

– Today I'm going to talk about a very great, some people say the greatest woman ruler of all time. I personally don't believe that but that's what's claimed by some historians. That is, Catherine the Great of Russia. Now like last week, I've written a small piece for my blog, which I know a number of you look at, and this one's called "Russia in the 18th Century After Peter the Great: A thumbnail sketch." In other words a thumbnail sketch of what I'm talking about this evening. And so, as last week, I will read what I've written on the blog. I should emphasise that the piece I've written on the blog is entirely me, so all mistakes are mine as well. And what I wrote was this: Peter died in 1725 at the relatively young age of 53. And Russia ceased to build on Peter's reforms until the reign of Catherine the Second whom we know as Catherine the Great, who came to the throne in 1762. So in a sense, between 1725, Peter's death, and 1762, Catherine the Great's accession, there is a hiatus. And Russia slips backwards rather than going forwards in terms of this perennial Russian attitude of catching up with the West. There were in fact six tsars between Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. There were three female ones. Catherine the First, who was Peter's widow; Anna, who was Peter's niece; and Elizabeth, who was Peter's, well, illegitimate daughter by his second marriage because he was still married to his first wife when she was born. He later legitimised her after he divorced his first wife and put her in a nunnery. Additionally to these three women, Catherine the First, Anna, and Elizabeth, there were three men or boys, but all of them died very soon after becoming tsar. The first one was Peter the Second who was Peter's grandson who only lasted three years, dying as a teenager. The second was Ivan the Sixth, Peter's great-great-nephew, who was a babe in arms, literally a baby in arms, who was overthrown in a coup d'etat. That is to say his mother, who was acting as his regent, was overthrown in a coup d'etat and he spent his whole life a prisoner until he was murdered in 1764. And finally, there's Peter the Third, Peter's own grandson, who succeeded in 1762, and was overthrown within months of coming to the throne by his wife. And then he was murdered, almost certainly in my opinion, with his wife, complicit in his murder.

So, who was the wife that had her husband murdered? Well, none other than Catherine the Second, Catherine the Great. I've written here, "What a family." Well, we've been celebrating the House of Windsor here in Britain over the weekend and even they have not reached the level of internal family friction that the Romanovs managed here in the 18th century. Catherine the Great herself was not Russian. She was born a German princess and she married Peter who later became Peter the Third when she was 14 and he was 50. She's arguably Russia's greatest ever ruler. If you were doing a university course and had to write me a lecture, I would probably say something like, "Which was the greater ruler, Peter the Great or Catherine the Great?" And you

would probably divide down the middle on whom you chose. She was, however, and importantly, influenced by the European Enlightenment, and attempted to rule in the interest of all her subjects, even the most lowly, brackets, but not in the interest of serfs. In the end, however, I think Russia proved too large a problem to be solved in one reign and by one person. And the sadness for Russia was it's still today, in my opinion, awaiting a natural successor to Catherine. So from the end of the 18th century to this decade of the 20th century, 21st century, I should say, Russia is still looking for a successor to Catherine. I know some historians will point to Alexander the Second in the 19th century, others would point to the very short-lived democracy between the 1st and the 2nd Russian revolutions in 1917, and I suppose some people might point to Yeltsin. But the harsh reality is that Catherine, the last woman to rule Russia, and if you can see any chance of a woman ruler in Russia in the next period of time, you are a better person than I am 'cause I can't see it, in the final analysis, I would say, she failed as Peter had done. They failed to embed the reforms so strongly in the state that new rulers couldn't undo the progress that had been made. Even in democracies, we know, that where we have an outstanding leader who makes large changes, there's always a risk that incoming heads of state or heads of government will undo the good that the previous one did. In the end, in my view, both Peter and Catherine failed to make Russia a modern European country. Modern in the sense of a modern 18th century European country. I've written my last sentence: Russia has always slipped back into the very worst form of Russian absolutism; under tsar Alexander the Third, the penultimate Russian tsar; Stalin, of course; and now, and now Putin.

Now my main topic today covers the period 1730 to 1796. That is the bulk, if you like, of the 18th century. During those 60-odd years, Russia was ruled by a succession of three women, Anna, Elizabeth, and Catherine the Second, whom we know as Catherine the Great. But some of you who remember last week, I barely remember last week, so good on you if you could remember what I was talking about, you may remember from last week that Peter the Great died in 1725. So if I'm beginning the story in 1730, what on earth happened in those five years between 1725 and 1730? And the answer is two very forgettable tsars. The first, Peter's widow Catherine the First; and the second, Peter the Second. Catherine the First's claim to the throne is simply because Peter had made her co-tsar in 1721. She had been crowned as co-tsar. So those who wanted to see her as tsar were able to say, "But she's already the tsar and Peter desired." But why they really wanted it is because they could control her. You will remember that she was an illiterate serf from Lithuania. If you're illiterate, there are real problems about ruling a country, even in the 18th century. You have to have everything written, read out to you. Everything read out to you. And so there's massive opportunities to change what you read because she can't ever check. But she had had two children; one of them Peter, named after his father, and the other Elizabeth. So why didn't they

