



Catherine the Great

Simon Dixon

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“[A] superb biography....Scholarly, refreshing, commonsensical, and compelling, vividly portraying the charismatic Empress and her times.”

—Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of *Sashenka*

Simon Dixon's *Catherine the Great* is a complete and revealing portrait of an extraordinary leader, chronicling her rise to power and her remarkable reign as empress of Russia. Catherine Merridale, author of *Ivan's War*, calls this definitive history, “attractive, engaging, and very intelligent....Established fans of the Russian empress will find plenty of new material and those who are meeting her for the first time will be dazzled.”

Catherine the Great Details

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From Reader Review Catherine the Great for online ebook

Ranjeev Dubey says

A book for those who like courtly glitter, pagentry, description of royal balls, flamboyant expositions of life in medieval courts and of course easy reading. It wasn't my cup of tea and I struggled to get to the data I needed to find but I have given it 3 stars for achieving what it set out to do. Its reasonably well researched too. If you are not trying to contextualize Catherine within the larger Russian or European political environment, and you do like entertaining historical reads, this is it.

Kathrin Shawcross says

Dissapointing. An uninteresting account of an incredible figure.

Bookhode says

This is the worst history book I've ever read, and considering the subject matter at hand, I'm not sure how is that even possible. Thanks to some really admirable lack of basic storytelling skills, and his utter misunderstanding of concept of being interesting, this guy Simon Dixon has somehow managed to tell an incoherent, boring, pointless, dry, shallow and outright stupid tale about one of the most fascinating characters and one of the greatest rulers in human history. And that really requires a special level of failurism, that one could only dream (or have nightmares) about.

Simon Dixon's abomination of a book is filled with endless lists of repetitive quotes, with randomly chosen segments from Catherine's letter correspondences, with rows upon rows of names of Russian nobles who are just being mentioned for the sake of it, and whose roles are almost never explored any further. There are tons and tons of meticulously listed prices in roubles for numerous projects or activities, but they don't MEAN anything because we are never told how much is one rouble worth, or how much could a person in Russia usually earn at that time, so we have nothing to compare those numbers to, and nothing to give them scope or relevance.

On the other hand, this is a perfect book for everyone who always wanted to know what was the color of Catherine's favorite chair in a certain room in her palace, or if she ran her nose a lot in the early March of 1787, or what was the opera she was listening to during the prince of Prussia's second visit. But while it provides plenty of trivial bits of useless information, the book completely neglects to even attempt to explain some of the biggest and most crucial questions about Catherine's reign. For example, the fascinating coup of 1762, which brought Catherine to power, is covered in literally one page, without ever elaborating on any reasons that led to it, or introducing any factions on the court, or providing any detailed analysis about this unlikely event. Instead, we are just told in passing that the tsar was dethroned and soon killed, and that Catherine will be crowned, and yay, let's talk about what kind of dress will she wear at her coronation, and spend an entire chapter listing who gets to sit where during the big event.

This is just complete worthless crap. It's obvious that Simon Dixon did not have a clue about the subject he was writing about, and instead of analyzing or explaining things, he was just throwing out a bunch of

numbers and data, and hope that his shit will stick to as many walls as possible. Disgusting and disgraceful.

Current score: 34/100

Current ranking: 41st (out of 45) on my list of non-fiction books.

Bruno Bouchet says

Have to agree with the comments about this book being obsessed with physical details. He seemed to spend more pages on the credentials of the architect who built a palace that Catherine stayed in for a couple of months in her youth than on the reasons why a really minor German princess was invited to the Russian court as a prospective wife for the future Tsar. So many lists, so many roubles. I can understand that a historian may want to ground his work in facts and those sorts of facts are the ones that are irrefutably documents but it was too much. I wanted politics, I wanted insights and explanations not numbers of beads. Ended up putting it back - clearly meticulously researched and with a remarkable knowledge of subject, but too many trees, not enough forest!

Mandy says

I had wanted to know more about her politics and the changes she made, but I learned way too much about how many roubles she spent on what person and what building project. *sigh* It was a good start, though.

