REVIEW ARTICLE—CRITIQUE EXHAUSTIF

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Some Recent American Publications on the Reign of Catherine the Great


Within a brief interval two anthologies have appeared devoted to Catherine the Great and her reign. Both are volumes in established series, are available as inexpensive paperbacks, and are addressed, primarily, to college and university undergraduates. Aside from these similarities, they differ in every respect. Oliva’s comprises materials, both primary and secondary, that present three different perspectives on the empress: her own, that of her contemporaries, and the judgments of later historians. In the first category fall excerpts from Catherine’s memoirs; her correspondence with Voltaire, Diderot, and Falconet; her Instructions of 1767; and four decrees issued during her reign (including the Charter to the Nobility of 1785). Contemporary views are represented by selections from eight personal accounts: four by Russians (Dashkova, Golovin, Radishchev, Shcherbatov) and four by foreigners (Buckinghamshire, the French embassy, Richardson, Diderot). The seven historical commentaries range from Karamzin and Herzen through Kliuchevskii to Pokrovskii, a Soviet textbook, and finally the Americans Gershoy and Billington. Oliva includes a thirteen-page introduction, a chronology of Catherine’s life, and a brief bibliography.

One should recognize Oliva’s service in providing a handy compilation of varied materials, especially as the paperback edition of Catherine’s memoirs now seems to be out of print. And pedagogues who believe in students discovering things for themselves might appreciate the brevity of Oliva’s editorial introduction. On the other hand, the value of his service is much less than it might have been, had he undertaken to collect data not easily available elsewhere. It is painfully obvious that Professor Oliva has an aversion to translating Russian. The only sources translated afresh are three items from French, which total less than fourteen pages; he simply borrows translated Russian sources from others. One could not quarrel with this procedure if
materials in translation were abundant, but they are not. Nor does Oliva alert the reader to problems of authenticity as concerns Catherine's memoirs: namely, that Herzen's edition contains but one of several variants of her recollections, written at different times for different purposes and none of which were completed. (On this very complicated issue, we can all profit from the sensitive analysis of the late O. E. Kornilovich, "Zapiski Imperatritsy Ekateriny II," Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnago prosveshcheniia n.s., pt. XXXVII [January 1912], 37-74.) Also, one may question the legitimacy, in methodological terms, of ascribing the Charter to the Nobility—or other government decrees, for that matter—directly to Catherine. To be sure, such documents do reveal much about her reign and were issued with her endorsement, but to imply that they were principally products of her pen is another matter. Oliva's commentaries as editor contribute little of value. His introductory essay is so brief and general as to be worthless; it neither poses problems nor suggests fresh perspectives. Minor errors creep in, too: e.g., Platon Zubov is proclaimed the favorite longest under Catherine's patronage, whereas Grigorii Orlov's tenure considerably exceeded Zubov's. The bibliography lists Bil'basov's biography as comprising twelve volumes; evidently the author is unaware that volumes III-XI never appeared.

In contrast to Oliva's scissors-and-paste compilation, Raeff's "profile" rests on foundations of greater originality and depth. Instead of primary sources, twelve essays by eleven different scholars—one piece is jointly authored—examine Catherine as an individual, her relations with educated society, and her statecraft. A brief introduction and bibliography are supplemented by a postscript that reviews the historiography of Catherine's reign and suggests areas for future study. In making his selection of topics and authors, Raeff has focused upon studies of Catherine's intellectual development and her many-sided impact on Russian culture and society. At the same time, the editor has presented diverse historiographical styles. Thus prerevolutionary and emigre Russian scholarship (Bil'basov—whose name is misspelled throughout—Kizevetter, Lappo-Danilevskii, Miliukov), as well as Soviet (Bakhirshin and Shazkin, Gukovskii, Luppol) and non-Russian (Ammann, McConnell, Raeff), are all represented. Especially laudable is the translation of work heretofore available only in Russian. Of the twelve selections, ten have been translated for the first time, nine from Russian. The two pieces already in English—Allen McConnell's comparison of Catherine and Radishchev, and Raeff's own study of Potemkin—are both unusually perceptive and, in the latter case particularly, probably not as widely known as they should be. The selections mesh well, treating varied subjects while keeping Catherine in the foreground or nearby.

Four different translators worked on this project, which explains most of its minor defects. While Professor Raeff has provided helpful annotations in many cases, some inconsistencies and infelicities escaped his scrutiny. For example transliteration, that bugaboo of all translators of Russian, varies among the selections. In one place we read Peter (p. 25), in another Petr (p. 30), in a third Piotr (p. 260); Viazemskii (p. 155) later becomes Vyazemsky.