succeed? This would have given and being the normal line of succession. And as I've said, because Peter the Great, her husband, had changed the rules and so she succeeded. This is not as straightforward as being presented in Britain this weekend at the Jubilee celebrations. The Queen succeeded by Charles, succeeded by William, succeeded by George. We know what's going to happen unless unfortunately something unforeseen happens in terms of an early death or whatever. That we know. But Russia wasn't quite like that. Peter the Great was this dominating figure. And if he said his wife was co-tsar, well, she was co-tsar. They had fallen out badly. She took a lover, he took a lover. Oh they were always taking lovers in Russia in the court and they must have been at it like rabbits. But as he became ill at the end of 1724, he dies at the beginning of 1725, they were reconciled. I think reconciled genuinely on a personal level. I don't think she was plotting to take over. I think this was a genuine reconciliation of husband and wife. He was suffering from a blocked urinary tract, which would be easily treatable today. And it led to gangrene of the bladder from which he died. Now he's reported to have said with his dying breath, "I leave it all to..." And he passed out. Gone. Very suspicious. Did he really say "I leave it all to her" or did he change his mind again? We've no idea. But those around her, as I said, wanted at her on the throne because they knew they could control her. She died shortly afterwards. That is to say, she acceded in 1725 and she died in 1727. She was nothing like Peter the Great, and there was no interest in those around her to pursue Peter's vision of a modern Western European country. It simply had died with him. Now she is succeeded by Peter's grandson, Peter. Peter succeeded her but he was a child. He proved entirely unsuitable. He enjoyed being tsar for less than three years, dying of that great threat in the earlier part of the, and middle, of the 18th century of smallpox. Didn't matter who you were, what position in society, smallpox was a killer. And he died in January, 1730. A foreign commentator commenting at the time said this: Unless the empire of Russia rouses itself from under the lethargic slumber which it has now fallen into, their furred gowns and long petticoats will return upon them. In other words, remember that Peter had introduced Western dress. This foreign observer, anonymous, we don't know who he was, I assume it was a man: Their furred gowns and long petticoats will return and all the sordid affectation of a singularity from all the world, which made them so truly contemptible before, will do the like again. Although Russian society was backward in terms of Western Europe, the Russians themselves saw themselves as superior. Note Mr. Putin's attitude towards the West. They didn't see themselves as inferior. They saw themselves as a superior civilization. Think the Chinese, if you want another example of that.

Now we've reached 1730. So those five years after Peter's death have been disastrous in terms of a modernization policy. In hindsight, you could say that the two female tsars, Anna and then subsequently Elizabeth, paved the way for the great female tsar, Catherine the

Great. Russia's advance then, by 1730, its advance in virtually all matters from imperial expansion to Western militarization had been driven into the sand within five years of Peter's death. There was no successor. At 37 and relatively well-educated, you might have thought that Anna presented an opportunity for Russia to get back on the tracks that had been laid by Peter. However, the word that historians use to describe her is usually the word cruel. She enjoyed, there are such people, she enjoyed being cruel. She didn't really, she didn't really have much interest in government. She had an interest in her own pleasure, but it's in her case, a warped pleasure. And this is just one example. This is a famous example of how warped this woman actually was. She had, well, let me tell you the story. I'll read you the story: The most bizarre event in Anna's reign took place in February, 1740. That's at the end of her reign. She was infuriated when Prince Mikhail Golitsyn married a Roman Catholic. When his wife died prematurely, Anna decided to take her revenge and forced him to remarry. She selected the most unattractive woman she could find, an elderly maid, as his new bride. A palace made of ice blocks was built on the frozen Neva River in the middle of St. Petersburg. It was completed with ice parapets, ice furniture, ice chandeliers. And this ice palace was designed for the couple's honeymoon. After the wedding during which the doors of the church were locked to prevent the bridegroom from running away, Anna arranged the reception in a stable with an unappetizing menu of horse flesh washed down with fermented mare's milk, as a jester read a poem describing the newlyweds as fools. Cruel beyond cruel. Anna forced them dressed as clowns to ride in a cage on top of an elephant through the streets of St. Petersburg to the Ice Palace and locked them naked into the bedroom on a bed of ice, telling them that if they wish to survive, they should make love. They did survive, but only because a maid traded a pearl necklace for a sheepskin coat and smuggled it in to the couple. Now that is weird and bizarre behaviour in anybody's book. Even in terms of Russian autocrats, that's really bad. I think the term that should be used is not cruel, I would use the term barbaric. I would definitely say barbaric. But they, remember, think that they are superior to the West. And in some ways they had adopted, adapted and adopted Western customs. But only on the surface. And I have a piece here which I should share with you: Anna's court, I read, was a paradox hovering uneasily between drunken debauchery and European refinement. She ordered a new winter palace constructed, and indulged her taste for luxury in lavish spectacles that rivalled Bourbon, France. There were elegant new gowns and liveried servants, but appearances were deceptive. The palaces were infested with lice and rats. I'm not sure, to be honest, whether the palaces in England in the 18th century weren't full of lice and rats as well. But I'll let that go. And more often than not, courtiers wore tattered reeking undergarments beneath their imported clothing. It's only on the surface. When Russia, throughout history, has attempted to come to the West, is it always only on the surface? When Gorbachev and Yeltsin attempted to reform Russia, was it really only on the surface, and the Russians were

