

pose was accomplished and my manifesto did not fail of its object. Therefore, it was good.

With Ivan's death there was no longer a legitimate adult claimant to the throne. Therefore, there was no focal point for a succession crisis. Until nine years later, in 1772, when Paul reached his majority at eighteen, Catherine's crown was secure.

50

Catherine and the Enlightenment

IN THE MIDDLE of the eighteenth century, most Europeans still regarded Russia as a culturally backward, semi-Asiatic state. Catherine was determined to change this. The intellectual and artistic life of the century was dominated by France, and Catherine's governess in Stettin had made French her second language. During her sixteen years as an isolated, embattled grand duchess, she had read many of the works of the great figures of the European Enlightenment. Of these, the writer with the greatest effect on her was François-Marie Arouet, who called himself Voltaire. In October 1763, after fifteen months on the throne, she wrote to him for the first time, declaring herself to be his ardent disciple. "Whatever style I possess, whatever powers of reasoning, have all been acquired through the reading of Voltaire," she told him.

Voltaire was sixty-one when, in 1755, he had decided to settle down. Two imprisonments in the Bastille; voluntary exile in England; an initially euphoric sojourn at the court of Frederick of Prussia, followed by misunderstanding, estrangement, and, eventually, painful rupture; a complicated warm and cool relationship with Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour—all this was behind him. He was ready to bury himself in work and he believed that he would find a haven of tranquillity in the independent republic of Geneva, governed by a council of aristocratic Calvinists. Already a millionaire from his writing, he bought a villa with a splendid view of the lake and called it *Les Délices*. Soon he was in

trouble again. A number of Genevois disapproved of an article about their city in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* that seemed to represent the Calvinist clergy of Geneva as rejecting the divinity of Christ. In fact, it was the mathematician and physicist Jean d'Alembert who had written these words, but Voltaire was believed to be the writer's inspiration, and he bore the brunt of the council's complaints. In 1758, he moved to Ferney. It seemed a safer haven. The Château de Ferney was on French territory, but only just; Geneva was three miles away. Paris and Versailles were three hundred. Should the French authorities decide to make trouble for him again, he needed only an hour to move back across the border to Geneva, where he still had many admirers. Geneva was also the home of the publisher who was then printing *Candide*.

Voltaire had not moved to this new dwelling to live in idleness. Instead, he saw Ferney as well placed to be his command post for an intensification of violent intellectual combat. The philosophical wars of the Enlightenment were being fought in earnest. Louis XV had forbidden Voltaire to return to Paris. The man of letters was eager to fire back, and Ferney became the launching point for his philosophical, intellectual, political, and social fusillades. He wrote books, brochures, histories, biographies, plays, stories, treatises, poems, and over fifty thousand letters that now fill ninety-eight volumes. The Seven Years' War had concluded, and France had lost both Canada and India to England. Voltaire rubbed salt into these wounds by denouncing war as the "great illusion." "The victorious nation never profits from the spoils of the conquered; it pays for everything," he said. "It suffers as much when its armies are successful as when they are defeated. Whoever wins, humanity loses." He fired polemical salvos against Christianity, the Bible, and the Catholic Church. At one point, he considered Jesus a deluded eccentric, *un fou*. At the age of eighty, he rose early on a May morning and climbed a hill with a friend to see the sunrise. At the top, overwhelmed by the magnificent panorama of red and gold, he knelt and said, "Oh, mighty God, I believe." Then, standing up, he said to his friend, "As to Monsieur the son and Madame his mother, that is another matter!"

A further advantage to Ferney was that the most direct roads between northern and southern Europe passed through Switzerland, and these roads were traveled by many of the European intellectual and artistic brotherhood. Voltaire, in his château, was living in the geographical heart of Europe, and was therefore assured of a swarm of visitors: too

many. A multitude came to see him from every quarter: German princes, French dukes, English lords, Casanova, a Cossack hetman. Many were English, to whom Voltaire spoke in their own language; the parliamentary statesman Charles James Fox, the historian Edward Gibbon, the biographer James Boswell. When uninvited people arrived, Voltaire told his servants, "Send them away. Tell them I am very sick." Boswell begged to be allowed to stay overnight and see the patriarch in the morning; he said he would sleep in "the highest and coldest garget." He was sent to a pleasant bedroom.

Nor did Voltaire confine himself to intellectual matters. In 1762 and during the years following, Voltaire became "the Man of Calas." The backdrop to this affair was the persecution of Protestants in France. Protestants were excluded from public office; couples not married by a Catholic priest were considered to be living in sin; their children were considered illegitimate. In the southern and southwestern provinces of France, these laws were grimly enforced.

In March 1762, Voltaire learned that a sixty-four-year-old Protestant Huguenot, Jean Calas, a dealer in linens in Toulouse, had been executed under torture. His eldest son, suffering from depression, had committed suicide in the family's house. The father, Jean, knowing that the law demanded that the body of a suicide be dragged naked through the streets, pelted with mud and stones, and then hanged, persuaded his family to join him in reporting a natural death. The police saw the rope marks on the son's neck, however, and charged that Calas had murdered his son to prevent him from converting to Catholicism. A high court prescribed torture to make Calas confess. He was placed on the rack and his arms and legs were pulled from their sockets; in agony, he admitted that his son's death was a suicide. This was not the confession the authorities wanted; they demanded that he confess to murder. Fifteen pints of water were poured down his throat; he still protested his own innocence. Another fifteen pints were forced into him; he was convinced that he was drowning, but still cried that he was innocent. He was stretched on a cross in the public square before the Toulouse cathedral. The public executioner took a heavy iron bar and crushed each of his four limbs in two places; the old man still proclaimed his innocence. He was strangled and died.

Donat Calas, the youngest of six Calas children, came to Ferney and begged Voltaire to defend his dead father's innocence. Voltaire, appalled and infuriated by this cruelty, undertook the legal rehabilita-

tion of the victim. For three years, from 1762 to 1765, he hired lawyers and mobilized European opinion. During the summer of 1763, he wrote *Traité sur la Tolérance*, which argued that Roman persecution of Christians in the early years of Christianity had now been surpassed by Christian persecution of other Christians who were "hanged, drowned, broken on the wheel, or burned for the love of God." Eventually, Voltaire appealed to the high council of the kingdom, presided over by the king. There, eventually, Jean Calas was posthumously exonerated and his reputation rehabilitated.

This triumph was accompanied by another. Elisabeth, the daughter of Pierre Paul Sirven, a Protestant living near Toulouse, wished to convert to Catholicism and had been spirited away to a convent by a Catholic bishop. There, she ripped off her clothes and demanded to be flogged; prudently, the bishop returned her to her family. A few months later, Elisabeth disappeared. She was discovered drowned in a well. Forty-five local witnesses testified that the girl had committed suicide, but the prosecutor ordered her father's arrest and accused him of having murdered his daughter to prevent her conversion. On March 19, 1764, Sirven and his wife were both condemned to be hanged; their two surviving daughters, one of them pregnant, were to be forced to watch. The family fled to Geneva, reached Ferney, and asked Voltaire to help them. The philosopher again took up his pen. He recruited Frederick of Prussia, Catherine of Russia, Stanislaus of Poland, and other monarchs to take up the cause. After nine years of endless argument, Sirven was acquitted. "It took two hours to condemn this man to death," Voltaire said bitterly, "and nine years to prove his innocence."

With Voltaire in eternal combat, his widowed niece, Mme Denis, acted as mistress of the house—and as his bedroom companion. Voltaire saw nothing wrong in sexual irregularity; he defined morality as "doing good to mankind." In any case, it was an age of sexual irregularity, and Voltaire's relationship with Mme Denis was straightforward. He concealed nothing: she was his mistress; he called her "my beloved." In 1748, in the early years of their relationship (it continued until his death), he had written to her, "I shall be coming to Paris only for you. . . . In the meantime, I press a thousand kisses on your round breasts, on your ravishing bottom, on all your person, which has so often given me erections and plunged me into a flood of delight."

