Catherine the Great: Reforming Russia

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Individual Paper
When Catherine became the sole ruler of Russia in 1762, the country seemed backward to Europe. While Europe was advancing in government, economy and sciences, Russia was disorganized, agriculturally underdeveloped, and sparsely populated. No one knew the treasury balance, as well as the number of towns, and there was no map with which to count them. Catherine recalled in her memoirs that “the chief portion of the army was abroad, and had not been paid for eight months” (McGuire 72). Serfs (or slaves) were in rebellion, and public health and education needed looking after. She had her work cut out for her. Yet Catherine the Great’s reforms would guide Russia out of the Middle Ages, enabling the country to become a modern world power.

Catherine was born on April 21, 1729 and originally named Sophia Augusta Frederica. Her parents were minor nobles. In 1742, when she was 15, her mother received a letter from the Russian Empress Elizabeth, requesting Sophia come to Russia. Two hours later Sophia’s father received a letter from King Fredrick stating that he wished Sophia to marry Peter III, Empress Elizabeth’s nephew, whom she had named her heir (McGuire 32). Her mother and Sophia traveled for six weeks by carriage, and reached Moscow on February 20, 1744 (McGuire 33).

Lifestyle in Moscow dumbfounded Sophia with its rough grandeur. The palaces were rather dilapidated. The smoke was thick, rats were common, and most courtiers had lice. The once fine furniture and china direly needed repair or replacement (McGuire 38). Compared to the western standards Sophia was used to, Russia was ages behind. Sophia witnessed the gap between commoners and nobles, and the extent of poverty.

On June 28, 1744, Sophia was baptized into Russian Orthodoxy. Her name was changed
to Catherine Alekseyevna. The following day, Catherine and Peter were betrothed in a four-hour ceremony. Time progressed, and tensions grew between them, as the Empress Elizabeth began planning their wedding. The marriage was unhappy from the beginning. Nine years passed, and Catherine grew increasingly lonely. She filled this void with books, and by age 23 had vastly improved her education, but to Elizabeth’s disappointment, produced no heir (History Web).

Elizabeth provided a substitute for Peter: Sergei Saltykov, who may be the biological father of Paul I, who was born on September 20, 1754.

Empress Elizabeth died on December 25, 1761, and Peter was named Tsar, but power was not to remain in his hands for long. After insulting the army by creating an alliance with Prussia, he proceeded to confiscate church lands and ordered the inter-workings of the church be changed (McGuire 66). Thus, Peter insulted his two greatest allies: the army and the church, and it cost him dearly. Catherine knew she needed to act quickly.

One hour before dawn on June 27, 1762, Catherine’s ally Aleksey Orlov woke Catherine and told her General Passek, who was helping her plan to seize the throne, had been arrested. She knew she must make haste in order to still seize power. At eight that morning, she was proclaimed her Majesty the Empress Catherine (McGuire 15). Upon returning to the palace, she drew up a document for Peter to sign, forfeiting the throne to her. Most reactions to Catherine’s rise to power were positive, as the Russian populace disliked Peter III. There were however some negative reactions. The Pugachev Rebellion was led by Emelian Pugachev. He claimed to be Peter III, who had been deceased for some time. This man and his followers incited much unrest, and greatly threatened Catherine’s position; however, the threat was eliminated. Another case was when a man claimed to be inspired by God to restore Ivan, a relation to Peter the Great, to
the throne. The man approached Ivan’s prison cell, but the guards killed Ivan in compliance with Catherine’s orders. With the throne more firmly in her grasp, she turned to reforming industry, education, health, and administration.

Her first intention was drawing the country out of debt by focusing on agriculture. Catherine encouraged horse, sheep, and cattle breeding. She offered grants for farmers to purchase new machinery and learn western methods. Catherine “acknowledged that not a small number of such regions still lie fallow, that could be advantageously and easily most usefully utilized to be populated and lived in” (Germans From Russia). She offered pleasing terms in German and French newspapers to foreigners who wanted to settle in Russia (History Web). If they could not afford the journey, they had the option of notifying the Russian ambassador near them, who would finance their voyage. All immigrants were allowed to enter Russia on the terms that they announced their presence, and were willing to be detained, but once settled, were to be exempt from taxes for a certain time.