simply waiting for a Putin to take them back again? And we've certainly seen barbarism by Russian troops in the Ukraine. And we've seen barbarism by Russian, um, I'm not sure how you describe them, by Russian intelligence agents killing in Western European countries like Britain. But, and perhaps this is important, but the Russian Empire as such lumbered on. It fought wars during Anna's reign in the West with Poland and in the East with the Ottoman Empire. And gradually, slowly, bit by bit, the empire expanded westwards from Moscow, eastwards from Moscow, southwards from Moscow. Almost with a life of its own. Almost independent of what was happening in St. Petersburg and in the palace. Anna died of untreated kidney stones after 10 years as tsarina, as a female tsar in 1740. She was succeeded by her great-nephew, Ivan the Sixth. He was a babe in arms, his mother ruled in his name. And they were both overthrown shortly afterwards. He was imprisoned for the rest of his life, being murdered, as I said before, being murdered in the 1760s. I've written here: I know this is confusing and I don't expect you all to keep up. Forget the detail. Just remember one word, chaos; and one sentence, Peter's legacy was being destroyed by his successors, the internal rivalry of the House of Romanov, which was used by rival nobility jockeying for power in the palaces of St. Petersburg. That's all we need to know.

But the legacy of Peter the Great was in danger of completely being ignored and Russia was slipping backwards into, you choose the word. Into barbarism? Yes, I think you can use that word. But then comes Elizabeth, his illegitimate daughter by Catherine, his second wife, who he had legitimised and she becomes empress in 1740. And I simply asked a question of myself here, was Elizabeth an improvement on Anna? Could she recover the legacy of Peter the Great? Well, she thought she could. And she actually said on her accession the following: I promise that I will show myself worthy to be the daughter of Peter the Great. Well, sadly she didn't. If you look in Geoffrey Hosking's book, which some of you will have, "Russian History: A Very Short Introduction," in the Oxford series, and you look up Elizabeth in the index, you will find no entry whatsoever. She doesn't appear in a very short history of Russia. That rather indicates, well, it underlines if you like her unimportance or her lack of fulfilling her promise to be Peter the Great's daughter. So nothing improved during Elizabeth's reign either. I've written here: She wasn't, in modern language, focused on the job. She was perfectly intelligent enough to be. She gave the task of running Russia to a succession of favourites. I love that word, favourites. It's the sort of word they used when we were at school because they dare not use the word lovers. But most of them were. These women, when we read Catherine the Great, extremely promiscuous. I'm not saying the men weren't either but the women were as promiscuous as the men. What is she famous for? Well she's actually famous for pleasure. At least she wasn't cruel. But she loved pleasure. And she wasn't interested in the business of government at all. And I've got a piece here which I wanted to read, which I think is, um, here we are: She had 15,000 different dresses and outfits.

4,000 were lost in a fire. She also had male garments. No, no, no, no, no, no. She is decidedly female. She had male garments because it allowed her to wear silk stockings uncovered from a dress on top. And she was very proud of her legs. Strange, isn't it? If you're ruling a country the size of Russia, you shouldn't be worried about how men view your legs. But she was. Like Elizabeth the First of England who was obsessed by her hands. If you ever wanted to give her a present, Elizabeth of England, Elizabeth the First, you gave her gloves, because- With jewels. Leather with jewels all over them because her hands. Here, it's her legs. Well, okay. "The court followed her lead, however, succumbing, in the words of a commentator," a Russian commentator, "later to," wonderful word, "voluptuousness," which led to, quote: The ruination of noble houses and the corruption of morals. We're back to sex at St. Petersburg. I should have really called this course, "Sex in St. Petersburg," and you'll find far more people listening in. But there is a course there. Perhaps a C-O-A-R-S-E course. A coarse course. She was adding to the Winter Palace. And by the time of her death, she'd spent one and a half million roubles on the Winter Palace. Now think this is a society with serfs. This weekend at the Platinum Jubilee of our queen, there has been lots of comments about how can we spend all this money on the Platinum Jubilee when there are people in Britain today suffering from the crisis in costs, who can't afford to feed their families or heat their houses? Well, it is an easy jibe to make, but it also is a correct jibe to make in terms of factually correct. And here, and here, she's spending a million and a half roubles on the Winter Palace, which didn't need it. She had no intellectual interests. She regarded reading as injurious to one's health. But there were Western ideas creeping in. And when we say Western ideas, we largely mean the ideas from France. People like Rousseau, Diderot, Voltaire. And there was one person in St. Petersburg, who after the marriage to Peter who is to succeed Elizabeth as tsar, Peter the Third, and that, of course, is Catherine. Catherine the Great. She couldn't abide this court of loose morals, although she had loose morals. And she couldn't abide the barbarism of the court, especially not reading. And to fill her time, she spent very little time with her husband who was unable to have children and was completely and utterly boring to Catherine, Catherine spent her time reading. And thus was introduced to the ideas of the Enlightenment. So becoming ruler of Russia, she sought to introduce the ideas of the Enlightenment into Russia. That's her great claim to fame, if you like. She knew Elizabeth. Of course she did. Elizabeth the tsar. But she doesn't like her, she tries to avoid her. And in her own memoir, Catherine the Great's own memoir, she wrote, "It was not easy to find topics of conversation," she means with Elizabeth, "as there were many for which she did not care. For instance, one had to avoid mentioning the King of Prussia or Voltaire, illness and death, beautiful women, French manners and scientific matters." Utterly wonderful list, isn't it? "The king of Prussia, Voltaire, illness, death, beautiful women, French manners and scientific matters. Various superstitions also had to be considered. You will say it was difficult

