



Potemkin: Catherine the Great's Imperial Partner

Simon Sebag Montefiore

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As a young guardsman, Grigory Potemkin caught the eye of Catherine the Great with a theatrical act of gallantry during the coup that placed her on the throne. Over the next thirty years he would become her lover, co-ruler, and husband in a secret marriage that left room for both to satisfy their sexual appetites. Potemkin proved to be one of the most brilliant statesmen of the eighteenth century, helping Catherine expand the Russian empire and deftly manipulating allies and adversaries from Constantinople to London.

This acclaimed biography vividly re-creates Potemkin's outsized character and accomplishments and restores him to his rightful place as a colossus of the eighteenth century. It chronicles the tempestuous relationship between Potemkin and Catherine, a remarkable love affair between two strong personalities that helped shape the course of history. As he brings these characters to life, Montefiore also tells the story of the creation of the Russian empire. This is biography as it is meant to be: both intimate and panoramic, and bursting with life.

Potemkin: Catherine the Great's Imperial Partner Details

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Monica says

Tramas, espionagem, assassinatos, paixões, sexo, poder, riqueza, ostentação, ambição - todos esses ingredientes se misturam na história da Rússia do século 18 sob o reinado de Catarina II, ao lado do estadista e “favorito” Potemkin (nome hoje ironicamente mais lembrado como um encouraçado da era pré-revolucionária russa!). Magnificamente bem contada pelo inglês Simon Sebag Montefiore, esta história nos fez refletir sobre os absurdos do poder e a transitoriedade das conquistas humanas. Como acontece em muitos trabalhos de história bem pesquisados, na minha opinião Montefiore às vezes esmiúça detalhes demais na tentativa de contar tudo o que se sabe sobre essa época de ouro da história russa. É um livro denso de informações e confesso que em alguns momentos tive vontade de fazer uma leitura dinâmica. Mas é tão bem escrito - e a história tão fascinante - que sempre voltava atrás para reler com mais calma as passagens puladas. Em resumo, esta leitura me encantou e abriu muito meus horizontes.

Eric Grounds says

This is a wonderful book. It has taken me two years to read it because I have studied it piece by piece to assimilate an intricate and minutely detailed life. Simon Sebag Montefiore writes so well that it is a pleasure merely to read what he writes, almost no matter what the subject (on which theme, I should write a review about Jerusalem, the Biography, which I read six years ago)
What an astonishing man Potemkin was. Anyone who has read this should also read Henri Troyat's Catherine the Great.

Edward says

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(The full and extremely extensive references for this book, which were included in the hardback edition, are available on the author's website at: <http://www.simonsebagmontefiore.com>. To make the paperback a manageable and readable size, the author and publishers have decided not to include them in the paperback. We hope the readers will agree that, for most, the balance of convenience is best served by this policy.)

Hadrian says

Brilliant biography of two giants of Russian history. Only too often it is seen that many leaders have intensely troubled domestic lives, but these two are the glimmering exceptions. Montefiore has taken this story out of the relative backwaters of history and made it shine again.

Siria says

Meticulously researched and absorbingly written, this is a truly excellent biography of the man who was a real power behind the Russian imperial throne in the late eighteenth century—Prince Grigory Potemkin, lover of Catherine the Great and the man who commanded her armies towards military glory. Much of Sebag Montefiore's research uses sources not previously known to scholarship in general, not just English-language scholarship. Such a wealth of information does lead to the book feeling a little over-populated at times, a little intimidating for the reader who doesn't have a strong background in the history of the era and the author does have a tendency to go off on tangents about some of the (admittedly fascinating in their own writes) people with whom Potemkin and Catherine were in contact throughout their lives. A little more editing would have helped, but one cannot doubt Sebag Montefiore's intellectual rigour, thoroughness and enthusiasm. Absolutely worth reading if you have any interest in Russian history, or in an example of a biography well done.

Okidoki says

Detaljrik och torr som en doktorsavhandling. Endast en Potemkinfanatiker kan orka sig igenom de 600 sidorna. Nu vet jag vilka som sprang in till Katarina om närtorna och att den store Potemkin själv hade ihop det med många damer och nästan alla av systerdöttrarna. Trots allt skvaller en väldigt opersonlig skildring. Jag saknar Herman Lindqvist.

Lauren Albert says

My criticisms were two. First, the beginning half of the book seemed more about Catherine than about Potemkin. Second, Montefiore was so vehemently pro-Potemkin that it made me doubt his argument. Anyone who believed anti-Potemkin stories was biased, jealous, etc. I would have preferred a more moderate tone which would have, I think, served his argument better. But it was otherwise excellent.

