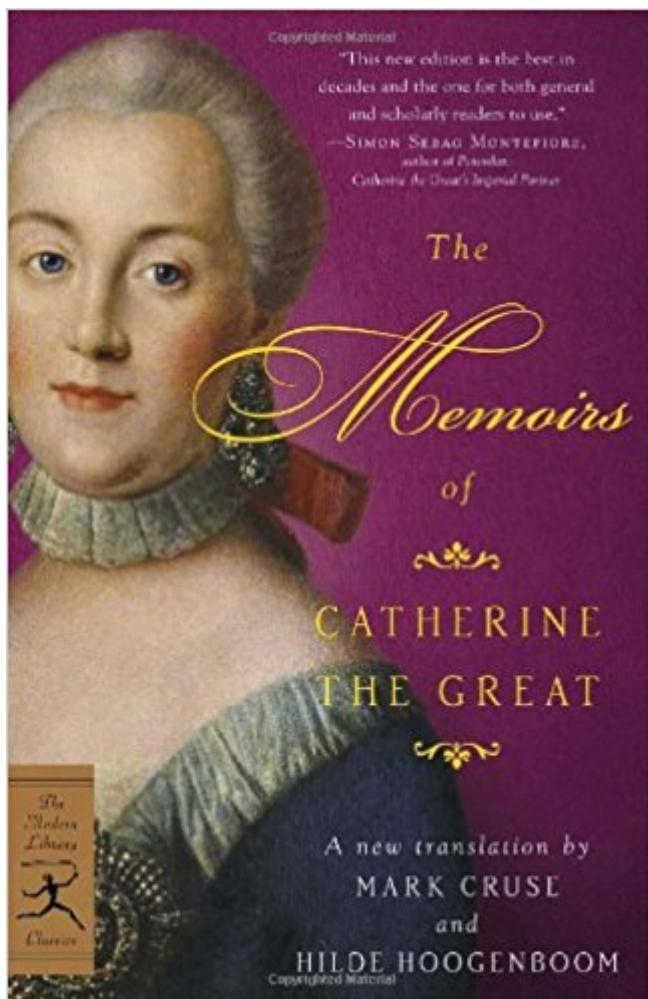


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# The Memoirs Of Catherine The Great (Modern Library Classics)



## Synopsis

Empress Catherine II brought Europe to Russia, and Russia to Europe, during her long and eventful reign (1762–1796). She fostered the culture of the Enlightenment and greatly expanded the immense empire created by Czar Ivan the Terrible, shifting the balance of power in Europe eastward. Famous for her will to power and for her dozen lovers, Catherine was also a prolific and gifted writer. Fluent in French, Russian, and German, Catherine published political theory, journalism, comedies, operas, and history, while writing thousands of letters as she corresponded with Voltaire and other public figures. The *Memoirs of Catherine the Great* provides an unparalleled window into eighteenth-century Russia and the mind of an absolute ruler. With insight, humor, and candor, Catherine presents her eyewitness account of history, from her whirlwind entry into the Russian court in 1744 at age fourteen as the intended bride of Empress Elizabeth I's nephew, the eccentric drunkard and future Peter III, to her unhappy marriage; from her two children, several miscarriages, and her and Peter's numerous affairs to the political maneuvering that enabled Catherine to seize the throne from him in 1762. Catherine's eye for telling details makes for compelling reading as she describes the dramatic fall and rise of her political fortunes. This definitive new translation from the French is scrupulously faithful to her words and is the first for which translators have consulted original manuscripts written in Catherine's own hand. It is an indispensable work for anyone interested in Catherine the Great, Russian history, or the eighteenth century. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Catherine the Great's memoirs have long been seen as a self-serving attempt to justify her seizing the throne from her husband, Peter III. This fresh, clean translation (the first in English to be based on the original manuscripts), although it provides insight into the mind of the ruler and the Russian court, is unlikely to change that assessment. The memoirs cover the years before Catherine (1729–1796) became empress in 1762. As the memoir makes clear, Catherine, born a German princess, had a hard time adjusting to life in the Russian court, which she considered backward. Her marriage to Peter III was unhappy from the start, and she makes no bones about her unhappiness with him and his mistresses. At the same time, she rationalizes her own dalliances: "I have just said I was attractive. As a result, I was already halfway along the road to temptation...." The translators provide a substantial introduction, but readers without prior knowledge of Catherine the Great might want to have Isabel de Madariaga's biography of the czar on hand for reference. Color illus., 2 maps, not seen by PW. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Catherine II of Russia, who reigned from 1762 to 1796, cultivated an image as an enlightened monarch, an image to which three different memoirs contributed. This new translation from the original French spans a portion of the memoirs from 1744, when she, a German princess, arrived in Russia to marry Grand Duke Paul, heir to the throne, through 1759. But as the translators note, Catherine wrote of this period near the end of her life, which lends her recollections an air of considerable self-justification: after all, her claim to rule was dubious, having come to power in a palace coup in which her husband was assassinated. Although historians will read this work wary of Catherine's biases, general readers can still enjoy the vividness of Russian court life that she supplies. Its appearance, its rituals, its gossip, its hazardous intrigues--Catherine's remembrance of details will interest those who've digested the best current popular biography, Isabel de Madariaga's *Catherine the Great* (1990). Gilbert TaylorCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

