IV
Pugachev
1773—
1774

God, what a sad country our Russia is!
—Alexander Pushkin
on reading Gogol's Dead Souls
I. The Yaik

In the first three risings, as we have seen, Cossacks of the Don and Volga played a critical role. After Bulavin, however, the seedbeds of revolt shifted farther east, following the retreat of the frontier. Thus, while Pugachev was himself a Don Cossack, it was the Yaik Host which formed the spearhead of his insurrection. Unyielding frontiersmen, the Yaik Cossacks were descended largely from Don and Volga Cossacks who had fled into the Urals to escape Muscovite expansion. Some, however, traced their ancestry to the first Cossacks who appeared in the region after Ivan the Terrible’s conquest of the Volga in the mid-sixteenth century. They insisted that Tsar Michael, in return for guarding the frontier, had promised their forebears full “possession of the Yaik River with its tributaries and all its adjacent land from its source to its mouth [so they might] gather there to live as free men.” Whatever the validity of this claim, the Yaik Cossacks did in fact receive a small subsidy from the government as a reward for border service against the Tatars, Kalmyks, and Kirghiz. Their main livelihood, however, was fishing, supplemented by cattle herding and salt production, which had replaced the marauding operations of an earlier age. The Yaik, they said, referring to its plentiful supply of fish, was “the golden Don with a silver lining.”

By the early part of the eighteenth century, however, not even the remote Yaik was safe from government intervention. Little by little the Urals were being settled by Russian colonists, industry was expanding under government tutelage, and the new frontier, like the old, was vanishing. The revolt of Pugachev represented a last-ditch stand against this Muscovite expansionism, a final battle between frontier and heartland, after which there was no more steppe land to conquer save in the distant stretches of Siberia and central Asia.

Peter the Great, near the end of his reign, took the first steps to incorporate the Yaik Cossacks into the expanding state system. In 1721 the Yaik Host, together with its parent body on the Don, was placed under the jurisdiction of the War College in St. Petersburg. The Cossacks were so outraged that they burned down their capital, Yaitski Gorodok (Yaitsk for short), and prepared to flee to the Kuban or to the Kirghiz steppes in central Asia. But Peter sent an army to stop them, and adding insult to injury, appointed his own ataman to rule over the Host, a practice continued by his successors. Peter, ever hungry for new recruits, sought ultimately to absorb the Cossacks into the regular military service; and though he himself died in 1725, his object was partly fulfilled, toward the middle of the century, when a chain of forts and outposts was built along the Yaik and the governor of Orenburg (founded in 1735) was given full authority over the Cossacks in the area.

The Cossacks themselves were torn by dissension. As on the Don, two parties took shape: the more prosperous loyalists, headed by the elders and the government-appointed ataman, and the dissident rank and file, numbering between 3000 and 4000 and filled with the spirit of rebellion. As in Bulavin’s revolt, disputes broke out over salt extraction and over attempts by the authorities to recover runaway serfs. But the main source of friction was the right to fish in the Yaik, over which the government had established a monopoly, compelling the Cossacks to lease concessions for a large annual payment. During the 1760s, shortly after the accession of Catherine the Great, a scandal erupted when a group of dissidents accused the ataman, in league with the elders, of pocketing part of the payment. He denied the charges and ordered his accusers beaten with whips. A government commission sent to investigate the affair found that the ataman had indeed embezzled some 2000 rubles intended for the treasury in St. Petersburg. Yet no punishment was forthcoming. This infuriated the dissident party, who took matters into their own hands. Disturbances broke out, and troops had to be sent from Orenburg to restore order. But tensions continued to mount, reaching a climax on the eve of Pugachev’s appearance.

Meanwhile, a new crisis arose over the question of military service. Hitherto the Yaik Cossacks, though under the general jurisdiction of St. Petersburg and Orenburg, enjoyed considerable autonomy, serving on a voluntary basis in their own detachments with their own elected officers. In 1765, however, new regulations came down from the War College, headed by Zakhar Chernyshev, who more than anyone else was responsible for the explosion that followed. From now on service was made mandatory.
for all able-bodied Cossacks, and the practice of electing officers was abolished. The rank and file indignantly refused to submit to this new violation of their traditional liberties, but Chernyshev was adamant and troops sent from Orenburg began taking conscripts by force.

With the outbreak of war with Turkey in 1768, matters became still worse. The authorities began to recruit Yaik Cossacks into a regular unit of the Russian army, which from the standpoint of the Cossacks meant being reduced to ordinary serfs. As regular recruits, they would be outfitted in Western-style uniforms, shorn of their beards, and subjected to rigid discipline by Muscovite and foreign-born officers. "From the very beginning of our existence there have never been such regulations as are now being introduced," the Cossacks protested. They particularly objected to the loss of their beards, which as Old Believers they prized "almost equal to their lives." A series of delegations made the long journey to St. Petersburg with petitions for redress, only to be evicted without ceremony on Chernyshev's orders. In the end, however, Catherine relented. The war with the Turks was not going well, and she needed loyal soldiers, not potential mutineers, for her army. Anxious to placate the Cossacks, she disbanded the regular detachment and allowed them to return to their old system of service. Moreover, in December 1770 she ordered a new commission to look into their grievances on the Yaik.