Daniel Kukwa says

It's a potentially fantastic biography...rendered merely "good" by (1) a strange apologist tone for Catherine, making her seem positively genteel, considering the autocratic hold she held over Russia, and (2) an obsession with too much court & religious ceremonial detail...which drove me to distraction numerous times.

Ray Akerboom says

Beautiful story of what happened in the Russia in the eighteenth century in the Royal Court where a German Princess came and conquered. She took over from her idiot of a husband of whom she was married, almost by force. He happened to become Tsar of Russia and she simply murdered him and took over the shop. And did it in a rather enlightened way. But not too much enlightened, because compared to Russian leaders nowadays, the current one looks rather angel like compared to her. Of course she had her fill of wars, riots, slavery and waste, but it was part of the times. And she seems to have been a rather charming personality. Who changed lovers like we do bedclothes. I started reading this book because of a wonderful exhibition in the Hermitage Museum in Amsterdam about Catherine and, like the book, I do recommend it very much. Together they make up a wonderful image of a most interesting lady!

Arminius says

Catherine the Great was the German born wife of Peter III. Peter was (the Ruler of Russia) The former ruler Empress Elizabeth's handpicked successor. When Russia Nobles found Peter unacceptable they kidnapped and most likely assassinated him. He may have been killed in a struggle but in either event he was killed.

The Nobles afterward quickly put Catherine in power she being the next in line of succession. What they found in Catherine was somewhat of a surprise. She was swept up in the Enlightenment and was very ambitious. She wrote and had a lifelong correspondence with the French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire.

As Empress, she attempted to systemize and unify Russia's laws which were an inconsistent at the time and had an odd combination of past laws. She also attempted to unify a country that had enormous diversity. She traveled to all parts of Russia to learn about these varying cultures. She also built schools and instructed at what should be taught.

She tried to write a book on Etymology which is the study of the history of words, their origins, and how their form and meaning have changed over time. She even wrote to George Washington for help with English words.

She built and stocked the Hermitage Museum with world class art from artists Raphael, Giorgione, Titian, Veronese, Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Dyck et al. She turned St. Petersburg into one of the most beautiful cities in the world paying for and building magnificent buildings and architecture.

She also expanded the Russia Empire by waging war against the Ottoman Turks. Russia had engulfed the Crimea, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Courland. She extended the Russian border to the Black Sea. She had a son, with Peter III, named Paul of whom she basically ignored. However, when Paul had children she became a doting grandmother. She bragged to everyone how smart her two grandsons were.

Her love life is well documented in this book. She had numerous affairs.

When she was younger someone told her she was cute. She remarked that that was the only time in her life that someone said that to her. I just found that touching.

I am betting there is a better book about her. The author tended to overload the reader with the cost of building and the cost of the various Balls which were customary of the times. The battles are not well discussed or her reasons for her disliking of the Turks so much. I think her story could be much more interesting. This book just left me somewhat underwhelmed.

Angela Damhuis says

I quit half way. Too many figures, boring. I never got to learn About her. Why was she so great?

Y says

I am surprised by the amount of reviewers who left three stars or less on this biography while critiquing the lack of political intrigue or focus on Catherine's romantic relationships. Dixon clearly states on the second page that he "sought to recover a sense of place, situating Catherine in the context of the Court society" As such, his work focuses on the Court institution and all the laborious details involved. If you want political intrigue, Madariaga's biography would be more fitting.

While I personally found a good part of his writing to be quite dry and overladen with figures and details that I had little interest in, it cannot be denied that Dixon did a good job of describing the court life of Catherine's time and all the nuances at play. Though this book is certainly not for everyone—I would say the work is closer to an academic biography more so than a popular one—it is well written for what it is and offers meticulously researched detail and well-deserved attention to the unreliability of Catherine's own memoirs that he quotes throughout his book.

Jodi says

Many reviewers are criticizing this biography because it frames Catherine's story quite heavily in the context of her role as Russian Empress. Having read both Catherine's Memoirs and Massie's biography, I have an idea of where these readers are coming from: Massie's bio absolutely reads like a heroine-centered novel. (To be fair, I read both of those books before reading this one, a fact which likely impacted my reading, as Catherine was a fully formed character in my imagination before I started this book.)

