



HISTORY STORIES

Why Catherine the Great's Enemies Turned Her into a Sex Fiend

From nymphomania to bestiality to voyeurism, there were few themes of sexual deviance that were not invented about the Empress of Russia.

UNA MCILVENNA • NOV 27, 2018

She ruled over all of Russia for more than three decades, expanding its borders and making it one of the most powerful players in global politics. But that power is what made [Catherine the Great](#) the victim of notorious misogynistic myths ever since. Nymphomania, bestiality, voyeurism, even a love of erotic furniture—there were few themes of sexual deviance that were not invented about the Empress of Russia.

Historians describe Catherine as “taking many lovers.” However, from 1752-1796, a span of 44 years, Catherine was involved in 12 romantic relationships, with most lasting for more than two years each. These are hardly the sort of numbers one might expect from a raging sex maniac. Like England’s Queen [Elizabeth I](#), Catherine recognized that to marry meant to relinquish her power, and so instead chose partners with whom she usually enjoyed a good working relationship.

Catherine the Great's first marriage was a mismatch.

Her arranged marriage with her husband, the future Czar [Peter III](#), was a mismatch from the beginning. By 1752, nine years into her marriage, Catherine had already found an alternative lover, Sergei Saltykov. Shortly after that she met Stanislaus Poniatowski, with whom she had a daughter, and whom she would later install as king of Poland, thereby strengthening Russia’s position in Europe with a loyal vassal. After overthrowing her husband Peter III in a coup d’état in July 1762, Catherine was

crowned Empress of Russia. She would never marry again, instead taking lovers whom she promoted to key positions in the Russian government.

A key player in the coup was Grigory Orlov with whom she would have a son while she was still married. When in August 1772 Orlov left court, Catherine took another lover, Alexander Vasilchikov. But this relationship did not last long: Vasilchikov was replaced in 1774 with Grigory Potemkin, who became Catherine's long-term de facto consort. Of this change in partners, Catherine wrote to a friend: "Why do you reproach me because I dismiss a well-meaning but extremely boring bourgeois in favor of one of the greatest, the most comical and amusing, characters of this iron century?" Even after their relationship ended around 1776, Potemkin remained her favorite minister, earning the title "Prince of the Holy Roman Empire."

Over the next 20 years, Catherine would have a further seven romantic relationships. Although these were usually with much younger men, there is little to suggest any kind of voracious sexual appetite. So where do the legends about Catherine come from?

Cleopatra, Anne Boleyn were also targeted.

It must be understood that all women who have wielded political power have been subjected to accusations of sexual deviance or voracity. Cleopatra was said to have offered men [a night of lovemaking](#) with her at the cost of their lives. Anne Boleyn was [falsely accused of affairs](#) with five different men, including incest with her brother. Catherine de Medici was portrayed as the devious madame of [a harem of seductive ladies-in-waiting](#) whom she ordered to seduce noblemen, and was accused of securing prostitutes for her young sons. [Elizabeth I](#), in order to avoid this kind of speculation, had to present herself as the similarly implausible "Virgin Queen."

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These women, who did not conform to the reductive vision of second-class submissive wife to a more powerful man, suffered repeated slander always based in invented accusations of sexual insatiability.

At each point, these stories originate in the minds of their greatest enemies. Accounts of [Cleopatra's](#) life, for example, all originate from Romans, who were eager to glorify the [Roman Empire](#) and its founder Octavius Augustus, who had been Cleopatra's rival.

In France, where Catherine's lack of support for the recent [Revolution](#) meant that she had become a vilified representative of the ancien régime, the same kind of pornographic libels that had been used against [Marie Antoinette](#) were ready to be deployed against her. Revolutionary presses happily poured out the same kind of polemical prose that depicted Catherine as prey to her voracious sexual appetite. British presses did the same with obscene political cartoons.

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These depictions included the most notorious myth of all: it was claimed that, during an orgy of bestiality, Catherine died when the harness that was suspending a stallion above her broke, causing her to be crushed by the horse. (In reality she died from a stroke.) The use of horse-riding as a sexual metaphor had a long history in libelous attacks on courtly women. Horse-riding was integrally linked with notions of nobility, and this story was also a perfect subversion of Catherine's noted equestrian skills.

In case one doubts the misogyny at the heart of the negative legends about her, one need only consult the thoughts of her powerful contemporaries. Catherine's great rival throughout her reign, [Frederick the Great](#), ruler of Prussia, said about her: "A woman is always a woman and, in feminine government, the cunt has more influence than a firm policy guided by straight reason." Sour grapes indeed from one who could never overcome her enormous power.

Even her own son, [Emperor Paul I](#), whom she'd tried to prevent inheriting the crown, passed an edict forbidding any woman from ascending to the Russian throne in the future. And those misogynistic views would carry on into the new century: Russia's most famous poet Alexander Pushkin would call Catherine nothing more than "a Tartuffe [hypocrite] in skirts."

As a woman who exercised more power than almost any other male contemporary, Catherine would suffer the worst kinds of misogynistic invention of sexual depravity.

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