The commission, headed by Major General von Traubenberg of the Orenburg garrison, did not arrive until the end of the following year and, when it finally came, showed little sympathy for the complaints of the rank and file. Indeed, it began its work by arresting seven of the dissidents and having them shaved and whipped in the public square as a lesson to their sympathizers. A more provocative act would be hard to imagine, and the enraged Cossacks declared they would retaliate by "shaking up Moscow." As a first step they ambushed a government convoy and liberated their shorn and beaten comrades, who were being taken as recruits to Orenburg. Then, on January 13, 1772, a band of Yaik dissidents fell upon Traubenberg's commission, slaughtered the general and most of his subordinates, and sacked the houses of their own elders. When word of the outbreak reached St. Petersburg, Catherine ordered a regiment of infantry from Mos- cow under Major General Fyodor Freiman to suppress it and punish the ringleaders. Freiman reached Orenburg in May 1772 and, reinforced by a detachment of service Cossacks, proceeded toward Yaik. On June 3 he was intercepted by a force of Yaik rebels who set fire to the grassy steppe in an effort to stop him, but smashing his way through the flames, Freiman pressed on by forced march to Yaik, which he seized with few casualties. Severe repressions followed. Dozens of Cossacks had their nostrils slit, scores were beaten with the knout, and more than a hundred were exiled with their families to Siberia. Moreover, the commander of the Yaik garrison, Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Smirnov, replaced the regular ataman of the Host, which was saddled with a heavy fine. The mutiny was crushed. But discontent smoldered, and barring a cessation of government encroachments, a new rebellion seemed inevitable.

2. The "Third Emperor"

When Russians are unhappy, as Kluchevsky observed, the way is opened for a pretender. At about this time, rumors arose among the Cossacks of the reappearance of Peter III, who had been murdered in 1762 by a group of Catherine's favorites. Peter's violent death at the hands of the aristocracy conjured up the traditional myth of the good tsar martyred for the people, and murmurs of his resurrection and imminent return gained widespread acceptance.

In many respects, Peter was an unlikely candidate for the role of a "people's tsar." A German by birth and culture, he harbored an ill-concealed aversion for the Orthodox church and Russian traditions. His idol was Frederick the Great, and for Prussian institutions, especially the Prussian army, his admiration was boundless. Yet there was ample reason why, at least in retrospect, he should have emerged as a popular ruler. During his brief reign he had reduced the onerous salt tax, abolished the secret police, and converted ecclesiastical serfs into state peasants. He had also forbidden merchants to buy serfs for factory labor, a sop to the nobility which nevertheless endeared him to the peasantry. More
than that, he had permitted Old Believers who had fled abroad to return to Russia and settle in the southeast, particularly along the Irgiz River in Saratov province, a statute, we shall see, of which Pugachev was to make use. The schismatics, in addition, were given freedom to worship as they pleased, which together with the other reforms convinced many citizens that Peter had "a heart inclined to goodness."

His most celebrated act, however, was to emancipate the gentry from compulsory service. By the manifesto of February 18, 1762, noblemen were permitted to retire to their estates, to travel freely abroad, and even to enter the service of a foreign government. It was a revolutionary step which aroused immediate hopes among the peasants that their own emancipation was in the offing. The conversion a few weeks later of monastic serfs into state peasants seemed a prelude to this general emancipation. But it failed to materialize. Instead, Peter was deposed and assassinated by a court conspiracy, and the peasants concluded that the nobility had murdered him in order to keep them in chains.

So it was that Peter III, whatever his defects as a ruler, came to be regarded as a martyr in the people's cause. His short-lived reign, his decrees favoring peasants and schismatics, his sudden and mysterious disappearance all contributed to his reputation as a "just tsar" betrayed by the wicked aristocracy. Next to his wife, Catherine, he seemed, despite his own German birth and upbringing, the very model of an Orthodox sovereign. Catherine was an uncompromising Westerner, a self-proclaimed daughter of the Enlightenment, whose foreign ways, like those of Peter the Great, aroused widespread resentment. As a woman and a usurper, with neither Russian blood nor legal claim to the throne, she could hardly inspire the customary reverence among the people for their anointed father and protector. On the contrary, she incurred their profound hostility and suspicion. One of her first measures was to return the ecclesiastical serfs to their former masters, an act which set off such violent disturbances, with tens of thousands of participants, that she was forced to reverse herself and restore them to the state peasantry. In 1767, when she summoned the Legislative Commission to prepare a new code of laws, rumors of a general emancipation quickly revived, only to be denounced in a notorious decree which not only upheld the existing system but also prohibited serfs from petitioning the crown against their masters on punishment of the knout and forced labor for life in Siberia. The following year the Legislative Commission was dissolved, and hopes of reform turned to disappointment. Far from being liberated, the peasants were subjected to tighter restrictions, heavier exactions, and closer supervision by their lords. At the same time, the most hateful policies of Peter the Great—war, expansion, and bureaucratic repression—were revived, with their attendant burdens of increased taxation and recruitment.

Small wonder that ordinary Russians, as their grievances accumulated, looked back to Peter III with increasing nostalgic affection. Small wonder, too, that during Catherine's reign more than twenty pretenders appeared to haunt the empress and her supporters. In the decade preceding the Pugachev rebellion no less than ten impostors came forward. In fact, rumors that Peter III was still alive began to circulate almost immediately after his death. He had liberated the serfs, it was said, but the tsarina had suppressed the decree and tried to murder him; like the Tsarevich Dmitri, however, he had escaped his assassins and a soldier who resembled him had been buried in his place.

Rumors of this sort found especially rich soil along the southern frontier where dissident elements were heavily concentrated—where peasants, Cossacks, and schismatics, yearning for their old way of life, had long hoped that a good tsar would someday appear and by the stroke of his pen grant them freedom, happiness, and prosperity. Old Believers, with their apocalyptic cast of mind, were particularly prone to believe in the coming of a messiah who would deliver them from their oppressors, and they did much to encourage the rumor that Peter III, who had shown them leniency, was about to reclaim the throne. As early as 1762, the year of Peter's death, word spread among the Yaik Cossacks that the tsar was hiding among them, and in the village of Chernkovka, near Ufa, a focal point of Pugachev's revolt a decade later, the local priest and sexton recited prayers for his miraculous resurrection. Before long, rumors swept through the Ukraine that the "third emperor [i.e., Peter III] did not die" but was "traveling to Kiev to inspect Little Russia."

