

Excerpt from Chapter Three

The Empress of Art: Catherine the Great and the Transformation of Russia

On the day of her coup, while Catherine was addressing cheering regiments in St. Petersburg, her husband, Tsar Peter III, was nursing a bad hangover at his new summer palace at Oranienbaum. He wouldn't get to enjoy it much—or celebrate his name day at a gala at nearby Peterhof. Dressed in a borrowed green Guards uniform, her hair perfectly coiffed, Catherine mounted a white stallion and led 14,000 men out of St. Petersburg south to Oranienbaum. There, a handful of Guards officers, headed by her lover's ruthless brother Alexei Orlov, aka "Scarface," arrested Peter III. A week later, after a midday meal at nearby Ropsha, Peter's captors tried to suffocate him with a mattress. When the tsar escaped, they strangled him with a scarf. Catherine's takeover was complete—and unexpectedly easy. In the biting words of Peter III's idol Frederick the Great, "He allowed himself to be dethroned like a child sent off to bed."

Catherine's loveless marriage was a disaster from the start. Though Peter was a year older than Catherine, his behavior was immature and childlike. ". . . There is nothing worse than having a child-husband," she wrote her mother's friend in Hamburg, Madame Bielke. "I know it by experience, and I am one of those women who believe that it is always the fault of the husband if he is not loved, for in truth I would have loved mine very much, if it had been possible to do so, and if he had had the kindness to want it." With the childless Empress Elizabeth growing anxious for a Romanov heir, she encouraged 25-year-old Catherine to have an affair with "handsome as the dawn" Count Sergey Saltykov. Many historians believe Saltykov may have fathered her son, the future Paul I.

In contrast to Catherine, her German-born husband disliked everything about Russia, including its religion. Just as Russia was enjoying an advantage in the hard fought Seven Years' War, the newly crowned Peter III made peace with Frederick the Great. Peter's pro-Prussian policies and inappropriate conduct, on top of overly extravagant spending even by Russian imperial standards, alienated important constituencies including the army, the Church, and the courtiers. Enmity between the imperial couple was also reaching a boiling point, with a drunk Peter at one point threatening to have Catherine arrested. Though Peter backed off, writes Robert Massie, Catherine understood that he wanted to end their marriage. "Things took such a turn that it was necessary to perish with him, by him, or else to try to save oneself from the wreckage and to save my children, and the state," she would later write in her memoir. Plotting alongside Catherine was her lover Gregory Orlov and his four brothers who mustered support of Russia's powerful Guards regiments. When Catherine proclaimed herself empress, most Russians breathed a sigh of relief.

Given Peter's bloody, ignoble end, it's surprising that Catherine did not stay clear of Oranienbaum, the Romanov's summer compound on the Gulf of Finland, once the coup was complete. In fact, in her first commission as tsarina, Catherine hired Peter's court architect, Antonio Rinaldi, to build her private dacha on the estate. Oranienbaum's original resident, Peter the Great's powerful associate and Field Marshal Alexander Menshikov, built a lavish main palace around the same time his mentor was constructing Peterhof, five miles to the west. As a symbol of its luxury and status, Menshikov named the property Oranienbaum, German for "wild orange tree," after the citrus trees that grew in the

conservatory. Menshikov ran the Empire during the reign of Peter's widow, Catherine I. After her death, Menshikov was exiled to Siberia by the aristocracy. A decade later, Peter's heirs confiscated Oranienbaum; in 1743, Empress Elizabeth gave the property to her nephew Peter.

As Grand Duchess, Catherine gardened at Oranienbaum and bought land adjoining the estate, dreaming of her own dacha. At age twenty, she was already showing signs of her theatrical interests. "For this I ordered the Italian architect Antonio Rinaldi to build in an isolated part of the woods a large platform for an orchestra of 60 musicians and singers," Catherine recalled in her memoirs. "I also ordered the Italian court poet to write some verses and the chapel master Araja to compose the music. On the garden's main passage, an illuminated stage and curtain were put up, and in front of them a table was set for dinner . . . After the first course, the curtain, which was hiding the main passage, rose, and the spectators saw approaching from afar about twenty bulls transporting the moving orchestra, which was adorned with garlands, and they were surrounded by as many dancers as I could find. Everybody jumped up from their table to get a better view of the beauty of the symphony and the spectacle."

Antonio Rinaldi had been recruited to work in Kiev and Baturin by Cyril Razumovsky, hetman of the Ukraine and younger brother of Elizabeth's favorite, Alexei Razumovsky. From there, Rinaldi moved on to Oranienbaum where he designed a miniature rococo-style palace with fortifications to please the military-obsessed Peter III. For her own retreat, Catherine chose a charming wooded area on the upper park behind Menshikov's palace. Catherine and Gregory Orlov had been lovers for just over a year, and she had borne his son, Alexei, in secrecy two months before her coup. "Nature was unusually generous when it came to his physique, intellect, heart and soul," she wrote about the handsome war hero. She wanted a place that was "hers and hers alone"—a secluded setting for trysts with her lover during the long White Nights of summer.

In July 1768, Catherine invited forty guests to a luncheon and garden tour of her new palace. Their first glimpse of the ochre and yellow dacha was its reflection in an ornamental lake. With twenty-eight ground floor rooms and nine reception rooms, the long one-story palace was modest in size for a royal residence. But there was nothing modest about the interiors, some of century's most lavish and elegant. Critic Alexander Benois called the palace "one of the foremost places in the history of eighteenth century art . . . a work of art with such integrity, such harmony, such superb execution—such a grand, exquisite knick-knack that, looking at it, one simply has to fall in love. The painted patterns, the stucco ornament, the paintings, the architectural details—all of these are linked in a single inseparable whole that has in its purely musical effect something in common with the sonatas of Haydn and Mozart."