each province was assisted by a complicated network of institutions and officials. Catherine the Great tried — not too successfully — to separate the legislative, executive, and judicial functions, without, of course, impairing her autocracy or ultimate control from St. Petersburg. Local gentry participated in local administration, and were urged to display initiative and energy in supporting the new system. The judicial branch too was organized, quite explicitly, on a class basis, with different courts and procedures for different estates. Catherine the Great's reform of local government was apparently influenced by the example of England, more particularly by Blackstone's views on the matter, and also by the example of the Baltic provinces. The arrangement that she introduced lasted until the fundamental reform of 1864.

Catherine the Great's scheme of local government fitted well into her program of cooperating with and strengthening the landlords. Other measures contributing to the same purpose included the granting of corporate representation and other privileges to the gentry. The incorporation of the gentry began in earnest with the formation of district gentry societies in 1766–67, developed further through the legislation of 1775 concerning local government, and reached its full development in the Charter to the Nobility of 1785. The Charter represented the high-water mark of the position and privileges of the Russian gentry. It recognized the gentry of each district and province as a legal body headed by an elected district or provincial Marshal of the Nobility. The incorporated gentry of a province could petition the monarch directly in connection with issues which aroused its concern, a right denied the rest of the population. Moreover, the Charter confirmed the earlier privileges and exemptions of the landlords and added certain new ones to give them a most advantageous and distinguished status. Members of the gentry remained free from obligations of personal service and taxation, and they became exempt from corporal punishment. They could lose their gentry standing, estates, or life only by court decision. The property rights of the landlords reached a new high; members of the gentry were recognized as full owners of their estates, without any restriction on the sale or exploitation of land, forests, or mineral resources; in case of forfeiture for crime, an estate remained within the family. Indeed some scholars speak — exaggeratedly to be sure — of Catherine the Great's introducing the modern concept of private property into Russia. Also in 1785, the empress granted a largely ineffective charter to towns which provided for a quite limited city government controlled by rich merchants.

As earlier, a rise in the position of the gentry meant an extension and strengthening of serfdom, a development which characterized Catherine the Great's entire reign. Serfdom spread to new areas, and in particular to Ukraine. Although Catherine's government in essence confirmed an already existing system in Ukraine, it does bear the responsibility for helping to legalize serfdom in Ukraine and for, so to speak, standardizing that evil throughout the empire. A series of laws, fiscal in nature, issued in 1763–83, 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 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 of 1762. The total number of peasants who thus became serfs has been variously estimated, but it was in the order of several hundred thousand working males — the usual way of counting peasants in imperial Russia — and well over a million persons. The census of 1794–96 indicated this growth of serfdom, with the serfs constituting 53.1% of all peasants and 49% of the entire population of the country. As to the power of the masters over their serfs, little could be added, but the government nevertheless tried its best: it became easier for the landlords to sentence their peasants to hard labor in Siberia, and they were empowered to fetch the peasants 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. Catherine the Great also instituted firmer control over the cossacks, abolishing the famed Sech on the Dniester in 1775 and limiting the autonomy of the Don and the Ural "huts." Some of the Dniester cossacks were transferred to the Kuban river to establish a cossack force in the plain north of the Caucasian mountains.

Other government measures relating to land and people included a huge survey of boundaries and titles — an important step in legalizing and confirming landholdings — the above-mentioned final secularization of vast Church estates with some two million peasants who became subject to the so-called College of Economy, and a program of colonization. Colonists were sought abroad, often on very generous conditions and at great cost, to populate territories newly won from Turkey and other areas, because serfdom and government regulations drastically restricted the mobility of the Russian people. Elizabeth had already established Serbian communities in Russia. Catherine the Great sponsored many more colonies of foreigners, especially of Germans along the Volga and in southern Russia.

Catherine II's efforts to promote the development of industry, trade, and also education and culture in Russia will be treated in appropriate chapters. Briefly, in economic life the empress turned in certain respects from rigid mercantilism to the newly popular ideas of free enterprise and trade. In culture she cut a broad swath. A friend of the philosophers, one
who corresponded with Voltaire and arranged for Diderot to visit Russia—unprofitably, as it turned out—a writer and critic in her own right, and a determined intellectual, Catherine the Great had plans and projects for everything, from general education to satirical reviews. Indeed, she considered it her main mission to civilize Russia. For this reason, too, she 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 instruments. And, again in the interests of civilization, the empress pioneered in introducing some feeble measures to help the underprivileged, for example, widows and orphans.

