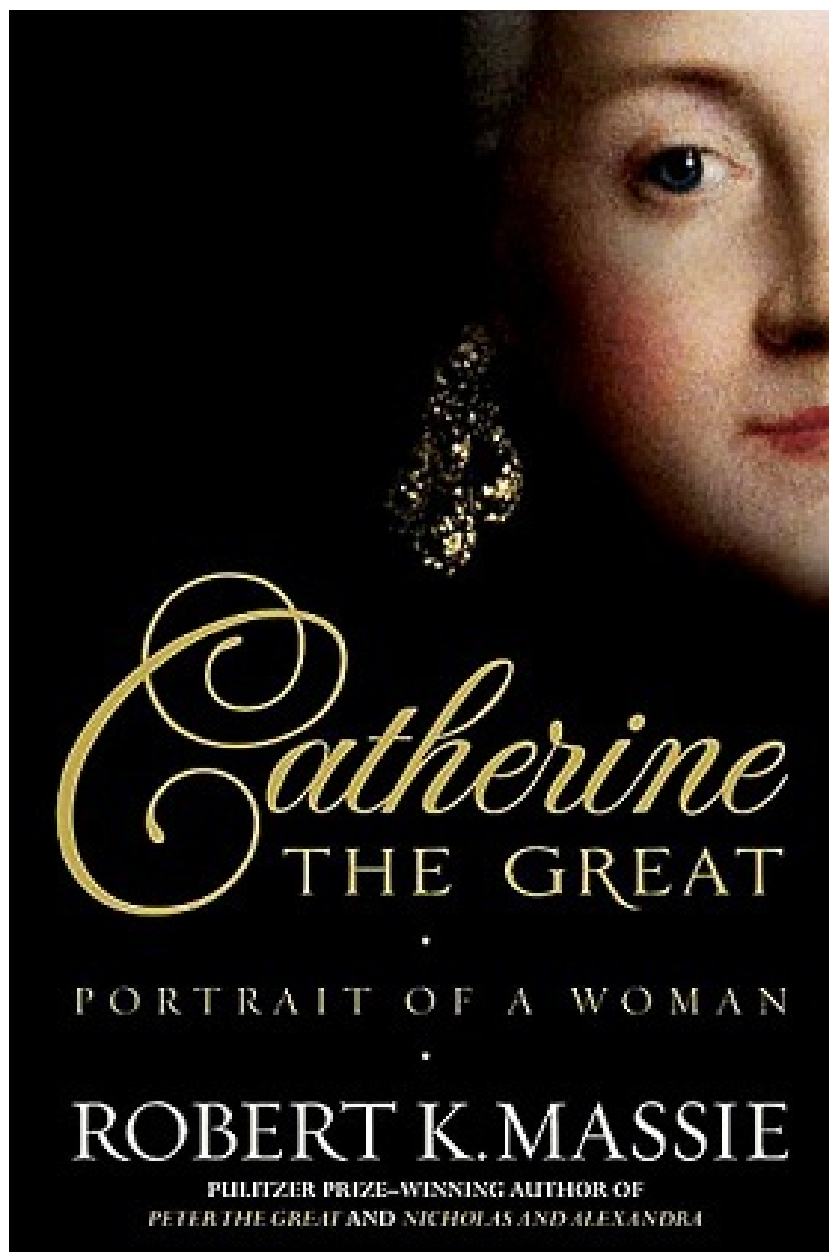


Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman Book PDF Download



By:
Robert K. Massie

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What people Say:

Grace Tjan

First things first: that wasn't my

name. The Empress Elizabeth, who was Peter the Great's daughter (now, that is a man who truly deserves "the Great" after his name!), changed my name to Ekaterina when she converted me into the Russian Orthodox religion. As for that superfluous title that follows my new name, it was prematurely bestowed on me by the Legislative Commission that I convened to give Russia a more enlightened legal code (more on this later)

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My real name is Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg. Yes --- I was a German import. Many Romanov royals, including my future husband Tsar Peter III, are actually

, specifically Prussians. This caused some awkwardness later when we went to war against Prussia in my reign --- but that was still far in the future. Papa was the ruler of the Anhalt-Zerbst principality. Some people would call him a minor aristocrat, but he was still a prince,

? Mama was formerly a princess of the house of Holstein-Gottorp (yes, that's where those lovely cows come from), whose late brother was affianced to the young Empress Elizabeth. He died of smallpox before the wedding, but Elizabeth never forgot him, and when it was time to look for a spouse for the Tsarevich, she naturally turned toward his family.

