

Maria Feodorovna (Sophie Dorothea of Württemberg)

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Maria Feodorovna (Russian: Мари́я Фёдоровна, 25 October 1759 - 5 November 1828) was the second wife of Tsar Paul I of Russia and mother of Tsar Alexander I and Tsar Nicholas I of Russia.

Contents

- 1 Princess of Württemberg
- 2 Grand Duchess of Russia
- 3 Personality
- 4 European Tour
- 5 Last Year under Catherine II
- 6 Empress of Russia
- 7 Dowager Empress
- 8 Children
- 9 Notes
- 10 Bibliography



Maria Feodorovna. Portrait by Alexander Roslin.

Princess of Württemberg

Maria Feodorovna was born in Stettin (now Szczecin, Poland) on October 25, 1759 as Princess Sophie Marie Dorothea Auguste Louise of Württemberg. She was the daughter of Friedrich II Eugen, Duke of Württemberg and his wife Friederike Dorothea of Brandenburg-Schwedt. Named after her mother, Sophia Dorothea, as she was known in her family, was the eldest daughter of eight children, five boys and three girls. In 1769, when she was ten years old, her family took up residence in the ancestral castle at Montbéliard, near Basel, then in the Duchy of Württemberg, in what is today Alsace.^[1] Montbéliard was the seat of the junior branch of the House of Württemberg to which she belonged, it was also a cultural center and many intellectual and political figures frequented her parents' palace . The family's summer residence was situated at Étupes.

Princess Sophie's education was better than average in the culture-oriented paternal home and she would love the arts all her life. By the age of sixteen, she spoke German, French, Italian and Latin. When she turned seventeen, Sophia Dorothea was tall, buxom and rosy cheeked with a sunny disposition. Strong and tender, toughful and naive. She had been brought up according to French fashion and refinements, as was the custom

of that era, but with German bourgeois simplicity.^[2] Family virtues were to be valued above all.

In 1773, Sophie Dorothea was among the group of German Princesses considered as possible wives of the heir to the Russian throne, the future Tsar Paul I. However, Sophie of Württemberg was not yet fourteen years old at that time, and Wilhelmina of Hesse-Darmstadt (Natalia Alexeievna) a princess of a more appropriate age was chosen instead.

Sophie was engaged to Prince Louis of Hesse, brother of Paul's first wife, but when the Russian heir to the throne became a widower in 1776, Frederick II of Prussia proposed Sophie as the ideal candidate to be Paul's second wife. Sophie's former fiancé, the Prince of Hesse-Darmstadt, received a monetary compensation when the engagement was broken. Sophie was seventeen years old and pleased with the prospect of being Empress of Russia. When her mother lamented the unfortunate destiny of some Russian sovereigns, she replied that her only concern was to make her way in her new country quickly and successfully.

The Russian Empress, Catherine II, was delighted with the idea. The princess of Württemberg shared with her not only a similar education but also the same original name and place of birth. Frederick II arranged the marriage and Sophie was summoned to Berlin, where Paul joined her. They met for the first time at a state dinner given in honor of his arrival in Berlin. Sophie was eager to please, having learned that Paul's tastes were serious: she talked geometry with him during their first interview. Next day she wrote a glowing letter to a friend in which she declared that she was "madly in love". Paul was as happy with the young princess as she was with him. "I found my intended to be such as I could have dreamed of," Paul wrote to his mother, "*She is tall, shapely, intelligent, quick-witted, and not at all shy.*"^[3] Sophie's first impressions were no less enthusiastic. "*I am more than content,*" she wrote. "*Never, dear friend, could I be happier. The Grand Duke could not be more kind. I pride myself on the fact that my dear bridegroom loves me a great deal, and this makes me very, very fortunate.*" By early fall, she had fallen deeply in love with her future husband. "*I cannot go to bed, my dear and adored Prince, without telling you once again that I love and adore you madly,*" she wrote to Paul. Soon after arriving at St Petersburg that September, she converted to the Orthodox Church, took the title of Grand Duchess of Russia and traded the name Sophie Dorothea for Maria Feodorovna. The wedding took place on September 26, 1776.

Grand Duchess of Russia

Paul was exceedingly ugly and of difficult character but Maria Feodorovna

Paul was exceedingly ugly and of unkind character, but Maria Feodorovna was completely satisfied with her fate. "*My dear husband is a perfect angel and I love him to distraction*" she wrote to a friend. Maria Feodorovna never changed her feelings for Paul, and despite everything that happened later, despite his difficult and often tyrannical character, she truly loved him.^[4]

Catherine II, at least at the beginning, was enchanted with her daughter-in-law, about whom she wrote to a friend: "I confess to you that I am infatuated with this charming Princess, but literally infatuated. She is precisely what one would have wished: the figure of a nymph, a lily and rose complexion, the loveliest skin in the world, tall and well built; she is grateful; sweetness, kindnesses and innocence are reflected in her face."^[5] However, the relationship between the two women quickly turned sour. Maria naturally sided with her neglected husband in the acrimony between the Empress and her son, and the Grand Duchess's good intention to ease the difficult situation only aggravated the differences between them.

