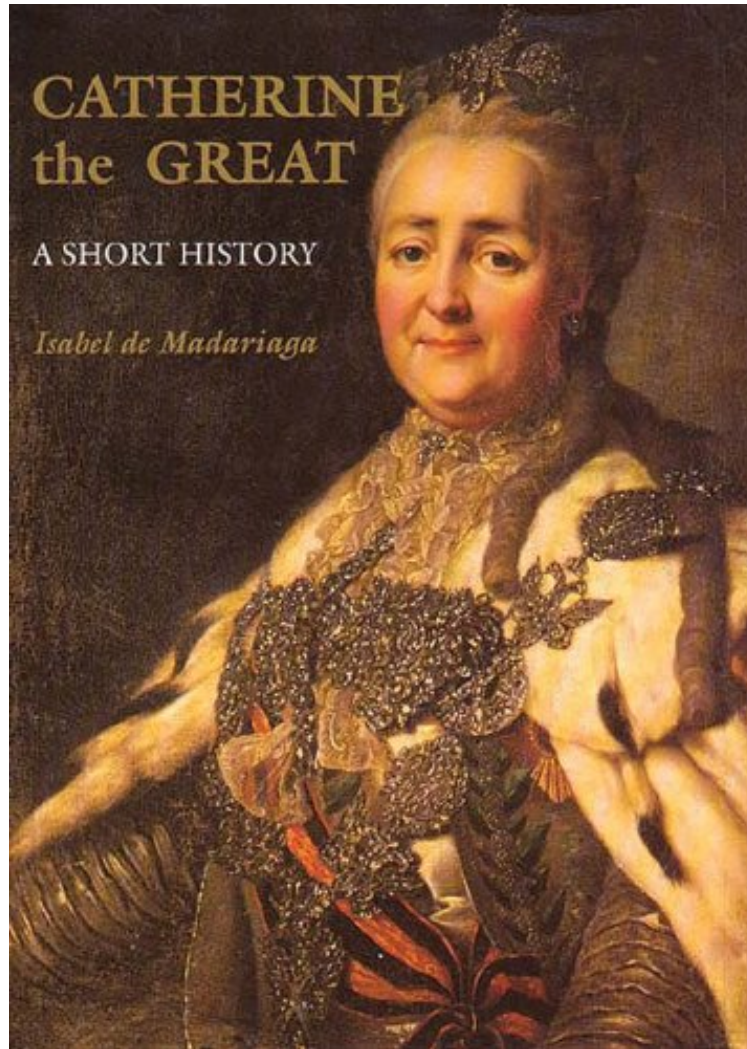


## Catherine the Great: A Short History

Von Isabel de Madariaga

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**Von Isabel de Madariaga : Catherine the Great: A Short History** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Catherine the Great: A Short History:

KundenrezensionenHilfreichste Kundenrezensionen0 von 0 Kunden fanden die folgende Rezension hilfreich. A Superior Study of a Great WomanVon Bruce KendallCatherine is one of history's most complex, intelligent, strong-willed and resourceful women. de Mariaga's account is accurate and straightforward. Though she lacks the rhetorical flourish and eye-for-drama that makes Troyat's bio such a joy to read, de Mariaga pays closer attention to historical detail and gives the reader a keener sense of the political atmosphere Catherine faced and then recreated in her image. de Mariaga doesn't dwell long on Catherine's formative years, dealing with the entire period from German childhood to ascension to the Russian throne in the prologue. She does mention the effect that Plutarch, Tacitus and Montesquieu

had on the fifteen year Catherine. When the Swede, Count Gyllenborg urged her to read these authors, Catherine acted on the suggestion by ordering the library of the Academy of Sciences and its bookshop be sent to her. The books, when they came, were over the head of a fifteen-year old, but she turned to them later in life. de Mariaga tells us that years later, while awaiting news from Potemkin during the second Turkish campaign, Catherine (along with her newest consort, Zubov) distracts herself by translating Plutarch' Lives. Catherine had to deal with many powerful factions when she came to power, following Peter II's secret assassination by the Orlov's. Some of the aristocratic members of her early cabinet, especially Panin, were hoping for a parliamentary form of government, with a select few advisors wielding the majority of the power. Catherine, with the backing of the Orlovs, displayed her mettle early on in circumventing such notions. As far as she was concerned, Russia would remain an an autocracy. Yet she was diplomatic enough not to appear heavy-handed in her decision-making and gave the impression, even to those she disagreed with strongly, that she was considering their proposals. She gave into Panin on his idea of a council, but it was to be fashioned by her, so the old idea of service to the sovereign was reinforced. Even so it took her a good five years to consolidate her authority and spoil the ambitions of those who wanted to keep her a figurehead regent serving only until the czarovich Paul reached his majority. de Mariaga stresses the importance of the assembly of 1767 in helping validate Catherine's rule and cementing her government. The assembly was important in that it allowed Catherine to come in contact with a wide cross-section of the Empire, and allowed her to confer new status on previously disenfranchised segments of the population (except the serfs, of course), at the expense of the nobility. The nobility found itself unable to resist Catherine's power-grab, for she was now speaking directly to "her children" with the divine voice of the Enlightenment. To have denounced her plan before a national assembly would have been tantamount to denouncing providence itself. Catherine epitomized the "enlightened despot." She combined the "enlightened" political model of Montesquieu with her own brand of absolute power. A case could be made that she wasn't so much power-hungry as unwilling to share policy-making with those less-enlightened than she; namely, the Russian nobility whom she saw (correctly) as interested primarily in maintaining their wealth and status. Catherine corresponded frequently with Voltaire. She brought Diderot to Russia. She wrote voluminously on subjects ranging from political science to drama. She was a Renaissance Man in woman's garb in an Age of Enlightenment. Her diplomatic skills were exemplary. She could be ruthless and iron-fisted when the occasion dictated it. She, like Peter the Great before her, forged a new Russia, less dependent on old superstitions and the whip, more attuned to education and the new humanism. While her sexual proclivities have been vastly over-sensationalized, it could well be stated that in the area of bedroom-diplomacy Cleopatra was her only rival. Again, if you are a reader interested in good story-as-bio, stick to Troyat. If you are interested in the political panorama of 18th c. Russia, de Mariaga is the best guide I know of.

**Kurzbeschreibung** There is no shortage of biographies of Catherine the Great, of varying quality and degrees of sensationalism. But there exists no brief account of her reign that incorporates the extensive research findings of the last twenty years and presents them accessibly, accurately, and concisely to the student and the general reader. Following her magisterial *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, Isabel de Madariaga has written the most informative, balanced and up-to-date short study of this spectacular period in Russian history.