

**PETER III, EMPEROR OF
RUSSIA: THE STORY OF
A CRISIS AND A CRIME**

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Peter III, Emperor of Russia: The Story of a Crisis and a Crime by R. Nisbet Bain

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PETRUS III
OMNIVM

IMPERATOR
ROMANORUM

PETER III EMPEROR OF RUSSIA

THE STORY OF A CRISIS AND A CRIME

BY

R. NISBET BAIN

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Peter the Great," "Gustavus III," etc.*

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INTRODUCTION

THE present volume is an attempt to construct an authentic and impartial biography of the Russian Emperor, Peter III. Biographies of that unfortunate Prince abound, I know; many of these biographies in various languages I have made it my business to read: yet I think I may safely say that while not one of them can be regarded as authoritative or even satisfactory, most of them are obviously fictitious. The reason of this is not far to seek. First, the memory of Peter has been so absolutely eclipsed by the brilliance of the extraordinary woman who superseded or, rather, suppressed him, that to many people he is only interesting as the husband, the murdered husband of Catherine. His short life is a mere episode in her turbulent and dramatic career. In the second place, most of the memoirs relating to Peter are frankly polemical—either lampoons or apologies. While the friends of Catherine are obviously interested in representing Catherine's detested husband as a brutal, vicious, irresponsible despot, the friends of Peter, exaggerating his many amiable personal qualities and extenuating his undeniable absurdities, picture him, as simply and solely the victim of an ambitious consort and an ungrateful people. As usual the truth lies midway between these two extremes. Peter was notoriously unfit for ruling an Empire, but he would have made a good average eighteenth century *junker* or squire. His heart was good if his head was weak; although anything but a hero himself, he was capable of an exalted hero-worship; and a Prince who could conduct an orchestra and plan a library, should not in fairness be stigmatized as a mere idiot.

But a full and impartial life of Peter III. on modern lines must be very much more than a mere personal rehabilitation. The reign of Peter III. coincides with perhaps the most acute diplomatic crisis, not merely in the history of Russia, but in the history of Europe during the eighteenth century. I allude, of course, to the imminent collapse of the Prussian monarchy at the beginning of 1762, a catastrophe only and hardly averted by the enthusiastic devotion of the new Russian Emperor to Frederick the Great. This interesting and important subject, never, I will venture to say, adequately dealt with before, because Russia's share in it has hitherto been overlooked or disregarded, is sufficient of itself to justify an exhaustive record of the epoch-making events crammed into the brief six months during which Peter III., to his own hurt and harm, saved Frederick II. from apparently inevitable ruin.

Finally, there is the mysterious fate of the unhappy Emperor himself. Only of recent years has the thick veil which covers the tragedy enacted at the little country house at Ropsha been partially lifted. We still do not know precisely *how* Peter III. was done to death, but that he actually perished by violence there can now be no doubt whatever; moreover, the long debated question of Catherine's innocence or guilt can at last, in the light of recently discovered documents, be regarded as practically settled. For a critical estimate of the various documents relating to this history, many of which are now used for the first time, I must refer my readers to the bibliography which follows.

R. NISBET BAIN.

CRITICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS

(1) *Keith, Despatches.* Brit. Mus. MSS. 82,935; Bibl. Egerton, 1862; Brit. Mus. Add. 6825; Mitchell Papers, Vol. XXII; Brit. Mus. Add. 80,999. Most of these documents, still unprinted, are now used for the first time.

Keith, the English Ambassador at St. Petersburg, as the personal friend of Peter III. in the first six weeks of his reign, is an important witness during that particular period. His account of the Revolution is less satisfactory, but defective rather than erroneous. He is naturally somewhat biassed in Peter's favour.

(2) *Mercy d'Argenteau, Despatches.* Hist. Coll. of Imp. Rus. Hist. Soc., Vol. XVIII.

Mercy, the Austrian Ambassador at St. Petersburg, is an acute observer, and his despatches, written in cumbrously stately German, abound with the most minute particulars and the most piquant *aperçus*. He is antipathetic to Peter, and suspicious towards Catherine, but, considering his strong anti-Russian bias, wonderfully fair, and, so far as his information goes, very accurate.

(3) *Raumer, Beiträge zur neuern Geschichte. Theil III.,* Bd. 1.

Raumer's contribution consists, for the most part, of extracts from the despatches of the French minister, Breteuil, who does not impress one as either very accurate or very

acute. Much of his information, too, is obviously at second hand. Doubtless he had not so much secret service money at his disposal as his Austrian and English colleagues, and the course of events kept him away from Court during the whole of Peter's reign.

(4) *Herrmann, Geschichte des russischen Staats*. Bd. V., Abthl. 3.

This section of Herrmann is composed almost entirely, often verbatim, of the despatches of the Saxon Minister Brühl and his colleagues. Brühl is always lively and amusing. The *chronique scandaleuse* of the Court particularly interests him, and he has a rare quality of summarizing personal character epigrammatically. On the other hand, he is obviously credulous, and it is very hazardous to accept his unsupported statement of any fact.

(5) *Bolotov, Zapiski*

Bolotov represents the "man in the street" of the period. He is often inaccurate when he alludes to events beyond his ken, as, for instance, when he tells us that ex-Chancellor Bestuzhev was banished to Siberia, when, as a matter of fact, he was simply relegated to his own country house. But Bolotov was actually on the spot up to the very eve of the Revolution, and, if we want to know what St. Petersburg looked like in the days of Peter III., we could have no better guide than this observant, garrulous, inquisitive young Russian officer, who has something of the character of Pepys, and whose curiosity, overcoming his cowardice, frequently leads him into strange places.

(6) *Dashkova. Memoirs of the Princess Dashkova*. Ed. Bradford.