Modern Eastern Europe
Catherine II, Russian in full YEKATERINA ALEKSEYEVNA, by name CATHERINE THE GREAT, original name SOPHIE FRIEDERIKE AUGUSTE, PRINZESSIN (princess) VON ANHALT-ZERBST (b. May 2, 1729, Stettin, Prussia - d. Nov. 17, 1796, Tsarskoye Selo, near St. Petersburg, Russia), German-born empress of Russia (1762-96), who led her country into full participation in the political and cultural life of Europe, carrying on the work begun by Peter the Great. With her ministers she reorganized the administration and law of the Russian Empire and extended Russian territory, adding the Crimea and much of Poland.

Origins and early experience. Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst was the daughter of an obscure German prince, Christian August von Anhalt-Zerbst, but she was related through her mother to the dukes of Holstein. At the age of 14 she was chosen to be the wife of Karl Ulrich, duke of Holstein Gottorp, grandson of Peter the Great and heir to the throne of Russia as the Grand Duke Peter. In 1744 Catherine arrived in Russia, assumed the title of Grand Duchess Catherine Alekseyevna, and married her young cousin the following year. The marriage was a complete failure; the following 18 years were filled with deception and humiliation for her.

Russia at the time was ruled by Peter the Great's daughter, the empress Elizabeth, whose 20-year reign greatly stabilized the monarchy. Devoted to much pleasure and luxury and greatly desirous of giving her court the brilliancy of a European court, Elizabeth prepared the way for Catherine. Catherine, however, would not have become empress if her husband had been at all normal. He was extremely neurotic, rebellious, obstinate, perhaps impotent, nearly alcoholic, and, most seriously, a fanatical worshipper of Frederick II of Prussia, the foe of the empress Elizabeth. Catherine, by contrast, was clear-headed and ambitious. Her intelligence, flexibility of character, and love of Russia gained her much support. She was humiliated, bored, and regarded with suspicion while at court, but she found comfort in reading extensively and in preparing herself for her future role as sovereign. Although a woman of little beauty, Catherine possessed considerable charm, a lively intelligence, and extraordinary energy. During her husband's lifetime alone, she had at least three lovers; if her hints are to be believed, none of her three children, not even the heir apparent Paul, was fathered by her husband. Her true passion, however, was ambition; since Peter was incapable of ruling, she saw quite early the possibility of eliminating him and governing Russia herself.

The empress Elizabeth died on Jan. 5, 1762, while Russia, allied with Austria and France, was engaged in the Seven Years' War against Prussia. Shortly after Elizabeth's death, Peter, now emperor, ended Russia's participation in the war and concluded an alliance with Frederick II of Prussia. He made no attempt to hide his hatred of Russia and his love of his native Germany; discrediting himself endlessly by his foolish actions, he also prepared to rid himself of his wife. Catherine had only to strike: she had the support of the army, especially the regiments at St. Petersburg, where Grigory Orlov, her lover, was stationed; the court; and public opinion in both capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg). She was also supported by the "enlightened" elements of aristocratic society, since she was known for her liberal opinions and admired as one of the most cultivated persons in Russia. On July 9, 1762, she led the regiments that had rallied to her cause into St. Petersburg and had herself proclaimed empress and autocrat in the Kazan Cathedral. Peter III abdicated and was assassinated eight days later. Although Catherine probably did not order the murder of Peter, it was committed by her supporters, and public opinion held her responsible. In September 1762, she was crowned with great ceremony in Moscow, the ancient capital of the tsars, and began a reign that was to span 34 years as empress of Russia under the title of Catherine II.
Early years as empress: Despite Catherine’s personal weaknesses, she was above all a ruler. Truly dedicated to her adopted country, she intended to make Russia a prosperous and powerful state. Since her early days in Russia she had dreamed of establishing a reign of order and justice, of spreading education, creating a court to rival Versailles, and developing a national culture that would be more than an imitation of French models. Her projects obviously were too numerous to carry out, even if she could have given her full attention to them.

Since her coup d’état and Peter’s suspicious death demanded both discretion and stability in her dealings with other nations, she continued to preserve friendly relations with Prussia, Russia’s old enemy, as well as with the country’s traditional allies, France and Austria. In 1764 she resolved the problem of Poland, a kingdom lacking definite boundaries and coveted by three neighboring powers, by installing one of her old lovers, Stanislaw Poniatowski, a weak man entirely devoted to her, as king of Poland.

Frustrated in her attempts at reform, Catherine seized the pretext of war with Turkey in 1768 to change her policy; henceforth, emphasis would be placed above all on national grandeur. Since the reign of Peter the Great, the Ottoman Empire had been the traditional enemy of Russia; inevitably, the war fired the patriotism and zeal of Catherine’s subjects. Although the naval victory at Cesme in 1770 brought military glory to the Empress, Turkey had not yet been defeated and continued fighting. At that point, Russia encountered unforeseen difficulties.

First, a terrible plague broke out in Moscow; along with the hardships imposed by the war, it created a climate of disaffection and popular agitation. In 1773 Yemelyan Pugachov, a former officer of the Don Cossacks, pretending to be the dead emperor Peter III, incited the greatest uprising of Russian history prior to the revolution of 1917. Starting in the Ural region, the movement spread rapidly through the vast southeastern provinces, and in June 1774 Pugachov’s Cossack troops prepared to march on Moscow. At this point, the war with Turkey ended in a Russian victory, and Catherine sent her crack troops to crush the rebellion. Defeated and captured, Pugachov was beheaded in 1775, but the terror and chaos he inspired were not soon forgotten. Catherine now realized that for her the people were more to be feared than pitied, and that, rather than freeing them, she must tighten their bonds.

Before her accession to power, Catherine had planned to emancipate the serfs, on whom the economy of Russia, which was 95 percent agricultural, was based. The serf was the property of the master, and the fortune of a noble was evaluated not in lands but in the “souls” he owned. When confronted with the realities of power, however, Catherine saw very quickly that emancipation of the serfs would never be tolerated by the owners, whom she depended upon for support, and who would throw the country into disorder once they lost their own means of support. Reconciling herself to an unavoidable evil without much difficulty, Catherine turned her attention to organizing and strengthening a system that she herself had condemned as inhuman. She imposed serfdom on the Ukrainians who had until then been free. By distributing the so-called crown lands to her favorites and ministers, she worsened the lot of the peasants, who had enjoyed a certain autonomy. At the end of her reign, there was scarcely a free peasant left in Russia, and, because of more systematized control, the condition of the serf was worse than it had been before Catherine’s rule.

Influence of Potemkin: In 1774, the year of Russia’s defeat of Turkey, Grigory Potemkin, who had distinguished himself in the war, became Catherine’s lover, and a brilliant career began for this official of the minor nobility, whose intelligence and abilities were equaled only by his ambition. He was to be the only one of Catherine’s favorites to play an extensive political role. Ordinarily, the Empress did not mix business and pleasure; her ministers were almost always selected for their abilities. In Potemkin she found an extraordinary man whom she could love and respect and with whom she could share her power. As minister he had unlimited powers, even after the end of their liaison, which lasted only two years. Potemkin must be given part of the credit for the somewhat extravagant splendor of Catherine’s reign. He had a conception of grandeur that escaped the rather pedestrian German princess, and he understood the effect it produced on the people. A great dreamer, he was avid for territories to conquer and provinces
to populate; an experienced diplomat with a knowledge of Russia that Catherine had not yet acquired and as audacious as Catherine was methodical, Potemkin was treated as an equal by the Empress up to the time of his death in 1791. They complemented and understood each other, and the ambitious minister expressed his respect for his sovereign through complete devotion to her interests.

The annexation of the Crimea from the Turks in 1783 was Potemkin's work. Through that annexation and the acquisition of the territories of the Crimean khanate, which extended from the Caucasus Mountains to the Bug River in southwestern Russia, Russia held the north shore of the Black Sea and was in a position to threaten the existence of the Ottoman Empire and to establish a foothold in the Mediterranean. Catherine also sought to renew the alliance with Austria, Turkey's neighbor and enemy, and renounced the alliance with Prussia and England, who were alarmed by Russian ambitions. Yet, during Catherine's reign, the country did not become involved in a European war, because the Empress scrupulously adhered to the territorial agreements she had concluded with several western European nations.

