

# Memoirs of the Empress Catharine II

Pages: 374

Publisher: HardPress (May 23, 2018)

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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Memoirs of the Empress Catharine II

by Catherine II (Empress of Russia)

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## PREFACE.

Some hours after the death of the Empress Catherine, her son, the Emperor Paul, ordered Count Rostoptchine to put the seals upon her papers. He was himself present at the arrangement of these papers. Among them was found the celebrated letter of Alexis Orloff,\* in which, in a cynical tone and with a drunken hand, he announced to the Empress the assassination of her husband Peter III. There was also a manuscript, written entirely by the hand of Catherine herself, and enclosed in a sealed envelope, bearing this inscription:—*Еро HiciieparopckOMy BwcoieCTBy, EjescapeBnny H BejHKOMy Khh3h> HaBjy HeTpoBHiy, jpo6e3HOMy cbmy MoeMy.* (To his Imperial Highness, the Cesarewitch and Grand Duke Paul, my beloved son.) Under this envelope was the manuscript of the Memoirs which we now publish.

The manuscript terminates abruptly towards the close of the year 1759. It is said that there were with it some detached notes, which would have served as materials for its continuation. Some persons affirm that Paul threw these into the fire; but nothing certain is known upon this point. Paul kept his mother's manuscript a great secret, and never entrusted it to any one but the friend of his childhood, Prince Alexander Kourakine. The Prince took a copy of it. Some twenty years after the death of Paul, Alexander Tourgeneff and Prince Michael Worontzoff obtained copies from the transcript of Kourakine. The Emperor Nicholas having heard of this, gave orders to the Secret Police to seize all the copies. Amongst them was one written at Odessa, by the hand of the celebrated poet Pouschkine. A complete stop was now put to the further circulation of the Memoirs.

\* See Memoirs of the Princess Daschtow. London, 1840,

The Emperor Nicholas had the original brought to him by the Count D. Bloudoff; read it, sealed it with the great seal of state, and ordered it to be kept in the imperial archives, among the most secret documents.

To these details, which I extract from a notice communicated to me, I ought to add that the first person who spoke to me on the subject was Constantine Arsenieff, the preceptor of the present Emperor. He told me, in 1840, that he had obtained permission to read many secret documents relative to the events which followed the death of Peter I, up to the reign of Alexander I. Among these documents, he was authorized to read the Memoirs of Catherine II. (At that time he was teaching the Modern History of Russia to the Grand Duke, the heir presumptive.)

During the Crimean war, the archives were transferred to Moscow. In the month of March, 1855, the present Emperor had the manuscript brought to him to read. Since that period one or two copies have again circulated at Moscow and St. Petersburg. It is from one of these that we now publish the Memoirs. As to their authenticity, there is not the least room for doubt. Besides, it is only necessary to read two or three pages of the text to be quite satisfied on the point.

We have abstained from all corrections of the style, in every case in which it was not evident that the copy presented some fault of transcription.

Passing to the Memoirs themselves, what do we find?

The early years of Catherine II—of that womanemperor, who occupied for more than a quarter of

a century all contemporary minds, from Voltaire and Frederic II to the Khan of the Crimea and the Chiefs of the Kirghis—her young days described by herself! .... What is there for the Editor to add to this?

In reading these pages, we behold her entering on the scene, we see her forming herself to that which she afterwards became. A frolicsome girl of fourteen, her head dressed "d la Moise," fair, playful, the betrothed of a little idiot, the Grand Duke, she has already caught the disease of the Winter Palace—the thirst of dominion. One day, while "perched" with the Grand Duke upon a window-sill, and joking with him, she saw Count Lestocq enter: "Pack up your things," he said, "you are off for Germany." The young idiot seemed but little affected by the threatened separation. "It was pretty nearly a matter of indifference to me also," says the little German girl; "but the crown of Russia was not so," adds the Grand Duchess.

Here we have, in the bud, the Catherine of 1762!