Foreign Affairs: Introductory Remarks

In spite of her preoccupation with internal affairs, Catherine the Great paid unflagging attention to foreign policy. Success and glory could be attained by diplomacy as well as by enlightened reform at home. In war perhaps even more than in peace. Assisted by such statesmen as Nikita Panin and Potemkin and such generals as Rumiantsev and Suvorov, the empress scored triumph after triumph on the international stage, resulting in a major extension of the boundaries of the empire, the addition of millions of subjects, and Russia’s rise to a new importance and eminence in Europe. However, Catherine the Great’s foreign policy was by no means a novel departure. New ideas did appear; for example, Panin’s early doctrine of a northern accord or alliance of all leading northern European states to counterbalance Austria, France, and Spain; and Potemkin’s celebrated “Greek project,” which we shall discuss in its proper place. But, in fact, these ideas proved ephemeral, and Russia continued on her old course. As Russian historians like to put it, Peter the Great had solved one of the three fundamental problems of Russian foreign relations: the Swedish. Catherine the Great settled the other two: the Turkish and the Polish. In addition to these key issues, the famous empress dealt with many other questions, ranging from another Swedish war to the League of Armed Neutrality and the need to face the shocking reality of the French Revolution.

In foreign affairs, important events of the reign clustered in two brief segments of time. The years 1768–74 witnessed the First Turkish War, together with the first partition of Poland in 1772. Between 1787 and 1795 Russia participated in the Second Turkish War, 1787–92, a war against Sweden, 1788–90, and the second and third partitions of Poland, 1793 and 1795. It was also during that time, of course, that Catherine the Great became increasingly hostile to the French Revolution. Fortunately for the empress, Great Britain was immersed in a conflict with its North American colonies during the latter part of the First Turkish War, while during the second crucial sequence of years all powers had to shift their attention to revolutionary France.

Russia and Turkey

In their struggle against Turkey the Russians aimed to reach the Black Sea and thus attain what could be considered their natural southern boundary as well as recover fertile lands lost to Asiatic invaders since the days of the Kievan state. The Crimean Tartars, successors to the Golden Horde in that area, had recognized the suzerainty of the Sultan of Turkey. In pushing south Catherine the Great followed the time-honored example of Moscovite tsars and such imperial predecessors as Peter the Great and Anne. The First Turkish War, 1768–74, was fought both on land and, more unusual for Russia, on sea. A Russian army commanded by Rumiantsev advanced into Bessarabia and the Balkans, scoring impressive victories over large Turkish forces and appealing to the Christians to rise against their masters; another Russian army invaded and eventually captured the Crimea. A Russian fleet under Alexis Orlov sailed from the Baltic to Turkish waters and sank the Ottoman navy in the Bay of Chesme on July 6, 1770; however, it did not dare to try to force the Straits. After Alexis Orlov’s expedition Russia maintained for a considerable period of time a direct interest in the Mediterranean—witness Paul’s efforts at the end of the century to gain Malta and the Ionian islands—and gave up its attempt to obtain a permanent foothold there only in the reign of Alexander I, under British pressure. In spite of the fact that the Russian drive into the Balkans had bogged down, Turkey was ready in the summer of 1774 to make peace.