At Ferney, the master usually did not appear until midday dinner. During the day, he read and wrote and then continued far into the

night, allowing himself only five or six hours of sleep. He drank an ocean of coffee. He suffered from severe headaches. To help the people of his village, he built a watchmaking factory and then persuaded all of his friends in Europe to buy its products; from St. Petersburg Catherine placed an order worth thirty-nine thousand pounds. By 1777, this once small, impoverished village of forty-nine people had become a prosperous town of twelve hundred. Every Sunday, Voltaire opened the chateau for dancing. On October 4, 1777, Ferney celebrated its patron in the courtyard of his chateau with an evening of singing, dancing, and fireworks. This was the last fete held at Ferney. On February 5, 1778, Voltaire left for Paris, promising to return in six weeks. In Paris, the population, which had not seen him for twenty years, gave him an ovation whenever he appeared. Marie Antoinette asked to meet and embrace him; he could not oblige her because he was still banned from court by her husband, Louis XVI. He met and embraced Benjamin Franklin instead. He never returned to his chateau. On May 30, 1778, he died in Paris.

While Voltaire lived, Frederick of Prussia told him, "After your death, there will be no one to replace you"; when the philosopher was gone, the king said, "For my part, I am consoled by having lived in the age of Voltaire." Later, Goethe added, "He governed the whole civilized world." Catherine's lament was more specific: it was not his wisdom she mourned; it was his gaiety. "Since Voltaire died," she wrote to her friend Friedrich Melchior Grimm, "it seems to me that honor no longer attaches to good humor. He was the divinity of gaiety. Procure for me an edition, or rather, a complete copy of his works, to renew within me and confirm my natural love of laughter."

After Voltaire's death, the empress told Grimm that she intended to build a replica of the Château de Ferney in the park at Tsarskoe Selo. This "New Ferney" would become the repository of Voltaire's library, purchased by Catherine from Mme Denis for 135,000 pounds. The books went to Russia, but the architectural project was abandoned, and the library of over six thousand volumes, annotated by Voltaire page by page in the margins, was placed in a hall of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. In the center of this space, the place of honor, was an exact copy of Houdon's remarkable statue of Voltaire seated.

It is there, today.

• • •

Voltaire was interested in Russia. In 1757, he had persuaded Empress Elizabeth to commission him to write a history of Russia under her father, Peter the Great. The first volume had been published in 1760; he was still working on the second volume when Elizabeth died and Catherine overthrew Peter III. With rumors of what had happened at Ropsha reverberating throughout Europe, Catherine thought of enlisting Voltaire to help her clear her name. One of her secretaries at the time was a native of Geneva, François-Pierre Pictet, a disciple of Voltaire's and a former actor in the patriarch's amateur theatricals at Les Délices. At Catherine's request, Pictet sent a long account to Voltaire, explaining the intolerable situation in which she had found herself after her coup, and her innocence in the murder itself. Voltaire accepted this account, and brushed it aside by saying, "I know that . . . [Catherine] is reproached with some *bagatelle* about her husband, but these are family matters in which I do not mix."

Originally, Voltaire maintained a certain reserve toward the new empress. European opinion held that she was unlikely to remain on the throne for long, and Voltaire was reluctant to plunge into an epistolary relationship with her. His reluctance increased on news of the sudden death of Ivan VI. "I believe we must moderate a little our enthusiasm for the North," he wrote to d'Alembert. Once it was apparent that the German princess had a firm seat on the Russian throne, Voltaire began to see in her an enlightened monarch who might work to apply the principles of justice and tolerance that he proclaimed. Thereafter, their correspondence flourished, garnished with mutual flattery, until his death. Their political ideology was similar: they agreed that monarchy was the only rational form of government, provided the monarch was enlightened. "Why is almost the whole earth governed by monarchs?" Voltaire asked. "The honest answer is because men are rarely worthy of governing themselves. . . . Almost nothing great has ever been done in the world except by the genius and firmness of a single man combating the prejudices of the multitude. . . . I do not like government by the rabble."

The relationship between an ambitious, politically powerful woman and the most celebrated writer of the age became one of mutual benefit. Both were mindful that they were playing before an immense, influential audience. Catherine recognized that a letter to Voltaire, which could be passed along to his friends, was potentially a message to

the intelligentsia of Europe. For Voltaire, what could be more flattering than to have another ruling sovereign become his royal disciple? He addressed her as “the Semiramis of the North,” “Saint Catherine,” and “Our Lady of St. Petersburg.” In return, she showered him with sable pelisses and jeweled snuffboxes, and sent diamonds to Madame Denis. But it was a relationship that thrived on distance; despite the intimacy of their correspondence, the empress and the patriarch never met. Near the end of his life, when Voltaire was toying with the idea of paying Saint Catherine his personal respects, this appeared to be the last thing she wanted. Perhaps nervous about exposing her country or herself to Voltaire’s analytical eye, she wrote urgently to Grimm, “For God’s sake, try to persuade the octogenarian to stay at home. What should he do here? He would either die here or on the road from cold, weariness and bad roads. Tell him that *Catau* is best seen from a distance.”

Even before she first wrote to Voltaire in 1763, Catherine had reached out to another towering Enlightenment figure, Denis Diderot. Diderot, born in a small town near Dijon in 1713, was as warmhearted as Voltaire was cynical, as rough-hewn as Voltaire was sophisticated and polished, and retained though life the innocence of a child and the enthusiasms of adolescence. According to Catherine, Diderot was “in certain ways . . . a hundred, in others not yet ten.” Intending as a boy to become a priest, he attended a Jesuit school for seven years (his brother became a priest) and the University of Paris, and became a translator of English books into French. Increasingly, he was fascinated by the whole universe of knowledge: mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, anatomy, Latin, Greek, history, literature, art, politics, and philosophy. As a young man, he had rejected the biblical God as a monster of cruelty and the Catholic Church as a fountainhead of ignorance. He saw nature, which, he noted, made no distinction between good and evil, as the only permanent reality. He was arrested and imprisoned. Released, he became the founder and chief editor of the new *Encyclopédie*, “the bible of the enlightened.” Working with d’Alembert, he brought out the first volume in June 1751; ten more volumes were to follow. The philosophy of the *Encyclopédie* was humanistic; man was placed in nature; he was equipped with reason to make his way. The importance of scientific knowledge, the dignity of human labor were stressed. For denouncing “the myths of the Catholic church,” his license to publish was revoked.

This negative attention enormously stimulated desire to acquire and read each of the eleven volumes as it was published.

From the first, Voltaire praised and encouraged. To d’Alembert he wrote, “You and M. Diderot are accomplishing a work which will be the glory of France and the shame of those who persecute you. Of eloquent philosophers, I recognize only you and him.” Six years later, when the project was again in trouble, Voltaire urged, “Go on, brave Diderot, intrepid d’Alembert. Fall upon the knaves, destroy their empty declarations, their miserable sophistries, their historical lies, their contradictions and absurdities beyond number.”

One of those closely watching these developments was the new empress of Russia. Soon after her accession, and aware of the influence of Diderot and d’Alembert, Catherine set about winning their support. In August 1762, two months after she took the throne, the difficulties of publishing the *Encyclopédie* in France provided her with an opportunity. She offered to have all subsequent volumes printed in Riga, the westernmost city in her empire. But her offer came too soon after the death of Peter III at Ropsha, and the editors of the *Encyclopédie* were wary of trusting their work to a ruler whose tenure seemed uncertain. Ultimately, the French government, learning what Catherine had offered, relented and authorized continued publication in France.