Catherine’s glorification reached its climax in a voyage to the Crimea arranged by Potemkin in 1787. In a festive Arabian Nights atmosphere, the Empress crossed the country to take possession of her new provinces; the Emperor of Austria, the King of Poland, and innumerable diplomats came to honor her and to enjoy the splendors of what became known as “Cleopatra’s fleet,” because Catherine and her court travelled partly by water. She dedicated new towns bearing her name and announced that she ultimately intended to proceed to Constantinople.

**Effects of the French Revolution:** Catherine, like all the crowned heads of Europe, felt seriously threatened by the French Revolution. Poland, encouraged by the example of France, began agitating for a liberal constitution. In 1792, under the pretext of forestalling the threat of revolution, Catherine sent in troops and the next year annexed most of the western Ukraine, while Prussia helped itself to large territories of western Poland. After the national uprising led by Tadeusz Kosciuszko in 1794, Catherine wiped Poland off the map of Europe by dividing it between Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795.

Catherine’s last years were darkened by the execution of Louis XVI, the advance of the revolutionary armies, and the spread of radical ideas. The Empress realized, moreover, that she had no suitable successor. She considered her son Paul an incompetent and unbalanced man; her grandson Alexander was too young yet to rule.

**Assessment.** Russians, even Soviet Russians, continue to admire Catherine, the German, the usurper and profligate, and regard her as a source of national pride. Non-Russian opinion of Catherine is less favorable. Because Russia under her rule grew strong enough to threaten the other great powers, and because she was in fact a harsh and unscrupulous ruler, she figured in the Western imagination as the incarnation of the immense, backward, yet forbidding country she ruled. One of Catherine’s principal glories is to have been a woman who, just as Elizabeth I of England and Queen Victoria gave their names to periods of history, became synonymous with a decisive epoch in the development of her country.

At the end of Catherine's reign, Russia had expanded westward and southward over an area of more than 200,000 square miles, and the Russian rulers’ ancient dream of access to the Bosporus Strait (connecting the Black Sea with the Aegean) had become an attainable goal. At the end of her reign Catherine claimed that she had reorganized 29 provinces under her administrative reform plan. An uninhibited spender, she invested funds in many projects. More than a hundred new towns were built; old ones were expanded and renovated. As commodities were plentiful, trade expanded and communications developed. These achievements, together with the glory of military victories and the fame of a brilliant court, to which the greatest minds of Europe were drawn, have won her a distinguished place in history.

Catherine’s critics acknowledge her energy and administrative ability but point out that the achievements of her reign were as much due to her associates and to the unaided, historical development of Russian society as to the merits of the Empress. And when they judge Catherine the woman, they treat her severely.
Her private life was admittedly not exemplary. She had young lovers up to the time of her unexpected death from a stroke at the age of 67. After the end of her liaison with Potemkin, who perhaps was her morganatic husband, the official favorite changed at least a dozen times; she chose handsome and insignificant young men, who were only, as one of them himself said, “kept girls.” Although in reality devoted to power above all else, she dreamed endlessly of the joys of a shared love, but her position isolated her. She did not love her son Paul, the legitimate heir, whose throne she occupied. On the other hand, she adored her grandsons, particularly the eldest, Alexander, whom she wished to succeed her. In her friendships she was loyal and generous and usually showed mercy toward her enemies.

Yet it cannot be denied that she was also egotistical, pretentious, and extremely domineering, above all a woman of action, capable of being ruthless when her own interest or that of the state was at stake. As she grew older she also became extremely vain: there was some excuse, as the most distinguished minds of Europe heaped flatteries on her that even she ultimately found exaggerated. A friend of Voltaire and Diderot, she carried on an extensive correspondence with most of the important personages of her time. She was a patron of literature and a promoter of Russian culture; she herself wrote, established literary reviews, encouraged the sciences, and founded schools. Her interests and enthusiasms ranged from construction projects to lawmaking and the collection of art objects; she touched on everything, not always happily but always passionately. She was a woman of elemental energy and intellectual curiosity, desiring to create as well as to control.

Excerpts from Catherine the Great, Portrait of a Woman
By Robert K. Massie

Chapter 43 - “Dura!” (Fool)

No one knows exactly when the plot to remove Peter III from the throne first took shape in Catherine’s mind. As Peter’s consort, she had become empress of Russia. Politically, however, this meant little; from the beginning of her husband’s reign, her position was one of isolation and humiliation. “It does not appear that the empress is much consulted,” Ambassador Keith reported to London, adding that he and his fellow diplomats “think it not the likeliest way of succeeding to make any direct or particular address to her Imperial Majesty.”

Breteuil, the French “ambassador, wrote, “The empress is abandoned to grief and dark forebodings. Those who know her say she is scarcely recognizable.”

Her position was particularly delicate since she was pregnant. With her physical activity severely restricted, there was little she could do to lead, or even encourage, the overthrow of her husband. The more she examined her situation; the greater appeared the risks, and she concluded that her best course was to withdraw completely from court life, do nothing, and wait to see how Peter managed his role as emperor. Catherine never gave up her ambition; instead, she simply allowed it to be guided by patience.

As she had imagined might happen, Peter’s errors and the insults he heaped upon her made her more popular. On February 21, 1762, Peter’s birthday, Catherine was forced to pin the ribbon of the Order of St. Catherine on Elizabeth Vorontsova’s gown, an honor previously conferred only on empresses and grand duchesses. Everyone understood that this was intended as a public insult to Catherine, and it won her increased sympathy. Breteuil, the French ambassador, wrote, “The empress bears the emperor’s conduct and the arrogance of Vorontsova nobly” A month later he reported that she was “putting a manly face on her troubles; she is as much loved and respected as the emperor is hated and despised.” One factor in Catherine’s favor was that the court and the foreign ambassadors all regarded the emperor’s choice of a mistress—not now the presumed empress-to-be—as farcical. Breteuil described Elizabeth Vorontsova as “having the appearance and manners of a pot-house wench.” Another observer described her “broad, puffy, pock-marked face and fat, squat, shapeless figure.” A third reported that “she was ugly, common and stupid.” Everyone who tried to understand her appeal to the emperor failed.

In her secluded apartment, Catherine’s third child, Gregory Orlov’s son, was born in secrecy on April 11, 1762. Named Alexis Gregorovich (son of Gregory) and later titled Count Bobrinskoy, the infant
was swaddled in soft beaver skin and spirited out of the palace to be cared for by the wife of Vasily Shkurin, Catherine’s faithful valet. Shkurin himself was responsible for the ruse that ensured that the birth would not be noticed. Knowing that the emperor loved fires, Shkurin waited until Catherine’s contractions became severe and then set fire to his own house in the city, trusting that Peter and many in the court would rush to watch the blaze. His guess was correct, the fire spread to other houses, and Catherine was left alone with a midwife to bear her child.

On June 12, 1762, Peter left St. Petersburg for Oranienbaum to drill his fourteen hundred Holstein soldiers before sending them off to war. Rumors of restlessness in the capital reached him, but his only precautionary response was to order Catherine to leave the city. He instructed her to take herself not to Oranienbaum, where she had spent sixteen summers: (Oranienbaum was now the domain of Vorontsova. the empress-to-be) but to Peterhof, six miles away. Meanwhile, the Orlov brothers, circulating among the Guards, speeded the flow of money and wine to the men in the barracks - all of these good things passed out in the name of the Empress Catherine. Panin, the Orlovs, and Dashkova understood that the crisis was near.

On the morning of Friday June 28, Catherine was asleep in Peter the Great’s small waterside pavilion of Mon Plaisir in the gardens of Peterhof. At five o clock the empress was awakened by a maidservant. The next moment Alexis Orlov, arriving from St Petersburg quietly entered the room and whispered, “Matushka, Little Mother wake - up!” The time has come! You must get up and come with me! Everything is ready for your proclamation!”