When Catherine allowed foreigners into Russia, she did not limit them to agriculture. She knew expansion was needed in mining and other industries. She especially focused on silver mining, and founded the School of Mines in St. Petersburg, complete with an underground mine (History Web). In 1762, she decreed anyone could open a factory except within the two capitals, as they were overcrowded. New industries emerged: linens, pottery, leather, and furniture. Over time, the number of factories grew from 984 to 3161 (History Web). Internal trade consisted of corn, iron, hides, furs, leather, fats, fish, caviar, wax, hemp, flax, ropes, and pitch; some of these products were produced in factories, others by common tradesmen (Madariaga, Russia...Age
Russia’s exports were timber, flax, leather, furs, linen, cloth, and iron, and expanded under Catherine after the Treaty of Kyakhta in 1768. By 1765, 75% of Elizabeth’s debt was paid and Catherine had increased the trade balance from 127 rubles in 1772 to 25,761 in 1796.

Once Catherine revitalized the economy, she turned to education. What she found was disheartening. There was little appreciation for the arts, so Catherine began strongly encouraging various forms, and in the 1780’s she had the Hermitage Theater built (State Hermitage Museum). Many provincial noble-women were uneducated, so Catherine established and funded a ladies’ boarding school attached to the Smolny Convent. Catherine appointed Princess Dashkova, Catherine’s long-time ally, to be the first president of the newly established Russian Academy. Eleven years after establishment, the first Russian dictionary was published (Dashkov, Russian Academy). Catherine charged Boards of Social Welfare with setting up schools: provincial towns with a major school with at least six teachers, and district towns with a minor school with two teachers minimum. If there was no building due to finances, schools were to be housed in government offices. Catherine and her advisors also embarked on a new endeavor, “Creating a new kind of people” (Madariaga, Short History 106). They intended to accept children from various backgrounds at an early age and educate them. Eventually she adopted the Felbiger’s methods, where all students were taught the same curriculum using memory training. These new schools were co-educational, and all social classes attended. Four new principals were implemented: the blending of moral and professional education, the dissolving of class barriers, female education, and in certain instances required male attendance. By the end of her reign, the number of schools had reached 549 with 61,966 students (Dukes 244). Catherine did much for the young learners in her country; she offered grants for studying abroad, eliminated corporal
punishment, enabled girls to be educated, and made public education free.

Catherine sought to improve public health in Russia. In the statute of 1775, she laid down the foundations for health care: each province and district was required to have a physician, a surgeon with two assistants, two apprentices, and an apothecary (Madariaga, *Short History* 78). She also established midwife schools and lying-in hospitals, and founded civilian hospitals (Where Peter the Great had only established military hospitals), including Russia’s first College of Medicine. Then, after a small-pox epidemic came to Moscow, she sent for Doctor Dimsdale a well known physician who had published a paper on small pox inoculation. He inoculated Catherine against the disease on October 12, 1768. She volunteered to set an example for her people, and after being mildly ill for three weeks, the doctor declared the vaccination a success. She bought homes in the capitals where Dimsdale vaccinated the many Russians who followed their ruler’s example (History Web). By setting up civilian hospitals, establishing schools to educate new doctors, and being a healthy example, Catherine reformed public health for her people.

Catherine implemented many administrative reforms. In 1764, Catherine decreed that all governor-generals take a census, map their region, report on industries, and properly administer transportation, public services, orphanages, and prisons (History Web). Then after the town of Tver burned down, a commission drew up a plan on Catherine’s orders, creating a model for future towns. In this plan, precautions were taken to prevent fires, as most buildings were wooden.