In 1765, Catherine made a grand gesture to Diderot that became the talk of Europe. Three children had been born to Diderot and his wife, and all three had died. Then, when Madame Diderot was forty-three, a fourth child was born, a daughter, Marie Angélique. Diderot idolized this little girl and treasured the time he spent with her. He knew that he must provide for her dowry. But he had no money; everything had gone into the *Encyclopédie*. He decided to sell his only valuable possession, his library. Catherine heard about his decision from Diderot’s friend, her ambassador to France and Holland, Prince Dmitry Golitsyn. Diderot had asked fifteen thousand pounds for his books. Catherine offered sixteen thousand but attached a condition: the books should remain in Diderot’s possession for his lifetime. “It would be cruel to separate a scholar from his books,” she explained. Diderot thus became without either he or his books leaving Paris . . . Catherine’s librarian. For this ser-

vice, she paid him a salary of a thousand pounds a year. The following year, when the salary was forgotten and went unpaid, an embarrassed Catherine sent Diderot fifty thousand pounds—to cover fifty years in advance, she said.

The empress's purchase of Diderot's library captured the imagination of literary Europe. Diderot, astonished, wrote to his benefactress: "Great princess, I prostrate myself at your feet. I reach out my arms to you, I would speak to you, but my soul faints, my mind grows cloudy. . . . Oh, Catherine, be sure that you do not reign more powerfully in Petersburg than in Paris." Voltaire joined in: "Diderot, d'Alembert and I—we are three who would build you altars. . . . Would one ever have suspected fifty years ago that one day the Scythians [Russians] would so nobly recompense in Paris the virtue, science, and philosophy that are treated so shamefully among us." From Grimm: "Thirty years of labor have not brought Diderot the slightest recompense. It has pleased the Empress of Russia to pay the debt of France." Catherine's response was, "I never thought that buying Diderot's library would bring me so many compliments."

There was, no doubt, a larger purpose behind her generosity. If so, the gift achieved its objective: Europeans now believed that there were things in the east other than snow and wolves. Diderot threw himself into the task of recruiting artistic and architectural talent for Catherine. His house was turned into an employment agency on her behalf. Writers, artists, scientists, architects, and engineers swarmed to solicit appointments in St. Petersburg.

In 1773, Diderot, who hated to travel and had never before left France, summoned the resolution to embark on the journey to Russia that he felt he owed to Catherine. He was sixty years old, subject to stomach cramps and drafts of cold air, and he was afraid of Russian food. The prospect of crossing Europe to reach a country famous for violence and freezing temperatures was daunting; nevertheless, he felt an obligation to thank his benefactress in person. In May 1773, he set out. He got only as far as The Hague, where he halted for three months to rest with his friend Prince Dmitry Golitsyn.

With autumn approaching, the philosopher set out on the second stage of his journey. Huddled and coughing in a post chaise, he hoped to reach his destination before extreme cold arrived. Unfortunately, it

was snowing in the Russian capital when he arrived on October 8, and he collapsed into bed. The day after his arrival he was awakened by the pealing of bells and the booming of cannon celebrating the wedding of the nineteen-year-old heir to the throne, Grand Duke Paul, to Princess Wilhelmina of Hesse-Darmstadt. Diderot, indifferent to ceremonies, avoided the festivities; this inclination was reinforced by his having nothing to wear other than plain black clothes and by his having left his wig behind somewhere during his journey.

Catherine warmly welcomed the famous editor of the *Encyclopædia*. The man she saw before her possessed a "high brow receding on a half-bald head; large rustic ears and a big bent nose, firm mouth . . . [and] brown eyes, heavy and sad, as if recalling unrecalable errors, or realizing the indestructibility of superstition, or noting the high birth rate of simpletons." The empress had her guest inducted into the Russian Academy of Sciences and then began a series of conversations in her private study. "M. Diderot," she told him at their first meeting, "you see this door by which you have entered. That door will be opened to you every day between three and five in the afternoon." Diderot was charmed by her simplicity and the complete informality of their long, intimate sessions. Catherine would sit on a sofa, sometimes with a piece of needlework in her hands, and her guest would take his place in a comfortable armchair opposite her. Diderot, completely at ease, talked interminably, contradicted her, shouted, gesticulated, and called her "my good lady." The empress laughed at his exuberance and familiarities. He took her hands, shook her arm, and tapped her legs in making his points. "Your Diderot is an extraordinary man," Catherine wrote to Mme Geoffrin. "I emerge from interviews with him with my thighs bruised and quite black. I have been obliged to put a table between us to protect myself and my limbs."

Their conversations roamed widely. With some idea of the topic likely to be discussed, Diderot prepared notes and memoranda, which he then read to the empress; after this preliminary, they both spoke freely. He put before her his views on tolerance, the legislative process, the value of competition in commerce, divorce (which he favored in cases of intellectual incompatibility), and gambling. He begged her to provide Russia with a permanent law of succession. He urged her to introduce the study of anatomy in girls' schools to make the young women better wives and mothers, and help them thwart the wiles of seducers.

The cordiality of their relationship encouraged Diderot to hope that he had found a ruler willing to apply the principles of the Enlightenment to her government. He believed that it would be easier to reform Russia than France, since Russia seemed a blank new page on which history had written nothing. He gave his views on the education of Grand Duke Paul: after serving as a statesman's apprentice in the different administrative colleges, the young man should travel all over Russia, accompanied by economists, geologists, and jurists, to familiarize himself with different aspects of the country he would someday rule. Then, after getting his wife pregnant to ensure the succession, he should visit Germany, England, Italy, and France.

If Diderot had confined himself to specific suggestions, he might have had more specific impact. But, having edited a massive encyclopedia that attempted to include the totality of knowledge, Diderot conceived himself as an authority and therefore a suitable adviser on every aspect of human life, culture, and government. He considered it his duty to instruct the empress on the way to govern her empire. He cited examples from the Greeks and Romans, and urged her to reform Russian institutions while she still could. He urged the establishment of an English-style parliament. He subjected Catherine to a questionnaire containing eighty-eight items, including the quality of tar supplied by each province, the cultivation of grapes, the organization of veterinary schools, the number of monks and nuns in Russia, the number and condition of Jews living in the empire, and the relations between master and serf.

If Diderot's irrepressibility made Catherine laugh, his probing questions probably discomfited her. Listening to him, she eventually decided that her learned, garrulous guest had no sense of the reality of Russia. "Monsieur Diderot," she finally said to him,

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 touchy.

Eventually, however, Diderot realized that the empress did not intend to put into practice any of the advice he had been preaching for so many weeks, and the glow of their first conversations began to fade. His own worsening health, his loneliness in an alien court, the open hostility of courtiers jealous of his easy access to the sovereign, all contributed to Diderot's increasing desire to return home. He had seen much of Catherine but almost nothing of Russia. When he spoke of departing, she did not urge him to stay. He had been her guest for five months, and she had sat with him for sixty afternoons. He was the only one of the *philosophes* she was ever to meet.

Diderot left Russia on March 4, 1774. He had been dreading the return journey, and, to ease his passage, Catherine provided him with a specially constructed carriage in which he could lie down. When she said goodbye, she handed him a ring, a fur, and three bags containing a thousand rubles each. The journey was more difficult than he had feared. The ice was breaking on the rivers along the Baltic coast, and, as his carriage was crossing the river Dvina, the ice cracked and the carriage began to sink. The old man was pulled free, but the horses were drowned, and three-quarters of his baggage was lost. He wound up with a high fever. Eventually, he made it back to The Hague and recuperated in Prince Golitsyn's care.

From Catherine's perspective, the visit had been less than a success. Diderot's ideas did not constitute a practical program for Russia; a noble, idealistic *philosophe* was not a practical politician or administrator. Once physically recovered, Diderot, however, decided that his visit had been a triumph. From Paris, he wrote to Catherine, "Now you sit beside Caesar, your friend [Joseph of Austria], and a little above Frederick [of Prussia.] your dangerous neighbor."