Startled, Catherine sat up in bed “What do you mean?” she asked. “Passek is arrested,” Orlov explained. Wordlessly, the empress arose and put on a simple black dress. Without arranging her hair or powdering her face she accompanied Orlov out the door and through the gardens to the road where his hired carriage was waiting. Catherine got in, accompanied by her maid and her servant Shkurin, while Orlov sat up on the box next to the driver. Halfway to the city, they met Catherine’s hairdresser on his way to Peterhof to prepare her hair for the day. The empress turned him around, saying that she would not need him. Then, nearing the capital they encountered another carriage bringing Gregory Orlov and Prince Bariatinsky to meet them. Gregory took Catherine and Alexis into his carriage and drove directly to the barracks of the Izmailovsky Guards.

It was nine in the morning when they reached the barracks courtyard. Gregory Orlov leaped from the carriage and ran to announce Catherine’s arrival. A drummer boy came tumbling out a door, followed by a dozen soldiers, some half-dressed, others fastening on their sword belts. They pressed around Catherine, kissed her hands, feet, and the hem of her black dress. To a gathering, larger crowd of soldiers, the empress said that her life and that of her son had been threatened by the emperor, but that it was not for her own sake, but for that of her beloved country and their holy Orthodox religion that she was compelled to throw herself on their protection. The response was enthusiastic. Kyril Razumovsky, the regiment’s popular colonel and Catherine’s supporter, arrived, bent his knee before the empress, and kissed her hand. On the spot, the regimental chaplain, holding a cross before him, administered an oath of allegiance to “Catherine II of Russia.” It was the beginning.

Surrounded by a cheering crowd, with church bells ringing across the city, the empress walked down the Nevsky Prospect to the Winter Palace. There, an obstacle arose. The senior regiment of the Guards, the Preobrazhensky, had wavered. The majority of the soldiers favored Catherine, but some of the officers, having sworn an oath to defend the emperor, were uncertain. After a debate among themselves, the soldiers buckled on their swords, snatched up their muskets, tore off their tight-fitting Prussian uniforms, and dressed in as many of their old bottle-green jackets as they could find. Then, more like a mob than a military body, they hurried to the Winter Palace, which they found surrounded and guarded by the Izmailovsky and Semyonovsky regiments. The Preobrazhenskys shouted to Catherine,”Matushka, forgive us for coming last. Our officers held us back and, to prove our zeal, we have arrested four of them. We wish the same thing as our brothers.” The empress responded by nodding, smiling, and sending the archbishop of Novgorod to administer the oath of allegiance to “Catherine II of Russia.” It was the beginning.

Soon after the empress entered the Winter Palace, an older man and a young boy, still in his nightdress, arrived. It was Panin, holding Paul in his arms. On the palace balcony, Catherine presented her eight-year-old son to the crowd as heir to the throne. At this moment, Panin abandoned his thought that Catherine should act as regent for a boy emperor; Catherine now was God’s anointed, the sovereign autocrat.
After this tumultuous, triumphant day, Catherine was exhausted, but, sustained by excitement and ambition; she decided to finish what she had begun. A strong force of the Guards pledged to her must march to Oranienbaum to arrest Peter III. Here, Catherine made another dramatic decision: she would lead this march herself. First, she had herself proclaimed colonel of the Preobrazhensky Guards; this was the traditional privilege and rank of a Russian sovereign. Borrowing different parts of the bottle-green Preobrazhensky uniform from various obliging young officers, she dressed and put on one of their black, three-cornered hats crowned with oak leaves. Still, one piece of equipment was missing. A twenty-two-year-old subaltern of the Horse Guards rode out of the ranks to hand to the empress the sword knot her uniform was lacking. His officers frowned on the impertinence, but his proud, confident bearing pleased the empress, who accepted the gift with a smile. She asked his name; it was Gregory Potemkin. His face, his name, and his action would not be forgotten.

That morning of June 28, even as Catherine was being proclaimed Autocrat of All the Russias in the Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg, Peter III, wearing his blue Prussian uniform, was drilling his Holstein soldiers on the parade ground at Oranienbaum. This concluded, he ordered six large carriages to carry him and his entourage to Peterhof, where, he had informed Catherine, he would celebrate his name day, the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul.

In high spirits, the company arrived at Peterhof at two in the afternoon. The carriages pulled up in front of the Mon Plaisir pavilion, where Catherine was supposed to be waiting to congratulate her consort on his name day. When they arrived, the doors and windows were tightly closed and no one came out to greet them. No one, in fact, was there at all except a frightened servant, who could tell them only that the empress had left early that morning and that he did not know where she had gone. Refusing to believe what he had seen and been told, Peter rushed inside the empty house, running from room to room, peeping under beds, lifting mattresses, and finding nothing except the gala dress laid out the night before for Catharine to wear at Peter’s name day celebration. Infuriated that Catherine had spoiled his moment and his day, he screamed at Vorontsova, “Didn’t I always tell you she was capable of anything?”

That afternoon at Peterhof was warm and sunny, and the lesser members of Peter’s entourage remained on the terraces near the cool spray of the fountains or wandered through the gardens under the cloudless summer sky. Peter and his primary counselors gathered near the main canal, where Peter paced back and forth, listening to advice. An officer was sent to Oranienbaum to order the Holstein regiments stationed there to march to Peterhof, where, Peter declared, he would defend himself to the death. Peter climbed down into a small boat and was rowed toward the fortress to command that the boom be raised. The young officer on duty on the ramparts shouted down that the boat should keep away or he would open fire. Peter stood up, throwing aside his cloak in order to display his uniform and the broad blue ribbon of the Order of St. Andrew “Don’t you know me?” he shouted. “I am your emperor!”

“We no longer have an emperor!” came the reply. “Long live the Empress Catherine II! She is now our empress and we have orders to admit nobody within these walls. Another move forward and we fire!” Frightened, Peter hurried back to the galley, clambered aboard, and rushed into the stern cabin, where he collapsed into the arms of Elizabeth Vorontsova. Munnich took charge and gave the order to steer for the mainland. At four in the morning the galley reached Oranienbaum, which he considered safer than Peterhof.

On disembarking, Peter learned that the empress, at the head of a large military force, was marching toward him. Hearing this, he gave up. He dismissed everyone. In tears, he told Goltz to go back to St. Petersburg because he could no longer protect him. He sent away as many of the women as the carriages could hold, but Elizabeth Vorontsova refused to abandon him. He lay down on a couch, refusing to speak. A little later, he sat up, sent for pen and paper, and wrote a letter to Catherine in French, apologizing for his behavior toward her, promising to do better, and offering to share his throne with her. He gave this letter to the vice-chancellor, Prince Alexander Golitsyn, to deliver to his wife.

At five o’lock in the morning, twenty four hours after Alexis Orlov had awakened her at Mon Plasir, Catherine and her army had resumed their march. On the road to Peterhof, Prince Golitsyn met Catherine and handed her Peter’s letter. Reading it, and understanding that it offered only half of what she already possessed, she remarked that the welfare of the state now demanded other measures and that there
would be no reply. Golitsyn’s immediate response was to take the oath of allegiance to Catherine as empress.

After waiting in vain for a reply to his first letter, Peter wrote a second, this time offering to abdicate if he could take Elizabeth Vorontsova with him to Holstein. Catherine told his new messenger, General Izmailov, “I accept the offer but I must have the abdication in writing.” Izmajlov returned to Peter and, finding the despairing emperor sitting with his head in his hands, said to him, “You see, the empress wants to be friendly with you, and if you will voluntarily resign the Imperial crown, you may retire to Holstein unmolested.” Peter signed an abdication written in the most abject terms. He declared himself entirely responsible for the decay of the realm during his reign and utterly incapable of ruling. “I, Peter, of my own free will hereby solemnly declare, not only to the whole Russian empire, but also to the whole world, that I forever renounce the throne of Russia to the end of my days. Nor will I ever seek to recover the same at any time or by anybody’s assistance, and I swear this before God.” The six-month reign of Peter III was over. Years later, Frederick the Great said, “He allowed himself to be dethroned like a child being sent to bed.”