Ratratrat says

Molto lungo, molto dettagliato. L'autore simpatizza col protagonista nonostante non nasconde i suoi difetti... e smentisce la leggenda del "villaggi Potemkin" attribuendoli ad invidia dei suoi nemici. una figura a tutto tondo che adesso risulta evidentissima.. mi fa venir voglia di rileggere la biografia di Caterina la grande di

Troyat per confrontare le presentazioni. Non ebbe pace nemmeno dopo morto, viste le traslazioni dei resti.. finì perfino in un Museo dell'ateismo e contro le religioni dei tempi staliniani, esposto in una bacheca..

Kathryn Kettel says

As a young guardsman, Grigory Potemkin caught the eye of Catherine the Great with a theatrical act of gallantry during the coup that placed her on the throne. Over the next thirty years, he would become her lover, co-ruler, and husband in a secret marriage. Together Potemkin and Catherine proved to be one of the most brilliant imperial couples of the eighteenth century. Wielding enormous power to their advantage, they were able to lead eighteenth-century Russia into an unforgettable golden age. But don't take my word for it, multiple historical pieces of evidence were used backup such noble claims. The author was able to put together this acclaimed book by using multiple first-hand accounts, which adds to the great historical accuracy of the book. Come read for yourself and be amazed how The Imperial Love Affair outshines modern classics like Game of Thrones because of its outstanding historical accuracy and educational entertainment value one receives from such a book.

Simon Mccrum says

An enormous story, incredibly well researched, absolutely astounding and outstanding.

Robert Morris says

This is a weird book. I suppose it is a testament to what a colossal figure Potemkin is, that a regular biography isn't enough, and he needs a whole new genre. The first sections of this book read a bit like a romance novel. Catherine the Great's rise to power is of course fascinating, but it takes back stage to the growing relationship between the empress and her consort. This is the right approach for a man of whom we can definitely say: "He slept his way to the top".

Once Potemkin has attained his position, the book becomes a more conventional political history, which I find much more satisfying. Montefiore is engaged in a project of rehabilitation, and I think it is largely successful. Potemkin is mostly known as a manufacturer of fake villages, and as an exponent of flim-flammetry, and this is unfair. The author shows that he was a truly incredible figure, without which Russia, and the 18th century would both have been different and poorer. He does this by painting an impressively researched portrait of high Enlightenment Russia and Europe. Potemkin lived at the final moment before it all got a bit too serious with the French Revolution, and Europe's ruling classes learned that all these new ideas could kill them. The book's description of Europe's enlightened despots floating down a river in the Crimea, as the Revolution begins to churn in France, is gorgeous.

The reason I did not rate this book higher is Montefiore's uncritical embrace of his subject. The book is meant as a rehabilitation, but it reads like hagiography. Prince Potemkin's servants and courtiers are quoted at great length about his virtues. They are not exactly disinterested. There is some cursory mention of serfdom, and the fact that most prominent characters in the book was the owner of thousands of "souls". It can sometimes be hard to swallow the gleeful celebration of Potemkin and his ilk, who profited so mightily

from the forced misery of others. Definitely worth a read, but also a bit frustrating.

Emma says

Montefiore is fast becoming one of my favourite popular historians. In this, thorough and meticulous research is presented with his particular skill: an enthusiastic, engaging, and amusing style of writing that is both able to convey the intricacies of the historical period and maintain a narrative flow that many novelists would envy.

The author's stated aim was to raise Potemkin from the sidelines of Russian history, to reevaluate the evidence, and reveal the man for the titanic and influential statesman he was. In that, he has certainly succeeded. It would be hard to finish the book without feeling something close to awe for what Potemkin achieved both personally and through the fascinating and powerful partnership with Catherine the Great. My personal preference was for the first half of the book, which focused on their meeting and the development of this relationship. Montefiore frequently relates the contents of their shared correspondence, often sent back and forth multiple times a day, and the idea that such personal interaction is here for us to read sent a genuine shiver down my spine. Their clear love and lust for each other is interspersed with political and legal debate, social commentary, and health complaints, including the debilitating effects of diarrhoea.

This is history masterfully done.

Colleen Courtney says

The original title is more accurate, in that this is a biography of Potemkin. Catherine is important to his story, of course, but this book focuses on Potemkin's life and accomplishments, clearing up centuries of rumors and lies. It's a good compliment to other biographies of Catherine and the Romanovs, showing how Potemkin was crucial to the expansion of the empire.

James says

Quite a myth-busting book. Potemkin was great too, and the Potemkin villages that bear his name are unfair to his legacy, and untrue to boot!