In December of 1777 Maria gave birth the first of her ten children, the future Tsar Alexander I. Just three months later, Catherine took the new born away to raise him on her terms without interference from the parents. When a second son was born in April 1779, Catherine did the same thing. This caused bitter animosity with Maria, as the parents were only allowed weekly visits. For the next four years, the couple did not have any more children. Deprived of rearing her eldest sons Maria Feodorovna had to occupy herself decorating the Palace of Pavlovsk, Catherine's gift to celebrate the birth of her first grandson. Maria's efforts would produce one of the most beautiful estates in all of Russia.



Maria Feodorovna has been cited as the tallest of Russian tsarinas. The short stature of her consort presented problems while dancing.

Personality



Maria Feodorovna in 1792 by Jean-Louis Voille. "The Empress Maria was a very

Maria Feodorovna was not a great beauty, but was tall, fair, fresh, extremely shortsighted and inclined to be stout.^[7] Her carriage was indisputably regal, and she loved the pomp and ceremony associated with court life. She also had a taste for splendor and a passionate interest in small court intrigues. Particularly tenacious of her rank, she was prepared to spend the whole day from morning until night in full dress without respite or fatigue, implacably imposing the same burden on all her entourage, and was ruled by etiquette in the most intimate details of her domestic life. She loved order and regularity. Unlike the Romanovs, she was frugal, a rare virtue in a princess of that time, but she came from a large family that for long time was only a minor branch of the house of Württemberg.

Her even temper and her patience were instrumental in knowing how to deal with a difficult husband and make a success of her marriage. Her parsimony was such that as a new Grand Duchess, she did not hesitate to

Empress Maria was a very handsome woman; her plumpness kept her fresh.”

Wrote in her memoirs Madame Vigeè Le Brun^[6] “ She had a tall figure, full of dignity, and magnificent fair hair.”

take over the clothes of her husband's first wife and to dispute with the lady's maids the very slippers of the defunct Natalia. ^[8]

Maria cultivated the arts with great enthusiasm, not disdaining even needlework ^[9]. She was skilled in watercolor, she also knew engraving, designed cameos, and created objects of ivory and amber, which she often presented as gifts. She was a gifted musician, and was a renowned

specialist in horticulture, with a lifelong passion for flowers and plants.^[10] At Pavlovsk she gathered a literary circle in imitation of that of Étupes, and she organized theatricals for her husband, who delighted in that amusement. In addition to all this, she found time to devote energies to the great charities and educational institutions. She established the institute of the blind in Saint Peterburg, and supported the career of the blind musician Charlotta Seuerling, whose mother she saved from ruin. Serious and purposeful, she prided herself in being cleverer than her mother-in-law, never losing an opportunity of contrasting her own impeccable virtue with her mother in law's failings. She was equally watchful to attack Catherine's favorites Potemkin and Mamonov.

Clever, talented, purposeful and energetic, Maria Feodorovna would make a nearly perfect Imperial wife, and Paul for many years would be a model husband deeply in love with the woman he married.

European Tour

Paul and Maria asked Catherine for permission to travel abroad to Western Europe. In September 1781, under the pseudonyms of "the Count and Countess Severny," the heir to the Russian throne and his wife set off on a journey that lasted fourteen months and took them to Poland, Austria, Italy, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. Paris made a special impression on the couple.^[11] In Austria, Joseph II compared Maria Feodorovna with her husband, finding her superior.

During their visit to Italy, they proved to be much in love, surprising their travelling companions, when Paul could not stop giving kisses in public to his wife. On their way back to St. Petersburg, Maria went to Württemberg to visit her parents. At the end of 1782, they returned to Russia, and Maria devoted her attention to her Palace at Pavlovsk, where she gave birth to Alexandra Pavlovna, the first of six daughters she would bear during the next twelve years. To celebrate Alexandra's birth, Catherine II gave them the Palace of Gatchina, that would occupy Paul's attention until he was called to the throne. Catherine II let the parents raise their daughters.

Maria Feodorovna proved to be very fertile and had ten children: four sons and six daughters. From then on the Russian Imperial house, who until then consisted of only Paul, would be a large family. The younger children were given up to the parents.