to live at that court. 'I shan't contradict you,' said Catherine." She saw in one sense, the barbarism of Russia, that I've mentioned since Peter the Great's death, of it slipping backwards, and she doesn't like it. She doesn't like it on a personal level. And she's become very Russian. She adopted the Orthodox faith, she had no choice about that. She understands the Orthodox religion, she understands Russian culture. She likes Russia and the Russians. What she doesn't like is the Russian elite ruling Russia, and in particular, Tsar Elizabeth.

During Elizabeth's reign, Russia did remain, in European terms, a leading power. It gained territory from Sweden. And at one point, it even had a Russian army in the streets of Berlin. But like the clothes on top, covering the ragged undergarments, as they put it, so this was simply was simply a veil passed across what is a barbaric country still, and which the young Catherine resented greatly. Elizabeth died at the end of 1761 and her nominated successor is Peter the Third, her nephew. Peter is married to Catherine the Great. Catherine the Great wrote this of her husband and I will read it to you. It said, this is Catherine, "I was taught to obey and it was my mother's business to see about my marriage." Well, he got smallpox at the time that they were meant to marry and there was a delay. So that's what she's talking about. "But to tell the truth, I believe that the crown of Russia attracted me more than his person." She's 14. Or she's thinking back to when she was 14. "But to tell the truth, I believe that the crown of Russia attracted me more than his person. He was 16, quite good-looking before the pox, but small and infantile, talking of nothing but soldiers and toys. I listened politely and often yawned, but dared never interrupted him. And as he thought that he had to speak to me, and referred only to the things which amused him, he enjoyed talking to me for long periods of time, many people took this for affection, especially those who desired the marriage. But, in fact, we never used the language of tenderness. It was not for me to begin, for modesty and pride would have prevented me from doing so, even if I had had any tender feelings. As for him, he had never even thought of it. Which did not greatly incline me in his favour." Isn't that lovely? And did not greatly incline me in his favour. She didn't like him. And perhaps that isn't surprising. She's an educated young woman, come from Germany, and she's meeting this barbarous kid who's uneducated and is interested in toys and soldiers and who is unfulfilling in the relationship. Not surprising, she took lovers. So when he becomes tsar, he isn't, he doesn't fit the bill really at all. It's clear to the nobility of the court that Peter isn't suitable for the tsar. And so, she moved towards a coup d'etat against her own husband, confident that she could rule Russia. Not only confident that she could rule Russia, but wanting to rule Russia, and then wanted to for years during Elizabeth's reign. In the chronicle that I've been using, I wanted to read a little piece of editorial: Peter was deposed in favour of his wife, Catherine. And soon afterwards, in July, 1762, killed in suspicious circumstances by the brother of her then lover. Hmm. Did she order his murder? We cannot be sure. I believe she was

complicit in it. Maybe they were telling her they were going to do it. So, "Oh, no, no, no. I don't want to hear. Just do what you have to do." Maybe it was a conversation like that rather than "I want you to go and murder him." There was really no opposition to Catherine's takeover of power. This isn't a country that has the means really of doing so. It's only the nobility. And the nobility, again, make a mistake. They thought that she would be as easy to manage as Catherine the First was easy to manage. "After all, she's only a woman," they would have said. They could pull her strings and they would then be able to manoeuvre themselves into power and riches. Well, Catherine was well aware of that and had no intention of allowing that to happen. Even though she took many lovers, the most prominent of whom was Potemkin. In fact, some believe she may even have married Potemkin. We can't prove that one way or the other. But, sex for her was sex and nothing else. Well with Potemkin, I think it was different. I think with Potemkin, it was a love affair. Definitely. Some people have compared it to the love affair between Napoleon and Josephine. Well, maybe. Maybe that's true. But in the main, sex was merely pleasure. And she wasn't going to allow these men to, well, not even Potemkin incidentally, to dominate her. She was tsar. She was the autocrat. She would make the decision. So even the lovers had to tread carefully when it came to politics. In fact, before she slept with any man, she got her lady-in-waiting, who was a Scottish lady in this case, to sleep with them to see if they were suitable. Wow, this is a different society even in 18th century Western Europe. Very different. And she is Western European, for goodness' sake. She's German. But she had embraced Russia. She's brighter, bluntly, than the men around her.