Samuel says

Recently, I decided that I hadn't done a good long review on a non fiction book in some time. So, having surfaced amid the sea of spy novels I had been reading, I downloaded a whole heap of non fiction books on things I liked. Espionage, geopolitics, history. It was from the latter category that I found the book that I shall review here.

I knew of Catherine the Great from watching a history channel documentary when I was younger. But I only heard snippets of the mysterious Grigory Potemkin. So when I found out that Simon Sebag Montefiore, writer of the legendary autobiography on Stalin, court of the red tsar had written a book on Catherine and

Grigory, I snapped it up, not knowing what I was going to expect. As it turns out, I got more than I bargained for.

What a story. What a life! Awe inspiring and sweeping, the life of Catherine the Great's one true love, the only man on earth who was her equal, and the de - facto co - Tsar of all Russia is an amazing story. Politics, war, creation and love. It has the scope of a literary Game of Thrones but with far more compassion and touching humanity than House of Cards. Now to the review. What makes a man great?

Like any good autobiography, we begin the story at the end. A man is racing across what would be present day Romania. He's dying and his medical staff are failing to save him. Deciding that all is lost, he asks that as he's traveled so far for much of his life, he'd prefer to pass away lying still on a hill. His wish granted, this man, one of the most powerful in Europe, is carried to a solitary foggy hill by the side of the country road. He's soon at peace and just before he gives up the ghost, he begs forgiveness to the only woman he ever truly loved.

Letters are sent, couriers dispatched and soon, Catherine the Great, the German who rose to become the definitive Russian empress, opens the letter with the news she didn't want to hear. Suffering a complete emotional and literal collapse, she shuts herself away and only comes out a few months later when another man comes to Court in St Petersburg. He's carrying the letters of his boss and mentor. Presenting them to his sovereign, she dismisses everyone else from her study, and as the door slams shut, they weep together in their shared grief of the one who left them.

What man could have provoked such a reaction that would be fit for a biopic? Gregory Potemkin, that's who. Maligned as a Russian womanizer and slandered with that great historical lie about potemkin villages (which was made by an Austrian who hated his guts), Gregory Potemkin is so much more than that. A seemingly unknown part Polish son of Russian country gentry, through smarts, cunning and jaw dropping audaciousness he managed to work his way up to become the most powerful man in all of Russia, and after marrying and negotiating an amicable separation, built an entire chunk of the Russia Empire in the area that Peter The Great was driven out of. A soldier, politician - no - Statesman of the highest order, Potemkin's achievements will amaze and impress you.

Potemkin the man is also fascinating. A big league eccentric who suffered from manic depression, dropped out of college and landed a place in the prestigious guards regiments of St Petersburg, Potemkin then found himself as a junior member of the uprising that brought his future wife to power and later serving as a war hero in conflicts against the Turks. He then became the lover of the Empress despite losing his eye and soon, evolved into much more than that. As their marriage disintegrated, they settled on an unusual but rather touching three way love triangle arrangement, leaving Potemkin free to become a nation builder only rivaled by Peter the Great.

A cultured, charming funny fellow, Potemkin was also ahead of his time in some respects compared to Russians past and present. Distinctly opposed his countrymen's natural antisemitism, took time to cultivate good relations with the Muslims who found themselves integrated and unlike any Russian general before or since, actually tried to keep as many of his troops alive as possible and not waste too many of them on human wave attacks (unlike his favorite General Suvorov). But Potemkin is no softie and the chapter where he masterminds the Siege of Ochakov, spends the night before the attack in a muddy dug out and then after the dust clears, waltzes back to St Petersburg in triumph and the loving embrace of his wife is by far the high point of the novel. Montefiore captures so much with his prose and paints a vivid portrait of a devil may care legend at the height of his powers.

But it's his relationship with the woman of his life, Catherine the Great which is the heart of this story.

Montefiore captures the passion the humor and sparks of their lifetime love affair, from its Auspicious beginning, the initial highs of married life, the crushing despair as they fought over love and power, and then the calm and serenity of the settlement they worked out. The letters they sent to each other are a highlight of this book and pretty touching. Work, business, jokes about the absurdity and folibles of the people around them, and so much more.

The book is divided into several chapters, the first half detailing the beginnings rise and marriage of Potemkin. It makes for pretty interesting reading as he's like something out of a Dickens novel, the spoilt child of fortune and fate and some call him. It concludes dramatically with Catherine playing him a card and accepting an arrangement they've chosen. The second part concerns the politics and history, how Potemkin built up Southern Russia and the future Ukraine and former republics.

Overall, this is a fascinating memoir about a great man, dispelling myths, adding to the legend and even teaching one a thing or two about a man whose vision reverberates throughout the ages and whose work still stands today. I hope someday this book is made into a biopic of some kind.

Totally recommended.
