

Scott Jones
Early Russia Readings

Alexander, John T. Catherine the Great: Life and Legend. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). 418 pages.

According to John T. Alexander in Catherine the Great: Life and Legend there is a tremendous amount of lies about one of Russia's greatest rulers, Catherine the Great. Of course, the historical record has always shown that Catherine completed the transformation of Russia into a European country, somewhat similar to those of western Europe. With his book, the author hopes to restore the image, and dispel the myths, about Catherine.

Alexander's first attempt to show the real Catherine is his treatment of her rise to thrown. Catherine came to the thrown after she had helped with the overthrow, and then murder, of her husband Peter III. According to Alexander, Catherine was a reluctant participant and only became involved as she became increasingly concerned with the idea that Peter was planning to divorce her. Drawing on the Russian nobility's fear of too much foreign influence, the German Catherine led the dissidents against Peter, which then installed her as the leader of Russia. Ironically, according to the author, Catherine went further than her husband in changing the Russian government. Under Catherine, Russian society was further introduced to western art, literature, education, music and architecture. Alexander explains that part Catherine's greatness was not in the originality of her ideas, but in the fact she was successful where so many other Russian leaders had failed, often miserably.

The second attempt by the author to show the real Catherine deals with her death. While not hiding the fact that Catherine had an insatiable sexual appetite, the author goes

to great length to prove that her death was not due to some weird fetish. The popular myth, according to the author, is that Catherine died when a horse that was being lowered on top of her dropped too suddenly and crushed her. The author quickly points out sources that show Catherine died due to an attack of apoplexy at the age of 67. However, this story is the focus of the author study into how these myths have come about. His conclusion is that many men's accounts of the leadership of Catherine have focused primarily on attacking her personal life, while leaving her public record in the shadows. Over time, Alexander argues, this has led to some serious misconceptions that have never received the proper treatment it deserves.

Catherine the Great does a good job of showing the contributions that Catherine the Great made as leader of Russia. She was able to accomplish many things that her predecessors were unable to accomplish. However, she was the victim of viscous rumors during her life and afterwards as well. It is unfortunate that such a great leader would have a biography spending more time with her sex life than with her great accomplishments.

Catherine was the ruler that finished what Peter the Great started. She officially brought the Russian people out of their "Dark Age" and into the enlightened era of Western Europe. Alexander tries to focus as much attention to Catherine's reforms, but he spends far too much time dealing with palace intrigue and innuendo, thereby falling into the same trap that Alexander ridiculed other male biographers of Catherine of doing to a great female leader.