Chapter 52 – Poland

For two years after Stanislaus Poniatowski had been summarily sent home from Russia by Empress Elizabeth in 1758, Catherine had remained emotionally tied to her former lover, the Polish nobleman. She had written to him often as the father of her little Anna, and had tried to secure his recall as ambassador to St. Petersburg. Then she met Gregory Orlov, a man less polished but with greater self-assurance, strength, and drive. Catherine and Stanislaus still corresponded, and their letters were filled with mutual expressions of affection - indeed, the warmth of their language led Poniatowski to consider himself permanently bound to Catherine. The grand duchess, however, was not telling him the whole truth. She managed to omit from her letters details of her affair with Gregory Orlov, including her pregnancy and the birth of her child Bobrinskoy by Orlov. If Stanislaus learned about Gregory from other sources, he persuaded himself that this raw, uneducated soldier could not be anything more than an infatuation. And once Catherine had taken the throne and her husband was dead, he put Orlov out of his mind and counted the days until she called him back to her side.

Catherine’s letter to Stanislaus still said nothing about her intimate relationship with Gregory Orlov, but she did praise him and his four brothers:

[The coup was] in the hands of the brothers Orlov...[who] shone by their art of leadership, their prudent daring, by the care introduced in small details, by their presence of mind and authority.. Enthusiastically patriotic and honest, passionately attached to me and my friends... there are five of them in all... the eldest of whom [in fact, Gregory was the second]... used to follow me everywhere and committed innumerable follies... His passion for me was openly acknowledged and that is why he undertook what he did..... I have great obligations to them.

These letters stunned Stanislaus. A desire to wear the Polish crown had never excited him. He did not want to be a king; he did not even wish to live in Poland. Considering himself a European sophisticate, he found that he had little in common with the rough, unruly Polish aristocracy, which rejected all authority except its own and would turn against any elected king at the first sign of a threat to its privileges. If he was to be near a throne, he saw himself more in the role of a prince consort, helping an empress to civilize her empire, than as the ruler of a country in which he had always felt a stranger. Accordingly, Catherine’s plan, which would have stranded him on a throne in Poland, had no appeal.

Catherine, however, had three reasons for terminating their personal relationship and making him king: she wanted to make certain that he was permanently disengaged from her personal life; this achieved, she wanted to compensate him for removing herself from his reach; and, more important, she wanted, through him, to dominate Poland. Her letters to her former lover grew cooler. She stopped making a secret of her relationship to Orlov. Stanislaus still believed that his physical presence would reignite her passion for him. He implored that he be allowed to come to Russia, at least for a few months, or even a few weeks. Catherine said no.

Stanislaus refused to accept or even to comprehend his rejection. In his mind, he still carried a picture of a lonely woman coping with the problems of an enormous empire, a woman who desperately needed his
help. A more rational man might have seen that Catherine was telling him that she had another lover whose place in her life and contribution to her success had raised him far above himself. Only gradually, Stanislaus grasped this bitter fact, and that the crown of Poland was to be his consolation. He responded with a final, despairing cry.

His appeal was wasted. Catherine had made up her mind. It would be useful to have a man who loved her on the Polish throne, and it was even more convenient that this man was poor and that the Polish crown paid only a pittance. This would ensure that he would always need money and be dependent on her. Stanislaus, although wearing the robes of a king, would become a pawn on the Polish chessboard. The most powerful piece on the board would be a queen—in this case, an empress. Given her former lover’s submissive character and disinterest in the bruising business of royal politics, Catherine was certain that it would be only a matter of time before Poland fell completely under Russian influence.

When news of the Russian-Prussian decision in favor of Stanislaus traveled to foreign capitals, it was widely assumed that the empress wanted to make her former lover king of Poland in order to marry him later and then incorporate his kingdom into her empire. Although the announcement raised the danger of antagonizing both Austria and France, neither of these states—both, like Prussia, weakened by war—was prepared to fight over the Polish succession. This did not mean that they approved of Catherine’s plan. France lodged its protest through its ally, Turkey, Poland’s southern neighbor. French diplomats in Constantinople lost no time in pointing out to the sultan and the grand vizier the danger of having a young, unmarried man on the throne of Poland, one whom the Russian empress had already had as a lover and might well choose as a husband if the marriage settlement brought her territory west of the Dnieper. Skillfully planted, these anxieties quickly took root. In June 1764, the grand vizier sent a note to St. Petersburg declaring that his country was willing to recognize the Russo-Prussian alliance, and also to approve the election of a native king to the Polish throne, but objected to the person of Stanislaus on the grounds that he was too young, too inexperienced, and, above all, unmarried.

In Poland, the Czartoryskis, Stanislaus’s family, accepted the logic of Turkey’s objections. They proposed a solution: the king-to-be would marry preferably a Polish Catholic girl—alax thirty-two, he was well past the age when most eligible young noblemen were married. They pressed their nephew to do this before election day in the Diet. All parties—Catherine, his family, the Turks, and, behind them, the French—now had a common goal: to force Poniatowski to promise that he would marry only with the approval of the Diet and that he would select a Polish Catholic wife. Stanislaus refused, declaring that no one could force him to become king on these terms and that he would rather forfeit the crown.

Ultimately, it was Catherine who forced a decision on him. Stanislaus received an official message from the Russian foreign ministry in St. Petersburg telling him that it was essential that, before the opening of the election Diet, he marry, or at least select a bride. He realized that the message must have been approved by Catherine. Understanding, finally, that he had lost the woman he loved, he surrendered and signed a declaration that he would never marry anyone other than a Roman Catholic, and then only with the approval of the Polish Diet. He was sufficiently practical, however, to write to Catherine that if she wanted to make him a king, she must provide the money for him to live up to this position. She sent him money. His promise to marry calmed Turkish fears, and the election was allowed to proceed.

Once Stanislaus agreed, Catherine sent the Russian army to help him keep his promise. Fourteen thousand Russian troops surrounded Warsaw to “keep the peace” and “guarantee a free and tranquil election.” Some Poles talked of armed resistance and appealing for foreign assistance, but most Diet members were too pleased by the prospect of a native king to oppose Russian intervention. The “free election” took place by voice vote on a summer day, August 26, 1764, in an open field outside Warsaw where members of the Diet, standing in the meadow grass, had a good view of the large Russian military camp nearby Stanislaus was elected, and, as he wrote afterward, “The election was unanimous and tranquil.” He was now King Stanislaus II Augustus of Poland, and, as it turned out, he had become the last king of Poland. Catherine’s former lover, who had dreamed of becoming her husband, became her royal vassal. In St. Petersburg, a relieved empress of Russia saluted the event by sending a note to Panin: “My congratulations on the new king we have made.”

**Chapter 54 - The First Partition of Poland and the First Turkish War**
Catherine was pleased. Stanislaus’s election as king had been a triumph for her, if not for Poland or for Stanislaus. Her victory however, led to an optimistic view of her ability to influence Polish affairs. Two years later, by attempting to force the Diet to alter policies on the issue of Polish “dissidents,” she opened the door to adversity and war.

The “dissident issue” was the official terminology applied to the conflicted status of various religious minorities in predominantly Roman Catholic Poland. These minorities—the Russian Orthodox population in the eastern third of the country, and hundreds of thousands of Protestant Lutherans in the north—had been actively harassed in their religious practices and had been denied most political rights. They were not permitted to elect deputies to the Diet or to occupy high administrative and military posts. For years, their leaders had looked abroad for help: Orthodox believers to Russia; the Protestants to Prussia. Their continuing troubles and recurrent appeals for protection gave Russia and Prussia another common interest in Poland and a further pretext for interference in Polish internal affairs.

Three months after Stanislaus’s election to the Polish throne, the Russian ambassador, Prince Nicholas Repnin, informed the new king that the empress would not permit the reforms in Poland for which the Czartoryskis and other powerful noblemen were asking—abolition of the liberum veto, making the crown hereditary, an increase in the army—until they made concessions to religious minorities: Orthodox and Protestant believers must be allowed to worship in their own churches and to take part in the public life and government of the community Stanislaus agreed to raise the dissident issue in the next Diet. Antidissident agitation flared immediately, fanned by ardent Catholic churchmen. Both sides were unyielding. By demanding political rights for religious minorities, Catherine was imposing demands on a fervently Catholic people who would rather fight than suffer the slightest alteration of their faith or infringement of their privileges. Religion was the overriding national issue; a threat to the Catholic faith reminded every Pole that he was a patriot.