Last Year under Catherine II

During the long years of Catherine's reign, Maria and Paul were forced to live in isolation in Gatchina with a tight income. They remained a devoted couple. Maria moderated the extreme elements in her husband

character, having a beneficial influence over him. She continued to beautify Pavlovsk, and dedicated herself to charitable work among its inhabitants. She was devoted to expanding her modest literary salon and ardently planned infrequent theatrical and musical evenings for her family and friends. She herself was an adept player of the harpsichord and loved to read. She kept voluminous diaries that recorded her life in detail. However, in keeping with her last wishes, Nicholas I burned all these volumes after her death. Even most of the letters she wrote have not survived since she usually requested that they be burnt.

The close relationship between Paul and Catherine Nelidova, one of Maria Feodorovna's ladies-in-waiting, was cause of the first crack in their marriage. Paul's liaison, a deeply intense but, according to him, only platonic attachment to Nelidova, one of Maria's ladies-in-waiting, was particularly painful for Maria Feodorovna, as the other woman had been her friend. Her relations with Nelidova became very bitter for several years. Later, however, she began to accept Paul's word that it was only a friendship, and eventually Maria not only reconciled with the idea, but joined forces with Nelidova in an attempt to moderate Paul's increasingly neurotic temperament.

Empress of Russia

After twenty years in the shadows, the death of Catherine II in 1796 allowed Maria Feodorovna to have a prominent role as Empress consort. During Catherine's lifetime, Maria had no chance of interfering in affairs of state, as Paul himself was excluded, but after her husband's accession to the throne, she took to politics, at first timidly, but increasingly resolutely afterwards.^[12] Her influence over her husband was great, and in general beneficial. Even so, it is possible that she abused it in order to help her friends or hurt her enemies.

Maria had exceptional taste. The palaces of Gatchina, Tsarskoe Selo, the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and The Hermitage were decorated and furnished under her personal guidance. She loved all the arts and supported them generously. Her most important heritage to Russia, however, was the establishment of the first schools for women, as well as numerous charity organizations in the empire. These institutions existed until the Russian Revolution of 1917. As Empress, she helped as much as possible her numerous poor relations, some of which, for example her brother, Alexander of Württemberg (1771-1833), were invited to Russia.

Although Paul and his wife were not as close as they once had been, there remained a good deal of warmth between them. Their relationship suffered further in the last years of Paul's life. After Maria gave birth to her tenth and last child in 1798, Paul became infatuated with nineteen-year-old Anna Lopukhina, and this time Paul assured his wife that his behavior was irreproachable and that the relationship was of a paternal nature. Paul was Emperor for exactly four years, four months and four days. He was murdered on 12 March 1801.

Dowager Empress

On the night of her husband's assassination, Maria Feodorovna thought to imitate the example of Catherine II and tried to proclaim herself Empress on the grounds that she had been crowned with Paul. It took Alexander I several days to persuade her to relinquish her reckless claim, for which she had no party to support her. For some time afterward, whenever her son came to visit, the Dowager Empress would place a casket between them



containing the bloodstained nightshirt that Paul was wearing on the day of the murder, as a silent reproach. The strained relationship between mother and son improved though, and thanks to the new Tsar, Maria Feodorovna, only forty-two years old when she became a widow, kept the highest female position at court. In public ceremonies, Maria often took the emperor's arm, while the Empress Elisabeth had to walk behind. This custom of precedence of the Dowager Empress over the wife of the reigning monarch, was introduced with her and was unique to the Russian court. It did cause resentment with Maria's daughter-in-law.

Maria not only had the highest female rank in the empire, but managed all the charitable establishments, controlled the bank for loans and enjoyed a considerable income. This substantial revenue made possible for her to live in grand style. Her apartments were furnished with richness and great taste. Perpetuating the tradition of Catherine II, she attended parades in military uniform, the cordon of an order across her breast. Her elegant, gay receptions, where she appeared sumptuously dressed, surrounded by ladies-in-waiting and chamberlains, were in sharp contrast with the simple court life of Tsar Alexander I, whose retiring ways and the withdrawn personality of his wife were no match for the Dowager Empress' old splendor in the style of the time of Catherine the Great.

The future of her daughters and the education of her three younger children kept Maria's attention occupied during the first years of her widowhood. She was a good and loving mother, and despite the fact that Catherine took over her two eldest children in their early years, Maria Feodorovna managed to maintain close relationships with them, as with all her children. They remained genuinely attached to her.^[13] Her son let her have total control over the future Nicholas I and his younger brother Grand Duke Michael. Maria Feodorovna tried in vain to surpass the education Catherine II had provided for her two eldest sons, but did not choose the best teachers for the young ones. Once all her children were grown up, the dowager tsarina maintained an avid correspondence with them, but being of a cold temperament, could be cool and remote.

