

# Catherine the great: enlightened despot essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Catherine the Great of Russia was influenced largely by the French Enlightenment and considered herself an enlightened despot; she read the works of Montesquieu and Voltaire and accumulated a considerable amount of knowledge of the theory of government and politics (de Madariaga).

Since her reign in Russia, it has been debated whether or not her implementation of Enlightenment ideals was for the greater good of her country, or for her to protect her place in power and further her own selfish gains. During her time as Empress, she minimized Russia's connections with other European nations yet tried to Westernize her country, she attempted to create a progressive law code, she encouraged literacy and the publishing of books and she improved the lives of the nobility while decreasing the status and rights of serfs. But was Catherine the Great's emphasis on a "well-ordered state" (Fisher) meant to benefit her country or her own power? Author Isabel de Madariaga writes of Catherine the Great with a certain fondness and respect, starting her article with the line, " Since I first took Catherine seriously as a ruler, some forty years ago, I have grown to like her very much. " de Madariaga not only discusses what is known about Catherine's personal life, but her take on philosophy and politics. According to de Madariaga, Catherine was hardworking, had an affinity for learning and used her education to further her great country in ways that benefited the people of Russia. One way in which Catherine's enlightened view on politics dramatically helped Russian citizens was her sense of what the rule of law meant; " she drew her condemnation of torture in judicial proceedings in her Great Instruction: ' The innocent ought not to be tortured; and in the eye of the law every person is innocent whose crime is not yet proved.

” (de Madariaga) Catherine greatly decreased the amount of torture that was used on Russian criminals and she was the first ruler of Russia to demonstrate any sense of legality (de Madariaga). She also had a profound understanding of the importance of public opinion and the proceedings of Russia’s Assembly were public and its’ accounts and activities were published in public newspapers. De Madariaga attributes this to Catherine’s “ political courage, that a mere five years after seizing the throne, she did not fear that such a gathering might provide a focus for opposition to her rule. ” Other authors may argue that point and say that it wasn’t political courage but rather a play to keep the support of the nobility and the rich that made Catherine place her criminals on public trial. Simon Henderson argues that, “ the mutual reliance between Catherine and the nobility as reason for her tentative approach to social reform. ” Catherine relied on the nobility to secure her power; she knew that if she kept them happy, they would have no reason to want to overthrow her.

In his article, Henderson quotes liberal historian Alexander Herzen who “ accused the Empress of seeking merely power, not progress or improvement in social welfare...Catherine’s professions of enlightenment were a mere sham...Soviet historians have called her a hypocrite, proclaiming liberal and enlightened ideals on the one hand but practicing oppressive despotism on the other. ” These historians use the fact that Catherine’s reign saw the apogee of serfdom and that she turned over 800, 000 peasants to private proprietors. Slavery went against the ideas and values of the Enlightenment that Catherine so proudly stood behind. But by enslaving peasants, she no longer had to worry about controlling them - they were now being controlled

by the nobility who owned them. Catherine could now just focus on winning the likeness of the nobility and keeping them happy so they would support her. Another author who supports the idea that Catherine the Great wasn't so much "enlightened" as she was controlling, is Alan W.

Fisher, who focuses on the Muslim population in Russia under Catherine's rule. Catherine defined enlightened government as "well ordered government" and rather than use brute force she achieved policy and programs through bureaucratic means. Catherine avoided the use of force in dealing with internal ethnic and religious minorities (Fisher). She applied "enlightened" principles to gain the respect and support of Russian Muslims by assimilating them into society and therefore, controlling them.

Catherine wanted to keep peace and a well-ordered state and knew that the Muslim population was not going anywhere so she decided to control the relationship between the Russian state and Islam. This cooperation would ensure the Muslim support and help Catherine further her Empire. Catherine ordered the government to build mosques and "the Russian state thus was making moves toward establishing control over the Islamic community by recruiting its religious leaders for government service" (Fisher). Muslim schools were then instituted in conjunction with the mosques, "thus further extending Russian control over Islam" (Fisher).

"Russian government controlled the subject matter taught in all Muslim schools in the empire" (Fisher). Though this did bring harmony between the Russian state and Islam and cooperation from her Muslim people, Catherine arguably acted out of selfishness in order to preserve her power and to

complete a Russian consolidation of people. She was granting Muslims rights and education but in turn was controlling every aspect of their public lives. Catherine the Great has garnered praise and elicited strong and passionate condemnation over the years.

Isabel de Madariaga argues that Catherine ruled with the people in mind and what was good for the people also happened to be what was good for herself; the tone of her article is a bit more personal and takes a look at the woman and the ruler. Simon Henderson critiques Catherine's policies and even quotes historians who say that her enlightened ideals were a shame and she was a hypocrite only looking out for herself, but there is a sense of admiration for her in his writing as well. Alan W. Fisher focuses on her rule of the Muslim people and though it may not have been morally right, trying to control their religion, she Catherine assimilated a large group of people into Russian society without any bloodshed. Though they may disagree on her motives, all of the authors agree on one thing - that Catherine the Great navigated Russia through a very trying time in history and was an innovative and fearless leader.