By the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji, Russia received the strategic points of Kinburn, Yenikale and Kerch in and near the Crimea as well as part of the Black Sea coast, west and east of the peninsula, reaching almost to the foot of the Caucasian range and including Azov. The Crimean Tartars were proclaimed independent, although they recognized the sultan as caliph, that is, the religious leader of Islam. Russia obtained the right of free commercial navigation in Turkish waters, including permission to send merchantmen through the Straits. Moldavia and Wallachia were returned to Turkey, but they were to be leniently ruled, and Russia reserved the prerogative to intervene on their behalf. Also, Russia acquired the right to build an Orthodox church in Constantinople, while the Turks promised to protect Christian churches and to accept Russian representations in behalf of the new church to be built in the capital. The provisions of the treaty relating to Christians and Christian worship became the basis of many subsequent Russian claims in regard to Turkey.
Although the First Turkish War in Catherine the Great’s reign marked the first decisive defeat of Turkey by Russia and although the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji reflected the Russian victory, Russian aims had received only partial satisfaction. Some of the northern littoral of the Black Sea remained Turkish, while the Crimea became independent. From the Ottoman point of view, the war was a disaster which could only be remedied by exactation of revenge and by restoration of Turkey’s former position by force of arms. The unstable political situation in the Crimea added to the tension. In 1783 Russia moved in to annex the Crimea, causing many Crimean Tatars to flee to the sultan’s domain. By 1785 Russia had built a sizable fleet in the Black Sea, with its main base in Sevastopol. At the same time Potemkin made a great effort to populate and develop the newly-won southern lands. The display which Potemkin put up for Catherine the Great, Emperor Joseph II of Austria, and the Polish king Stanisław Poniatowski when they visited the area in early 1787 gave rise to the expression “Potemkin villages,” i.e., pieces of stage décor which passed at a distance for real buildings and communities. Actually, without minimizing Potemkin’s showmanship, recent studies by Solovyevich and others indicate that progress in southern Russia had proved to be real enough.

At that time Potemkin and Catherine the Great nursed very far-reaching aims which came to be known as “the Greek project.” Roughly speaking, the project involved conquering the Ottomans, or at least their European possessions, and establishing — re-establishing the sponsors of the project insisted — a great Christian empire centered on Constantinople. Catherine the Great had her second grandson named Constantine, entrusted him to a Greek nurse, and ordered medals struck with a reproduction of St. Sophia. Austria finally agreed to allow the project after receiving assurance that the new empire would be entirely separate from Russia and after an offer of compensations in the Balkans and other advantages. Yet, like many other overly ambitious schemes, the Greek project proved to be ephemeral. Neither it nor its chief promoter Potemkin survived the Second Turkish War.

Turkey declared war on Russia in 1787 after the Russians rejected an ultimatum demanding that they evacuate the Crimea and the northern Black Sea littoral. The Porte enjoyed the sympathy of several major European powers, especially Great Britain which almost entered the war in 1791, and before long Sweden gave active support by attacking Russia. Catherine the Great had Austria as her military ally. The Second Turkish War, 1787–92, was confined to land action. Russian troops led by Suworov scored a series of brilliant victories over Turkish forces, notably in 1790 when Suworov stormed and won the supposedly impregnable fortress of Ismail. Incidentally, it was Michael Kutuzov, the hero of 1812, who first broke into Ismail. At the end of the war, Suworov was marching on Constantineople. By the Treaty of Jassy, signed on January 9, 1792, Russia gained the fortress of Ochakov and the Black Sea shore up to the Dniester River, while Turkey recognized Russian annexation of the Crimea. Russia had reached what appeared to be her natural boundaries in the south; the Turkish problem could be considered essentially solved.

The Partitioning of Poland

Catherine the Great’s Polish policy turned out to be as impressive as her relations with Turkey. In a sense the partitioning of Poland, an important European state, represented a greater tour de force than the capture of a huge segment of a largely uninhabited steppe from the Ottomans. But, whereas the settlement with Turkey proved definitive and, as many scholars have insisted, logical and natural, the same could not be asserted by any stretch of the imagination in the case of Poland. Indeed, the partitioning of that country left Russia and Europe with a constant source of pain and conflict.

It has often been said, and with some reason, that Poland was ready for partitioning in the second half of the eighteenth century. Decentralization and weakening of central power in that country rapidly gathered momentum from about the middle of the seventeenth century. Elected kings proved increasingly unable to control their unruly subjects. The only other seat of central authority, the sejm, or diet, failed almost entirely to function. Composed of instructed delegates from provincial diets, the sejm in its procedure resembled a diplomatic congress more than a national legislature. The objection of a single deputy, the notorious liberum veto, would defeat a given measure and, in addition, dissolve the sejm and abrogate all legislation which it had passed prior to the dissolution. Between 1652 and 1674, for example, forty-eight of the fifty-five diets were so dissolved, almost one-third of them by the veto of a single deputy. The only traditional recourse when the sejm was dissolved consisted in proclaiming a confession, that is, a gathering of the adherents of a given position; a confession could no longer be obstructed by a liberum veto, and it tried to impose its views by force. The Polish political system has been described as “anarchy tempered by civil war.”