So what does she achieve? Is she going to really transform Russia? She succeeded to the throne at the age of 33. She's to rule Russia for 34 years. And you would think that having read all those Enlightenment French scholars, and being a committed to the Enlightenment, she would manage to achieve something. And very often, this is given as an example. She wrote in a letter to a friend: One of the most important tasks should be the introduction of inoculation against smallpox, which as we know causes great harm, especially among ordinary people. And she introduced smallpox into, smallpox vaccinations, into Russia, in the same way that they were introduced into England by Queen Charlotte, the wife of George the Third. So she was concerned about modernization. She was also concerned, as that little quotation from the letter shows, about ordinary people. Not serfs, they don't count; but ordinary people, peasants. And that is given often as a great example of her enlightened attitude to ruling. And she herself is, um, described as one of those monarchs in Europe, like Joseph the Second in Austria, who followed the doctrine of Enlightened Absolutism. And some of you may remember from an earlier talk and an earlier course that Joseph the Second of Austria said: Everything for the people, nothing by the people. They knew best. They were the philosopher kings. They would decide what's best for you. I think, William, you need to take a five mile walk every Sunday. But I don't want to. No, I

know best. You will do a five mile walk. It was the assumption that they knew what was best. There's no democracy. This is very, very unlike the England of the late 18th century, which is advancing towards modern democracy. And unlike the young United States of America. This is still, even though it is Enlightened, is still an absolute autocracy. She said, on becoming tsar, this: Be gentle. This was advice that she gave herself in her private notebook. She wrote continuously: Be gentle, humane, accessible, compassionate, and openhanded. Don't let your grandeur prevent you from mixing kindly with the humble and putting yourself in their shoes. I swear by providence to stamp these hard words in my heart. Well, that's fantastic. And she did. In fact, she did attempt to modernise the government. This is Geoffrey Hosking's "Russian history," "She was an eager student of European Enlightenment," the point I'd been hammering away. "And in 1767, she undertook an unusually bold experiment to establish what she called a legal monarchy." That's an interesting phrase. "She convened and elected legislative commission to create a new law code. This was not just a return to the Muscovite practise of occasional consultation with elites. Catherine's commission was broadly elected and represented state officials, nobles, merchants, Cossacks, state peasants, and non-Russian communities. The only people not present were serfs and clergy." Wow! This really is, if she can deliver this, if she can only deliver this, Russia's history would have been very, very different. And Hosking goes on to say: As in France, two decades later, deputies brought with them from their electors petitions and proposals for reform. Catherine never intended the commission to limit her power. As she stated in the lengthy documentary she put before it, she believed in absolute rule since she wrote, "There is no other authority that can act with a vigour proportionate to the extent of such a vast domain." She knew what she had to do. She went the first step. But she could not accept what that would lead to. A legal monarchy would be like, if it had come about, would have been like 18th century Britain with a constitutional monarchy. Same thing. But she couldn't let go. And we don't get a proper parliament until the 20th century in Nicholas the Second's reign, the Duma. And when it questioned his absolutism, they didn't have it mint. And we know that the Duma, the parliament in Russia today, mm, cannot restrain, let alone introduce policies for Russia. It's in Putin's hands. This was the failure. She did, however, achieve some success, not in national government terms but in local government. She realised that the local nobility could be used to introduce administrative reforms throughout Russia. She introduced a charter for the nobles and a charter for Russian cities. And it was this giving of power to the nobility that remained the fundamental administrative structure of Russia until the revolutions in 1917. But she failed. And she failed not to opposition. She failed because she could not and would not take the step that was needed, the step towards constitutional monarchy. And there was no one to force her to do so. There was no one, not a parliament, as in England; not a church. There is no institution that can challenge her. The nobility

as a group, forget about it. They're after for themselves. And she resolved that problem by placing them in charge of local government. And Hosking comments on that in this way: She fixed the form of local government and much a provincial social and political life until the 1917 revolution. The point I've just made. The nobles became the only estate, estate in terms of church, nobles, commoners, the only estate to have guaranteed rights. And this fact meant that serfdom became even more arbitrary. Serfs had no legal protection against abuse. Russia was now run by a ruling class with its own defined rights, with a Europeanized culture of complete power over the persons of its serfs. The internal cultural and social gulf defined Russian life for the next century. The serfs, for their part, were capable perfectly of discerning that while they still had state obligations, their superiors had none. She's created, in effect, a mediaeval society. And serfdom continues, as we saw in an earlier meeting, right through to 1861. Catherine herself owned half a million serfs personally. She owned a further 2.8 million serfs who were designated state serfs. So it's pretty well three and a half million Russians were her serfs one way or the other. Bad enough in the 18th century, to keep that lid on Russian society, given that many peasants are equally poor and struggling, let alone certain minorities, she kept the lid on all of it. The lid remained on until it exploded in 1917. As I say, always say, if you were doing an essay for me, how about Catherine's failure to really reform Russian society in terms of some national or institution for constraint upon the monarchy and her failure to deal with serfdom? In fact, her decisions make things worse, led to Marxism. Comment.

For me, Catherine had a door opened. She opened it. Had she walked through that door, Russian history would have been massively changed. But she didn't. She simply didn't. Of course, if you wish to argue how great Catherine was, you can do that very easily. She increased the Russian empire by 200,000 square miles. She took that part which we now know as the Ukraine, at Odessa, and she built the beautiful city of Odessa. She took the Azov Sea. She took the whole of the Crimea from the local khanate. And in the dividing up of Poland, she took the greater part. The other bits were taken by Austria and Prussia. In 1795, Poland had gone. She took Belarus. And all the Americans listening to me tonight know that in her reign, the Russians took Alaska. Across the Aleutian Islands to Alaska, chasing the fur of sea otters, which is meant, so I'm told, to be particularly luscious fur, shiny and thick. We would regard that as horrendous but they took Alaska. And they introduced the Orthodox Church to Alaska. And today, Alaska as we all know, is part of the United States. The United States bought it in 1867. And the only, unless any American who lives in Alaska tells me otherwise, the only real presence of Russia you see today is or are the Orthodox churches and Russian orthodoxy. That's the most obvious sign of the Russian colonisation of Alaska. Just imagine if America hadn't bought Alaska off of Russia, what that would do to the geopolitics of the 21st century. Doesn't bear thinking