Diderot's exuberant stories about his long stay with Catherine so irritated Voltaire that he became sick with jealousy. For months, he had not received a single letter from St. Petersburg; clearly Catherine had rejected him for another. On August 9, 1774, four months after Diderot left Russia, Voltaire was unable to stand it any longer:

Madame:

I am positively in disgrace at your court. Your Imperial Majesty has jilted me for Diderot, or for Grimm, or for some

other favorite. You have no consideration for my advanced age. All well and good if Your Majesty were a French *coquette*; but how can a victorious, law-giving empress be so inconstant. . . . I am trying to find crimes I have committed that would justify your indifference. I see that indeed there is no passion that does not end. This thought would cause me to die of chagrin, were I not already so near to dying of old age.

Signed,

He whom you have forsaken,
your admirer, your old Russian of Ferney

Catherine answered lightly: "Live, Monsieur, and let us be reconciled, for in any case there is no cause for quarrel between us. . . . You are so good a Russian that you could not be the enemy of Catherine." Appeased, Voltaire declared that he acknowledged defeat and "returned to her in chains."

Voltaire had exercised the greatest intellectual influence on Catherine, and Diderot was the only one of the major *philosophes* she actually met, but it was in Friedrich Melchior Grimm that the empress found a lifelong friend. Born a Lutheran in Regensburg in 1723 and educated in Leipzig, Grimm traveled to Paris to make his career. He made his way through the literary salons and became an intimate friend of Diderot's. In 1754, he took over the *Correspondance Littéraire*, an exclusive fortnightly cultural newsletter, reporting from Paris on books, poetry, the theater, painting, and sculpture. The fifteen or so subscribers, all crowned heads or princes of the Holy Roman Empire, received their copies through their embassies in Paris, thus avoiding censorship and enabling Grimm to write freely. Once on the throne, Catherine became a subscriber, but her personal acquaintance with Grimm had to wait until September 1773, when he arrived in St. Petersburg—a month before Diderot—for the wedding of Grand Duke Paul to Princess Wilhelmina of Hesse-Darmstadt. Grimm was present as part of the escort for the bride.

Catherine knew Grimm by his reputation and through his newsletter. Six years older than Catherine, he shared many of her characteristics: German origin, French education, ambition, cosmopolitan interests, love of literature, passion for gossip. Beyond these, Grimm may also have appealed to Catherine because of his sound common

sense, his discretion combined with wit, and his quiet charm. From September 1773 to April 1774, he was frequently received in private by Catherine in the same kind of setting as Diderot. She invited him to remain in St. Petersburg and go into her service, but he declined, citing his age, ignorance of the Russian language, and unfamiliarity with the Russian court. Nevertheless, when he left for Italy in April, they began a correspondence that continued until Catherine's last letter in 1796, a month before her death. He returned to St. Petersburg in September 1776 and stayed almost a year, during which time she asked him to head a new commission on public schools. Again, he declined, although he later agreed to serve as her official cultural agent in Paris, managing her artistic and intellectual interests and contacts.

Catherine's friendship with Grimm became one of the most important relationships in her life. He functioned as a confidant and a sounding board—even a safety valve—in whom she had complete trust. She wrote to him with freedom; she could speak frankly of her personal life, including her thoughts about her lovers. Except for her son, Paul, and, later, her grandchildren, she had no family, and to Grimm alone she could pour out her thoughts and feelings as she might have done with a fond uncle or an older brother.

51

The Nakaz

IN 1766, CATHERINE WROTE to Voltaire that she was working on a special project. This was her *Nakaz*, or *Instruction*, intended to be a guideline for a complete rewriting of the Russian legal code. If all went well, Catherine believed, it would raise the levels of government administration, of justice, and of tolerance within her empire. She also hoped that it would announce to Europe that a new era, informed by the principles of the Enlightenment, was beginning in Russia.

When Catherine took the throne, the Russian legal code, promulgated in 1649 by Tsar Alexis, the father of Peter the Great, was chaotically obsolete. Since the code had first been issued, thousands of new laws had appeared, often without reference to previous laws on the same subject. There was no complete set of statute books. Imperial de-

crees by successive rulers conflicted, and ministers and officials issued new laws that contradicted earlier laws without the latter being annulled. The result was that government departments were disorganized, administration throughout the empire was inefficient and corrupt, and failure to define the authority of local officials had led to landowners taking ever greater powers at the expense of the peasantry.

Peter the Great's long reign (1689–1725) had aggravated this chaos. Peter's emphasis had been on reform by action; half of his decrees had never been recorded. No successor could have had more respect for the great reforming tsar than Catherine. Peter had made Russia into a European power; he had created a Western capital with access to Europe, launched a navy, mobilized a victorious army, brought women into society, demanded religious tolerance, and promoted the nation's industry and commerce. But he had died at fifty-two, and in the forty years since his death, lazy and incompetent rulers had made the confusion in Russian law worse. Catherine saw it as her task to clarify and complete what Peter had begun. Having absorbed liberal eighteenth-century political theory, which stressed the power of good laws to change society, Catherine concluded that the remedy for the flaws in her empire would be a new legal code. Because she had reached the throne steeped in the ideas of an enlightened European, she decided that these new laws should be based on Enlightenment principles.

Her plan was to summon a national assembly elected from all of the free social classes and ethnic groups of the empire. She would listen to their complaints and invite them to propose new laws to correct these flaws. Before this assembly gathered, however, Catherine decided that she must provide its members with a set of guiding principles upon which she wished the new laws to be founded. The result was her *Nakaz*, published under the full title *Instruction of Her Imperial Majesty Catherine the Second for the Commission Charged with Preparing a Project of a New Code of Laws*. It was the work that Catherine considered the most significant intellectual achievement of her life and her greatest contribution to Russia.

She began working on the *Nakaz* in January 1765 and devoted two to three hours a day to it for two years. The document was published on July 30, 1767, and is, in the view of Isabel de Madariaga, the preeminent historian of Catherine's Russia, "one of the most remarkable political treatises ever compiled and published by a reigning sovereign." In 526

articles, grouped into twenty chapters, she presented her view of the nature of the Russian state and how it should be governed. She began with Locke's belief that in an ordered society, law and freedom were necessary to one another, since the latter could not exist without the former. She drew heavily from Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Law*, published in 1748, which analyzed the structure of societies and the political rights of men in their relationship to the state. Of the total of 526 articles, 294 were taken or adapted from Montesquieu. She also drew 108 articles from the Italian jurist and legal scholar Cesare Beccaria, whose *Essay on Crimes and Punishment* had just been published in 1764. This work was a passionate attack on the relationship between crime and punishment in most states of contemporary Europe. Beccaria declared that the reform of the criminal, rather than his punishment, should be the purpose of laws, justice, and penal incarceration. Above all, Beccaria was revolted by the near-universal use of torture. Catherine, impressed by this work, immediately invited the author to come to Russia. Beccaria chose to stay in Milan.

Catherine's *Nakaz* deals with an immense range of political, judicial, social, and economic questions. It discusses what Russia was at that moment, and what it should be; how society ought to be organized, and how government and the administration of justice ought to be conducted. Her tone was that of a teacher rather than an autocrat. Her preamble reminded delegates and readers that the Christian religion teaches people to do good to one another whenever possible. She expressed the belief that every man wished to see his country happy, glorious, tranquil, and safe, and that people wished to live under laws that protected but did not oppress them. From these opinions and principles, she proceeded to what she believed were the basic facts about her own empire. "Russia is a European state," she declared, meaning with this statement to eliminate the Russian's traditional sense of geographical and cultural isolation, as well as the disdain of Europeans who believed that Russia was only a remote, primitive backwater. From there, she moved directly to an explanation of the need for absolutism in Russia. The sovereign was absolute, she said, "for there is no authority but that which centers in his single person that can act with a vigor proportionate to such a vast dominion." Any other form of government risked weakness.