Frederick of Prussia was happy to stand aside in Catherine’s struggle with the king and the Diet, and to devote himself to fomenting discontent in the Protestant areas of northern Poland. This served to strengthen the resistance of Polish Catholics to all foreign intervention and make Catherine’s effort more difficult. With members of the Diet obdurate and sullen, with Catholic bishops thundering against the wickedness of the dissenters, with some members of the nobility arming their followers, Catherine saw no alternative except to send more Russian troops into Poland. When the next Diet met in October 1767, Warsaw was occupied by a Russian army Repnin surrounded the Diet building with soldiers and placed some of them inside the Diet chamber to ensure that members voted as he instructed them.

Members looked to their king to protest, but Stanislaus accepted Repnin’s demands, whereupon they accused the king of betraying his country to the Russians. On November 7, 1767, the Diet, with multiple absentees, with Russian bayonets gleaming everywhere, and finding no one to rally behind, grudgingly submitted and agreed to equal rights for “dissidents.” Catherine and Repnin, however, were not finished. In February 1768, they forced the signing of a Polish- Russian treaty of alliance that confirmed the granting of liberty of worship to dissenting minorities and committed the king not to attempt any change in the Polish constitution without Russian consent.

Apprehension caused by events in Poland spread across Europe. Monarchs and statesmen, already astonished by the success of the former Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst in making herself an empress, now watched as she turned her lover into a king and extended Russian influence over his new kingdom. The Turks, neighbors of both Poland and Russia, were greatly alarmed by the growing increase in Russian military power in Poland, which Turkey had assumed would remain a permanently weak buffer state. Russian troops now were in a position to advance down the Dnieper, the Bug, and the Dniester and threaten the Turkish Balkan provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia. If they reached and crossed the Danube, they could threaten the city of Constantinople itself France, Turkey’s traditional ally, was also eager to curtail Russia’s growing influence in Poland. It was, therefore, not difficult for French diplomats in Constantinople to convince the sultan and the grand vizier that Russian expansion must be checked and that the wisest course would be to declare war before the Russians were ready. French bribes made this case persuasive in Constantinople. Turkey now needed only a pretext. An ideal casus belli presented itself in October 1768. Russian troops, fighting Poles in southeastern Poland, pursued them over the border into Turkish territory. The Ottoman Empire responded by issuing an ultimatum to the Russian ambassador, demanding that all Russian troops be removed not only from Turkish territory but from all of Poland. When the Russian ambassador refused even to communicate this demand to St. Petersburg, the Turks escorted him to the Seven Towers and locked him up—the Ottoman protocol for declaring war.
Frederick II, following these events from Berlin, clapped his hand to his head and groaned, “Good God, what does one have to endure to make a king of Poland?”

In the spring of 1769, Russian troops occupied and fortified Azov and Taganrog, which Peter the Great had conquered and subsequently, in 1711, had been forced to return to the Turks. Control of these ports and their fortresses meant command of the mouth of the Don, where the river enters the Sea of Azov. The Russians then took Kerch, at the point where the Sea of Azov meets the Black Sea, providing access to the Black Sea itself. Meanwhile, a Russian army of eighty thousand, using Poland as its base, advanced south into the Turkish provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia. General Peter Rumyantsev’s forces occupied all of Moldavia and much of Wallachia up to the Danube. In 1770, Rumyantsev led 40,000 men across the Dniester and inflicted two devastating defeats on larger Turkish armies. At the Battle of Larga, on July 7, he defeated 70,000 Turks, and at the Battle of Kagul, on July 21, he routed 150,000 Rumyantsev was promoted to field marshal. Watching from St. Petersburg, an overjoyed Catherine boasted to Voltaire that “at the risk of repeating myself or becoming a bore, I have nothing to report to you but victories.” The empress met almost daily with her war council and constantly sent long letters of appreciation and encouragement to her generals. Officers on leave were entertained at the Winter Palace, and at every military parade in the capital, the empress appeared in the uniform of one of the regiments of which she was honorary colonel.

From the first months of the war, Catherine was also looking for ways to use her navy to fight the Turks. Russia had no Black Sea fleet because the Russian empire possessed no foothold on that body of water. Peter the Great had constructed a Baltic fleet, but it had been allowed by his successors to fall into decay. Early in her reign, Catherine had begun to rehabilitate this fleet by repairing old ships, constructing new ones, and asking the British government to permit her to hire some experienced Royal Navy officers. A number of British captains had been recruited, including Captains Samuel Greig and John Elphinstone, both of whom were given the rank of rear admiral and paid twice the salaries they had received in their own navy.

Catherine wished to put this fleet and these officers to use. When, at a meeting of the war council, Gregory Orlov wondered aloud whether this weapon could be employed in the Mediterranean to attack the Turks from the rear, Catherine was interested. It was a daring concept that would involve sending a large part of the Russian navy completely around the ocean periphery of the European continent. The fleet would sail down the Baltic, across the North Sea, through the English Channel, past the coasts of France, Spain, and Portugal, through the Strait of Gibraltar, and into the eastern Mediterranean, carrying the flag of the Russian empress into the Aegean Sea. To make this strategy work, however, Catherine would need the support of a friendly European power. Again, she approached England, and again Whitehall consented. When Russians were fighting Turks—so the British government reasoned—they were also fighting France, which was Turkey’s traditional ally. And anything that might damage France, England’s permanent enemy, would always be approved in London. Accordingly, Britain offered facilities to the Russian fleet to rest, resupply, and carry out repairs in the English naval harbors of Hull and Portsmouth, and again at Gibraltar and Minorca in the Mediterranean.

The island of Chios lies off Turkish Anatolia, and in the waters of Chios on June 25, a Turkish admiral commanding sixteen ships of the line saw an unexpected sight: fourteen large ships flying the white ensign with the blue cross of St. Andrew—the naval flag of Russia—approaching in line of battle.

The result was annihilation; fifteen Turkish ships of the line were destroyed, and only one escaped. Nine thousand Turkish seamen died—and thirty Russians. Chesme Bay was an astonishing achievement for a fleet and a nation with no naval reputation. The victory allowed Orlov, who now saw himself as the liberator of the Orthodox Greeks, to move his fleet at will around the Aegean, attempting to persuade the Greeks to rise against their Turkish overlords. Lacking the active support of an ally with a land army, he failed. For a while he blockaded the Dardanelles. By autumn, the Russian crews were suffering from dysentery and the fleet withdrew to winter quarters in Leghorn. In the spring, Orlov was ordered to sail for home. He returned to a hero’s welcome. Kneeling before Catherine, he received the Order of St. George. Russia’s surprising 1770 successes—the advance of Russian armies to the Black Sea and the Danube, the presence of a Russian fleet in the Mediterranean, and the total destruction of the Turkish fleet at Chesme—struck Europe with an astonishment heavily freighted with alarm. The rapid expansion of Russian power began to worry her friends as well as her enemies. One of these was Catherine’s ally Frederick of Prussia, who took little pleasure in imagining Catherine’s permanent domination of all of Poland. Neither Prussia nor Austria liked the prospect of Russia reaching deep into the Balkans or the
idea of a Russian seizure of Constantinople. On the other hand, neither Frederick nor Maria Theresa saw how to prevent Russia from achieving these goals. Thus, although Frederick congratulated Catherine (“I cannot keep writing to you for every victory; I shall wait till there are half a dozen”), the last thing he desired was a wider war, which might bring in France and Austria against Russia and, therefore, require the participation of Prussia as Catherine’s ally in the fighting. In the 1764 treaty, Prussia had pledged to come to Catherine’s aid if Russia were attacked. In the present war, Turkey was clearly the aggressor, and, as a result, Prussia was already sending financial subsidies to Russia. But now Austria, alarmed by Russian penetration of the Balkans, was threatening to ally herself with the Turks. If this led to war, Russia would demand that Prussia fulfill her further treaty obligation, and he, Frederick, would have to fight Austria for the third time in his life. By now, Frederick had had enough of war. At fifty-five, he had already fought two wars against Austria to add Silesia to his kingdom; now the province was his and he had no wish to fight for it again. He preferred diplomacy. Poland’s independence was tottering; the Russian ambassador was already the de facto ruler of the kingdom, and it was only a matter of time before Catherine swallowed the country completely. To prevent this and do it peacefully Frederick scrambled to find a solution that might satisfy all three of Poland’s powerful neighbors. Suppose Prussia, Austria, and Russia could be appeased by each taking an area of the crumbling state? If Catherine would consent to take only the eastern, predominantly Orthodox, part of Poland, and Frederick took only what he wanted in the Protestant northwest, then Austria might be satisfied with the extensive Catholic-populated territory in the south. He was certain that if the three powers could agree on this plan, no one else in Europe could resist such a combination of power—not the Turks or the French, and certainly not the Poles.