The weakness of the Polish government acquired additional significance because that government had to face many grave problems. The Polish king ruled over Poles, Lithuanians, White Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews, not to mention smaller ethnic groups, over Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and subjects of Hebrew faith. He had to contend with an extremely strong and independent gentry, which, composing some eight per cent of the population, arrogated to itself all “Polish liberties,” while keeping the bulk of the people, the peasants, in the worst condition of serfdom imaginable.
And he had to deal with powerful and greedy neighbors who surrounded Poland on three sides.

The last point deserves emphasis, because, after all, Poland did not partition itself: it was divided by three mighty aggressors. In fact, in the eighteenth century, Polish society experienced an intellectual and cultural revival which began to spread to politics. Given time, Poland might well have successfully reformed itself. But its neighbors were determined that it would not have the time. It was the misfortune of Poland that precisely when its political future began to look more promising, Catherine the Great finally agreed to a plan of partition of the kind which Prussia and Austria had been advancing from the days of Peter the Great.

The last king of Poland — and Catherine the Great’s former lover — Stanislaw Poniatowski, who reigned from 1764 to 1795, tried to introduce certain reforms but failed to obtain firm support from Russia and Prussia, which countries had agreed in 1764 to co-operate in Polish affairs. In 1766–68 the allies reopened the issue of the dissidents, that is, the Orthodox and the Protestants, and forced the Polish government to grant them equal rights with the Catholics. That concession in turn led to violent protest within Poland, the formation of the Confederation of Bar, and civil war, with France lending some support to the Confederation, and Turkey even using the pretext of defending “Polish liberties” to declare war on Russia. Eventually Russian troops subdued the Confederates, and the first partition of Poland came in 1772.

That unusual attempt to solve the Polish problem stemmed in large part from complicated considerations of power politics: Russia had been so successful in the Turkish War that Austria was alarmed for its position; Frederick the Great of Prussia proposed the partition of a part of Poland as a way to satisfy Catherine the Great’s expansionist ambitions and at the same time to provide compensation for Austria — which in effect had taken the initiative in 1769 by seizing and “re-incorporating” certain Polish border areas — as well as to obtain for Prussia certain long-coveted Polish lands which separated Prussian dominions. By the first partition of Poland Russia obtained White Russian and Latvian Lithuania to the Dvina and the Dnieper rivers with some 1,300,000 inhabitants; Austria received so-called Galicia, consisting of Red Russia, with the city of Lemberg, or Lvov, of a part of western Podolia, and of southern Little Poland, with a total population of 2,650,000; Prussia took the so-called Royal, or Polish, Prussia, except Danzig and Thorn. Although moderate in size and containing only 580,000 people, the Prussian acquisition represented the most valuable gain of the three from the political, military, and financial points of view. In all, Poland lost about one-third of her territory and more than a third of her population.

This disaster spurred the Poles finally to enact basic reforms. Changes began in 1773 and culminated in the activities of the celebrated Four Years’ Diet of 1788–92 and in the constitution of May 3, 1791. The monarchy was to become hereditary, and the king obtained effective executive power; legislative authority was vested in a two-chamber diet with the lower chamber in a dominant position; the liberum veto disappeared in favor of majority rule; the diet included representatives of the middle class;
a cabinet of ministers, organized along modern lines, was created and made responsible to the diet. The Polish reform party profited from the benevolent attitude of Prussia, which hoped apparently to obtain further concessions from new Poland; Russia and Austria were again preoccupied with a Turkish war. But the May constitution brought matters to a head. While Prussia and Austria accepted it, Russia instigated the organization of the Confederation of Targowica in defense of the old order in May 1792. When the Russian army entered Poland on the invitation of the Confederation, the Prussians reversed themselves and joined the invaders. The second partition of Poland followed in January 1793. This time Russia took more of Lithuania and most of the western Ukraine with a total of 3,000,000 inhabitants; Prussia seized Danzig, Thorn, and Great Poland with a combined population of 1,000,000; Austria did not participate. In addition, Russia obtained the right to move its troops into what remained of Poland and control its foreign policy.