The first pretenders on record, a Ukrainian peasant and an Armenian trader, made their appearance in 1764 but only very
briefly, the former being arrested and the latter fleeing to an Old
Believer colony across the Polish border where Pugachev him-
self was to take refuge. Like their numerous successors, both men
were uprooted wanderers who tramped from village to village
in the outlying areas of the empire, armed with a sackful of bogus
manifestoes. The typical impostor was a runaway serf, deserter,
Cossack, or free homesteader from the so-called odnomysvy, who
like the Cossacks, were fighting a losing battle to retain their
former privileges. In 1765 a runaway soldier from this homesteader
class (about which more will be said later) appeared in Voronezh
province and, claiming to be an emissary of Peter III, distributed
a decree which suspended taxes and recruitment for a dozen
years. The response was electric and peasants from the surround-
ing area flocked to greet him. Emboldened by his success, he
began to claim that he himself was the emperor, but he was
seized by the authorities, publicly knotted in each village where
he had spread his false tidings, branded with the words “De-
serter and Impostor,” and banished for life to the Nerchinsk
mines of Siberia. Four years later another runaway soldier of
homesteader origin posed as the slain tsar, but he too was quickly
arrested and deported to Nerchinsk, where he continued to call
himself Peter III, attracting a considerable following among the
exiles.8

During the late 1760s and early 1770s the borderlands spawned
a whole series of impostors—Cossacks, homesteaders, soldiers,
peasants—who suspended taxes and recruitment, converted serfs
into state peasants, promised to restore the old ritual, and sparked
off disturbances among the poor. Between 1762 and 1772, ac-
cording to one estimate, there were forty serious outbreaks in
the rural districts of the south, many of them triggered by pre-
tenders or false manifestoes.9 As in Razin’s day, village priests
played an important part by reading the manifestoes to their
parishioners or by recognizing the pretenders and performing the
traditional rites in their honor. One by one, however, the impostors
were hunted down, arrested, and banished to forced labor in Si-
beria. A bizarre case occurred in far-off Montenegro, where a
wandering stranger was rumored to be the Russian emperor
seeking refuge from his would-be murderers. It was said that
he wept on hearing the name of the Grand Duke Paul and on

seeing a portrait of Peter III; and though he seemed to know no
Russian, many accepted him as the deposed tsar who was honor-
ing Montenegro with his presence, a thought which thrilled the
popular imagination and fed hopes of liberation from the Turkish
yoke. In 1773, however, the stranger was murdered and his move-
ment collapsed.10

Inside Russia itself, the pretender who attracted the widest
attention before Pugachev was a runaway serf named Fedor Bogo-
omlov, a typical drifter who (like “Tsarevich Petrushka” in
Bolotnikov’s time) had worked as a Volga boatman, lived among
the Kalmyk tribesmen, and finally joined the Volga Cossacks, who
in 1772 recognized him as Peter III when he showed them the
“tsar’s signs” (scars in the shape of a cross) on his body. Actually
he bore not the slightest resemblance to the late emperor, but
“the passing of many years had changed him,” his followers ex-
plained.11 Supported by Cossacks, boatmen, parish clergy, and
urban poor, Bogomolov started a rebellion in Tsarsityn which
spread through sections of the lower Volga valley, but when the
tide turned against him he was betrayed by his fellow Cossacks
and handed over to the authorities. Branded, whipped, his nostrils
slit, Bogomolov died on route to Siberia, where he was to have
served a life sentence at hard labor.

In November 1772, while the memory of Bogomolov was still
fresh, Emelian Ivanovich Pugachev arrived on the Volga and iden-
tified himself as Peter III. The last of the great Cossack rebels,
he was the first to style himself tsar. Thirty years old, he was of
medium height, broad-shouldered and narrow-waisted, his face
slightly pockmarked and with a short dark beard already flecked
with gray. A disgruntled Cossack with Old Believer sympathies,
a deserter from military service, a fugitive from justice, a wan-
derer on the outskirts of society, he fit the pattern set by earlier
pretenders of Catherine’s reign. By an odd coincidence he came
from the same Don settlement (Zimoveiskaya Stanitsa) as Stenka
Razin. At the age of seventeen, already married to a Cossack girl
from Euzulov, he was called to the army and received his bap-
tism of fire in the Seven Years’ War against Prussia. He became
the orderly of Colonel Ilya Denisov (who was to help crush
his rising fifteen years later) but was “mercilessly whipped” for
allowing the colonel’s horse to get away during an enemy raid.12
Trivial though it may seem, this is just the sort of incident which rankles and, with the accumulation of similar grudges, may set a man on the path of rebellion.

In January 1762, with the accession of Peter III, Russia withdrew from the war, and Pugachev was able to return home. In 1764, however, he was called up again and sent to recover fugitive Old Believers across the Polish border, where he himself was to seek refuge when hunted by the authorities. In 1768 he was mobilized a third time with the outbreak of war against Turkey. Now a noncommissioned officer, he took part in the siege of Bender under General P. I. Panin, another future opponent in his revolt. After Bender, he fell ill with pains in his chest and legs and was sent home to recuperate. Though his illness persisted, his application for early retirement was refused, and he tried in vain to flee to the Terek. After two arrests and two escapes, he made his way across the Polish border to the Old Believer colony at Vetka, which his unit had raided in 1764.