about. She defeated both Sweden and Denmark in a war in the West. Yes, she had success. Undoubted successes. Local government increasing. And culture. Yes, I know some of that culture is skin-deep but she did introduce culture. The Russian nobility did become, to some extent, obsessed by France. Replacing Germany, incidentally, at where they looked in the West for culture, they look now at France. I promised I would say something about Jews in Russia, but I'm not really going to because Judi is talking about that tomorrow and she's the expert and I am not. All I want to do is to say that there were Jews as early, as I said last week, in Kievan Rus', as early as the 7th century AD. And in Moscow, in around Moscow, Muscovy if you like, in Moscow, we know that there were Jews around 1470 because we have a chronicle that tells us that. But there were very few Jews and they had constraints placed upon them. Although not necessarily were those constraints implemented by the law system of the day. The change came in Catherine's reign with the acquisition of Polish territories because they acquired with the Polish territories large numbers of Jews, and the Jews then go to what the Russians call the Pale of Settlement. And I'm not going to do anymore because Judi will do that. And I'm squaring her bit and I'm certainly not going to say something which then turns out to be wrong when Judi speaks. So you can find out all about Jews in Russia. There were Jews early, is all you need to remember. They were small in number. And by the 11th century in Kiev, they were in a ghetto situation in Kiev. I will give you one last Jewish story. There was a Polish Jewish leader who became Russian when his part of Poland became part of Russia, called Jacob Frank. And he himself spread the rumour that his daughter, Eve Frank, was Catherine's illegitimate daughter. I think that's fantastic. Untrue. But I said, she had many lovers so you could, or gentlemen, you could all claim that you'd spent a night of passion with the empress and it would be very difficult for anyone to prove that you had not. Now the problem is, many of you listener have only been listening for one story. When the hell is he going to talk about the horse? Well, this is the point at which I talk about a horse. After her death, she was 67 when she died in 1796, rumours started a few months afterwards that she died as a result of having intercourse with a stallion. She underneath, the stallion above, who had been winched in this- Oh, this is disgusting. Who had been winched into position. Unfortunately the mechanism broke, dropped on Catherine and she died. No truth at all. Absolutely zero truth. The likelihood is simply that she had a stroke whilst on the toilet. Exactly the same way that George the Second of England died. In fact, doctors will tell you that's not an unknown place in which to die, sat on your own toilet. She didn't die immediately. She died later that day in her bed. She's gone. And I think Russia's last hope has died with her. We shall see in subsequent weeks that no one really picks up the mantle of reform. Okay, you can argue for Alexander the Third. You can argue for Kerensky in 1917. But, the truth is that all these people trying for reform are undone. Alexander the Second undone by his son, Alexander the Third, a brute of a man. The 1917 Kerensky Democratic government, undone by Lenin and Marxism. And the hopes of Gorbachev

and Yeltsin, undone by Putin. It appears that Russia is on some horrendous cycle. Who and when will that cycle be broken? When will Russia truly enter a European world finally? I don't know. I simply don't know. And no one knows. And if anyone thinks the death of Putin will lead to this glorious promised land, forget it, because it won't. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the story I'm telling this evening of Catherine the Great. You will read accounts of Catherine which present her in a better light than I have, I accept that. But I don't agree with it. As I always say, you're big boys, big girls, you can read for yourself, and you can come to your own conclusions about Catherine or anything else I speak about. I don't mind being controversial when I'm talking to adults because in one sense, I can be me and I can say what I think. Because you can read, you can challenge it. If I was doing this for university undergraduates, I would have to be, I'd have to say the opposite views to mine, I'd have to do this on one hand, this on the other. Come on. You're all grown up enough to be able to decide for yourselves. And thanks, I want to say thanks to everyone who sent me emails saying they're reading some of the books I recommended. And most of you have said, "Thank you, I enjoyed reading the book." That's nice of you. Some of you have said, "I don't agree with that book that you told me to read." Fine! Absolutely fine. That's what democracy is about. That's what we should be doing, reading, discussing, debating. And on that point, I'll stop.

– [Judi] Thank you, William. Do you have any time to go over questions and comments?

– Yes, I do.

– There are quite a few but you don't have to answer every one if you don't have time.

Q & A and Comments

– Oh, some people have said they would like me to talk about monarchy. I'm very happy to, if that fits in with what Wendy and Judi planned. It's an offer I will make, as it were. Yeah, lots of people.

– Oh, thank you. That's very nice, Dawn. You've found my blog and you like it. That's really good, that's heartwarming to know. You send these things out on the internet, you don't know whether anyone's looked, or whether everyone's looked and said how awful it is.

– Yep, more people took up the point about monarchy.

Q: "In view of the huge support for Putin in Russia," says Heather, "isn't he considered a worthy successor to the Catherine?"