She accepted from Montesquieu a qualification of her advocacy of absolutism; this was embodied in her acceptance of the limitation of

the supreme power of the Russian autocrat by certain “fundamental laws.” These “laws” were defined as traditions, habits, and institutions so deeply rooted in the history and life of a society that no monarch, however absolute, could or would act in opposition to them. They included respect for the permanence of the nation’s dominant religion, for the law of succession to the throne, and for the existing rights and privileges of dominant social groups, such as the nobility. Montesquieu defined such a state with such a ruler as a “moderate monarchy.” In this sense, Catherine was defining and presenting Russia as a moderate autocracy.

Turning to the role of laws in regulating the lives and relationships of people, Catherine wrote: “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.” In confronting the great issue of crime and punishment, she wholeheartedly accepted the views of Montesquieu and Beccaria, agreeing that “it is much better to prevent than to punish crimes.” She insisted that capital punishment be inflicted only in cases involving political murder, sedition, treason, or civil war. “Experience shows,” she wrote, “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.” Even sedition and treason were given narrow definitions. She distinguished between sacrilege and *lèse-majesté*. A sovereign may be said to rule by divine right, but he or she is not divine, and therefore it is neither sacrilege nor treason to commit a nonphysical offense against him. Words cannot be called criminal unless accompanied by deeds. Satirical writings in monarchies, even those relating to the monarch— and here she may have had in mind Voltaire’s struggles in France— should be regarded as misdemeanors, not crimes. Even here, care should be taken, because censorship can be “productive of nothing but ignorance and must cramp the rising efforts of genius and destroy the very will for writing.”

She rejected torture, traditionally used in extracting confessions,

obtaining evidence, and determining guilt in Russia. “The use of torture is contrary to sound judgment and common sense,” she declared. “Humanity itself cries out against it, and demands it to be utterly abolished.” She gave the example of Great Britain, which had prohibited torture “without any sensible inconveniences.” She was particularly incensed by the use of torture to force a confession:

What right can give anyone authority to inflict torture upon a citizen when it is still unknown whether he is innocent or guilty? By law, every person is innocent until his crime is proved. . . . The accused party on the rack, while in the agonies of torture, is not master enough of himself to be able to declare the truth. . . . The sensation of pain may rise to such a height, that it will leave him no longer the liberty of producing any proper act of will, except what at that very instant he believes may release him from that pain. In such an extremity, even an innocent person will cry out, ‘Guilty!’ provided they cease to torture him. . . . Then the judges will be uncertain whether they have an innocent or a guilty person before them. The rack, therefore, is a sure method of condemning an innocent person whose constitution is weak, and of acquitting the guilty who depends upon his bodily strength.

Catherine also condemned torture on purely humanitarian grounds. “All punishments by which the human body might be maimed are barbarism,” she wrote.

Catherine wanted punishments tailored to fit the crimes, and the *Nakaz* provided detailed analysis of different categories of crime and the appropriate punishments. Crimes against property, she said, should be punished by deprivation of property, although she understood that those guilty of stealing property were most often people who had none. She insisted that due process govern legal and courtroom procedures. She demanded that attention be paid to the role of judges, the truth of evidence, and the quality of proof required in reaching verdicts.

Some judges should be of the same rank of citizenship as the defendant; that is, his equals, so that he will not think him-

self fallen into the hands of people who will automatically decide against him. Judges should not have the right to interpret the law; only the sovereign, who makes the law, can do that. Judges must judge according to the letter of the law because this is the only way of ensuring that the same crime is judged the same way in all places at all times. If adherence to the law leads to injustice, the sovereign, as lawgiver, will issue new laws.

Catherine's attempt to address the problems of serfdom was the least successful part of the *Nakaz*. She began chapter II, her effort to deal with serfdom, by saying that "a civil society requires a certain established order; there ought to be some to govern and some to obey." In that context, she believed that even the humblest man had the right to be treated as a human being, but here her words collided with the general Russian belief that serfs were property. Even a hint of freeing the serfs met with protest, sometimes from people who prided themselves on their liberalism. Princess Dashkova was so convinced of the right of the nobility to own serfs that she attempted to persuade Denis Diderot of the necessity of serfdom in Russia. Catherine rejected this morally, even if she was politically powerless to change it. When Diderot was in St. Petersburg and criticized the squalor of the Russian peasant, the empress replied bitterly, "Why should they bother to be clean when their souls are not their own?"

Catherine wrote the *Nakaz* in French; her secretary translated her manuscript into Russian and other languages. She worked in private until September 1766, when she began to show drafts, first to Orlov, then to Panin. Orlov's opinion, predictably, was flattering. Panin was cautious; he saw in the *Nakaz* a threat to the whole political, economic, and social order. "These are axioms which will bring down walls," he warned. He worried about the impact that ideas taken from Montesquieu and Beccaria might have on uneducated delegates to the Legislative Commission. He was especially concerned because direct taxation of peasants and army recruitment were based on the institution of serfdom; he feared that without these two essential requirements, the state would wither economically and militarily. Beyond that, he wondered how freed serfs would live, since they possessed no land. He asked where the

state would find the money to compensate landowners for the serfs taken from them and for the land the serfs must farm to survive.

Catherine did not dismiss Panin's reaction. He was not a large landowner who had many serfs to lose; he had spent twelve years in Sweden and he generally favored reforms. She also found that he was far from alone in his opposition. On completing the original draft of the *Nakaz* early in 1767, she submitted it for review to members of the Senate. "Every part of it evoked division," she said later. "I let them erase what they pleased and they struck out more than half of what I had written." Next, she submitted the draft to certain educated noblemen; they removed half of the remaining articles. With these excisions, the *Nakaz* as finally published amounted to only one-quarter of the text that Catherine had labored two years to produce. This was the limit of absolute monarchy: even an autocrat could not override the views of those whose support she needed to remain in power.

In the version of the *Nakaz* ultimately printed, Catherine's frustration regarding serfdom is apparent in the way she uses language. She writes tentatively, almost apologetically, and then quickly backtracks, contradicts herself, and smoothes her message. Thus, her effort to say that serfdom should be a temporary institution, that a ruler should avoid reducing people to slavery, and that the civil laws should guard against the abuse of slaves comes out as a disorganized torrent of jumbled words:

Since the Law of Nature commands Us to labor to the utmost of Our power for the happiness of all people, We are obliged to render the situation of those who are subjected as easy as sound reason will allow. . . . And therefore, to avoid reducing the people to a state of slavery, unless urgent occasion indispensably obliges us to do it; in that case it ought to be done for no private interest, but for the public benefit. However, such occasions seldom or never occur. Of whatever kind subjugation may be, the civil laws should prevent the abuse of slavery, and guard against the dangers which may arise from it.

Two articles that Catherine had copied from Montesquieu were omitted in the final published document. One declared that serfs should be allowed to accumulate sufficient property to buy their freedom; the other that servitude should be limited to six years. To these

Catherine had added her own belief that once a serf had been freed, he should never be returned to serfdom. This was also omitted, and neither the Legislative Commission nor Russians ever heard, read, discussed, or acted on any these words.

Catherine made no claim to originality of authorship. When sending a copy of the *Nakaz* to Frederick of Prussia, she wrote frankly, "You will see that, like the crow in the fable, I have decked myself out in peacock's feathers; in this work merely the arrangement of the material and here and there a line or a word belong to me." To d'Alembert, she admitted, "For the sake of my empire, I have robbed Montesquieu without mentioning him by name. If he sees my work from the next world, I hope he will pardon me this plagiarism for the good of twenty million people. He loved humanity too well to take offense. His book is my 'prayer book.'"

The *Nakaz* was written in the hope that an updated legal code would lead to a more politically advanced, more culturally sophisticated, and more efficiently productive Russia. This did not happen. However, Catherine addressed the *Nakaz* not only to the Legislative Commission she intended to summon but to the educated public at home and abroad. And when translations appeared outside Russia, even with all the deletions, inconsistencies, and flagrant textual borrowing, it was still a sufficiently impressive document to earn Catherine wide approval. Translations in German, English, and Latin appeared almost immediately. In December 1768 she sent a version to Ferney. Voltaire pretended to believe that the *Nakaz* was a complete, detailed code of laws and declared that neither Lycurgus nor Solon "would have been capable of its creation." His exaggerated praise soared into absurdity when he called the *Nakaz* "the finest monument of the age which will bring you more glory than ten battles because it is conceived by your own genius and written by your own fair little hand."