At the heart of this cynical appeal to Poland’s neighbors to cooperate in joint aggrandizement was the territorial prize Frederick wanted for himself: East Prussia was physically separated from the rest of his Hohenzollern possessions. For years, Frederick had hoped to remedy this flaw by acquiring the Polish Baltic coastal territories that split his country.

By December, Frederick and the empress were seriously discussing Frederick’s proposal for the partition of Poland. Would Catherine agree to lower her demands for territorial cessions by a defeated Turkey in exchange for permanent territorial gains in Poland? Catherine pondered the question; savoring her military and naval victories, she was reluctant to compromise. After all, Russia was the only power actually at war with Turkey; it was she who was fighting and had defeated the Turks. Further, having invested so much effort and money in Polish affairs, she would have preferred, through Stanislaus, to make all Poland a permanent Russian satellite. As she considered her situation, however, she became more amenable. She realized that neither her ally Prussia nor an increasingly hostile Austria was likely to allow her to make sweeping Balkan acquisitions at Turkey’s expense. In the back of her mind, she feared that Austria and France might enter the war as Turkey’s allies; for months now, both Austria and France had been sending help in the form of money and military advisers to the confederates in Poland. Further, she realized that the deep permanent hatred between Orthodox and Catholic Poles was probably going to make Poland an endless military and financial drain. Finally, she knew that for many Russians, including leaders and believers of the Orthodox Church, bringing the Orthodox population of Poland under Russian protection would be enthusiastically welcomed, and that this would be sufficient to quiet those who had wanted more.

In March, soon after his brother returned to Berlin, Frederick wrote to Catherine suggesting that, in view of Austria’s aggression, perhaps it would be appropriate if Prussia and Russia simply followed her example and took what they wanted. In mid-May the Prussian minister in St. Petersburg reported to Berlin that the empress had consented to a partition of Poland.

In what came to be called the First Partition of Poland, the crumbling state lost almost a third of its territory and more than a third of its population. Russia’s share was the largest in territory 36,000 square miles, comprising all of eastern Poland as far as the Dnieper River and the whole course of the river Dvina flowing north toward the Baltic. This area, known as White Russia (now a part of the independent nation of Belorussia) had a population of 800,000 people, primarily of Russian stock with Russian identity, traditions, and religion. Prussia’s slice of Poland was the smallest, both in area and population: 13,000 square miles, with 600,000 people, predominantly German and Protestant. Frederick was satisfied, at least at that moment. By acquiring the Baltic enclaves of West Prussia and Polish Pomerania, he achieved his goal of uniting his kingdom geographically, stitching the separated province of East Prussia onto Brandenburg, Silesia, and other Prussian territories in Germany. Austria took a substantial piece of southern Poland.
27,000 square miles, including the greater part of Galicia. Maria Theresa acquired the largest number of new subjects: 2,700,000 Poles, overwhelmingly Catholic. A few Poles resisted this aggression, but against the strength of three major powers, they had little success. England, France, Spain, Sweden, and the pope condemned the partition, but no European state was prepared to go to war on behalf of Poland. Catherine’s intervention in Poland was successful. She had returned Russia’s frontier to the great trade route of the Dnieper. Two million Orthodox believers could profess their faith unhindered. But she still had important objectives in her war with Turkey. The fact that Russia’s western frontier had been brought back to the Dnieper did not mean the opening of that great water route to the Black Sea, because the Turks still controlled the estuary where the river flowed into the sea. Catherine meant to free this river mouth. The war with Turkey continued.

The year 1771 had produced a disappointment on the battlefields. On the Danube, Russian generals had been unable to follow up their victories of 1770. Even though General Vasily Dolgoruky had stormed into the Crimea and overrun the peninsula, this had not inclined the sultan to make peace. Three years of stalemate and frustration followed. Not until the end of 1773 did Russian prospects brighten. In December, Sultan Mustapha III died and was succeeded by his brother, Abdul Hamid. The new sultan, recognizing the unprofitability as well as the danger of continuing the war, decided to end it. Catherine prompted him with a new offensive on the Danube. In June 1774, Rumyantsev crossed the Danube with fifty-five thousand men. On June 9, fifty miles south of the river, a night bayonet attack by eight thousand Russians on forty thousand Turks broke the Turkish lines and led to a crushing Russian victory at Kozludzhi. The grand vizier, fearing that nothing could stop the Russians from reaching Constantinople, sued for peace. Rumyantsev opened direct negotiations in the field, and he and the grand vizier agreed to terms. On July To, 1774, in an obscure Bulgarian village, the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardzhi was signed. Rumyantsev immediately sent his son to St. Petersburg with the news, and on July 23, Catherine hurried out of a concert to receive it. The treaty brought Russia greater gains than she had dared to hope for. Catherine traded her conquests on the Danube for more important acquisitions on the Black Sea coast. The Balkan provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia were restored to Turkey. In exchange, Catherine gained the transfer to Russia of Azov, Taganrog, and Kerch, which provided unfettered access to the Black Sea. Farther west, she acquired the southern delta of the Dnieper River, and the mouth of the river itself, giving her empire another vital outlet to the Black Sea. Although the west bank of the river’s broad estuary still retained the massive Turkish fortress at Ochakov, the Russians now had a fort and port at Kinburn on the east bank, and the estuary was large enough to permit Russian commercial navigation and the unhindered construction of Russian warships. The peace terms also included the ending of the sultan’s political sovereignty over the Crimean Peninsula, where a Tatar khanate under Turkish protection had existed for centuries. The Crimean Tatars were now declared to be independent of Turkey. Everyone realized that the independence of the Crimea was unlikely to last; indeed, nine years later—Catherine was to annex the peninsula outright. Russian gains were not purely territorial. The treaty opened the Black Sea to Russian commerce by guaranteeing complete freedom of navigation. The treaty also included the right of Russian merchant ships to unlimited transit through the Bosporus and the Dardanelles into the Mediterranean. Turkey was also to pay to Russia a war indemnity of four and a half million rubles. Persecution of Christians in Moldavia and Wallachia was to cease, and Orthodox believers in Constantinople were to be able to worship at a church of their own. On a grander scale, the war had tipped the balance of power in the region in Russia’s favor; Europe was now aware that predominance in the Black Sea had passed to Russia. In Catherine's mind, these were achievements to match those of her predecessor, Peter the Great, who, on the faraway Baltic, had first opened a Russian pathway to the world.

Chapter 59 - Catherine and Potemkin: Passion

The outstanding figure of Catherine’s reign, other than Catherine herself, was Gregory Potemkin. For seventeen years, from 1774 to 1791, he was the most powerful man in Russia. No one else during her life was closer to Catherine: he was her lover, her adviser, her military commander in chief the governor and viceroy of half of her empire, the creator of her new cities, seaports, palaces, armies, and fleets. He was also, perhaps, her husband.

In 1762, he joined the five Orlov brothers and Nikita Panin in the coup that put Catherine on the throne. It was during this tumult that he supplied the missing sword knot that Catherine borrowed for the march on
Peterhof. Subsequently when Catherine was distributing rewards for assistance in the coup. Captain Potemkin was given an army promotion and ten thousand rubles.

At twenty-two, Potemkin was tall and slim, with thick auburn hair. He was intelligent, educated, and spirited. His appearance at court and his introduction to Catherine were sponsored by the Orlovs, who admired the young soldier as an engaging conversationalist and a talented mimic who successfully impersonated the voices of people around him. One evening, Catherine asked him to mimic her. Without hesitation, he spoke to her in her own voice, perfectly imitating her idiom and German accent. Catherine, always seeking wit and humor, could not stop laughing. The impertinence was risky but Potemkin had guessed that the empress would be amused and would forgive and probably not forget him. He had judged her correctly. Thereafter, he was often invited to her intimate evenings, which included no more than twenty people and from which all ceremony and formality were banned. She decreed that her guests must be good-humored and not speak badly of anyone. Lying and boasting were forbidden, and all unpleasant thoughts were to be deposited with hats and swords at the door. In this uninhibited atmosphere, Gregory—quick-witted artistic, musical, and able to make the empress laugh—was always welcome.