V To dream of the crown, however, was quite natural in the atmosphere of that court; natural not only for the betrothed of the Heir Presumptive, but for every one. The groom Biren, the singer Rasoumowsky, the Prince Dolgorouky, the plebeian Menchikoff, the oligarch Volynski—every one was anxious for a shred of the imperial mantle. The crown of Russia, after Peter I, was a *res nullius*.

Peter I, a terrorist and reformer, before all things, had no respect for legitimacy. His absolutism sought to reach even beyond the tomb. He gave himself the right of appointing his successor, and instead of appointing him, he contented himself with ordering the assassination of his own son.

After the death of Peter, the nobles assembled for deliberation. Menchikoff put a stop to all discussion, and proclaimed as Empress his old mistress, the widow of a brave Swedish dragoon, slain upon the field of battle, the widow of Peter also, to whom Menchikoff had resigned her "through devotion" to his master.

The reign of Catherine I was short. After her, the crown passed from head to head as chance directed: from the once Livonian tavern-keeper, to a street-boy (Peter II); from this street-boy, who died of small-pox, to the Duchess of Courland (Anne); from the Duchess of Courland to a Princess of Mecklenburg (wife of a Prince of Brunswick), who reigned in the name of an infant in the cradle (Ivan); from this boy, born too late to reign, the crown passed to the head of a woman born too soon—Elizabeth. She it is who represents legitimacy.

Tradition broken, the people and the state completely separated by the reforms of Peter I, coups d'etat and palace revolutions were the order of the day: nothing was fixed. The inhabitants of St. Petersburg, when retiring at night, knew not under whose government they should awake in the morning; they consequently took but little interest in changes, which, after all, did not essentially concern any but a few German intriguers, become Russian ministers, a few great nobles grown gray in perjury and crime, and the regiment of Preobrajensky, which disposed of the crown like the Pretorians of old. For all others, every thing remained unchanged. And when I say others, I speak only of the nobles and officials; for as to the great silent people—that people prostrate, sad, stupefied, dumb—it was never thought of. The people was beyond the pale of the law, and passively accepted the terrible trial which God had sent it, caring little for the spectres which mounted with tottering steps the ascent to the throne, gliding like shadows, and disappearing in Siberia, or in the dungeons. The people was sure to be pillaged in any case. Its social condition therefore was beyond the reach of accident.

What a strange period! The imperial throne, as we have elsewhere said,\* was like the bed of

Cleopatra. A crowd of oligarchs, of strangers, of panders, of minions, led forth nightly an unknown, a child, a German; placed the puppet on the throne, worshipped it, and, in its name, gave the knout to all who presumed to question the arrangement. Scarcely had the chosen one time to become intoxicated with the delights of an exorbitant and absurd power, and to condemn his enemies to slavery or torture, when the succeeding wave raised up another pretender, and the chosen of yesterday, with all his followers, was engulfed in the abyss. The ministers and generals of one day, were the next on their way to Siberia, loaded with chains.

This bufera infernale carried away people with such rapidity, that there was not time to get accustomed to their faces. Marshal Munich, who had overturned Biren, rejoined him on a raft, stopped upon the Volga, himself a prisoner, with chains on his feet. It is in the struggle of these two Germans, who disputed the empire of Russia as if it had been a jug of beer, that we may retrace the true type of the coups d'etat of the good old times.

\* Du Developpement des idees revolutionnaires en Russie. 2 Ed., London, 1853.

The Empress Anne died, leaving the crown, as we have just said, to a child only a few months old, under the regency of her lover Biren. The Duke of Courland was all-powerful. Despising everything Russian, he wished to civilize us with the lash. In the hope of strengthening himself, he destroyed, with a cold-blooded cruelty, hundreds of men, and drove into exile more than twenty thousand. Marshal Munich got tired of this; he was a German as well as Biren, and besides a good soldier. One day, the Princess of Brunswick, the mother of the little Emperor, complained to him of the arrogance of Biren. "Have you spoken on this subject to any one else?" asked the Marshal. "I have not." "Very well, then; keep silent, and leave every thing to me." This was on the 7th of September, 1740.