Founded in the late seventeenth century, Vetka had since been conducting a lively trade with the Ukraine and White Russia and supplying numerous communities on the Don and the Volga with Old Believer icons and crosses. From the time of Peter the Great, however, it had been raided repeatedly by Russian troops, who crossed the border in violation of Polish sovereignty. During the attack of 1764 the colony was largely destroyed, but many refugees were allowed to return to Russia under an amnesty of Peter III, of which Pugachev himself now took advantage. From Vetka he made his way to a border post in White Russia where returning schismatics were processed and, claiming to be an Old Believer, applied for resettlement in the Irgiz valley. By now the idea of posing as Peter III had already been planted in his brain. Characteristically, it was a runaway soldier at the internment center who remarked—probably with mischievous intent—that Pugachev resembled the late emperor; and a merchant suggested that he go to the Yaik and deliver the Cossacks from their tormentors. Actually, Pugachev looked no more like Peter III than did his predecessor Bogomolov. Neither eyewitness descriptions nor contemporary portraits of the dark and solidly built Cossack bear any similarity to the tall, fair, and round-shouldered emperor, who had in any case been born fourteen years earlier than Pugachev. Nevertheless, by the time he received his passport, the idea of styling himself tsar had taken firm root. And no one, least of all Pugachev himself, could have foreseen the consequences.

3. The Urals

When he reached the Irgiz, Pugachev stopped at an Old Believer monastery that served as a way station for dissidents fleeing to the Yaik. Its abbot, a former Moscow merchant named Filaret, maintained close contact with a network of fellow schismatics around the country, who formed a sort of underground railway for fugitive religious nonconformists. To Filaret, Pugachev revealed his plan to pose as Peter III and lead the Yaik Cossacks to some happier land—perhaps Turkey, perhaps the Kuban—farther south. This, of course, was the route which Nekrasov had taken in 1708 and which the Yaik Cossacks had themselves been considering since the 1720s, after their subordination to the War College by Peter the Great. For the Cossack rank and file, as for other discontented elements of Russian society, relocation was a powerful urge, nourished by their messianic expectations and by their belief in a Promised Land to the south, nearer the Holy Land where Christ was born, a New Jerusalem where no authority would tamper with their ritual or inhibit their freedom. Both these myths—of a deliverer and of a Promised Land in the south—were embodied in Pugachev’s plan, and Filaret proved a sympathetic listener. He told Pugachev about Bogomolov’s rising and about the recent disturbances on the Yaik. Though he did not think Pugachev resembled the tsar, the Yaik Cossacks were profoundly unhappy and ready for a deliverer to guide them to the “land of the Golden Mosque.” For Pugachev himself the urge to resettle in a happier place was very strong, a fact to which his long odyssey bears testimony. Encouraged by Filaret, he assumed the guise of a fish merchant and began to put his plan into practice.

He arrived on the Yaik in November 1772. An experienced soldier, a man of physical strength, restless energy, and compelling
character, he was well endowed with the qualities of a leader. And he came at a favorable moment, barely a month after the sentences against the murderers of Traubenberg had been announced: sixty-two condemned to death and hundreds to be beaten with whips, shorn of their beards, and sent into the army. If ever a deliverer was needed it was now, and Pugachev began to announce himself as the tsar. But before his movement could get off the ground one of his confidants betrayed him and he was taken to prison in Kazan. His confinement was brief. Claiming to be an Old Believer persecuted for “cross and beard,” he won over a guard who helped him to escape. He returned at once to the Yaik, where he found the Cossacks more agitated than ever. The sentences against the mutineers, though much reduced by the government, had been carried out, arousing a strong desire for revenge.

Somehow Pugachev established contact with a group of dissidents who were hiding out to avoid punishment. Appearing before them, he assumed the role of Peter III, who had come to redress their grievances. Nor was it hard to win their support; imitating Bogomolov, he exhibited marks on his body which he said were the tsar’s. He then delivered an extraordinary speech into which all the rumors and legends about the late emperor were woven—that the gentry had tried to remove him because of his sympathy for the people, that he had escaped his assassins and gone into hiding, that he had wandered a dozen years but had now returned to claim the throne, liberate the poor, and punish their oppressors.

I was in Kiev, in Poland, in Egypt, in Jerusalem, and on the Terek River. From there I went to the Don and then came to you. And I hear that you have been wronged and that all the common folk have been wronged. There is great reason why I am not loved by the gentry: many of them, young men and others of middling years . . . though fit to serve and given posts, went off into retirement and lived at their will off the peasants in their villages and quite ruined them, poor folk, and they alone almost ruled for themselves the whole empire. So I began to compel them to service and wanted to take away from them their villages, so that they serve only for wages. And the officials who judge suits unjustly and oppress the people I punished and wished to hand over to the block. And so, for this they began to dig a ditch for me. And when I went to take a row on the Neva River they arrested me there and they made up a false tale about me and they forced me to wander over the face of the earth.

He had returned, however, for he “wanted to see how the common people were faring and what oppressions they have suffered from the officials.” Now he would join his son Paul (reputed to be on bad terms with Catherine) and go to St. Petersburg and send Catherine to a nunnery or back to her own country. But “if she meets me with bad words, I know already what to do then.”