A: He would claim he was. I don't think he is. I don't think he has an

enlightened attitude. It would be my answer to that.

– Absolutely, Ronnie. Catherine the Great wasn't so great when it came to the Jews. That's the story that Trudy is going to tell.

Q: "Why couldn't she learn to read?"

A: You mean Catherine the First, Peter the Great's second wife? Because she was born a serf. She only got involved with Peter– She was, um, um, how do I put this in a Woke age? I can't really. She was extremely sexy and she had been captured by Russian soldiers, passed around, until the general got hold of her and took her to St. Petersburg and introduced her to a courtier who introduced her to Peter. And the rest is history. And she never bothered to learn.

– "Succession in Russia was always usurpation, right to the end." No, that's not entirely true, Ronnie. Not if you're talking about tsarism. No, it goes fairly straightforwardly in the 19th century. If you're talking later, then in Marxist times, certainly, like Khrushchev, and certainly if you're talking in terms– No, not Yeltsin. Yeltsin was actually groomed by, sorry, Yeltsin actually groomed Putin for the job.

– "It seems that every nation of people think themselves superior." Well, that's a very good topic that we should look at. You shouldn't ever ask someone who's British that question. No, no.

– So Marilyn says,

Q: "Did any uprisings occur during the five-year hiatus?"

A: Nothing that threatened the state. It's all, it's all, we say in Britain that we are so London-focused that our politics doesn't take into account the rest of the country. In truth, they were St. Petersburg-focused or if you like, Moscow and St. Petersburg-focused.

– Yes, Betty says, yeah, Betty, this is a very good topic we should look at–

Q: "Didn't the Germans think they were a superior race?"

A: Answer, yes. Didn't the English think they were superior to the savages of Africa and India? Yes. Don't the Jews think they punch above their weight? That's for you to answer. Don't the Japanese think they are a superior race? Yes. And you could add in plenty more. The Americans, definitely. And I'll move on before I'm– You can't lynch me, I love Zoom. None of you can actually reach me to throw anything.

– Oh, um, "Please," Monty, "Please do a lecture around the book, 'Russia: Revolution and Civil War,' by Anthony Beevor. " Yes, that his

book's only just been published. I've got my copy, I'd put an advance order into Amazon. I have not read it yet. I will be looking at it and I will reach the revolution. Anthony Beevor is an excellent historian. I'm going to put some more books on the blog at some point. But this new book by Anthony Beevor, B-E-E-V-O-R, called "Russia: Revolution and Civil War." "Russia: Revolution and Civil War, 1917 to 1921" by Anthony Beevor has had rave reviews. He is a brilliant historian and I think it's going to be a brilliant book, but I haven't yet read it. Give me a chance.

– Monty said, "The Jews punch above their weight." Aubrey answers, "True but shouldn't be guilty of hubris. It's not appropriate and comes back to bite us." Well, that's true of all people who think they're superior, even on an individual level, let alone on a national level. We're suffering from a prime minister with hubris at the moment. You suffered with a president who had hubris in Trump.

Q: "Do the qualities that you ascribe to Russia apply to Ukraine?"

A: Yes. Yes they do.

– David says, this is an interesting point,

Q: "While discussing the uniqueness of Russia society, is it not amazing the contributions of Russians who've left Russia, both forced and willingly to Western society?"

A: Yep.

– Oh, Clive. Well done, Clive. "Catherine purchased art from Robert Walpole, Britain's first prime minister, for the Hermitage." Oh it's got a question mark. I'm sorry, I don't know the answer to that. I don't know. Sorry, It's a question I can't answer that. I thought you were telling me something.

Q: "Was the husband of Catherine the Great simple-minded?"

A: I mean he wasn't the brightest button in the box, Arlene, that's true. Whether he was simple-minded, hm, I think the jury would be out.

– No, I can't. Oh, sorry Jean. I don't mean to be rude.

Q: "Can you briefly explain," the word is I can't do this briefly. "Can you briefly explain where Russian orthodoxy differs from Western Christian religion?"

A: No, it's not easy to describe. I will come back to orthodoxy at a later time and try and re-explain orthodoxy. It's a very conservative form of religion and it's not focused, as Western Christianity and Judaism is, on doing good for other people less fortunate than

yourselves. Education being a case in point. It doesn't have that social element. It's a very- In defence of it, it is what you might describe as a very spiritual religion rather than like most of Christianity and Judaism, which is a very practical religion. That's it. That's the shortest I can do.

- Wilmer says, "Hi, William. After reading some books on Catherine the Great's court, I found it was full of suspicious behaviour that was reported to Catherine by her maids. When I was in Moscow 11 years ago, I noticed that people riding in their subway never smiled back, just as if they were suspicious of my smile." And Jackie says, "It's the same in London. If a stranger smiles at you, they think you're a bit doolally." Doolally, a good English word from India, meaning Deolali, which was where soldiers with mental illnesses were sent. But I always say in Britain, you know there's a real disaster happening when people begin to talk to each other. And you know you're in trouble if you're on a British train and people start talking. We don't talk to each other. We're very- We go in our own bubbles. In fact, if people start talking loudly on a train, people can't cope with it. I'm one that can't cope with it.