The Poles responded in March 1794 with a great national uprising led by Thaddeus Kosciusko. But, in spite of their courage, their fight was hopeless. The Poles were crushed by the Russians, commanded by Suvorov, and the Prussians. Austria rejoined her allies to carry out the third partition of Poland in October 1795. By its provisions, Russia acquired the remainder of Lithuania and Ukraine, with 1,200,000 inhabitants, as well as the Duchy of Courland, where Russian influence had predominated from the time of Empress Anna; Prussia took Mazovia, including Warsaw, with 1,000,000 people; Austria appropriated the rest of Little Poland, with Cracow, and another 1,500,000 inhabitants. Poland ceased to exist as an independent state.

The partitioning of Poland brought tragedy to the Poles. Its impact on the successful aggressors is more difficult to assess. As Lord and other historians have shown in detail, Prussia, Russia, and Austria scored a remarkable, virtually unprecedented, diplomatic and military coup. They dismembered and totally destroyed a large European state, eliminating an old enemy, rival, and source of conflicts, while at the same time adding greatly to their own lands, resources, and populations. Eastern Europe fell under their complete control, with France deprived of her old ally. Significantly, after the division of Poland, the three east European monarchies for a long time co-operated closely on the international scene—partners in crime, if you will. Yet, even some of the philosophes praised at least the first partition of Poland, calling it “a triumph of rationality.” But the Poles thought differently and never accepted the dismemberment. As a result, Poland, Polish rights, and Polish boundaries remained an unresolved problem, or series of problems, for Europe and the world. For imperial Russia, the partitioning of Poland resulted in, among other things, the Polish support of Napoleon in 1812 and the great rebellions of 1831 and 1863.

Russian scholars like to emphasize that the Russian case contrasted sharply with those of Prussia and Austria: in the three partitions of Poland Russia took old Russian lands, once part of the Kievan state, populated principally by Orthodox Ukrainians and White Russians, whereas the two German powers grabbed ethnically and historically Polish territory; the Russians, therefore, came as liberators, the Prussians and the Austrians as oppressors. If Catherine the Great deserved blame, it was not for her own acquisitions, but for allowing Prussia and Austria to expand at the expense of the Poles. Much can be said for this point of view, for it states the facts of the dismemberment correctly; yet at least two caveats seem in order. The brutal Russian policy toward Poland had to allow for the interests of other aggressors and indeed led to further repartitioning, with Warsaw and the very heart of the divided country linked to Russia in 1815. Also, Catherine the Great herself cared little about the faith or the ethnic origins of her new subjects. She thought simply in terms of power politics, position, and prestige—everything to the greater glory of Russia, and of course, to her own greater glory. After suppressing the Confederation of Bar, Russian troops also suppressed a desperate uprising of Ukrainian peasants against their Polish and Polonized landlords. These landlords continued to dominate and exploit the masses quite as effectively after the partitions as before them. In fact, some Ukrainian historians have complained that the oppression increased, because the strong Russian government maintained law and order more successfully than had the weak Polish authorities.

Foreign Policy: Certain Other Matters

Catherine the Great's foreign policy encompassed a wide range of activities and interests in addition to the relations with Turkey and Poland. Important developments included the Russian role in the League of Armed Neutrality, a war against Sweden, and the empress's reaction to the French Revolution. Russia advanced the doctrine of armed neutrality at sea in 1780 to protect the commerce of non-combatant states against arbitrary actions of the British who were engaged in a struggle with their American colonies. Several other European countries supported Russian proposals which eventually became part of international maritime law. Russia and her partners in the League insisted that neutral ships could pass freely from port to port and along the coast to combatants, that enemy goods in neutral ships, except contraband, were not subject to seizure, and that to be legal a blockade had to be enforced, rather than merely proclaimed.
Swedish armies were engaged in fighting Turkey. The Swedes repeatedly threatened St. Petersburg; however, the war proved inconclusive. The Treaty of Werliah signed in August 1790, merely confirmed the pre-war boundary. Denmark, allied with Russia, participated in the hostilities against Sweden.