At the beginning of her reign, there were over 50 agencies in charge of collecting revenue. These were free to spend said revenues, making creating a budget impossible; thus
Catherine reformed finance collections with the Statute of 1775 (Madariaga, *Short History* 186). In this statute she also repealed roughly 32 taxes. The Statute of 1775 was also meant to reorganize the provinces. In ten years, the 25 original provinces were divided into 41, with 300,000 to 400,000 residents, and there were 50 by 1796. Districts were divided to have between 20,000 and 30,000 residents, raising the district count from 169 to 493 (Madariaga, *Short History* 70). Within the Statute of 1775 were also laws regarding criminals. Torture was strictly forbidden, and Catherine wished prisoners to be considered as “innocent until proven guilty” (Catherine, *Modern History Sourcebook*, Catherine, *Legislative Commission*). Catherine also set up Courts of Conscience, modeled after England’s, where more unusual cases were viewed. Thus the Statute of 1775 was significant because Catherine reorganized her country’s budget, provinces, and court system. It allowed Catherine to reform Russia and help it begin to meet western standards.

Furthermore on February 28, 1780, Catherine issued the Armed Neutrality Act (Raeff 198). In this Act, Catherine declared the “flag covers the goods” (Madariaga, *Short History* 83). Once the Act was in place, Russian ships were protected from the British, who had a tendency to confiscate goods from neutral ships, and they increased the number of foreign ships sailing under their flag. The merchant navy went from around 20 ships to more than 400. The Neutral League, or the group of neutral powers, consisted of Russia, Sweden, Denmark-Norway, and later included Austria, Prussia, and Portugal. In this act not only did she help Russia, but also the other countries that were neutral at that time.

Though Catherine was normally tolerant towards differing religions, in 1783, 1791, and 1794, she issued decrees limiting the rights of the Russian Jewish population. The Jews were
confined to 386,000 square miles of land, including those acquired by Poland and Turkey, and restricting their commercial activity. In 1794, Russia was facing financial difficulties, and Catherine ordered the Jews to pay taxes twice as high as Christians from the same areas. These restrictions lasted for around 130 years, until pogroms (where Jews were forced to leave their homes in the early 1900’s) resulted in mass emigration (UW).

In 1796, Catherine convinced her grandson Alexander to succeed her and drew up a document announcing the change on November 24. However, on November 6, 1796, she suffered a stroke. Her servants found her collapsed in her bathroom. When Catherine’s son Paul heard, he ordered all her personal documents destroyed (McGuire 104). In those documents was her announcement of her grandson Alexander’s succeeding her. Despite Catherine’s careful planning, Paul still took power after her death; however, when he was assassinated five years later, Alexander took the throne, just as his grandmother had wished.

Catherine left behind an astounding legacy. She was very dedicated to her adopted country up until her death (Gribovski). Russia was still caught in the middle ages in comparison to western society when Catherine overthrew Peter III, but by the end of her reign she had directed her country towards the path to becoming a powerful nation. The divisions she placed on provinces lasted until the October Revolution in 1917. Between the annexation of the Crimea and acquisitions from Poland, she added 200,000 square miles to the area of Russia, and increased the population from 20 million to 36 million people (Russian Expansion-see appendix) (Catherine, First Partition, Catherine, Final Partition). Catherine once wrote to Baron von Grimm she hoped that serfdom would be abolished “in the time of Monsieur Alexander” (History Web). Catherine understood that the reaction to abolishing serfdom would not be
positive. Her general structure for administration lasted until the reforms of Alexander II in 1864, who in 1861, abolished serfdom. She is not a great reformer because of her success, as she did not succeed in all areas, but because of the extent of her reforms in the limitations and backwardness of her country. What is so impressive about Catherine is that she was foreign born, was Russia’s sole ruler for 34 years, but died of natural causes. She is believed to have died a true Russian because of her devotedness to her adopted country.
Appendix
Primary Sources

"Catharine II Announces the First Partition of Poland (1772)." Sam Houston State University - Texas - Carnegie Research Doctoral Univ. Web. 17 Jan. 2012. <http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/PartPol1.html>. This document offers information regarding Catherine's intentions for Poland once the king died. She gives her reasons for wanting to be part of the events relating to choosing Poland’s next ruler. This is a primary source because it is a firsthand document written in the time of Catherine the Great.

