Catherine the Great

Catherine the Great (1729–1796) was a German princess who became Empress of Russia after organizing the overthrow of her incompetent husband, Peter III. Like her predecessor, Peter the Great, Catherine had a desire to “westernize” Russia and wanted the country to be seen as a European (rather than an Asian) power. Catherine was very interested in the liberal, democratic Enlightenment ideas of western Europe, and she frequently declared her love of liberty and freedom. However, she later came to feel threatened by many of these ideas, especially after the French Revolution toppled an absolute monarchy like her own. She eventually increased the power of large landowners and viciously put down rebellions of the serfs. Catherine also greatly extended the boundaries of the Russian empire.

The excerpt below is from a letter written by a French diplomat in Moscow during Catherine’s reign.

This princess seems to combine every kind of ambition in her person. Everything that may add luster to her reign will have some attraction for her. Science and the arts will be encouraged to flourish in the empire, projects useful for the domestic economy will be undertaken. She will endeavor to reform the administration of justice and to invigorate the laws; but her policies will be based on Machiavellianism [the belief that it is acceptable for a ruler to do anything to gain and/or stay in power]; and I should not be surprised if in this field she rivals the king of Prussia. She will adopt the prejudices of her entourage [followers] regarding the superiority of her power and will endeavor to win respect not by the sincerity and probity [honor] of her actions but also by an ostentatious display of her strength. Haughty as she is, she will stubbornly pursue her undertakings and will rarely retrace a false step. Cunning and falsity appear to be vices in her character; woe to him who puts too much trust in her.


Directions: On a separate sheet of paper, answer these questions.

1. **Summarizing** In your own words, summarize the diplomat’s assessment of Catherine’s personality and her style of rule.

2. **Determining Cause and Effect** Why do you think the French Revolution caused Catherine to back away from her support of democratic ideals?
The following activities are ways the basic lesson can be modified to accommodate students' different learning styles.

**English Learners (EL)**

Have students identify and list any words in the letter excerpt that they do not understand. Students should then look up the words in a dictionary and record the definitions.

**Verbal/Linguistic; Intrapersonal**

*Enlightened despotism* is a term describing the actions of absolute rulers who were influenced by the Enlightenment. Ask students to research this concept, as well as more details about Catherine the Great’s reign. They should then write a two-page paper summarizing the idea of enlightened despotism and judging whether Catherine was an enlightened despot or simply a “traditional” absolute monarch. Students should support their opinions with facts.

**Logical/Mathematical**

Catherine is known to historians as “the Great.” Tell students that many other monarchs throughout history have had nicknames (called cognomens or bynames), many of which are quite amusing or unflattering. Ask students to prepare a table of a dozen monarchs, including Catherine. Tables should include the monarch’s name/bbyname, nationality, birth/death dates, and an explanation for the byname.

**Kinesthetic; Interpersonal**

Catherine’s interest in westernizing Russia led her to create the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, which she filled with great western European works of art that she acquired from private collectors. Ask groups of students to create a class display that includes a model of the Hermitage complex and examples of some of the pieces Catherine collected there.

**Visual/Spatial**

Obtain several portraits of Catherine the Great and show them to the class. Then ask them to write about the kind of monarch they imagine Catherine was, based on the images conveyed in the portraits.

**Advanced Learners**

The author of the letter speculated that Catherine’s policies would be based on Machiavellianism. Ask students to research more about Machiavelli’s views, and have them write a two- to three-page paper that explains them and discusses their influence on Catherine as well as other Russian czars.

**Logical/Mathematical**

Have students use an organizer similar to the one below to evaluate Catherine’s adherence to Enlightenment principles. Ask students to research key concepts of the Enlightenment and list several in the table. Then have them provide examples of ways Catherine’s actions did or did not live up to those ideals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enlightenment principle</th>
<th>Catherine followed it by ...</th>
<th>Catherine did not follow it by ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Below Grade Level**

Ask students to write in their journals whether they believe that Catherine, as she is described in the letter excerpt, sounds like someone who would make a good leader. They should give reasons for their views. Then have students exchange journals, read one another’s entries, and respond in writing.