I was all of 14 years old when Elizabeth summoned Mama and me to Russia to marry Peter III. I was just a tiny slip of a girl then! The entirety of my trousseau consisted of three old dresses, a dozen chemises, a few pair of stockings and a few handkerchiefs. You see, Mama had spent all of the money that the empress sent for me on her own wardrobe. That's Mama for you. Soon after my wedding, Elizabeth unceremoniously sent her back home for being a meddling mother-in-law and a clumsy Prussian secret agent. I never saw her again for the rest of my life.

That's my husband. As you can see, he's not much of a catch, but he's still Peter the

Greatâ€™s only surviving grandson, and thatâ€™s

I married --- the future Tsar of all the Russias. Peter was a sickly man-child who would rather play with his toy soldiers on our marital bed than with me. He was not allowed to play with them during the day, so they were hidden under the bed. As soon as we were both in bed, Madame Krause, our nanny/supervisor, would come in and brought out the toy soldiers. I couldnâ€™t even move in the bed --- they were so many of them! Peter played with them until well after midnight, and every time someone knocked at the door to check on us, we had to scramble to hide the toys under the blanket. It was farcical: a newly married couple constantly on guard lest they be caught playing with toys. But the Empress Elizabeth was not amused when, years into our marriage, we had not produced the heir that she was expecting from us.

Tatiana

Like probably every woman of note in history, open about and unashamed of her sexuality, Catherine the Great is primarily remembered as a power- and man-hungry, salacious, perverted woman. Try googling her name and see how high on the list of the results is the ever-pressing question -

Does anyone care about her accomplishments in politics, art and science? Not really. But her sexual exploits? Oh, YES!

That's why I appreciate

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so much. It is an honest, frank, compassionate account of this superbly intelligent and deeply dedicated to her adoptive country woman's life.

As expected from a biography of a monarch, this work is pretty heavy on historical details. I won't lie, I skimmed over a good quarter of the book, not desiring to read much about domestic and foreign policies, wars, legislation and reforms.

Matt

Firstly, to answer your most pressing question regarding Catherine the Great, the Empress of Russia from 1762 to 1796:

Moreover, if you have an abiding interest in the origins of this rumor, Robert K. Massie's

will not satiate your deviant interest (it certainly didn't satisfy mine). Massie refuses to engage the slander "born during her own lifetime" at any level.

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Thus, there is not one sentence of horse sex in nearly 600 pages of text.

Of other sexual encounters, though, there are many.

The story of Catherine the Great is filled with sex. There are enough romantic entanglements, sordid liaisons, and passionate affairs to fuel several television seasons on premium cable. There are also dozens of the betrayals, murders, coups, plots and palace secrets that underlie so much of Russia's imperial history. Massie gives life to them all in a book that balances the literal hugeness of Russia "a stage 1/8 the size of Earth" with an intimate, warts-and-all portrayal of her leaders.

Matt

My ongoing exploration of biographies has pushed into yet another realm; women of power. What better way to begin than with a woman who held much power in her time and about whom I know very little? Bring on Catherine the Great of Russia! Robert K. Massie does a sensational job of pulling out a strong and well-rounded story of this most interesting Empress of Russia. She faced hurdles and impediments throughout her life, but always found a way to succeed. While Massie offers the reader numerous

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Born into a somewhat noble (though by no means powerful) family, Sophia Augusta Fredericka of Anhalt-Zerbst was the first-born and yet shunned by her parents. In an era when male heirs were prized, Sophia was forced to live in the shadow of her younger brother, whose health was precarious at the best of times. Sophia was deemed plain and on the verge of ugly by her mother, something that Massie does not refute strongly in his narrative. As was the norm in the era, she would have to be married off in order to bring some wealth and prominence to her family, as Anhalt-Zerbst was by no means significant. Answering a call from Empress Elizabeth in Russia, Sophia and her mother traveled to court. There, negotiations began to join Sophia to the Grand Duke Peter, himself a teenager. While at court, Sophia tried her best to fit in and studied Russian, as well as commencing a conversion from the Lutheran Church to Orthodoxy, the state religion of Russia and long practiced by the Romanovs. While this would surely dilute her ancestral roots, Sophia was willing to do all she could to earn favour with the Empress and Grand Duke. After her conversion, Sophia became Catherine and her future as Empress Consort began.