The Dowager Empress' exalted position made her Palace at Pavlovsk a mandatory place to visit for the great personages of St. Petersburg, but her attempts at having more political influence over her son's policies were not very successful. She vehemently opposed any approach her son made to get to an agreement with Napoleon Bonaparte. In this, she maintained her haughty and categorical opinion. When the French Emperor offered to marry her youngest daughter, Anna Pavlovna, Maria strongly opposed the proposed marriage. Her court was the center of anti-Napoleon sentiment during the Napoleonic Wars and she was a bitter enemy of Bonaparte.

Even past fifty, she retained traces of her youthful freshness. Of a robust constitution, she outlived five of her ten children, including her eldest son and his wife Elisabeth Alexeievna, seeing the ascension to the throne of her third son, Nicholas I, and was an influential figure in the early education of his grandson, the future Alexander II. She died in Pavlovsk on November 5, 1828, at the age of sixty-nine.

After her death, Maria's memory was revered by her children and grandchildren. Later Russian tsarinas looked up to her and used her as a role model. Her Palace of Pavlovsk, in which she lived for so long and left a big imprint, was maintained for her descendants as she left it, almost as a family museum, in accordance with her



Maria Feodorovna loved all the arts and supported them generously.

instructions, first by her younger son Michael and later by the Konstantinovich branch of the family who inherited and kept it until the Russian revolution.

Children

Maria Feodorovna married Paul on 7 October 1776. Their marriage resulted in the birth of ten children:

1. Alexander I, Tsar of Russia (1777-1825), m. Luise Auguste, Princess of Baden (Elizabeth Alexeiyevna) (1779-1826), and had two daughters (both died in childhood).
2. Konstantin Pavlovich, Grand Duke of Russia (1779-1831), married with:
 1. Juliane, Princess of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld (Anna Feodorovna) (1781-1860)
 2. Joanna, Countess Grudskinska, Princess Lowicz (1799-1831). No children.
3. Alexandra Pavlovna (1783-1801) m. Joseph, Archduke of Austria, Count Palatine of Hungary (1776-1847), and had one daughter (died at birth).
4. Elena Pavlovna (1784-1803) m. Friedrich Ludwig, Hereditary Grand Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1778-1819), and had two children (including Paul Friedrich, Grand Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin).
5. Maria Pavlovna (1786-1859) m. Karl Friedrich, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (1783-1853), and had 4 children (including Karl Alexander, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, and Augusta, Princess of Saxe-Weimar, the wife of Wilhelm I, German Emperor).
6. Catherine Pavlovna (1788-1819) married to:
 1. Georg, Duke of Oldenburg (1784-1812), had 2 sons
 2. Wilhelm I, King of Württemberg (1781-1864), and had 2 daughters (including Sophie, Princess of Württemberg, the first wife of Willem III, King of the Netherlands).
7. Olga Pavlovna (1792-1795).
8. Anna Pavlovna (1795-1865) m. Willem II, King of the Netherlands (1792-1849), and had 5 children (including Willem III, King of the Netherlands, and Sophie, Princess of the Netherlands, the wife of Karl Alexander, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach).
9. Nicholas I, Tsar of Russia (1796-1855), m. Charlotte, Princess of Prussia (Alexandra Feodorovna) (1798-1860), and had 11 children (including Alexander II, Tsar of Russia, and Olga Nikolaievna, Grand Duchess of Russia, wife of Karl, King of Württemberg).
10. Michael Pavlovich, Grand Duke of Russia (1798-1849), m. Charlotte, Princess of Württemberg (Elena Pavlovna) (1807-1873), and had 5 children.



Fedot Shubin's statue of Emperor Paul. "Paul was exceedingly ugly," wrote in her memoirs Madame Vigée Le Brun ^[14] "A flat nose, and a very large mouth furnished with very long teeth, made him look like a death's head."

Notes

1. ^ Pavlovsk: Suzanne Massie, p. 8
2. ^ Paul the First: Kazimierz Waliszewski, p. 17

3. ^ The Romanovs: Autocrats of All the Russias: W. Bruce Lincoln, p. 367
4. ^ Pavlovsk: Suzanne Massie, p. 12
5. ^ Catherine the Great,: Henri Troyat, p. 268
6. ^ Madame Vigee Le Brun: Memoirs, p. 128
7. ^ Paul the First: Kazimierz Waliszewski, p. 17
8. ^ Paul the First: Kazimierz Waliszewski, p. 17
9. ^ Paul the First: Kazimierz Waliszewski, p. 17
10. ^ Pavlovsk: Suzanne Massie, p. 36
11. ^ Tsar Paul and the Question of Madness: Hugh Ragsdale, p. 19
12. ^ Paul the First: Kazimierz Waliszewski, p. 18
13. ^ Pavlovsk: Suzanne Massie, p. 36
14. ^ Madame Vigee Le Brun: Memoirs, p. 124

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Preceded by Sophie of Anhalt-Zerbst	Royal Consorts of Russia 1796 – 1801	Succeeded by Louise of Baden
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