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Gary Marker, Imperial Saint

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REFERENCES

Gary MARKER, ***Imperial Saint. The Cult of St. Catherine and the Dawn of Female Rule in Russia***. DeKalb, IL : Northern Illinois University Press, 2007, 307 p.

- 1 Gary Marker's fascinating study of the cult of St. Catherine and the construction of a basis of legitimacy for female rule in early modern Russia reads like a well-plotted detective story, one of those murky ones where the detective is called to solve a case where the murder implement, the body, and even the basic fact of the murder are missing, obscure, or subject to doubt. Marker's evident delight in exposing the shifting, unstable foundations of the legend of St. Catherine of Alexandria and her appropriations in Russian cultural and political life carries the reader along on path of engrossing historical sleuthing. The mystery at the heart of the book requires the author to trace the rhetorical and symbolic uses of the life of a saint who seems never to have existed and whose « life » accreted over several centuries of hagiographic creativity. In particular, he examines the ways the saint's image was to justify the ascent of a female ruler (Catherine I, wife of Peter the Great) whose own life, like her saintly namesake's, underwent a process of imaginative reinvention in order to fit the expectations of a reigning empress of Russia. As the idea of a female ruling in her own right was itself a novel concept in the early eighteenth century, it too had to be constructed de novo at the same time that it had to be ostentatiously clothed in the sanctity of ancient tradition and precedent.
- 2 The book opens by placing the issue of female rule in Russia in its historical and historiographic context, where it occupies an important but poorly studied position. For lack of a male heir, upon his death in 1725, Peter the Great was followed on the throne by his widow, Catherine I. By all measures Catherine was an unlikely choice. A foreigner of humble origins, born into a different faith, she had been the mistress of at least one member of Peter's retinue, and she had lived with Peter out of wedlock prior to her own precipitous rise to the status of Orthodox convert, wife, crowned empress, and ultimately,

reigning sovereign. Catherine lived and ruled for less than three years after Peter's death, but she opened the floodgates to a series of women, children, and foreigners who succeeded her on the throne. The fact that the Russian Empire shifted apparently so easily from a paradigm of exclusively male rule to one accommodating females on the throne endows Marker's investigation with evident weight.

- 3 Part One traces the figure of St. Catherine of Alexandria back to its inchoate origins in tales of unnamed clusters of holy women and martyrs. Over the centuries, Catherine gradually acquired a name, a family history, a specific and expanding tale of martyrdom, and a marvelous set of characteristics: royal status, manly bravery, piercing intellect and reason, stunning beauty, and resolute faith in the face of hideous bodily torment. An important addendum to the tale, particularly popular in Latin Europe though not unknown in the Orthodox East, was the tale of her mystical marriage with Jesus in heaven. Marker follows this ever-changing tale with great subtlety, remarking on the particularities of traditions of veneration over time and place without trying to force Orthodox and Catholic trajectories into rigidly distinctive shapes.
- 4 From ancient texts, the book then moves to Russia, where it traces the veneration of St. Catherine from its meager medieval beginnings to its rise as a private cult specifically directed to the women of the tsarist family, to the slightly more public homage to and support of the saint and her monasteries in the distant Sinai and closer to home, near the tsars' country estate outside of Moscow. With these deliberate attentions, in the second half of the seventeenth century, the Romanovs created the basis of a politicized linkage of the martyr and the women of the royal family. Given the amplitude and variation within the cult of St. Catherine, the particular manifestation of the saint that would be most useful to the Russian royals was not immediately apparent. In the seventeenth-century work of Dmitrii Rostovskii, the vision of Catherine as "Militant Bride of Christ" received an unprecedented boost in a Russian context.
- 5 Rostovskii's commentaries, in combination with the already established connection between the saint and the tsarist women, laid the groundwork for Peter the Great's appropriation of Catherine as the namesake and mirror of his second wife. In spite of the apparent difficulty of representing Peter's mistress-wife in the guise of the famously virginal saint, the corporality of the martyr's tale facilitated the identification of the real-life woman with her holy namesake. The much-vaunted story of Catherine's heroic self-sacrifice and mobilization of resources to ransom Peter and his troops at the battle of the Pruth lent further substance to the encomia to the two Catherines' shared courage, manliness, and cool reason. Marker's study soars in its contextual and close readings of particular texts, both literary and visual.
- 6 Marker formulates a compelling argument that Peter himself had no intention to establish his wife as his heir, and that the tsar's ambivalence or even resistance to such an idea was shared by important churchmen, particularly by Feofan Prokopovich, the principal mouthpiece of Peter's publicists. In a masterful deconstruction of Feofan's commentaries, Marker shows the painful and circuitous way in which Feofan reconciled himself with the seeming travesty of female rule. Using unlikely and unpropitious historical examples, Feofan constructed a forced justification for female rule based on an artificial narrative of continuity and historical precedents. On the basis of this evidence, the book offers an important reflection on the significance of Peter's famous transformations of Russian culture: "The Petrine use and invention of precedence were themselves based on precedents deeply embedded in Russian culture, rhetorical

strategies for making troublesome decisions seem normal, jarring discontinuities seem primordial and divinely sanctioned. Peter and his inner circle saw fit to deploy precedence, what might be termed a discourse of continuity, alongside their more celebrated displays of innovation, renewal, modernity, and anti-tradition from the 1690s until Peter drew his final breath. Ultimately, therefore, the political culture of the Petrine era, for all its breathtaking transformations, cannot be completely grasped without recognizing this dynamic (227).” As this quotation suggests, this book supplies far more than a look at the brief and undistinguished reign of a minor ruler. In addition to a brilliant display of source work, it offers an important reassessment of Peter the Great and early eighteenth-century Russia court culture. It makes an irrefutable case for the persistence of religious framing of politics and culture in an era better known as a time of enlightenment and militant secularization.

- 7 Marker’s final chapter treats the symbolic afterlives of the two Catherines, the saint and the empress, in the reigns of subsequent rulers of the eighteenth century. Most startling in this chapter is his exposé of the uses of the St. Catherine/Catherine Alekseevna legacy by Empress Elizabeth (1741-1761). Elizabeth presented herself repeatedly and ostentatiously as the daughter of both her parents, Peter the Great, and *Catherine I*. The lineage that she flaunted came “from both her parents, a fact,” Marker wryly notes, “that would have been obvious long ago had the practice of cutting off the quotes just before her mother was named not been adopted (218).”
- 8 Gender analysis runs deeply through the book, although it rarely reaches the surface of the discussion. In elevating the personal to the sphere of politics, Marker allows us to shed the belittling caricatures of the female-centered imperial courts of eighteenth-century as frivolous sites of favoritism and scandal, and to look instead at the workings of politics through the highly personalized mechanism of knightly orders, religious patronage, and carefully constructed homiletics.
- 9 Marker never makes claims beyond what the evidence will support, and he is far too honest to stage a grand denouement, whether identifying the “real” St. Catherine or settling once and for all the matter of Peter’s ideas on the succession. In its quest for elusive answers, *Imperial Saint* provides a model of original and insightful reading of non-standard sources, and illuminates important unexplored aspects of early modern Russian politics and culture.