

Catherine the Great?

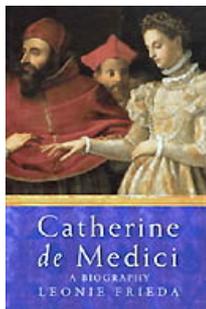
Historians, novelists and screenwriters have dealt harshly with Catherine de Medici. Leonie Frieda mounts the case for the defence in her new biography of the woman who sparked the St Bartholemew's Day Massacre



Amanda Foreman

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Catherine de Medici

by Leonie Frieda

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On the night of 24 August 1572, a screaming mob rampaged through Paris's narrow streets on a murderous hunt for Huguenots. In only a few hours the entire Protestant population was gone. The mutilated corpses of hundreds of men, women and children ended up in the Seine, poisoning the river for months afterwards. Known as the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, this terrible event has haunted popular imagination for one reason in particular - its chief instigator was a woman, Catherine de Medici, the Queen-mother of France.

The violence she unleashed spread through France and for a few days it seemed possible that Catherine would become the Queen-mother of modern genocide. What she had originally planned as a mafia-style assassination of her enemies had turned into a national catastrophe. It is no wonder historians have treated her harshly. Moreover, for all her conspiracies and stratagems, Catherine was a far less successful ruler than her contemporary, Elizabeth I. During her 30-year career as Regent for her three sons, France suffered eight religious wars; its riches dwindled and borders shrunk.

But, like 'Bad King' Richard III, in more recent times she has attracted her share of supporters. Honoré de Balzac, for example, argued that her chief crime was in acting like a politician. Robert Knecht, the doyen of sixteenth-century French history, presents her as a desperate mother, sacrificing all for her misbegotten children. Leonie Frieda has gone one step further. Her biography is a full-blooded, so to speak, rehabilitation. In a less talented writer, such an attempt would have been precarious at best. But Frieda's confidence in her mission permeates the book, raising what is in any case a fascinating narrative to the level of cogent and powerful argument. Whether or not she is ultimately successful is less important than the entertaining ride she provides along the way.

Frieda clearly has inexhaustible enthusiasm for the jaw-dropping anecdote. In Catherine she found the perfect subject, a woman whose deeds and connections belong to the freak-show rather than the pantheon of history. There was nothing normal or ordinary about Catherine's life. Born in 1589 and orphaned when she was just three weeks old, this only child of Lorenzo II de' Medici and a French princess, never experienced a home or family life. Shunted between convents - a hostage or a pawn depending on political circumstances - Catherine learnt to disguise her intelligence behind a humble facade. Yet the loneliness and fear which characterised her early years left their mark. Intimacy, tenderness and empathy were never more than words to Catherine. She was capable of great love, but it was the kind which blighted rather than blessed the recipient.

However, her ability to appear cheerful and submissive became her most powerful defence once she arrived in France. The French immediately dismissed the dumpy little Italian stranger as a nonentity. As the wife of Francis I's second son, Henri, she had no patronage to distribute and, following the death of her uncle, Pope Clement VII, no dowry for largesse. Few could be bothered to talk to her, including Henri, despite the fact that she worshipped him all their married life. Furthermore, for the first 10 years of their marriage she failed to conceive. It was only after the couple sought help for an unnamed sexual problem that Catherine suddenly revealed a prodigious fecundity, producing nine children - five boys and four girls.

Catherine's apparent lack of ambition protected her from the jealousies and plots which infested the Court. After Henri II ascended the throne in 1547, she was able to drift into a fairly satisfactory routine of royal and motherly duties. Even her husband's mistress, Diane de Poitiers, saw no need to go beyond the usual acts of petty triumph and humiliation. After all, as Frieda points out, the king made certain that the whole world knew where his affections resided. The gold initials emblazoned throughout his residences were not those of HC but HD.

But whatever emotional tortures Henri inflicted on Catherine during their 26-year marriage, he repaid during his last 10 days. Felled by a jousting lance which shattered his face, the king died after prolonged agony. If Catherine's death had followed shortly after, she would have been remembered as the woman with no personality who introduced broccoli, artichokes and ballet to France. Instead she assumed the first of three regencies for her sons, Francis II, Charles IX, and Henri III. None of her sons was suited to rule. All were weak-minded bordering on the demented. Whether she would have done better without them is hard to say, but she probably would not have done worse.

It is usual for films and novels portray Catherine at this time as a sinister Italian crone; double-dealing in her ante-chamber, concocting poisons in her cabinet. Even Catherine's contemporaries had learned to fear the Queen-mother. 'She is always lying,' recorded one, 'even when she is telling the truth.' There is no doubt that she felt resorted to ruthless measures in order to keep the leading French noble families, the Catholic Guises and Protestant Bourbons, at bay. The monarchy was in a perilous situation. France seethed with unrest, the fires of war perpetually stoked by religious hatred and nationalist ambition.

According to some historians, Catherine cynically used the French Huguenots as a counterpoise against the Guises. She protected Protestant interests only when they were allied with those of her sons'. Frieda, on the other hand, argues that Catherine was a genuine pragmatist who tried in vain to instill a degree of religious toleration in her adopted country. Ever mindful of the need to maintain the status quo, she married off one daughter, Elizabeth, to Phillip II of Spain and the other, Margot, to the Protestant Henri of Navarre. In Frieda's version it was Huguenot intransigence that drove Catherine from the Politiques - the advocates of a peaceful solution - into the arms of the ultra-Catholics.

But was it really a desire for stability that ultimately led Catherine to make mass murder her chosen instrument? Or rage at seeing her influence over her second son, Charles IX, usurped by his adviser, the Protestant Comte de Coligny? Catherine regarded the world through the prism of a domestic, albeit Italian, melodrama. Family feuds and factious conspiracies she understood, the sort of religious fanaticism which leads to wars and riots was beyond her imagination. She could read hearts but not minds.

In contrast to a later ruler, the Empress Marie-Thérèse, who sacrificed her children to the interests of Austria, Catherine was prepared to sacrifice France to protect her sons. In the arena of court intrigue, therefore, she reigned supreme. But on the world stage, France suffered. Indeed, Frieda admits that Catherine possessed courage and cunning, but lacked a sense of vision or statesmanship. In the words of one contemporary, 'she had too much wit for a woman, too little honesty for a Queen.'

Yet her achievements, not to mention her sheer strength of character, demand more than grudging respect. Catherine not only survived but ruled over a country which despised foreigners, during an era which hardly favoured women. This intelligent and well-researched biography of her is a worthy testament to Catherine's formidable strength. Catherine de Medici reveals Frieda, a first-time biographer, to be a writer of tremendous talent and skill.

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