Marrying Peter, a man whom she did not love or even particularly care about, was the least of her worries. Catherine's husband had little interest in bringing forth his own heir, as Massie explores, choosing instead to have little Prussian toy soldiers brought to the bed after he and Catherine retired (I cannot refrain from saying that it brings a whole new meaning to 'toys in the bedroom'). Catherine suffered both physical and emotional pains at this flagrant insult to her person, a matrimonial virginity that lasted upwards of nine years. Such rejection took its toll, as well as a number of miscarriages after Peter did consummate the marriage. Both the Grand Duke and Duchess turned elsewhere for their physical needs, with Catherine having at least three men in her life who proved to be significant lovers. Massie goes so far as to stress the depth of these affairs by presenting the reader with the fact that Catherine eventually had children with all three. When Catherine finally bore

Peter an heir, they named him Paul and the little one received all the protection due someone in the line of succession. An interesting fact in Russia, the Throne was not passed along by a firm family tree (the tradition of primogeniture). The reigning sovereign was able to choose their successor, as Peter the Great had established when he negated past rules of succession. Elizabeth had chosen her nephew, though she did deeply admire Catherine as well. When Elizabeth died, Peter ascended to the Throne, though he was little known and even less liked by the people. Massie describes Peter III as being belligerent and highly pompous, poor traits for an emperor. He would not engage in conversations and sought to overturn all the major decisions within the state that had been established by Elizabeth. Catherine saw this and knew that she could not remain subservient to a man who treated her so poorly. Massie lays the groundwork for the proverbial last straw when Peter tried to shame his wife at a public banquet. Thereafter, Catherine took matters into her own hands.

Catherine's formal ascension to the Russian Throne proved interesting and is in line with her hold on power for the length of her reign. Catherine, still stinging from the rebuke in front of so many, organized a coup that overthrew Peter III and saw her take his place. Massie offers a strong narrative for the reader to understand the nuances of this and how Catherine was able to sway the support of the military to her favour before assuming power. Peter III was banished and lost his fight to regain his position, leaving Catherine to begin her lengthy reign. Peter III had only reigned a few months, which made the coup all the more surprising to the outside world. Catherine wasted no time in solidifying her strength both within Russia and on an international scale. Moves to secularise the Church and make priests bureaucrats of the state proved to be a means of lessening the control (and deflating competition) over the population, without banishing religion entirely. Some speculate this was Catherine seeking to give Protestantism a new strength in the country, though this is not entirely supported. She revisited the idea of serfs and the nobility, in an era when slavery remained rampant around the world (especially in the soon to be created United States), though these were not subjugated people of a different culture or ethnicity. On a grander scale, Massie speaks of Catherine's desire to continue ruling as an autocrat, but still have the input of the people who so loved her. Catherine formed a loose advisory board, where representatives could meet and debate various issues of importance to Russia. However, when representatives got caught up in the minutiae, nothing was forthcoming and the collective dissolved with little to show for itself. (It was at this gathering that Catherine was given the title 'The Great', which might indicate that they did something that pleased the Empress!) Surely concerned with her subjects, Massie explores how Catherine handled many health crises within Russia, from smallpox to the plague and many other situations in between. She was by no means wanting to ignore those under her, but did remain isolated so as not to catch what was in the air. On the international front, Catherine returned to her roots and solidified an alliance with Prussia and its monarchy, as Massie seems to insinuate that Anhalt-Zerbst falls under or close to the Prussian lands. Europe was still teetering between a number of alliances, which could turn a single fallen domino into a full-blown war. Russia kept things peaceable and forged ahead with Prussia, turning to small Poland and carving out chunks to strengthen their respective empires. Catherine remained ruler in all but name of Poland, choosing its kings and keeping a close eye on the situation there. While she kept Russian land interests in mind and the military strong, Catherine made sure her people did not forget other Romanov rulers who

had helped make Mother Russia strong, erecting monuments and statues of those who came before her. The waning years of Catherine's reign seemed to be a time to remember others and prepare for the end of her own life. It had surely been a full and remarkable reign, which Massie asserts was by no means bland.

As I entered this biography, I could not have told you much about Catherine or what she did for Russia. Massie helps with his attention to detail and significant research on both the region and its ruler. While I remain flummoxed by the number of names, geographic regions, military campaigns, and even historical alliances, Massie uses a detailed narrative to navigate through all this and help me see Catherine's place. That this Empress was a significant figure in Russian history is not lost on me, nor is that she was the last female ruler of the country (after her son, Paul, reinstated primogeniture). Much like some of the other strong females I hope to discover in my biography journey, Catherine leaves an indelible mark on history. Massie is also a biographer to which I will surely return, as his interest in Russia is one that will prove very telling in these trying political times.

Kudos, Mr. Massie for bringing Sophia Augusta Fredericka of Anhalt-Zerbst to life for me. You have a wonderful way with words and prove that European history is full of intricate details that can be compared effectively to the modern political scene. This book solidifies that Catherine surely earned her moniker, while the current autocratic ruler of the country is anything but formidable.

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Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman by Robert K Massie is the extraordinary story of an obscure young German princess who travelled to Russia at the tender age of fourteen and rose to become one of

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