

The FROMM INSTITUTE  
A BRIEF HISTORY of RUSSIA  
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CATHERINE the GREAT — In Her Own Words

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CATHERINE II “The Great” (1729 / r. 1762 – 1796)

On her childhood :

“Very early, it was noticed that I had a good memory:  
therefore, I was insistently tormented with learning everything by heart.”

“The title of Queen rang sweet in my ears, child though I was ... This idea of a crown  
began running in my head then, like a tune ...”

“I never liked dolls. ... There was never a boy more daring than I.”

“I do not know whether as a child I was really ugly, but I remember well that I was often told that I was and that I must therefore strive to show inward virtues and intelligence. Up to the age of fourteen or fifteen, I was firmly convinced of my ugliness and was therefore more concerned with acquiring inward accomplishments and was less mindful of my outward appearance.”

“One cannot always know what children are thinking. Children are hard to understand,  
and especially, when careful training has accustomed them to obedience,  
and experience has made them cautious in conversation with their teachers.”

“[Growing up] I treated everyone as best I could and made it my task to earn the friendship or at least to lessen the enmity of those whom I suspected of being evilly disposed toward me. I showed no preference for any side, did not meddle in anything, always had a serene air, much kindness, attentiveness, and politeness for everyone, and because I was naturally quite cheerful, I saw with pleasure that from day to day I gained the affections of the public, who regarded me as an interesting child who was not without intelligence.”

“My disposition was naturally so accommodating that no one was ever with me a quarter of an hour without falling comfortably into conversation, chatting with me as if they had known me for a long time.”

On her husband, Peter III :

“I listened with a blush to these family confidences, thanking him for his ready trust, but deep in my heart I was astonished by his imprudence and lack of judgment in many matters.”

“The Grand Duke was naturally as discreet as a cannon blast, and when he had a heavy heart and something on his mind, he could not wait to recount it to those with whom he was accustomed to speak, without considering to whom he spoke. ... He always innocently believed

that everyone was of his opinion and that there was nothing more natural. ... I resolved to show great consideration for the Grand Duke's confidence so that he would at least view me as someone he could trust, to whom he could say everything without any consequences. I succeeded in this for a long time."

"From the age of ten, Peter III was partial to drink."

On her ascension to power :

"He [ Peter III ] did not have a bad heart. But a weak man usually has not."  
[Meaning, he was not going to accommodate by dying naturally.]

"Power, without the nation's confidence, is nothing."

On ruling :

"I have no way to defend my borders, but to extend them."

"I sincerely want peace, not because I lack the resources for war,  
but because I hate bloodshed."

"I may be kindly, I am ordinarily gentle,  
but in my line of business, I am obliged to will terribly [ terror-fully] what I will at all."

"What right can give anyone the authority to inflict torture upon a citizen,  
when it is still unknown whether he is innocent or guilty ?"

"The use of torture is contrary to sound judgment and common sense.  
Humanity itself cries out against it, and demands that it be utterly abolished."

"Experience shows that the frequent use of severe punishment  
has never rendered a people better. The death of a criminal is a less effective means of  
restraining crimes, than the permanent example of a man deprived of his liberty  
during the whole of his life to make amends for the injury he has done to the public."

"What had I not to suffer from the voice of an irrational and cruel public opinion when this  
question was considered by the Legislative Commission? The mob of nobles ... began to  
suspect that these discussions might bring about an improvement in the position of the  
peasants.... I believe that there were not twenty human beings who reflected on the subject with  
humanity [ humaneness ] ."

"Tell ten thousand people to draft a letter, let them debate every phrase,  
and see how long it takes and what you get."

[ To Denis Diderot : ] "I have listened with the greatest pleasure to all the inspirations of your  
brilliant mind. But all your grand principles, which I understand very well, would do splendidly in  
books and very badly in practice. In your plans for reform, you are forgetting the difference  
between our two positions: you work only on paper which accepts anything, is smooth and

flexible and offers no obstacles either to your imagination or your pen, while I, poor empress, work on human skin, which is far more sensitive and irritable.”

“The laws ought to be so framed as to secure the safety of every citizen as much as possible Political liberty does not consist in the notion that a man may do whatever he pleases; liberty is the right to do whatsoever the laws allow ...

The equality of the citizens consists in that they should all be subject to the same laws.”

“Self-interest usually brings injustice with it.”

On love and other matters :

“Men make love more intensely at 20, but make love better, however, at 30,”

"One day [one of my ladies-in-waiting] noticed my tears and asked me about them;  
I gave her the best reasons I could, without telling her the true ones."

“I like to praise and reward loudly, to blame [scold] quietly.”

“I am one of the people who love the ‘why’ of things.”

“Madame, you must be gay [light-hearted]; only thus can life be endured. I speak from experience, for I have had to endure much, and have only been able to endure it, because I have always laughed whenever I had the chance.”

“There is nothing, it seems to me, so difficult as to escape from that which is essentially agreeable.”

“You were in the mood to quarrel.  
Please inform me, once the inclination has passed.”

“I do not love strife, because I have always found  
that in the end, each remains of the same opinion.”

"Writers today are incapable of the ancients' tact."

“Your wit makes others witty.” [Letter to Voltaire]

“This, is the effect that can be produced by a stupid, carelessly spoken word—it is never forgotten.”

“The more a man knows, the more he forgives.”

“Praise is the only gift, for which people are truly grateful.”

“I cannot live one day without love.”

“I shall be an autocrat, that’s my trade;  
and the Good Lord will forgive me,  
that is His.”