



Catherine the Great; Mao Zedong

Books Reviewed:

[Catherine the Great](#) [1]

Books Reviewed:

[Mao Zedong](#) [2]

Issue:

[135](#) [3]

Reviewer:

[Clive Barnes](#) [4]

News to Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

2

Hatt's portraits of these two great autocrats are ambitious. Her attempt to do justice to the detail of these long lives and to the impact they had on their huge nations, falls victim to the wealth and difficulty of her material, and to the format of the series. The distinguishing feature of the format is the separation of a number of discussion points at the end of the books. Here, two sides of an argument are presented, with supporting evidence and sources, and the reader is invited to 'Judge for Yourself'. Was Mao's agricultural reform a success or a failure? Was Catherine the serf's friend or the serf's enemy?

This is a reminder that 'facts and statistics can be used to support completely different points of view'. But it makes for a curious book when some of the central questions are not explored in the body of the text. This, with so much of its major parts removed elsewhere, tends to collapse into exhaustive and exhausting detail. The long march of events is interrupted only by the occasional double page spread which attempts to inject a burst of background information, on, for instance, Chinese philosophy or the history of the Romanov dynasty.

A great deal of research is evident in both Hatt's text and its accompanying illustrations and sources. However, this is a format which demands a level of concentration, tolerance and flexibility which will surely restrict its readership. Finally, why is a bold squiggly, handwritten type of font used for the books' subheadings and for the captions to their illustrations? It doesn't help English readers to familiarise themselves with Russian or Chinese personal and place names if they have difficulty deciphering them.

Running Order:

8

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[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/catherine-the-great>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/mao-zedong>

[3] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/135>

[4] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/clive-barnes>