The government of France thought otherwise. The monarchy viewed the document as so dangerous that by order of the king, publication in France was banned, and two thousand copies on their way from St. Petersburg to Paris were held at the frontier. Voltaire mocked French censors for banning the work, a compliment, he assured Cath-

erine, that would guarantee its popularity. Diderot wrote, "Justice and humanity have guided the pen of Catherine II. She has reformed everything." Frederick of Prussia called the *Nakaz* "a masculine, nervous performance worthy of a great man," and made the empress a member of the Berlin Academy.

The *Nakaz* was not, as Voltaire rhapsodized, a code of laws; rather, it was a collection of principles on which Catherine believed that good government and an orderly society should be based. In a letter to Frederick, she suggested that she was well aware of the discrepancy between the Russia of reality and the nation she hoped it might become: "I must warn Your Majesty that you will find different places in the document which will perhaps seem strange. I beg that you remember that I have often accommodated myself to the present, without closing the path to a more favorable future."

"All Free Estates of the Realm"

CATHERINE HAD WRITTEN the *Nakaz* as a preliminary to summoning an assembly that would assist in creating a new code of laws for the empire. Once the document was published, even in its severely truncated form, in December 1766, she initiated this second stage by issuing an imperial manifesto calling on "all free estates of the realm"—this meant all Russians except serfs—to select delegates to a legislative commission. During the spring of 1767, delegates were chosen, representing the many creeds, ranks, occupations, and social classes of the Russian empire. They included government officials, members of the nobility, townspeople, merchants, free peasants, and the inhabitants of outlying parts of the empire whose people were neither Christian nor racially Russian. Their task would be to inform the empress of the grievances, needs, and hopes of the people they represented, thereby providing her with material to use in drafting a new code of laws.

The basic electoral criteria were geographic territory and class. The

central government offices sent 29 delegates. All noblemen living in a particular district were to elect a single delegate for their district; this produced 142 noble delegates (among them three Orlov brothers, including Gregory and Alexis). All property owners in a town were to choose one deputy to represent their town, regardless of the size of the town's population; the result was that the towns, with 209 delegates, had the largest representation in the assembly. The state peasants, working on state lands but legally free, sent one delegate for each province for a total of 56. The Cossacks of the Don, the Volga, the Yaik, and Siberia were to send whatever number of delegates their own chieftains determined; they sent 44. Another 54 delegates came from the non-Russian tribes, Christian, Muslim, and even Buddhist; they sent one delegate for each tribe. Serfs, the overwhelming majority of the Russian population, were considered property and were not represented; they and their interests were presumed to be represented by their owners. When the elections were over, the Legislative Commission was to be composed of 564 delegates.

It was understood that the assembly would limit itself to providing information and advice, and that all final decisions would continue to be made by the empress. Catherine never intended that the Legislative Commission should discuss how Russia was governed. She had no wish to create a body that would limit the absolute power of the Russian autocrat, and she had made clear in the *Nakaz* that she considered absolutism the only form of government workable in Russia; nor was the Legislative Commission to be permitted to aspire to a permanent political role. There was to be no restriction on the expression of general political views, and any grievance, local or national, could be discussed, but the commission was to be purely advisory. As it happened, the delegates in the Legislative Commission showed no inclination to extend their authority. The status and supreme powers of the sovereign were understood and accepted.

Most of the delegates were confused as to exactly what was wanted from them. Any previous demand involving participation in the central government had been regarded with suspicion by the nobility, who considered a summons to the capital for state duty a form of service to

be evaded if possible. Catherine endeavored to reverse this perception and make the role of delegate attractive by attaching rewards and privileges to the work. All expenses were to be paid by the state treasury. Delegates were also to receive a salary, ranging from 400 rubles a year for noblemen and 122 rubles a year for town delegates to 37 rubles a year for free peasants. All delegates were to be exempted for life from capital punishment, torture, and corporal punishment, and their property was to be protected from confiscation. Delegates were to wear a special badge of office, which was to be returned to the state when they died. Nobles were entitled to incorporate this badge in their coats of arms so that their descendants would know that they had taken part in this historic work. "By this institution," Catherine's manifesto concluded, "we give to our people an example of our sincerity, of our great belief in them, and of our true maternal love."

Catherine announced that the new Legislative Committee would meet in Moscow and that she would open the proceedings in person. By summoning the assembly to the ancient capital, she hoped to prove to the city's large, conservative population that she, her *Nakaz*, and the new legal code intended to serve Old Russia as well as the new. Before the delegates gathered, she strengthened this message by announcing that she would make a voyage down the Volga, cruising through the heartland of Old Russia. Beside adding to her personal knowledge of her empire, she meant by showing herself among her people to impress observers at home and abroad. In fact, she was excited by this prospective journey. On March 26, 1767, she wrote to Voltaire, "Perhaps at the moment when you least expect it, you will receive a letter from some corner of Asia."

The voyage was on a grand scale. More than a thousand people accompanying her boarded a flotilla of large riverboats at Tver, on the upper Volga, on April 28, 1767. The voyagers stopped at Yaroslavl and then at Kostrama, where, in 1613, a delegation representing "all the classes and all the towns of Russia" had come to petition the first of the Romanov dynasty, sixteen-year-old Michael, to accept the Russian throne. From Kostrama, she and they moved down the river to Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, and Simbirsk. Catherine delighted in this method of travel. "There can be nothing more pleasant than voyaging as an entire house without fatigue," she wrote to Nikita Panin.

In Kazan, where she stayed for a week, Catherine found herself in a different world. Surrounded by ethnic and cultural diversity, she considered the applicability to Russia of the principles she had inscribed in the *Nakaz*. On May 29, she wrote to Voltaire:

These laws, about which so much has been said, are . . . not yet enacted, and who can answer for their usefulness? It is posterity, and not we, who will have to decide. Consider, if you will, that they must be applied to Asia as well as Europe, and what difference of climate, people, customs, and even ideas! . . . There are in this city twenty different peoples who do not resemble each other at all. We have, nevertheless, to design a garment to fit them all. They can agree on general principles well enough, but what about the details?

Two days later, in another letter to Ferney, she returned to this theme:

There are so many objects worthy of a glance, one could collect enough ideas here for ten years. This is an empire to itself and only here can one see what an immense enterprise it is as concerns our laws, and how little these conform to the situation of the empire in general.

Traveling south down the great river, Catherine marveled at the wealth of nature along its banks. To Nikita Panin, she wrote:

Here, the people along the Volga are rich and extremely well fed. The grain of every kind is so good here and the wood is nothing other than oak and linden. The earth is such dark stuff as is seen nowhere else. In a word, these people are spoiled by God. Since birth I have not eaten such tasty fish as here, and everything is in such abundance that one cannot imagine, and I do not know anything they might need; everything is here.

She and her party disembarked in Simbirsk to return to Moscow. A century and a half later, Alexander Kerensky, the prime minister of the 1917 Russian provisional government, described Simbirsk, which was his birthplace:

The town rose high on a hill overlooking the river and the meadowlands of rich, fragrant grass stretching to the eastern horizon. From the summit right down to the water stretched luxuriant apple and cherry orchards. In the spring the whole mountainside was white with blossoms, fragrant, and at night, breathless with the songs of nightingales.