Others at court noticed that a strong mutual admiration was developing, and there was gossip. It was said that Potemkin, encountering the empress in a palace corridor, had fallen on his knees, kissed her hand, and not been reprimanded. The Orlovs did not like these stories. Gregory was the established favorite and the father of her child, Bobrinkskoy; he and his brothers had been endowed with enormous power and wealth. It seemed to them that Potemkin had begun to trespass. By some accounts, Potemkin was called to Gregory Orlov’s room, where, to teach him a lesson, the two brothers, Gregory and Alexis, fell on him and beat him. Later, it was rumored that it was in this struggle that Potemkin lost the sight in his left eye (a more believable explanation is that he was permanently blinded because of faulty treatment of an infection by an incompetent doctor). Whatever the cause, this disfigurement so upset Potemkin that he withdrew from court. When the empress asked about him and was told that he was suffering from a physical disfigurement, she sent word that this was a poor reason and that he should return. He obeyed. He arrived to find the government and Catherine struggling with multiple crises. The war with Turkey was entering its sixth year, the Pugachev rebellion was spreading, and Catherine’s intimate relationship with Alexander Vasilchikov was in its final stage. Potemkin, believing he had been summoned for personal reasons, was dismayed to find Vasilchikov still firmly embedded. He asked for a private audience with Catherine, and on February 4 he went to Tsarskoe Selo. She told him that she wanted him to remain close. He returned to court, where he seemed happy; he continued to make Catherine laugh, and he was generally recognized as the heir presumptive to the office of favorite. One day supposedly, he was walking up the palace staircase when he met Gregory Orlov descending. “Any news at court?” Potemkin asked. “Nothing in particular,” Orlov answered. “Except that you are going up and I am coming down.” Vasilchikov managed for a few more weeks to cling to his perch because Catherine worried about the impression a change would make in St. Petersburg and abroad; she was also afraid of alienating Panin by dismissing his nominee, Most important, she wanted to be certain that her new choice was the right one.

He became Catherine’s lover—and immediately became intensely jealous. Apart from lying next to her hapless husband, Peter, Catherine had slept with four men before Potemkin—Saltykov, Poniatowski, Orlov, and Vasilchikov. The existence of these predecessors, and mental images of her as the sexual partner of other men, tormented Potemkin. He accused the empress of having had fifteen previous lovers. In an attempt to calm him, Catherine secluded herself in her apartment on February 21, writing a letter entitled “A Sincere Confession,” which gave an account of her previous romantic experiences. It is unique in the annals of written royal confessions; an all-powerful queen attempting to win forgiveness from a demanding new lover for previous actions in her life.

In spelling out the details of her past life, she began with the circumstances of her marriage, and then described the painful disappointments of the love affairs that followed. Her earnest, apologetic, almost pleading tone laid bare how desperately she wanted Potemkin. She began by explaining how Empress Elizabeth’s anxiety concerning her failure to produce an heir to the throne had led to her first love affair. She admitted that, under pressure from the empress and Maria Choglokova, she had chosen Sergei Saltykov, “chiefly because of his obvious inclination.” Then Saltykov was sent away, “for he had conducted himself indiscreetly:”
“After a year spent in great sorrow, the present Polish king [Stanislaus Poniatowski] arrived. We took no notice of him, but good people... forced me to notice that he existed, that his eyes were of unparalleled beauty and that he directed them (though so nearsighted he doesn’t see past his nose) more often in one direction than in another. This one was both loving and loved from 1755 till 1761, [which included] a three year absence. Then the efforts of Prince Gregory Orlov, whom again good people forced me to notice, changed my state of mind. This one would have remained for life had he himself not grown bored. I learned of... [his new infidelity] on the very day of his departure to... [the peace talks with the Turks] and as a result I decided that I could no longer trust him. This thought cruelly tormented me and forced me out of desperation to make some sort of choice [Vasilchikovj, one which grieved me then and still does now more than I can say...

Then came a certain knight [Potemkin]. Through his merits and kindness, this hero was so charming that people... were already saying that he should take up residence here. But what they didn’t know was that we’d already called him here....

Now, Sir Knight, after this confession may I hope to receive absolution for my sins? You’ll be pleased to see that it wasn’t fifteen, but a third as many: the first [Saltykovj chosen out of necessity and the fourth [Vasilchikov] out of desperation, cannot in my mind be attributed to any frivolity. As to the other three [Poniatowski, Orlov, and Potemkin himself, if you look closely, God knows they weren’t the result of debauchery for which I haven’t the least inclination, and had fate given me in my youth a husband whom I could have loved, I would have remained true to him forever. The trouble is that my heart is loath to be without love even for a single hour. ... If you want to keep me forever, then show as much friendship as love, and more than anything else, love me and tell me the truth.”

As the news swept through the court of Potemkin’s promotion, Countess Rumyantseva wrote to her husband, the general, who, a few months before, had been Potemkin’s superior in the Turkish war. “The thing to do now, my sweet, is to address yourself to Potemkin.”

Potemkin remained jealous of everyone, flaring up when she paid attention to anyone else. One night at the theater, when she made friendly remarks to Gregory Orlov, he got up and stormed out of the imperial box. Catherine cautioned him to moderate his attitude toward this former lover: “I only ask you not to do one thing: don’t damage, and don’t even try to damage, my opinion of Prince Orlov, for I should consider that to be ingratitude on your part. There’s no one whom he [Orlov] praised more to me and whom... he loved more both in former times and now till your arrival, than you. In April, Potemkin moved into the apartment immediately beneath the private apartment of the empress; their rooms were now connected by the private, green-carpeted spiral staircase. At night one climbed, or the other descended, the spiral staircase in order to spend time together.

When they became lovers, Catherine was forty-four, ten years older than Potemkin. She was inclining toward plumpness, but her mental acuity and vitality remained exceptional. And Potemkin could see that his passion for this woman was powerfully reciprocated, which only added to her attractiveness. He might have settled into the luxurious life of an imperial favorite and collected the rewards that came with that position. But Potemkin had no interest in simply becoming the purveyor of private pleasures to the empress. He wanted a life of action and responsibility and he meant to achieve it with the support of the woman who personified Russia. Catherine was eager to accept him on this basis. She thought him the handsomest man she had ever met; she scarcely noticed the damaged eye. At thirty-four, he had gained weight and his body was no longer slim. Biting his nails had become an obsession. None of this mattered. To Grimm, she wrote: “I have parted from a certain excellent but very boring citizen [Vasilchikov] who was immediately replaced—I do not myself quite know how-by one of the greatest, most bizarre, and most entertaining eccentrics of the iron age.”

Potemkin, too, was immersed in passion, but he was uneasy about something else. He realized that he owed his new preeminence exclusively to the empress, and that just as she had summoned and then dismissed Vasilchikov so, too, she could, at any moment, replace him. There was, of course, a climactic step that would change his status. His plan was extravagant, impracticable perhaps only a daydream: he wanted to legalize their union by marriage. He spoke to her about it soon after he became the official favorite, and it was a measure of his power over her that she considered it. For Catherine, it would not have been easy; she was wary of surrendering power. This time, because of her love for Potemkin, she may have agreed.
If there was a marriage, this is a widely believed version of how it happened:

No one was to know. But to be a proper Orthodox ceremony, it had to include a church, a priest, and witnesses. These arrangements were made. On June 8, 1774, after a dinner in honor of the Izmailovsky Guards, Catherine, wearing the uniform of the regiment, and accompanied only by a favorite maid, set out in a boat from the Fontanka Canal, crossed the Neva River to the Vyborg side, and entered an unmarked carriage, which took her to the St. Sampsonovsky Church. There, Potemkin, wearing his general’s uniform, was waiting. Only five people were present: Catherine, Potemkin, her maid, her chamberlain, and Potemkin’s nephew Alexander Samoilov. The marriage was performed.