"Catherine the Great's Instructions to the Legislative Commission, 1767 - Documents in Russian History." Seton Hall University Academic Server. Web. 18 Jan. 2012. <http://academic.shu.edu/russianhistory/index.php/Catherine_the_Great's_Instructions_to_the_Legislative_Commission,_1767>. These documents reinforced facts and provided new facts. They offer a clear statement regarding Catherine's intentions at the beginning of her reign. This is a primary source because it was written by Catherine the Great.

"From the Memoirs of Adrian Moyseevich Gribovski." Sam Houston State University - Texas - Carnegie Research Doctoral Univ. Web. 03 Jan. 2012. <http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Gribov.html>. This excerpt from the memoirs of Adrian M. Gribovski gave insight into how Catherine the Great lived. It explained the life she led, which I found helpful in understanding the Empress. This is a primary source, because it is a firsthand record from the time of Catherine the Great.

"Germans from Russia Heritage Collection." NDSU Libraries — Home. Web. 04 Jan. 2012. <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/history/people2.html>. This site offers the manifesto Catherine the Great composed immediately after taking the throne. It explains her intentions as Empress, her knowledge of the country, and more, helping me to understand her better. This is a primary source because Catherine the Great wrote it herself. (Note: translated from Russian to German then to English.)

2012. <http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Dashkov.html>. This entry from Princess Dashkova's journals gives Catherine the Great's purpose for establishing a Russian academy. It offered details about the beginnings to the academy and how Catherine intended it to function. This is a primary source because it is an excerpt from a journal entry written at the time of Catherine the Great.

“Declaration of the Powers concerning the Final Partition of Poland (1795).” *Sam Houston State University - Texas - Carnegie Research Doctoral Univ.* Web. 18 Jan. 2012. <http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/PolPart2.html>. This site offered me information about the dealings with foreign affairs Catherine was involved in. This was written in 1795, declaring her intentions for Poland. As this was written in the time of Catherine II, it is a primary source.
Secondary

cyclopaedia/hutchinson/m0009306.html>. This is a map of Russian expansion during
Catherine II's rule. It was helpful in giving a clear image regarding how much she
increased the area of the country. This is a secondary source, because it analyzes primary
sources.

Catherine the Great's accomplishments. I found many details to be helpful. This is a
secondary resource because there are no actual primary sources, but a great deal of
research has been done, backing up the author's work.

This book offers details about Catherine's dealings with the nobility of Russia, and a
specific commission she instituted. This book contains and analyzes primary sources,
making it a secondary source.

This book helped to reinforce the facts I had already obtained. In addition to being
reinforcement, I also gained more insight and details regarding the reforms Catherine II
instituted. This is a secondary source because it contains and analyzes primary sources.

Madariaga, Isabel De. Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great. New Haven: Yale UP, 1981.
Print. This book gave specific details regarding some of the Reforms instigated by
Catherine II. This is a secondary source, because it analyzes primary information.

me detailed information about Catherine the Great. It gave me clear information
regarding how she came to power, how she used it, and also contains quotes, and excerpts
from letters and other documents. This is a secondary source because it analyzes and
contains primary sources.
Raeff, Marc. *Catherine the Great; a Profile*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Print. This book gave details about Catherine the Great politically. I found it helpful in terms of her actions regarding the serfs. This is a secondary source because it is an examination of primary sources.

"State Hermitage Museum Review | St. Petersburg | “Fodor’s Travel Guides”*. Web. 07 Jan. 2012. <http://www.fodors.com/world/europe/russia/st-petersburg/review-154816.html>. This website gave me details about the Hermitage Theater. There was also a great deal of helpful information about Catherine II's art collection. This is a secondary source, because it analyzed primary sources.

*UW Faculty Web Server*. Web. 17 Jan. 2012. <http://faculty.washington.edu/rmcnamar/link269/article1.html>. This source gave information regarding the restrictions Catherine the Great inflicted on the Jews. This was helpful because it shows yet another reform she instituted while in power. This is a secondary source because it analyzes primary sources.