On the 8th, Munich dined with Biren. After dinner he left his family with the Regent, and retired for a moment. Going quietly to the residence of the Princess of Brunswick, he told her to be prepared for the night, and then returned. Supper came on. Munich gave anecdotes of his campaigns, and of the battles he had gained. "Have you made any nocturnal expeditions?" asked the Count de Lcewenhaupt. "I have made expeditions at all hours," replied the Marshal, with some annoyance. The Regent, who was indisposed, and was lying on a sofa, sat up at these words, and became thoughtful.

They parted friends.

Having reached home, Munich ordered his aide-de-camp, Manstein, to be ready by two o'clock. At that hour they entered a carriage, and drove straight to the Winter Palace. There he had the Princess awakened. "What is the matter?" said the good German, Anthony Ulrich, of Braunschweig-Wolfenbiittel, to his wife. "I am not well," replied the Princess.—And Anthony Ulrich turned over and slept like a top.

While he slept, the Princess dressed herself, and the old warrior conferred with the most turbulent of the soldiers in the Preobrajensky regiment. He represented to them the humiliating position of the Princess, spoke of her future gratitude, and as he spoke, bade them load their muskets.

Then leaving the Princess under the guard of some forty grenadiers, he proceeded with eighty others to arrest the chief of the State, the terrible Duke of Courland.

They traversed without impediment the streets of St. Petersburg; reached the palace of the Regent; entered it; and Munich sent Manstein to arrest the Duke in his bed-chamber, living or dead. The officers on duty, the sentinels, and the servants looked on. "Had there been a single officer or

soldier faithful," says Manstein, in his memoirs, "we were lost." But there was not one. Biren, perceiving the soldiers, endeavoured to escape by creeping under the bed. Manstein had him forced out: Biren defended himself. He received some blows from the butt-ends of their muskets, and was then conveyed to the guard-house.

The coup d'etat was accomplished. But something stranger still was soon to follow.

Biren was detested; that might explain his fall. The new Regent, on the contrary—a good and gentle creature, who gave umbrage to no one, while she gave much love to the Ambassador Linar—was even liked a little from hatred to Biren. A year passed. All was tranquil. But the court of France was dissatisfied with an Austro-Russian alliance which the Regent had just concluded with Maria Theresa. How was this alliance to be prevented? Nothing easier. It was only to make a coup d'etat, and expel the Regent. In this case, we have not even a marshal revered by the soldiers, not even a statesman. An intriguing physician, Lestocq, and an intriguing ambassador, La Chetardie, are sufficient to carry to the throne, Elizabeth, daughter of Peter I.

Elizabeth, absorbed in pleasures and petty intrigues, little thought of overturning the government. She was led to believe that the Regent intended to shut her up in a convent. She, Elizabeth, who spent her time in the barracks of the guards, and in licentious excesses .... better make herself Empress! So also thought La Chetardie; and he did more than think; he gave French gold to hire a handful of soldiers.

On the 25th of November, 1741, the Grand Duchess, dressed in a magnificent robe, and with a brilliant cuirass on her breast, presented herself at the guard-house of the Preobrajensky regiment. She exposed to the soldiers her unhappy condition. They, reeking with wine, cried out, "Command, mother, command, and we will slaughter them all!" The charitable Grand Duchess recoils with horror, and only orders the arrest of the Regent, her husband, and their son—the Emperor.

Once again is the old scene repeated.

Anthony Ulrich, of Braunschweig, is awakened from the most profound slumber; but this time he cannot relapse into it again, for two soldiers wrap him up in a sheet and carry him to a dungeon, which he will leave only to go and die in exile.

Again is the coup d'etat accomplished.

The new reign seems to go on wheels. And once more nothing is wanting to this strange crown .... but an heir. The Empress who will have nothing to do with the little Ivan, seeks one in the episcopal palace of the Prince-Bishop of Lubeck. It is the nephew of the Bishop whom she selects, a grandson of Peter I, an orphan without father or mother, and the intended husband of the little Sophia Augusta Frederica, Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst-Bernburg, who resigned all these sonorous and illustrious titles to be called simply .... Catherine II.

And now, after all that has been said, let the reader picture to himself what must have been the nature of the medium into which destiny had cast this young girl, gifted, as she was, not only with great talent, but also with a character pliant, though full of pride and passion.