Back in Moscow, Catherine prepared for the opening of the Legislative Commission. With the delegates arriving in the city, Catherine decided to impress them with the importance of the work they were about to undertake. On the morning of Sunday, July 30, she drove through the streets to the Kremlin, sitting alone in a gilded carriage. After a religious ceremony in the Assumption Cathedral, she walked to the Palace of Facets, where the delegates were presented to her as she sat above them on a raised throne. On her right, a table draped in red velvet displayed copies of the *Nakaz* bound in red leather; on her left stood Grand Duke Paul, the ministers of the government, members of the court, and foreign ambassadors. A welcoming speech compared Catherine to Justinian. She responded by telling the delegates that they had a unique opportunity “to glorify yourselves and your country, and to acquire for yourselves the respect and gratitude of future centuries.” She presented each delegate with a copy of the *Nakaz* and a gold medal on a chain. The medal was stamped with an image of the empress. Its inscription read: “For the welfare of one and all.” The medals were popular and many were promptly sold.

The following morning, the commission began its work. Over several days, the vice-chancellor, Prince Alexander Golitsyn, read Catherine’s *Nakaz* aloud. This was the first of many readings, necessary because many delegates could not read. The impact of this document on moderately educated noblemen, town merchants, peasants whose horizons were limited to their own province, if not their own village, not to mention tribesmen from beyond the Volga, can only be guessed. The difficulty lay in knowing what a Cossack from the Don, or a Kalmuck from the steppes, would make of principles largely borrowed from Montesquieu, and selected and arranged by a German-born princess. Aphorisms such as “Liberty is the right to do all that is not forbidden by law” were ideas so alien to the majority of Russians as to be almost incomprehensible.

In the meeting hall, the delegates sat on benches according to the district from which they had come. The nobility sat in front; behind them were the townspeople, the Cossacks, and the peasant delegates. For the important role of marshal (or president) of the commission, the empress chose General Alexander Bibikov, a soldier; he was charged with organizing and guiding the commission's work. Before the delegates began the work they had been summoned to do, they insisted on debating what title they should present to the empress in gratitude for her calling them together. "The Great" and "All Wise Mother of the Fatherland" were the most popular. Discussion lasted several sessions, provoking Catherine to say impatiently to Bibikov, "I brought them together to study laws, and they are busying discussing my virtues." Eventually, she refused all titles, explaining that she had not earned any of them; that only posterity could impartially judge her achievements, and that God alone could be called "All Wise." Nevertheless, she was far from displeased when the title "Catherine the Great" received the greatest number of votes; she had been on the throne for only five years, whereas Peter the Great had not received this title from the Senate until his fourth decade as tsar. And there was no doubt that the offer of this title by an elected assembly of the free estates strengthened the legitimacy of her position. It eliminated further discussion of her ever reverting to the role of regent, as well as any talk of the accession of Paul when he came of age.

The commission took up rules of procedure and assignment to sub-commissions. The full assembly was to act as a general debating arena, and the main work of analysis, coordination, and drafting of new laws was to be distributed among nineteen subcommissions. The assembly turned to the reports the delegates had brought with them. Catherine believed that discussion of these grievances and proposals, setting forth the needs of each area and class, would be one of the Legislative Commission's most important functions; she expected it to give her a valuable picture of social conditions in Russia. Each delegate was certain that his own list of complaints should be the primary concern of the assembly. Hundreds of these lists and petitions had arrived; the six state peasant delegates from the Archangel region brought with them a mass of seventy-three petitions. Some were simple lists, often unrelated or contradictory; others were relatively sensible proposals for reform. In

all, over a thousand peasant petitions were submitted to the Legislative Commission. Naturally, the peasants were less able than the nobles and the townspeople to clearly spell out their grievances, and they tended to limit themselves to descriptions of local problems: fences knocked down, crops trampled by wandering cattle, the scarcity of timber, the cost of salt, the law's delay, the insolence of government officials. Because they were vulnerable to pressure from the local nobility or local government officials, it was difficult for them to be explicit in their complaints. Attempting to hear them all, the sessions went on spawning subcommittees, where much was begun and little finished. Eventually, Catherine realized that the mission assigned to the delegates to find laws suitable for all the citizens of the empire was beyond their reach. Nevertheless, an extraordinary thing was happening: for the first time in Russia, representatives of the people had been brought and were sitting together to speak frankly and publicly without fear of serious retribution about what troubled them and the people they represented.

Catherine was often present, secluded on a platform behind a drawn curtain. She learned something about conditions in her empire, but the commission's stumbling pace irritated her—so much so that at one point she rose from behind her curtain and walked out. Not only did the full assembly sessions disappoint her; some of the subcommittees made her angry. On one occasion, told that the subcommittee on towns had adjourned while waiting for additional copies of the *Nakaz* to be bound, she exploded, "Have they really already lost those copies which they have already been given?" In December, after five months of talk, she decided that she had heard enough and halted the commission session in Moscow. Hopeful that a change of place might revitalize the delegates, she ordered them to reconvene in St. Petersburg two months later. In mid-January, she set off in her sledge over the frozen road. A long string of other sledges, filled with delegates, followed.

When the Legislative Commission met again in St. Petersburg on February 18, 1768, it began by discussing the status of the nobility and the townspeople, the merchants, and the free peasants. Nobles asked that their prerogatives be extended in the form of greater power in provincial and local governments; they also wanted the right to enter commerce and industry in the towns. In addition, the noblemen argued

among themselves over definitions of the status and rights of the different layers of nobility. The old hereditary nobility demanded establishment of a strict demarcation between nobility of birth and men recently raised to noble rank for service or merit—men like the Orlovs.

Another bitter debate set noble landowners against town merchants. The nobility claimed the exclusive right to own serf labor and complete freedom in dealing with the serf problem, economically and administratively. The merchants, having heard from the *Nakaz* that all citizens were equal before the law, demanded the same privileges as the nobility, including the right to own serfs. The landowners fought to prevent this, just as the merchants were fighting the attempt by landowners to engage in industry and trade. In the end, both initiatives failed.

In the course of these debates between nobles and merchants on the right to own serfs, the larger, more explosive subject of serfdom arose. The assembly was divided between two fundamentally opposing viewpoints. Those who supported serfdom declared that the institution would be permanent; that it was the only solution to an economic problem that went deeper than the owner's social status and privilege; namely, that serfdom was essential to the supply and control of labor in a huge, primarily agricultural country. Serfdom's opponents spoke of the evils and human misery caused by a form of bondage approaching slavery. With economy and tradition on one side, and philosophy and compassion on the other, there appeared no bridge to span the gulf.

Catherine was no better able to find a solution than anyone else. In her original version, the *Nakaz* had gone as far as to advocate the gradual abolition of serfdom in Russia by allowing serfs, with the permission of their owners, to purchase their own freedom. The Russian nobility overwhelmingly opposed ideas like this, which had been stricken from the document before it went to print. The question of whether serfs should be allowed to own personal property apart from land came before the assembly. It led to heated discussions on the relationship between landowners and serfs, and the administrative and punitive powers landowners should have over their serfs. To the charge that the peasants were lazy and drunk, a liberal delegate replied, "The peasant knows his feelings. He knows that all he owns belongs to his landowner. How can he be virtuous when he is deprived of all means of being so? He drinks, not from laziness, but from downheartedness. The hardest worker becomes careless if he is constantly oppressed and owns nothing."

Other enlightened landlords spoke in favor of legal limitations on landlords' power over serfs; Bibikov, the marshal, urged that noblemen who tortured their serfs be declared insane, which would allow the law to seize their estates. But when specific improvements in the condition of serfs and the eventual abolition of serfdom were proposed, the speakers were shouted down. Liberals among the noble delegates were vilified and even threatened with death by extremist members of the conservative majority.

Catherine had hoped for support from Count Alexander Stroganov. He had been educated in Geneva and Paris, and it was he who had supported her at the moment when Peter III had shouted "*Dural!*" in a crowded banquet hall. But when Stroganov rose to speak in the Legislative Commission, he defended the institution of serfdom with passion. Prince Michael Scherbatov, who considered the hereditary nobility an institution ordained by God, argued that because Russia was a cold, northern country, peasants would not work without being forced to do so. The state could not force them, he said, because Russia was too large. Only the nobility could do it, but they had to do it in the traditional way, with no interference by the state.