The speech was precisely what the Cossacks wanted to hear. It played upon their nativist hostility toward the German empress, their hatred of Muscovite landlords and bureaucrats, their yearning for justice and retribution, and their sympathy for the peasants, who, in contrast to the gentry with their arrogance and foreign ways, were of their own kind and faith. Moreover, it appealed directly to their own vanity and self-interest. “If God helps me to gain the throne,” said Pugachev, “then Yaitsk will be the capital instead of Moscow or Petersburg, and the Yaik Cossacks will enjoy superiority over everyone else.” In addition, to quote a contemporary, Pugachev “was artful enough to take advantage of their religious prejudices, which he openly professed to espouse and protect.” That he was in fact an Old Believer seems doubtful. Indeed he himself later denied it, though the British ambassador calls him a “schismatic Cossack” and Pushkin says the same in his history of the rising.

He had, it is true, professed the old ritual in Vetka and on the Irgiz and in Kazan prison, but this was doubtless for reasons of expediency. And if now, before the Yaik Cossacks, he promised to uphold the “cross and beard” and to replace the four-pointed cross of the Nikonians with the eight-pointed cross of the dissenters, he would later promise the Moslems to respect their faith and, when passing through predominantly Orthodox territory, would refrain from promoting schismatic demands.

For the moment, however, he firmly defended the old ritual, and the Cossacks gave him an enthusiastic reception. Whether they truly believed he was the “third emperor,” however, is open to dispute. That he bore no resemblance to Peter has already been
indicated, but the Cossacks, already on the verge of open insurrection, needed little convincing to win them over. His closest supporters, men like Ivan Zarubin, Maksim Shigaev, and Timofei Miasnikov, appear to have been knowing accomplices rather than dupes. General Bibikov, Pugachev’s most formidable opponent, went so far as to call him their “puppet,” while Pugachev himself later testified—possibly to minimize his own guilt—that his confederates “did as they pleased.” Veterans of the mutiny against Traubenberg, they were anxious to resume their rebellion and saw the advantages of a pretender to attract a larger following. As Miasnikov testified, “we accepted him as the deceased sovereign, Peter Fyodorovich, so that he would restore our customs and destroy all the boyars, who think they are so clever in everything. We hoped that our undertaking would be supported and our power multiplied by the common folk, who also are oppressed and headed for ruin.” The government, he added, was trying “to introduce a new kind of military state that we have never agreed to accept. . . . It does not matter to us whether he is the sovereign or not. Out of mud we can make a prince. Even if he does not seize the Muscovite throne, we shall make the Yaik our own kingdom.”

The mutineers began spreading the news that Peter III had come to restore their former independence, and hundreds of Cossacks flocked to his banner. On September 17, 1773, to attract further adherents, Pugachev issued his first manifesto to the Yaik Host. Since he himself was illiterate, it was drafted by an accomplice, Ivan Pochitaïin, and appealed to immediate Cossack interests: “I, the sovereign, Peter Fyodorovich, pardon you of all your sins and grant you the river from its source to its mouth, the earth and the grass, and a subsidy of money, lead, powder, and grain. All this grant I, the great sovereign and emperor Peter Fyodorovich.” The same day Pugachev marched on the Cossack capital of Yaitsk. The rebellion had begun. Yaitsk, however, with its large garrison and strong fortifications, proved too difficult a target, so he bypassed the town and, advancing along the Yaik River in the direction of Orenburg, seized a series of isolated outposts with their artillery and munitions. At each stockade his messengers preceded him, waving their hats and shouting to the defenders that “all should rejoice because [the tsar] has risen and

is now coming here.” To those who were ready to join him Pugachev promised immediate deliverance. “I shall grant you eternal freedom, the rivers and seas, and all sorts of benefits and subsidies, food, powder, and lead, rank and honor, and liberty for centuries to come,” reads one of his early proclamations. Those who would resist, on the other hand, were threatened with torture and execution, which was usually enough to dispel any doubts about his true identity. On September 21 the town of Ilets, with a garrison of 300 service Cossacks, surrendered without a fight. With church bells clanging, the residents came out to greet the “emperor,” while parish priests with icons and crosses kissed his hand and offered the traditional welcome of bread and salt.

One by one forts and settlements took the oath to the impostor, and by early October he could boast more than 2000 followers and a large arsenal of cannon and rifles. Resistance was sporadic. At Fort Il'yinsk, when the rebels demanded entry in the name of the tsar, the gatekeeper replied: “We have in Russia the Sovereign Empress Catherine Alekseevna and her heir the Grand Prince Paul Petrovich. Aside from them we have no other sovereign.” Taking the fort by storm, Pugachev rounded up the officers and asked why they had opposed their sovereign. “You are not our sovereign,” they replied, “and we do not recognize you as such. You are a bandit and an impostor”—whereupon they were hanged on the spot.

The rebels met with stiffer opposition at Fort Tatischev, which guarded the crossroads to Orenburg and Yaitsk. Perched on a hill high above the Yaik, it was the main stronghold on the southeastern defense perimeter, with large stores of supplies and equipment and a well-armed garrison of a thousand soldiers under the command of Colonel Fyodor Elagin. A few days before Pugachev’s arrival the garrison was reinforced by 400 soldiers under Brigadier Christian von Bülow. Sent from Orenburg to intercept the impostor, Bülow learned that Pugachev had already collected some 3000 followers and a sizable quantity of guns, so he retired to Tatischev to join forces with Elagin. As usual, Pugachev’s messengers preceded their leader with warnings not to resist him. But while some of the defenders defected, the fort had to be taken by storm. Using a familiar tactic, the rebels set stacks of hay
able to breach the walls while their opponents were occupied with extinguishing the flames. The garrison surrendered, Elgin and Bülüow were put to death, and the jubilant Cossacks celebrated their triumph in a three-day debauch.