The French Revolution made a strong impression on Catherine the Great. At first she tried to minimize the import of the events in France and to dissociate them from the main course of European history and the Enlightenment. But, as the Revolution became more radical, the empress reacted with bitterness and hostility. At home she turned against critical intellectuals and indeed against much of the cultural climate that she herself had driven so hard to create. In respect to revolutionary France, she became more and more antagonistic and broke off relations in 1793 after the execution of Louis XVI. Of course, she also used the confusion and disarrangement produced in Europe by the French Revolution to carry out the second and third partitions of Poland without interference. Some historians believe that only the empress’s sudden death prevented her from joining a military coalition against France.

Evaluations of Catherine the Great

Much has been written for and against Catherine the Great. The sovereign’s admirers have included many intellectuals, from eighteenth-century philosophes led by Voltaire to Sidney Hook, who not long ago proclaimed her an outstanding example of the hero who makes history. The empress has received praise from numerous historians, in particular specialists in the cultural development, foreign relations, and expansion of Russia, including such judicious scholars as B. Nolde and Isabel de Madariaga. A few, for instance V. Leonovitch, also commended her policy toward the gentry, in which they saw the indispensable first step in the direction of liberalism—rights, privileges, and advantages had to be acquired first by the top social group, and only after that could they percolate downward.

The critics of Catherine the Great, who have included many pre-revolutionary Russian historians as well as the Soviet scholars as a group, have concentrated overwhelmingly on the empress’s social policy and the social conditions during her reign. Above all, they have castigated the reign as the zenith of serfdom in Russia. For this reason many of them would deny that Catherine II, in spite of her display and championing of culture, was an enlightened despot in the sense in which this term would apply to Emperor Joseph II of Austria, who did care for the masses. Even though very few social historians have ascribed personally to the empress a fundamental influence on the evolution of Russian society, they have been repelled by the contrast between her professedly progressive views and her support of serfdom, as well as by the ease and thoroughness of her accommodation to that great evil. Her immediate successors, Paul and Alexander I, showed different attitudes.

But whatever judgment we make of the empress—and it should be clear that the views mentioned above rarely clash directly, covering as they do different aspects of Catherine the Great’s activity—we must recognize the importance of her reign. In foreign policy, with the acquisition of southern Russia and the partitioning of Poland; in internal affairs, with the development of serfdom and of the gentry position and privileges; and in culture, with striking progress in Westernization, the time of Catherine the Great marked a culmination of earlier trends and set the stage for Russian history in the nineteenth century. But before we turn to Russia in the nineteenth century, we have to consider the reign of Paul and some broad aspects of the evolution of Russia from Peter the Great to Alexander I.

The Reign of Paul

Emperor Paul was forty-two years old when he ascended the throne. In the course of the decades during which his mother had kept him away from power, he came to hate her, her favorites, her advisers, and everything she stood for. Reversing Catherine the Great’s decisions and undoing her work was, therefore, one salient trait of Paul’s brief reign, 1796–1801. Another stemmed directly from his character and can best be described as petty tyranny. Highly suspicious, irritable, and given to frequent outbreaks of rage, the emperor promoted and demoted his assistants with dazzling rapidity and often for no apparent reason. He changed the drill and the uniforms of the Russian army, himself entering into the minutest details; imperial military reviews inspired terror in the participants. Paul generously freed from prison and exile those punished by Catherine the Great, including liberal and radical intellectuals and leaders of the Polish rebellion such as Kosciuszko. But their places were quickly taken by others who had in some manner displeased the sovereign, and the number of the victims kept mounting. Above all, the emperor insisted on his autocratic power and majesty even in small things like dancing at a palace festival and saluting. As Paul reportedly informed the French ambassador, the only important person in Russia was the one speaking to the emperor, and only while he was so speaking. With the same concept of the majesty of the Russian monarchy in mind, and also reacting, no doubt, to his own long and painful wait for the crown, Paul changed the law of succession to the Russian throne at the time of his coronation in 1797: primogeniture
in the male line replaced Peter the Great's provision of free selection by the reigning monarch. Russia finally acquired a strictly legal and stable system of succession to the throne.