It is valuable to read, among all the conjectures and propaganda written by others, what Catherine herself wrote. Of course, in memoirs, the issue always is candor, and Catherine certainly left out a lot. On the other hand, her descriptions of Elizabeth, Peter, and her mother, Johanna, are revealing and unflattering. These memoirs run from her arrival in Russia nearly to her accession to the throne--there is nothing at all about her reign as czarina. She wrote seven versions of these

memoirs, and Cruse and Hoogenboom have selected from several to put together this composite. They also supplement this text with editorial comments and bits of Catherine's other writings as needed to make sense of the memoirs. She rather frankly admits that her first two or three pregnancies were not by her husband, but stops short of saying who fathered Paul. (Oddly, there is no mention of Peter's circumcision, so necessary to his chances of fatherhood.) The events surrounding the birth of Paul are so pathetic that they are hilarious, even allowing for some self-pitying hyperbole. If you want the story of the life of Catherine, this is not it. But it's good to see where her biographers got their ideas.

Catherine wrote a number of autobiographical sketches throughout her life. The one translated in this volume is the last version that she began to work on in 1794 (near the end of her life). It was written in three books with book 1 covering 1728 to 1750, book 2 from 1750 to 59 but book 3 is not translated in this volume. If you are after Catherine's thoughts once she assumed power then this book is not for you. This book only covers her early life and as wife to the heir to the throne. I must say I was disappointed that the account of her time as a ruler was not included. Catherine is apologetic. She wants to discredit her husband (Peter III) as much as possible (she eventually deposed him and assumed power) so there are lots of indications of how hopeless and unfit to rule he was. Really early on in her memoir she says '...I saw and understood that he did not care for the nation that he was destined to rule, and that he clung to his Lutheranism, did not like his entourage and was very childish' (page 9). In another early bit Catherine lay very sick (she claims she caught pneumonia staying up all night learning Russian) and was at death's door. Her mother urged her to call a Lutheran pastor. Much to the shock of everyone, especially her mother, she called her Orthodox chaplain instead (page 11). Catherine was 14 years old. The Empress Elizabeth (Peter III's aunt) was very impressed. Of course, the whole story is included to show that, even at that early date, Catherine's loyalty lay with Russia and her people and not her German heritage. One thing I note is that Catherine was frequently bored with life at court. Her mind was too active to be satisfied with brainless chitchat and empty ceremony so she read a lot of books to keep her occupied. As she was fluent in French and German (and of course Russian!) she had access to a huge range of European literature. I never imaged that Catherine the Great was a book nerd!

These memoirs cover the period of time from when Catherine first went to Russia until just before Empress Elizabeth passes away. In other words, just as things get interesting the memoirs end! Cruse and Hoogenboom do an excellent job of translating from the original French into modern

English that is enjoyable and easy to read and understand. The detailed introduction provides very good context for the memoirs that makes them much more interesting than they would otherwise be. However, I am disappointed that they did the early memoirs instead of the later ones or at least didn't expand the work to include them. Catherine is clearly laying down the groundwork for the justification of the coup which she will later engineer. These memoirs end as Elizabeth's health is failing and she realizes her son is an infantile dangerous idiot (or at least Catherine says that Elizabeth agreed with her assessment of Peter). It killed me to have the memoirs end where they did. If these 2 ever do the later memoirs I will definitely buy them. I would recommend this to anyone fascinated by 18th century Russia as I am. But if you want to read Catherine describe the coup and her rule (the good stuff in my opinion) you will have to wait or just settle for a traditional biography or history written by someone other than Catherine herself.

The Memoirs of Catherine the Great were the first primary source I ever read about her. I had read biographies of her, and seen other writings in reference to her in history, art, and biographies of other persons where Catherine pops in: King Frederick "the Great" of Prussia, Empress Maria Theresa of Austria and her son and co-ruler Emperor Joseph II, and about Catherine's reaction to the French Revolution and the executions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. But I had never read Catherine's own versions of some of these people. Now, I knew going in that the Empress Catherine wrote a self-justifying, self-serving memoir, based on comments from the majority of critics I had read about her. (I find most memoirs are self-serving.) Nevertheless, from an intellectual standpoint, I enjoyed the chance for Catherine to have her say. Roberto Cortez Gonzalez, Ph.D.

I've read about every powerful woman in history. Elizabeth the First is my favorite. Catherine the second. I knew that she kept diaries and so I searched for a book that was factual, though I'm sure much is lost in translation. The book provides her view of life minus the omission of her many sins and cruelties. I found myself lost in the past, experiencing what made this incredibly smart woman so successful. She was considered a beauty. It's clear that our concept of beauty has changed dramatically. What's really worth reading is her power politics. It's a slow read, but an interesting look at a remarkable and long historical period when a woman ruled a powerful nation.

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