The fall of Tatischchev made a great impression on the surrounding population. It was the first major victory for the insurgents and, as in past uprisings, drew a swarm of fresh adherents to their camp. In addition, it opened the way to Orenburg, the main administrative center of the region. But why bother about Orenburg? Why not make directly for the heartland, arouse the peasantry, and catch the government off balance? A similar choice had confronted both Razin and Bulavin in the early stages of their risings, and both had chosen the peripheries, where the government was weakly entrenched and where they, by contrast, enjoyed the support of the people and an intimate knowledge of the terrain. To Pugachev not only did the same considerations apply with equal weight, but the driving force of his rebellion was the Yaik Host, for whom Orenburg, with its decrees and tax collectors, its recruiting parties and punitive expeditions, was the direct source of their misery and the chief object of their hatred. Now they would settle accounts.

Orenburg girded itself for the attack. Fortifications were strengthened, bridges were destroyed, and the people were mobilized and armed. Yet the governor, General Ivan Reinsdorp, remained apprehensive, for his garrison had fewer than 3000 men, only a fraction of whom were regulars, the rest being an assortment of Cossacks, Tatars, Kalmyks, and new recruits, many of them overage and poorly equipped. As for his officers, remarked a contemporary, “it is best to remain silent.” Pugachev’s agents had already penetrated the town, sowing dissension with the news of “Peter Fyodorovich’s” approach. To scotch the rumors Reinsdorp denounced Pugachev as an “impostor, scoundrel, and monster,” which merely added to the fear and confusion.

The siege began on October 5. At first the populace was plunged in despair. “All the inhabitants thought about death,” noted a local priest in his diary, “and there was great wailing and disconsolate sobbing.” But the panic faded as quickly as it came, and the residents settled down to endure the siege, which lasted nearly six months. Meanwhile, as winter set in, a particu-

larly severe one even by Russian standards, the rebels blockaded the city in an effort to starve the population into submission. Cannon deployed around the walls subjected the defenders to a continuous bombardment, which was answered in kind from within. While the siege dragged on, Pugachev established headquarters in the village of Berda, about three or four miles north of Orenburg. There he reigned as Peter II, at the head of a rebel “government,” while keeping Reinsdorp beleaguered all winter. At the same time, like Razin at Simbirsk and Bulavin at Cherkesk, he sent out riders in every direction to scatter the sparks of sedition. Hundreds of leaflets were issued, in Arabic, Tatar, and Turkic as well as Russian, promising freedom to those who cooperated and death to those who resisted. For the rural and urban poor it was not a difficult choice, and each week hundreds of new recruits flocked to Berda to serve the “third emperor.”

Throughout the southern Urals the air was filled with messianic expectations. Each day the conviction grew that “Peter Fyodorovich is alive,” risen like Christ from the dead to save the humble and punish their oppressors. “Our time has come,” said the common folk. “Now we shall get to the top, and we have nothing to fear.” Pugachev bands roved the countryside raiding gentry estates and announcing that the tsar had sent them “to give the peasants freedom.” Villagers were ordered to cease toiling for their masters or be impaled. “Why do you work for the landlords when the sovereign, Peter Fyodorovich, has given you liberty?” demanded the Cossacks. A reward of 100 rubles was offered for the death of a landowner and the destruction of his home; and for ten gentry victims—1000 rubles and the rank of general. Village priests were upbraided by the Cossacks for conducting services with the three-fingered sign of the cross, and were threatened with execution if they did not follow the old rites.

“I know that the common people will greet me with joy once they hear of my coming,” said Pugachev. And his prophecy was correct. In a few weeks he had raised a large if motley army: Cossacks and serfs, schismatics and priests, miners and foundry workers, and a variety of tribesmen—Bashkirs, Tatars, Kalmyks, Kazakhs—streamed to his standard. To these must be added a host of vagrants of every description—army deserters, escaped
Russian Rebels

convicts, unfrocked monks, highwaymen, political exiles, and even a few ruined or disgruntled noblemen, as well as officers of the Polish Confederation who joined in November and December when the revolt spilled over into their place of banishment in western Siberia. “Great and small, poor and rich—all will be esteemed as one class by the sovereign and merciful tsar,” proclaimed one of Pugachev’s early manifestoes. No wonder, given such disparate origins, the rebels were from the outset plagued by dissension. But they were united in their opposition to the existing order, with its infringement of traditional liberties, and their lives being wretched or their ambitions keen, they were eager to follow a leader who promised salvation.

During the early stages of the rising, Pugachev’s most numerous and effective supporters, apart from the Yaik Cossacks, were the Bashkirs and the factory peasants of the Urals region. The semi-nomadic Bashkirs, who differed markedly from the settled agricultural peoples of the Volga valley, gained their livelihood chiefly by hunting, herding, trapping, and beekeeping. Of Magyar stock, Turkic language, and Moslem religion, they fell increasingly under Russian domination after the fall of Kazan and Astrakhan to Ivan the Terrible in the 1550s. The founding of Ufa in 1586 heralded a wave of Russian colonization in Bashkoria, and over the next two centuries the pace of expansion quickened as settlers streamed in from the west, noblemen carved out estates, garrisons sprouted up, and officials imposed tribute, monopolized the salt trade, recruited native horsemen, and demanded provisions for their new stockades and forts.

At the same time, every device of persuasion or force was used to convert the tribesmen to Christianity. Missionaries were dispatched, tax concessions granted, mosques destroyed, and whole villages baptized at gunpoint. As if these outrages were not enough, from the time of Peter the Great, Russian industry began moving into the area on a large scale, and the tribesmen, beyond their normal tribute of furs and honey, were compelled to supply wood for factory furnaces and hay for factory horses. Step by step, with the seizure of grazing lands and game preserves, with the leveling of forests used for trapping and beekeeping, the Bashkirs were deprived of their traditional means of subsistence, and no relief was in sight. Colonization and industrialization con-

continued on their relentless course. Indeed, with the founding of Orenburg in 1735, new enterprises sprang up at an unprecedented rate, causing a rapid change in the social and economic structure of the region.