Her position at St. Petersburg was horrible. On one side was her mother, a peevish, scolding, greedy, niggardly, pedantic German, boxing her ears, and taking away her new dresses to appropriate them to her own use; on the other, the Empress Elizabeth, a coarse and grumbling virago, never quite sober, jealous, envious, causing every step of the young Princess to be watched, every word reported, taking offence at everything, and all this after having given her for

a husband the most ridiculous Benedict of the age.

A prisoner in the palace, she could do nothing without permission. If she wept for the death of her father, the Empress sent her word that she had grieved enough—"That her father was not a king, that she should mourn him longer than a week." If she evinced a friendship for any of her maids of honour, she might be sure the lady would be dismissed. If she became attached to a faithful servant, still more certain was it that that servant would be turned away.

Her relations with the Grand Duke were monstrous, degrading. He made her the confidante of his amorous intrigues. Drunk from the age of ten, he came one night, in liquor, to entertain his wife with a description of the graces and charms of the daughter of Biren; and as Catherine pretended to be asleep, he gave her a punch with his fist to awaken her. This booby kept a kennel of dogs, which infested the air, at the side of his wife's bedchamber, and hung rats in his own, to punish them according to the rules of martial law.

Nor is this all. After having wounded and outraged nearly every feeling of this young creature's nature, they began to deprave her systematically. The Empress regards as a breach of order her having no children. Madame Tchogloloff speaks to her on the subject, insinuating that, for the good of the state, she ought to sacrifice her scruples, and concludes by proposing to her a choice between Soltikoff and Narichkine. The young lady affects simplicity and takes both—nay, Poniatowsky into the bargain • and thus was commenced a career of licentiousness in which she never halted during the space of forty years.

What renders the present publication of serious consequence to the imperial house of Russia is, that it proves not only that this house does not belong to the family of Romanoff, but that it does not even belong to that of Holstein Gottorp. The avowal of Catherine on this point is very explicit—the father of the Emperor Paul is Sergius Soltikoff.

The Imperial Dictatorship of Russia endeavours in vain to represent itself as traditional and secular.

One word more before I close.

In perusing these Memoirs, the reader is astonished to find one thing constantly lost sight of, even to the extent of not appearing anywhere—it is Russia and the People. And here is the characteristic trait of the epoch.

The Winter Palace, with its military and administrative machinery, was a world of its own. Like a ship floating on the surface of the ocean, it had no real connection with the inhabitants of the deep, beyond that of eating them. It was the State for the State. Organized on the German model, it imposed itself on the nation as a conqueror. In that monstrous barrack, in that enormous chancery, there reigned the cold rigidity of a camp. One set gave or transmitted orders, the rest obeyed in silence. There was but a single spot, within that dreary pile, in which human passions reappeared, agitated and stormy, and that spot was the domestic hearth; not that of the nation—but of the state. Behind that tripple line of sentinels, in those heavily ornamented saloons, there fermented a feverish life, with its intrigues and its conflicts, its dramas, and its tragedies. It was there that the destinies of Russia were woven, in the gloom of the alcove, in the midst of orgies, beyond the reach of informers and of the police.

What interest, then, could the young German Princess take in that magnum ignotum, that people unexpressed, poor, semi-barbarous, which concealed itself in its 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.

It was only long afterwards that Catherine heard the Russian people seriously spoken of, when the Cossack Pougatcheff, at the head of an army of insurgent peasants, menaced Moscow.

When Pougatcheff was vanquished, the Winter Palace again forgot the people. And there is no telling when it would have been once more remembered, had it not itself put its masters in mind of its existence, by rising in mass in 1812, rejecting, on the one hand, the release from serfdom offered to it at the point of foreign bayonets, and, on the other, marching to death to save a country which gave it nothing but slavery, degradation, misery—and the oblivion of the Winter Palace.

This was the second memento of the Russian people. Let us hope that at the third it will be remembered a little longer.

A. HERZEN.

London, November 15th, 1858.

MEMOIRS

EMPRESS CATHERINE II.

WRITTEN BY HERSELF.

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