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Book Analysis – *The Captain's Daughter*

by Erik Wright

(History 2225)

The elderly serf Savelyich scolds and fusses over young nobleman Pyotr Andreyich, but he is clearly obligated to follow Pyotr's orders. Non-Russians living in the Province of Orenburg are described as "half-savages" who must be kept in submission by the government (Pushkin 47). Marya Ivanovna is both terrified and awed by The Empress, who has absolute power to grant pardon to her beloved Pyotr Andreyich. Alexander Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter* is filled with examples of the class divisions that existed in Russia in the late 1700s. These divisions, as well as the unfair treatment of underclass and minorities, led to tensions within Russia which resulted in numerous uprisings and rebellions.

In order to understand the social and political climate in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia it is important to understand its ruler, Catherine II, commonly known as Catherine the Great. Although she was born in Germany, Catherine's father had a distant connection to the Russian throne, and she was married to a Russian in line to inherit the throne. Her husband, Peter III, eventually came to power and ruled briefly in 1762, but it was Catherine who gained the support of the royal guard, military and much of the noble class. Catherine took the title of Empress soon after, and Peter III was likely murdered by her supporters. The Russian empire continued to expand during Catherine's rule, and she had many ideas to make Russia more progressive and united, including suggestions to improve the conditions for serfs. She assembled a commission that included representatives from the various social classes and minorities throughout Russia in an effort to put her plans into action. However, the effort was unsuccessful and Catherine turned her attention away from Russia's internal problems, focusing on expanding the Russian territory. The tensions between the noble class, peasants, and minorities continued to grow, leading to uprisings throughout the Russian empire. These uprisings changed the attitude of Catherine toward the poor, and she eventually instituted harsher terms for serfs and forced many Russians into labor in order to achieve her goals.

Certainly, the largest group of Russians who felt animosity toward the Russian nobility was the peasants and serfs who represented approximately ninety percent of the population. The agricultural society of Russia had always depended upon poor laborers, but a combination of agricultural disasters and heavy taxes left many of these laborers indebted to their landowners. In many situations, the debt of the peasants became so heavy that there was no possibility of being able to leave the land. In addition, the government began to impose such harsh restriction upon when a serf could leave a landowner that their condition became very similar to that of slaves. Pyotr Andreyich's teacher Savelyich gave a glimpse of this condition when he grumbled about the Frenchman hired to help educate Pyotr, "as though the master hadn't enough servants of his own on the estate!" (Pushkin 2). The gap of wealth and personal rights between the serfs and peasants, and the ruling class became increasingly wide during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While Catherine the Great originally had plans to improve the conditions for serfs, she ended up increasing tensions between the classes by exempting nobles from taxes and other judicial procedures ("Catherine II" 2).

Also among the groups who felt persecuted by the Russian nobility were certain religious groups. In the mid-1600s the Old Believers were a group of Russian Christians who felt that the Russian Orthodox Church had made too many changes in their liturgy in an effort to become more like the Greek Orthodox Church. Their refusal to adopt the new liturgy led to conflicts within the Church, and eventually the Old Believers were punished for causing division and unrest within the

Church. In addition, the Old Believers felt that some of the ruling power should be taken from the throne and given to local authorities. Many peasants supported the Old Believers thoughts, and the government had to suppress a number of rebellions. The leaders of the Old Believers were tortured and executed, and the persecution of Old Believers continued for many decades. Their persecution included heavy taxes and other restrictions imposed by the government (“Old Believers” 2). In addition to the Old Believers, Jews were also subjected to humiliation and persecution. In 1768, Jewish communities were attacked by Cossacks who claimed they were acting on Catherine’s wishes to “exterminate the Poles and the Jews, the desecrators of our holy religion” (“Cossacks” 2). *The Captain’s Daughter* includes a scene in which Pyotr Andreyich meets a veteran soldier while staying at an inn. The soldier explains to Pyotr that he must learn to play billiards because “One can’t be always beating Jews” when journeying from town to town (Pushkin 7).

In addition to the social and religious class tensions, there were also ethnic groups who felt resentment toward Russia’s nobility. The Cossacks were tribal horsemen who were often used by czars to help in wars and extending the Russian borders. Their relationship with the rulers was strained when their attempts to establish their own territory were prevented. Other minorities who were treated unfairly by the rulers included the Bashkirs from the eastern part of Russia, and the Muslim Tatars. The noble class attitude toward these ethnic groups is evident in Pyotr Andreyich’s description of “half-savage people who had but recently acknowledged the authority of the Russian sovereigns” (Pushkin 47). These groups were responsible for various uprisings during Catherine II’s reign, as they opposed the Russian rule and the unfair treatment they were given.

As tension grew within Russia, a number of imposters claimed to be Peter III in attempts to overthrow Catherine’s rule. Of these imposters, Emelyan Pugachev (Pugachov) was particularly successful at organizing the various ethnic and religious minorities, and peasants. He was a member of the Cossack minority who had traveled around Russia while serving in the Russian army. Seeing the poor living conditions and unrest among the lower classes, Pugachev began to organize an army to revolt against Catherine II. In 1773, this army captured the city of Orenburg, established the city as its headquarters, and began to advance on other cities. The setting for much of *The Captain’s Daughter* is near Orenburg, and Pyotr Andreyich experienced first-hand an attack on the fortress in which he was staying. The noble class prejudice toward the minorities is illustrated in Savelyich’s comments about their attackers, “If at least they were Turks or Swedes – but these wretches are not fit to be mentioned....” (Pushkin 89).

Pugachev’s revolt lasted for several months, but Catherine sent many troops to stop the rebellion and disband Pugachev’s supporters. Pugachev was captured by Cossack troops that were still loyal to Catherine. He was taken to Moscow and executed in January 1775. Despite the fact that Pugachev’s rebellion failed, he continued to be a symbol of inspiration for other Russian’s who wanted to see reform in their country. Catherine the Great died in 1796. Her reign was considered successful for the expansion of the country, but by its end the tensions within Russia were worse than ever. It would be nearly a century before progress was made in the social reformation of Russia.

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