All of that said, I think some of the reviews were a bit harsh (One to two stars? Come on. . .the level of research is worth more than that.). I think it is worth recalling that Catherine's fame is directly related to her government; therefore, to divorce her story too much from her work is to distort her story. I found the explanation of how Catherine's government worked -- and who played what role -- fascinating, and I think these details fill in what is missing in a more "strict biography" approach like Massie's. (Massie's book is absolutely worth reading -- I do not condemn him for his approach. But it does leave questions unanswered that Dixon's book by its more contextual approach answers.)

Dixon's work is an enjoyable and highly informative read -- very much worth the commitment that its length requires.

Anna says

I was going to wait to get the Robert K. Massie bio of Catherine the Great from my library as my first introduction to her, but I saw this one for \$3 at Half Price Books and thought I'd start here... I really wish I had waited for the Massie book and saved myself this reading experience.

I finished the whole thing and feel like I hardly know anything about Catherine or her life. What I do know a whole heck of a lot about is architecture and budgeting. Most of the book was spent discussing various palaces she ordered constructed and an in-depth dissection of their building features; also lots and lots of lists of items bought with their listed amounts in rubles. It was, excuse my language here, boring as fuck. Most of Catherine's policies and intrigues were hardly discussed, her love affairs were quick mentions, and freaking

POTEMKIN, one of the pivotal figures of her life, is barely present - and when he is, it has to do with whatever he was doing for her government and relates almost nothing about their personal relationship. There was also a lengthy section describing a war that Russia was in but I don't know why or what about, just that Catherine didn't like the Turks and I don't know why that was either.

Honestly the only reason I gave it 2 stars is because from what I can tell, everything is factually correct. Dixon doesn't make any unverifiable claims or wild conjectures. It does its job as a history book. It doesn't do its job as either a personal biography or as entertainment of any kind. Its focus was totally wrong, and I hated that. If I wanted to learn about a construction or money, I'd read an architecture book or a business book. If I pick up a book called "Catherine the Great", I expect to learn about Catherine the Great. I don't think that's too much to ask.

Jim says

This is the second biography I have read this spring about a Russian monarch, the other being Peter the Great. There is a kind of sameness to biographies of monarchs who have enjoyed long reigns -- as opposed to something like Tacitus's **The Histories**, about the Year of the Four Emperors in A.D. 69. The ruler comes to power, by fair means or foul, establishes himself or herself, issues numerous reforms, conducts several wars, weakens, dies, and is repudiated by his or her heirs. I think that is about enough for me for at least another year or so.

Simon Dixon does a creditable job marshaling his facts and footnoting his assertions. What he fails to do is step back and assess the contributions of his subject from his vantage point more than two centuries after Catherine's demise. There are some interesting illustrations, but no maps, which would have been helpful considering the many far-flung wars and royal visits to provincial cities.

A few weeks ago, I read George Bernard Shaw's short play **Great Catherine**, which, in its limited way, was as helpful as Dixon's 500-page biography.

Bill says

I'm a little disappointed in this book. I find the idea of Catherine the Great very fascinating but don't know much about her reign. This book really didn't give me much of a better sense about the monarch. It took some 120 pages before we even got to her reign, and then the book seemed more obsessed with all the buildings she had commissioned and how much everything cost.

I'll kindly take any suggestions anyone has for more illuminating books about her rule.

Anthony says

This was my first book, which I've read, in regards to the history of Russia and its monarchs. I still have a long way to go.

This book was very eye-opening though, as it gave some insight into the hearts and minds of, not only Catherine, but also the people surrounding her.

This was a very quick read, but it did give a great amount of detail about Catherine's beginnings, reign, and post-reign.

Since Catherine's reign was relatively close to the beginnings of the Russian Revolution, I have more books to read, both pre and post Catherine's reign. I am wondering if going back to Peter The Great's reign would be far enough. I'll have to do more research, which means, more books!