The impact of these developments on a nomadic people is not hard to imagine. Nor, indeed, is the ferocity with which the intruders were resisted. From the 1640s to the 1770s accumulating social, religious, and national grievances touched off half a dozen major risings, each more furious than its predecessor, till in Pugachev’s time the whole of Bashkoria raged out of control in a last-ditch struggle for independence. The first serious outbreak of the eighteenth century coincided, as we have seen, with the revolt of Bulavin under Peter the Great and continued for the better part of a decade. For the Bashkirs, however, there was no relief. In fact their situation continued to deteriorate at such a rate that the founder of Orenburg, Ivan Kirillov, warned of a new explosion if a “clever rogue like Senka Razin” should appear to lead them.

No new Razin was destined to appear for another generation, but the Bashkirs were unable to wait. In 1735 they rose against Kirillov himself to prevent the construction of Orenburg as a new center of Russian colonization. The Russians, said the insurgents, “want to own all the land,” and if Orenburg is built “there will be no more freedom.” After a savage six-year struggle a tsarist army subdued the Bashkirs, with orders “to crush them to death and raze their dwellings.” Nearly 30,000 tribemen were tortured and executed or died in prison or were given into bondage. Thousands were forced to convert, and the tribal aristocracy was decimated. Some 400 settlements were burned and countless animals, along with goods and money, were seized as booty. But the Bashkirs refused to capitulate. In 1755 they rose again under the mullah Batyrsha Ali in a renewed effort to expel the intruders. Orenburg was sacked, mines and foundries were destroyed, and hundreds of settlers were massacred. In the end, however, arrows and spears were no match for the cannon and rifles of the enemy. The rising was crushed in blood, followed by burning and looting in which thousands of natives were killed and hundreds of villages destroyed.

Faced with vastly superior arms, the Bashkirs were doomed to
defeat so long as they fought unaided. Their only hope lay in
an alliance with other discontented groups, Russians of course
included. Thus when rumors began to reach them that Peter III
was alive and was summoning all the oppressed into one united
army, many of the tribesmen, however skeptical of his real iden-
tity, were eager to respond. For with the return of the "male
sex" to the throne, they believed, their troubles would come to an
end. "Whether or not Pugachev is the tsar does not interest us," they
said. "Pugachev is against the officials, the generals, and the
boyars—that for us is enough."31 Pugachev, for his own part,
was anxious to have their support. In October 1773 manifestoes
reached the Bashkirs from the "sweet-tongued, merciful, soft-
hearted tsar," promising to restore their former way of life: "I
grant you hereafter the lands, the waters, the forests, the fisheries,
the dwellings, the meadows and seas, the grain, your own faith
and law, the crops, bodily nourishment, garments, subsidies of
lead, powder, and provisions—in a word, everything that you
have desired all your lives. Be again like the untamed animals of
the steppe."32 Yet his appeal, for all its magnanimity and elo-
quence, had a mixed reception. Among the Bashkirs, as among the
Cossacks, there were deep-seated divisions which the government
had long been exploiting in order to impose its control. Rather
than join a rebellion which might threaten their privileged posi-
tion, many of the tribal elders remained aloof or even, during a
later stage of the fighting, cooperated with the government against
the insurgents. The divisions, moreover, cut across class lines. For
most Bashkirs, whether needy or prosperous, cooperation with
the Russians was no easy matter. And they disliked not only the
landlords and officials but also the simple peasants who settled
on their lands, the ordinary workmen who labored in the
foun-
dries, the Yaik Cossacks who helped put down their rebel-
li-
ons—in short the very groups who constituted Pugachev's main
supporters. On the other hand, they shared with these groups
common grievances against the state, a common hatred of the
gentry, a common desire to recapture a golden past; and for some
this was enough to set aside, at least temporarily, their religious
and national differences.

The most prominent of Pugachev's early Bashkir adherents was
an elder named Kinzia Arslanov, who joined him in October with
a few hundred men. It was a modest beginning, but Kinzia, deter-
mined to win further adherents, sent to the villages agitators
armed with Pugachev's manifestoes and with bogus news that the
Tsarevich Paul was about to join his father with a large force of
Don Cossacks. Kinzia's efforts were so successful that Pugachev
made him a "colonel" in charge of a Bashkir regiment that took
part in the siege of Orenburg. By the end of November, Bashkirs
made up nearly half of Pugachev's entire army and had laid siege
to Ufa, the capital of Bashkirtia, assisted by Tatars, Mari, and
Russian peasants, so that the three principal towns of the southern
Urals—Yaritsk, Orenburg, and Ufa—were now in danger of
capture.