Is this story true? No documents have ever been seen, but there are other forms of evidence. In 1782, Sir Robert Keith, the British ambassador to Austria, walking with Emperor Joseph II, asked about the rumors. “Does it appear, sir, that Prince Potemkin’s weight and influence is diminished?” “Not at all,” the emperor replied, “but they have never been what the world imagined. The empress of Russia does not wish to part with him, and for a thousand reasons, and as [with] many connections of every sort, she could not easily get rid of him even if she wished to.” Why, if Potemkin were merely a favorite, could Catherine not get rid of him? She had gotten rid of Orlov who, with his brothers, had put her on the throne, and who was also the father of her son, Bobrinskoy. A marriage, however, had created a different situation. Perhaps this was what the emperor was saying.

The strongest written evidence appears in the language of Catherine’s daily messages to Potemkin beginning in the late spring of 1774. She addresses him as “dear husband” and “my master and tender spouse” and signs herself “your devoted wife.” She never called any other lover, before or after Potemkin, “husband,” or referred to herself as his “wife.” In June and July 1774, immediately after the marriage—if one occurred—she wrote, “I kiss you and embrace you with all my body and soul, dear husband.” A few days later: “Dearest darling, dear spouse, pray come and cuddle with me. Your caresses are so sweet and pleasing.”

The history of Russia offers the strongest evidence of all. After their physical passion had dimmed, Catherine and Gregory Potemkin continued a special relationship that was often incomprehensible to everyone around them. Marriage would provide an explanation. If they were secretly married and still deeply cared for each other but had agreed on a modus vivendi, it could account for the unique authority wielded by Potemkin in Catherine’s Russia for the rest of his life. During this time—over fifteen years—he received and returned Catherine’s devoted loyalty and affection. This was true even when both were sleeping with other people.

Chapter 71 – Dissent in Russia, Final Partition of Poland

By the spring of 1794, when Robespierre was supreme in France, many Poles had concluded that the further mutilation of their country and the humiliating constitutional settlement imposed were intolerable. In March, when the disarming of the Polish army was attempted, the nation rose up. Thaddeus Kosciuszko, a Polish officer trained in France who had fought beside Washington and Lafayette in the American War of Independence, suddenly appeared in Kracow and took command of Polish rebel forces. On March 24, with four thousand soldiers and two thousand peasants armed with scythes, he defeated seven thousand Russian soldiers near Kracow. The revolt spread, moving so quickly that when it reached Warsaw, the Russian occupation garrison of seven thousand men was caught by surprise. Three thousand Russian soldiers were killed or taken prisoner; the bodies of the dead were stripped and thrown naked into the streets. Frederick William of Prussia was denounced as a betrayer, and a portrait of Catherine, taken from the Russian embassy was publicly torn to pieces.

‘When reports of these events reached St. Petersburg, Catherine told Prussia and Austria that the time had come “to extinguish the last spark of the Jacobin fire in Poland.” Frederick William, smarting from the personal insults hurled at him by the Poles, asked for the honor of personally strangling Polish resistance. Catherine suggested that he take charge of putting down the revolt in Poland west of the Vistula River, and then advised Francis II of Austria to move into the south. Both hurried to oblige, and both expected to be paid for their efforts; thus, still another partition of Poland became an expectation of all parties. Frederick William divided the army he had deployed against France and sent twenty-five thousand men to the east against Poland.
By mid-July these twenty-five thousand Prussians and fourteen thousand Russians were advancing on Warsaw from two directions. Late in July, Frederick William himself arrived before Warsaw to direct a siege of the city. The Prussians made little progress, and in September, the king, declaring that he needed his troops to face threats from France, lifted his siege and withdrew.

By then, the Russians needed no help. Indeed, Catherine had realized that if Russia were to crush the revolt without assistance, she would be able to dictate a settlement. She placed Rumyantsev in overall command of her army in Poland and Suvorov in tactical command. On October 10, Suvorov defeated Kosciuszkó in a battle in which thirteen thousand Russians overwhelmed seven thousand Poles. Kosciuszkó was severely wounded, captured, and sent to St. Petersburg, where he was locked in the Schlusselburg Fortress. Suvorov next appeared before Praga, the fortified suburb across the Vistula from Warsaw.

Before launching his attack, Suvorov reminded his soldiers of the April slaughter of the Russian garrison in Warsaw. The assault began at dawn; “three hours later,” Suvorov reported, “the whole of Praga was strewn with bodies, and blood was flowing in streams.” Estimates of the dead ranged between twelve and twenty thousand. The Russians later claimed that Suvorov was unable to restrain his soldiers from taking revenge for the slaughter of their comrades in the spring—an argument that failed to explain the killing of women, children, priests, and nuns. Suvorov then used the carnage as an example to warn Warsaw that if it did not surrender, it would be treated as another Praga. Warsaw capitulated immediately, and armed resistance throughout Poland came to an end.

Catherine regarded Kosciuszkó as an agent of revolutionary extremism and believed him to be in correspondence with Robespierre. It was in this context that she and her council decided what was to be done with a prostrate Poland. They agreed that because the dangers of Jacobinism continued to threaten Russia, it was unwise to allow any Polish government to exist. Bezborodko insisted that centuries of experience had shown that it was impossible to make friends with the Poles; they would always support any future enemy of Russia, be this Turkey, Prussia, Sweden, or somebody else. Further, the buffer state concept did not apply to ideas that could cross frontiers. The council’s decision, therefore, was to treat Poland as a conquered enemy: all Polish regalia, banners, and state insignia, along with archives and libraries, were collected and sent to Russia. Suvorov was to govern by decree.

The next step was to agree on a new division of territory. Catherine would have preferred outright Russian annexation of all that remained of Poland, but she knew that this would be unacceptable to Prussia and Austria. Accordingly, she proposed a third and final partition. Austria hesitated, suggesting a return to the status quo but with greater supervision from outside. Prussia favored partition, either total or leaving a small, insignificant buffer state between the partitioning powers. Catherine’s proposal was the most extreme: she wanted to subdivide the entire remaining territory of Poland and thereby simply erase this dangerous neighbor from the map. Her proposal was accepted.

On January 3, 1795, Russia and Austria agreed to the third and final partition of Poland. Prussia, still at war with France, was told that the territory it desired could be taken whenever it was ready to do so. On May 5, Prussia made peace with revolutionary France and occupied its allotted slice of Poland. Russia’s prizes were Courland, what was left of Lithuania, the remaining part of Belorussia, and the western Ukraine.

Prussia took Warsaw and Poland west of the Vistula. Austria took Kracow, Lublin, and western Galicia. Afterward, Catherine repeated that she had annexed “not a single Pole,” and that she had simply taken back ancient Russian and Lithuanian lands with Orthodox inhabitants who were “now reunited with the Russian motherland.”

On November 25, 1795, Stanislaus, his kingdom dismembered, abdicated. When Catherine died a year later, the new emperor Paul invited the former king to St. Petersburg, where he was housed in the Marble Palace that the empress had built for Gregory Orlov. He died there in 1798. For Poland, the Third Partition meant national extinction. Not until the signing of the Versailles Treaty after the First World War, when the Russian, German, and Austrian empires had collapsed, did Poland physically reemerge. In the interim, for 126 years, the people and culture of Poland did not possess a nation.

Conclusion
She was a majestic figure in the age of monarchy; the only woman to equal her on a European throne was Elizabeth I of England. In the history of Russia, she and Peter the Great tower in ability and achievement over the other fourteen tsars and empresses of the three-hundred-year Romanov dynasty. Catherine carried Peter’s legacy forward. He had given Russia a “window on the West” on the Baltic coast, building there a city that he made his capital. Catherine opened another window, this one on the Black Sea; Sebastopol and Odessa were its jewels. Peter imported technology and governing institutions to Russia; Catherine brought European moral, political, and judicial philosophy literature, art, architecture, sculpture, medicine, and education. Peter created a Russian navy and organized an army that defeated one of the finest soldiers in Europe; Catherine assembled the greatest art gallery in Europe, hospitals, schools, and orphanages. Peter shaved off the beards and truncated the long robes of his leading noblemen; Catherine persuaded them to be inoculated against smallpox. Peter made Russia a great power; Catherine magnified this power, and advanced the nation toward a culture that, during the century that followed, produced, among others, Derzhavin, Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Dostoevsky Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekov, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Petipa, and Diaghilev. These artists and their work were a part of Catherine’s legacy to Russia.