The emperor's views and attitudes found reflection in his treatment of the crucial problem of serfdom and the gentry. On the one hand Paul continued Catherine the Great's support and promotion of serfdom by spreading it to extreme southern Russia, so-called New Russia, in 1797, and by distributing state lands and peasants to his favorites at an even faster rate than had his mother. Also, he harshly suppressed all peasant disturbances and tolerated no disobedience or protest on the part of the lower classes. Yet, on the other hand, Paul did not share his mother's confidence in and liking for the gentry. For this reason he tried for the first time to regulate and limit the obligations of the serfs to their masters by proclaiming in 1797 that they should work three days a week for their landlords and three days for themselves, with Sunday sanctified as a day of rest. Although Paul's new law was not, and possibly could not be, enforced, it did represent a turning point in the attitude of the Russian government toward serfdom. From that time on limitation and, eventually, abolition of serfdom became real issues of state policy. The emperor gave further expression to his displeasure with the gentry through such measures as the restoration of corporal punishment for members of that class as well as for the townspeople, and through increased reliance on the bureaucracy in preference to the gentry in local self-government and in general administration.

It was in the field of foreign policy and especially of war that Paul's reign left its most lasting memory. Just before her death, Catherine the Great had come close to joining an anti-French coalition. Paul began with a declaration of the Russian desire for peace, but before long he too, provoked by French victories and certain mistakes of tact on the part of France, turned to the enemies of the revolutionary government. Russia entered the war against France as a member of the so-called Second Coalition, organized in large measure by Paul and composed of Russia, Great Britain, Austria, Naples, Portugal, and Turkey. In the campaigns that followed, a Russian fleet under the command of Theodore Ushakov sailed through the Straits, seized the Ionian Islands from the French, and established there a Russian-controlled republic under the protectorate of Turkey. Russian influence extended even further west in the Mediterranean, for Paul had accepted his election as the grand master of the Knights of Malta and thus ruler of that strategic island.

The main theater of operations, however, remained on land. Russian troops joined allied armies in the Low Countries and in Switzerland, but their most effective intervention took place in northern Italy. There a force of 18,000 Russians and 44,000 Austrians led by Suworov drove out the French in the course of five months in 1798-99, winning three major battles and about a dozen lesser engagements and capturing some 25 fortresses and approximately 80,000 prisoners. Suworov wanted to invade France. Instead, because of defeats on other fronts and the change of plans in the allied high command, he had to retreat in 1799-1800 to southern Germany through the Swiss Alps held by a French force. His successfully managing the retreat has been considered one of the great feats of military history. On the whole, Suworov, who died very shortly after the Swiss campaign at the age of seventy, is regarded as the ablest military commander Russia ever produced — and this is a high honor. The qualities of this eccentric and unpredictable general included heavy reliance on speed and thrust and remarkable psychological rapport with his soldiers.

Disgusted with Austria and also with Great Britain, which failed to support Russian troops adequately in the Netherlands, Paul abandoned the coalition. In fact, in 1800 he switched sides and joined France, considering the rise of Napoleon to be a guarantee of stability and the end of the revolution. The new alignment pitted Russia against Great Britain. Having lost Malta to the British, Paul, in a fantastic move, sent the Don cossacks to invade distant India over unmapped territory. The emperor's death interfered at this point, and Alexander I promptly recalled the cossacks.

Paul was killed in a palace revolution in March 1801. His rudeness, violent temper, and unpredictable behavior helped the conspiracy to grow even among the emperor's most trusted associates and indeed within his family. His preference for the troops trained at his own estate of Gatchina antagonized, and seemed to threaten, the guards. The emperor's turning against Great Britain produced new enemies. Count Peter Pahlen, the military governor of St. Petersburg, took an active part in the plot, whereas Grand Duke Alexander, Paul's son and heir, apparently assented to it. It remains uncertain whether murder entered into the plans of the conspirators — Alexander, it seems, had not expected it — or whether it occurred by accident.