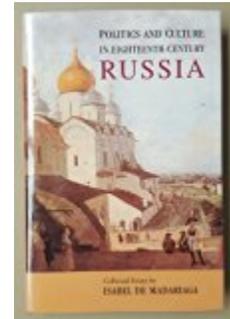


H-Net Reviews

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Isabel de Madariaga. *Politics and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia: Collected Essays*. London and New York: Longman, 1998. viii + 304 pp. \$36.00 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-32255-4; \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-32256-1.

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The “Collected Essays” of senior scholars make up a marvellous genre. Even when a volume contains no major surprises, with no occasional writings obscurely published and formerly unappreciated, it is heartening to have them in one convenient volume, with index. This collection, in fact, contains one reworked version of a previously unpublished lecture from 1984.

The collection at hand is somewhat artificially arranged into three general sections, “Russian Government and Society,” “Social and Administrative Problems,” and “Catherine II, Russian Society, and the World of Ideas.” There is, in fact, more unity than division here. De Madariaga is inescapably Catherine the Great’s biographer (*Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* [Yale, 1981], *Catherine the Great: A Short History* [Yale, 1990]). She is also her ardent defender. As Tony Lentin pointed out in “History Today” (December 1966), “seventy years of neglect and dismissal in the Soviet period as a foreign adventuress, hypocrite and poseur” fairly demanded that someone defend her.

Most of the essays gathered here, originally written between 1974 and 1998, defend some aspect of Catherine’s personality, her mind, or her policies. Even in the initial four, which appear tangential, concrete connections are apparent. “Tsar into Emperor: The Title of Peter the Great” (1997), for example, explores Peter’s intention to become “the heir of the Orthodox empire of Byzantium.” This strongly suggests that Catherine’s “Greek Project” was not an isolated event. Likewise, her study of the political library of the *verkhovnik* of 1730 fame, D. M. Golitsyn (1984), has at its core the idea of establishing a legal aristocracy limiting the power of the monarchy, a crucial issue which Catherine addressed seriously

in the 1760s and in her great charters of the 1780s. The exploration printed here represented fundamental groundwork for the biography, just as more recent essays explore related topics raised by her work and reviews of it.

At the heart of the volume, however, stands de Madariaga’s defence of Catherine’s reputation in the quicksilver Enlightenment(s). The prevalence of this theme is so ubiquitous that the organization of the book is a bit misleading. The second section, “Social and Administrative Problems,” describes the content, but scarcely reflects the purpose of the essays. In one way or another all five essays—“The...Origins of Russian Civil Rights” (1998), “Penal Policy in the Age of Catherine II” (1990), “Catherine II and the Serfs” (1974), “Freemasonry” (1994), and “Catherine and... the Russian Educational System” (1979)—attempt to refute numerous nineteenth-century critics of Catherine, and of the Enlightenment generally. Professor de Madariaga marshalls new evidence, contemporary appreciations, insightful European comparisons, even to demonstrate Catherine’s good intentions and humane policies. Thus when the volume formally turns to Enlightened Russia in the final five essays, it is almost anticlimactic. If one single point emerges clearly here, it is that the Enlightenment was not a single uniform phenomenon. Critics of Catherine, de Madariaga subtly and convincingly shows, selectively defined it to her discredit, and it is her task to show its complexity and to show the congruence of Catherine with its leading lights.

Inevitably infelicities creep into a collection of essays originally published over a quarter century. Written today, “Catherine and the Philosophes” (1981) would surely not inveigh against Peter Gay (1959!) as its straw-man.

Written today, the bibliographic survey in David Ransel's 1975 work on the Panin Party would probably not be cited for "recent trends" in scholarship (p. 76). Footnotes in this collection which cite the original location of de Madariaga's own previous publications might send the incautious reader scurrying to the library for articles already at hand.

The one previously unpublished essay is not the strongest. "Russia and the Enlightenment" perpetuates, one fleeting reference to the Synodal press notwithstanding, the carefully crafted Soviet myths of a significant secular printing enterprise and of a significant secular reading public, embodied in the falsehoods of the *Svodnyi katalog russkikh knig*. Nonetheless, the older scholarship, the more recent, and the new integrating introductory essay reveal de Madariaga's style as urbane, witty, feisty, and combative.

Conceptually, these essays appear dated in a more serious manner. De Madariaga was trained, and pursued "her" Catherine, long before the advent and flowering of contemporary feminist historical perspectives. This is, of course, just as it should be. Thus, it could never have occurred to her, as Dena Goodman has recently suggested in *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Cornell, 1994), that in the Enlightenment women spoke with a different voice than men, employed different media, and led different cultural institutions. All of this has arguably been ignored or denigrated by (male) historians for the two hundred years since Rousseau, but it has recently been resurrected. Judged by these recent standards, de Madariaga's

Catherine is still being measured to a man's suit of clothing.

Recent feminist historiography provides the insights that would put her back into, if not a dress, then into conversation, salon, and correspondence—that is, "epistolary commerce" (p. 140), the genres in which women *philosophes* not only excelled but which they pioneered. It is in this newer literature, not in de Madariaga, that one encounters the remarkable observation by Suzanne Necker that Catherine "never had a taste for pleasure, and this characteristic was one of the causes of her greatness; it is the taste for pleasure which undermines the consideration for all women" (p. 82). Remarkable new insight is gained when Catherine's stature is assessed not by the male standards of the *philosophes*, but by those of the *salonnières*. Thus the capstone essay from 1992, "The Role of Catherine in the Literary and Cultural Life of Russia," is less impressive than it might be.

Again, this is no criticism of de Madariaga. It highlights the fact that "her" Catherine, embodied in biography and in the present essays, have, with other more recent biographies and monographic studies, become the indispensable building blocks for the ever-changing explorations of new generations of historians. Any Russia historian's library or reading list requires that these collected essays stand next to her major works.

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