The poet and playwright Alexander Sumarokov objected to the special privileges, such as immunity for life from corporal punishment, granted in advance to peasant delegates to the Legislative Commission. Sumarokov also objected to the principle of majority voting. "The majority of votes does not confirm the truth, but only indicates the wishes of the majority," he said. "Truth is confirmed by profound reason and impartiality." Sumarokov further complained that "if the serfs were freed, the poor nobles would have neither cook nor coachman, nor lackey; their trained cooks and hairdressers would run away to better paid jobs and there would be constant disturbances requiring military force to put them down. Whereas at present landowners live quietly on their estates." ("And have their throats cut from time to time," commented Catherine.) It was known, Sumarokov concluded, that lords loved their serfs and were loved by them. In any case, he said, the common people did not have the feelings of noblemen. ("And cannot have in present circumstances," Catherine noted.) In the end, the empress reacted to Sumarokov's opposition by saying, "M. Sumarokov is a good poet . . . but he does not have sufficient clarity of mind to be a good lawgiver."

Despite Catherine's personal beliefs and misgivings regarding serf-

dom, the reactions by nobles in the assembly made her back away from further confrontation. Her recognition of the inherent danger in keeping this huge majority of the population in permanent bondage appeared in a letter she wrote to Procurator General Vyazemsky:

A general emancipation from the unbearable and cruel yoke will not ensue . . . [but] if we do not agree to the diminution of cruelty and the amelioration of the intolerable position of the human species, then, even against our will, they themselves will seize it sooner or later.

As her Enlightenment principles were battered in the assembly, Catherine, aware that she governed primarily through the support of the nobility, decided that she could not go further. Later, she commented:

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.

The discussions in St. Petersburg were proving even more unproductive and divisive than those in Moscow. The commission continued to stumble along, burdened by procedure, by conflicts of class, and by the generally impossible nature of its task. The twenty-nine Russian peasant delegates played little part in the discussions, except for one indefatigable delegate from the Archangel peasantry who spoke fifteen times. Many peasant delegates simply transferred their limited right to speak to noblemen from their districts. The few free peasants who did speak concentrated on grasping their chance to lay their complaints before the empress herself. Catherine, listening as they jumbled together every abuse, burden, and future fear, realized how far they were—and how far she now was—from Montesquieu. By the autumn of 1768, still without seeing any concrete results, the empress was tired. The commission had dragged on for eighteen months through more than two

In the summer and fall of 1768, the attention of the empress and her ministers was turning in a different direction. Russia's involvement in neighboring Poland and the shadow of a possible war with Turkey loomed over the sessions of the Legislative Commission. Catherine's enthusiasm for a new code of laws faded, and when Turkey declared war in October 1768, her thoughts and energies were directed toward this new challenge. Already, a number of noblemen who were assembly delegates were leaving to serve as officers in the army. On December 18, 1768, Count Bibikov announced that, by order of the empress, the full Legislative Commission would be prorogued indefinitely, although a subcommission would continue to meet. The last session of the full assembly took place on January 12, 1769, after which delegates dispersed to their homes, where they were to await a further summons. The subcommission met intermittently, but by September 1771, even this had ceased. At intervals in 1772 and 1773, the procurator general was informed that the empress intended to summon the full assembly after the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish war. But no summons ever came. The Legislative Commission never met again.

No new code of Russian laws was produced. The distance stretching between an Enlightenment philosopher's definition of an ideal monarchy and the immediate problems of everyday life in rural Russia was simply too great. Catherine looked to Montesquieu, but the nobles wanted confirmation and extension of status and privileges, and the peasants wanted restitution for broken fences, trampled crops, and illegally felled timber. Nevertheless, eighteen months and 203 sessions of effort were not entirely wasted. The documents submitted and discussed by delegates in the full assembly and the subcommissions contained a wealth of valuable information. Studying this mass of detail—these hundreds of grievances and competing claims—reinforced Catherine's conviction that the stability of Russia depended on maintaining the absolute authority of the autocracy.

Along with strengthening Catherine's belief in absolutism, something else had happened. Under the stimulus and protective cover of the *Nakaz*, the discussions in the full assembly and the various subcommissions had furnished delegates with new ideas that had never before been publicly discussed in Russia. In some cases, delegates actually quoted from a specific paragraph of Catherine's *Nakaz*, using the au-

mately, despite the failure of the Legislative Commission to create a new law code, it made a contribution to the nation's history. Taken together, the summons, the elections, and the 203 assembly sessions established a precedent for popular participation in government. It was the first attempt in imperial Russia to give the people a voice in their own political destiny.

Some have believed that the Legislative Commission achieved nothing, and that from the beginning both the *Nakaz* and the Legislative Commission were created simply for show, as no more than propaganda to impress Catherine's Enlightenment friends abroad. This judgment is shallow. Naturally, Catherine welcomed Voltaire's overheated praise for the *Nakaz*, but it does not follow that she wrote it simply to catch Voltaire's eye and win his blessing. Indeed, the Catherine scholar Isabel de Madariaga says:

The idea that the principal purpose of such an expensive and time-consuming operation . . . was only to throw dust in the eyes of Western intellectuals . . . is difficult to accept. It was possible for Catherine to win their golden opinions by corresponding with them as she did with Voltaire; by buying Diderot's library and leaving it in his possession; by inviting d'Alembert and Beccaria to come to Russia [although both refused]; by appointing Grimm as her personal agent in Paris. . . . This was sufficient evidence of Enlightenment credentials. . . . There was no need for her to embark on an enterprise of such major and time-consuming dimensions as the Legislative Commission.

It is worth noting that Catherine's writing of the *Nakaz* and summons to the Legislative Commission took place nine years before Thomas Jefferson wrote, and the Continental Congress voted to approve, the American Declaration of Independence. It preceded by twenty-two years Louis XVI's summons to the Estates-General. None of Catherine's successors on the Russian throne dared to summon such an assembly again until 1905, when Nicholas II was forced by revolution to sign a document transforming Russia from an absolute autocracy to a semiconstitutional monarchy—and then, in 1906, to summon

“The King We Have Made”

A NEW LEGAL CODE adapted to the needs of contemporary Russia was important to Catherine, but conduct of foreign policy ranked first among her concerns. From the beginning of her reign, Catherine pursued an active, forward strategy in the tradition of Peter the Great. As soon as she took the throne, she assumed absolute control of Russia's relations with foreign states. It was to inform her use of autocratic authority that she immediately demanded that she be shown all diplomatic dispatches arriving at the College of Foreign Affairs.

There was much to be done. When Peter the Great took sole possession of the throne in 1694, Russia was a landlocked giant, lacking a year-round, ice-free, saltwater port. Sweden dominated the upper Baltic, and the Black Sea was controlled by the Ottoman Turks. Later, as a result of his triumph in the Great Northern War, Peter broke the Swedish grip, extended Russian possessions down the Baltic coast to include the great port of Riga, and built a new national capital, St. Petersburg, on the Gulf of Finland. In the south, fighting the Turks, he tried to reach the Black Sea, succeeded at first on the mouth of the Don River at Azov, and then lost this prize when the Turks defeated him on the river Pruth. When Peter died in 1725, Russia still had no southern opening to the sea and the outside world. Along Russia's western border lay the huge, chaotically governed kingdom of Poland, which in earlier times had stripped away huge stretches of Russian and Ukrainian territory. For Catherine, therefore, wishing to emulate Peter by expanding her empire and creating new pathways to the world, the places to look were to the south and west. South lay Turkey; west, Poland.

The terminal illness of a king determined that her first objective would be Poland. The Polish Commonwealth, which merged the kingdom of Poland and the grand duchy of Lithuania, was as large as France. It stretched east to west between the Dnieper and the Oder, and north to south from the Baltic to the Carpathians and Turkey's Balkan provinces