- Oh Jonathan, that's a good comment, "She was the first in Russia to be inoculated against smallpox," absolutely right, "as an example to the empire. She wrote to Voltaire, characterising anti-vaxxers," that's great, "as stupid and ignorant. Some things never seem to change." Spot on! Right, absolutely right.

- No, Patricia asked,

Q: "How could Catherine the First succeed as the wife?"

A: Because Peter's laid down that she would. It wasn't a strict inheritance on primogeniture, as in England. It wasn't the eldest son. Now in England, the eldest, in Britain, now the eldest child, whether male or female, who succeeds and you go down the list. No, it wasn't like that in Russia. It becomes like that. But in this period, it wasn't.

Q: "What's the difference between peasants and serfs?"

A: Serfs can't leave their land, peasants can. Peasants can walk away, they're free. Serfs are not free, they're tied to the land. Worse than that. In Russia, many of the serfs from Catherine's reign onwards become little better, frankly, than slaves. She owned a million and a half serfs. The difference between a serf and a slave, a slave is like an object. You can treat a slave like you would treat, I don't know, an apple or a book or a carpet. You can kill them, you can rape them, you can do whatever you like. Serfs are merely- And you own a slave. Serfs are tied to land. And if you sell the land, the serfs go with the land. The serfs have some rights. Slave has no rights. I don't

know, Helen, whether you're American. If you are American, you know exactly what a slave is because that's what we have in the American plantations. Those slaves had no rights. They were owned. They could be sold. And you could do what you like to them without any criminal offence. Technically, you could not do that to serfs. But you try, as a woman, female serf who's been raped by the lord of the manor, you try suing him in Russia, you'll get nowhere.

– "Russia expanded territory, yet the tsars were incompetent. It doesn't add up." Yes it does, because most of the land they took was divided up after a war. So the lands they gain in Poland are divided up after European wars in which Russia did not act alone but acted with other European powers. So the European power like Prussia and Austria and Russia divided Poland between them. It's simply operated quite separately. In the East, the Ottomans were in total decline. In the South, there's no real power to stop them. So I don't think that, I don't think, I wouldn't say it doesn't add up. I think it does add up.

Q: "Was there a secret police?"

A: No, not in the sense that we understand the KGB. That develops later under tsarism.

– Yes, who said that? Jonathan said, "An excellent source on Catherine is the biography by Robert Massie." On my list, absolutely. Robert Massie's "Peter the Great," Robert Massie's "Catherine the Great," are excellent.

Q: "Where was the money coming from to run the country?"

A: Well, in the sale of, what exactly as, what's his name? Putin is doing today, selling of hemp and furs to the West. They're selling resources. They're also taxing merchants, they're taxing foreigners, they're taxing the church. All of these things.

Q: "Would you say there's a lid on Russia with Putin?"

A: There's an attempt by Putin to put a lid on. And the question is, when will it come off? But if it comes off, it won't, in my view, lead to democracy. You could publish it not in the streets of Geth. You could actually end up with someone worse than Putin.

Q: "How did one become a serf?"

A: You didn't. You were born a serf. How did you become a peasant? You were given your freedom or you bought your freedom or however it came about.

– Yeah, you are right. Alfred and Yon, I don't know which of you wrote

it, but it's right. "It seems to me that Catherine's greatest flaw is that she did not grasp the significance of the collapse after Peter the Great, and did not implement a plan to address problems that would arise from a weaker, incompetent successor." And that's true in democracies, as in autocracies. No president, no prime minister likes to think that they one day won't be. And if they think about it, they would hope that their successor is less competent than they are and they will appear greater in the public's eyes. There are very few politicians who plan for the future and walk away from it. And walk away from the job. Nelson Mandela is a big case in point of someone who walked away from the job. Yeltsin, interestingly, walked away from the job. And in both cases, I think both Mandela and Yeltsin believed that they had secured an acceptable succession. And actually neither of them had and it is a major problem.

Q: "What was the main reason Catherine took the initiative?"

A: Her own reading. Her own meetings with the West and with Western ideas.

Q: "How do her values jive with possibly having had her husband killed?"

A: Oh I don't know. Many of us, in our worst moment, I think my wife would say, she can easily imagine that. And I'm sure there are other men listening who say, "Yeah you are right, William." No, I think the 18th century was different. I think Russia was different. And she believed it was for the greater good of Russia, as simple as that.

- Oh! Ron, thank you. "Interesting note on sea otter fur which likely explains its desirability from Wikipedia." I love the fact that when you're talking, people are already looking stuff up, usually to prove you wrong. But in this case, Ron, thank you, because you've written something that is what I was saying. Ron has written, "Sea otters have the densest fur in the animal kingdom, ranging from 250,000 to a million hairs per square inch." Numbers that are hard to imagine, fancy that. I've never seen sea otter fur but if you are American, you would have done. Although I am informed that the sea otters that are on the west coast of America, sort of California northwards, do not have as good a fur as they did in Alaska. The Russians killed the better sea otters, the better in the sense of denser fur in Alaska, leading to their gradual coming southwards.

- Oh! Oh, I think that - I can't end with a better comment than Jeremy who said "Elvis died on the toilet too." Oh, that's wonderful. I can't beat that. I think, I think Wendy at that point, I should come to an end.

- [Judi] Thank you, William.