The discontents of the Bashkirs were equaled, or perhaps
exceeded, by those of the factory peasants, whose participation
in the Pugachevskaya obshchina added a distinctive new element, a sort
of incipient proletariat, to these primitive mass upheavals. The
industrialization of the Urals, already begun on a small scale in the
late seventeenth century, assumed major proportions under Peter
the Great and his successors. Rich beds of copper and iron as
well as an abundance of woodlands for fuel and of rivers for trans-
portation favored a rapid development of the area. Mines, furnaces,
and smelting works, founded by the state or by resourceful
merchants and gentry, such as the Demidovs, the Stroganovs,
the Tverdyshevs, and the Miasnikovs, sprang up in every corner,
reaching a high-water mark during the 1740s and 1750s, when the
number of enterprises more than doubled, so that a hundred
factories dotted the Urals by the time of Catherine's accession
in 1762.33

It is here that one must look for the prototype of the Russian
working class—not in the towns of European Russia, apart from
the state arsenals of Petersburg and Tula, but in the mines and
foundries of the Urals, where a factory life akin to that of the
next century was already beginning to emerge. This labor force,
as in agriculture, was founded on the institution of bondage. In
1721 Peter the Great permitted merchants with industrial estab-
ishments to purchase villages of serfs, who were bound to the
enterprises rather than to the owners. In addition, whole villages
of state peasants, largely from the middle Volga, were "ascribed"
to Urals factories as seasonal laborers. And as the need for labor
increased, paupers, vagabonds, convicts, dissenters, tribesmen, and other combustible elements were recruited for the metal works and mines. Finally, by a decree of 1736 all free workingmen, together with their families, were converted into bondsmen and tied forever to the factories, completing the legalization of forced labor.

The period of rapid industrialization in the mid-eighteenth century saw a sharp rise in the number of ascribed workers, who made up the bulk of the Urals labor force. From 100,000 in the 1740s the figure more than doubled by the time of Pugachev’s outbreak. As unskilled peasants, the ascribed workers were saddled with the heavy tasks of mining ore, felling trees, and hauling wood and charcoal, at which they toiled under appalling conditions and for little reward. The climate was severe, the hours were long, the wages were meager and often in arrears, the factories were shoddily built with damp, earthen floors, leaky roofs, and poor lighting and ventilation. Crowded into squalid huts or dormitories, the workmen were ill-clothed, even worse fed, compelled to pay exorbitant prices at factory stores, and subjected to extortions, fines, and beatings by callous foremen and administrators. Worse still, they were sometimes ascribed to enterprises 300 or 400 miles from their native villages, requiring weeks of travel with no pay. 34

By Catherine’s reign the ascribed peasants had been reduced to “utter squalor and ruin,” to quote from one of their numerous petitions to the authorities. “Just look at the factory workers,” wrote an army officer to the empress, “especially the ascribed peasants, who have been sacrificed completely to the factory owners, and those predators think about nothing but their own gain and greedily devour all the property of the peasants.” 35 Government inspectors concurred and recommended drastic reforms, but none was forthcoming. Yet, for all their grievances, there was little solidarity or class feeling among the Urals workers. Like their Cossack and Bashkîr allies, they formed two distinct groups whose interests seldom coincided. There was a nucleus of more or less skilled workmen who lived permanently at the factories (in which they were employed the whole year round) and were considerably better off than the ordinary seasonal laborers. As artisans or foremen, not only did they receive higher wages and have less tedious duties, but they also received an allotment of free grain (akin to the zhalovanie of the Cossack hierarchy) and were allowed to engage in trade outside working hours. Although their lives were far from easy, they acquired a certain stake in their enterprises and, while eager for improvements, were not opposed to factory life as such. For the up-rooted peasants, by contrast, the routine and discipline of factory work was hard to accept after the seasonal cycle, the rhythm of hard and slack labor, and the freedom of the outdoors to which they were accustomed. It was a dismal existence, tantamount in their eyes to penal servitude, and they found adjusting to it difficult. Rather than better conditions, they wanted to rid themselves of the factories and return to their rural life, which, for all its hardships, seemed a lost paradise by comparison. They yearned to be restored to the state peasantry, which they considered their rightful status, but their petitions to the government were unavailing.

Small wonder that, in contrast to the skilled workers, they should have resorted to violence as an outlet for their grievances. During the 1750s and 1760s a wave of riots and disturbances swept the Urals region. At one Demidov factory in 1760, troops were called in and ordered the peasants to return to work. “We do not want to work at Demidov’s,” was the reply, “and we will not listen to any decrees. You can send ten decrees and as many soldiers as you like, but we will not go back to work as long as there is no decree from the senate with the personal signature of the empress.” 36 When such decrees were not forthcoming, the peasants began to manufacture their own, or to circulate bogus edicts brought in from outside. In 1762, following Peter III’s emancipation of the gentry, counterfeit manifestoes appeared liberating the ascribed workers from the factories and restoring them to the state peasantry. When Peter prohibited the further acquisition of serfs by factory owners, these manifestoes gained wide credence and workers began returning to their villages. “If we are hunted down and forcibly sent back to the factories,” they warned, “there will be killing on both sides.” 37

A special trouble spot in those years was the Avziano-Petrovsk iron works, one of the largest enterprises in the Urals and a center of worker discontent since its construction in the early
1750s. For the next two decades it was the scene of repeated violent outbursts, one of which coincided with the Bashkir revolt of 1755 and brought severe government reprisals. Not surprisingly, then, it was to the Avziano-Petrovsk works that Pugachev sent an emissary, Khlopusha by name, in search of weapons and volunteers. Himself a former metal worker, Khlopusha had turned to brigandage, had been four times beaten with the knout, had twice escaped from Siberia, and was languishing in an Orenburg prison, with torn nostrils and branded forehead, when Governor Reinsdorp offered him freedom if he would go to Berda and denounce Pugachev as an impostor. Eager to escape his chains, Khlopusha accepted, but on arriving in Pugachev’s camp promptly defected to the rebels. Pugachev sent him on a new mission, to drum up support among the Urals workers, and this time he faithfully carried out his assignment. With a Cossack escort he arrived at Avziano-Petrovsk in October 1773 and, in the name of Peter III, granted the workers “personal liberty and freedom from all taxes.” The announcement was greeted with jubilation, and hundreds of workers joined him, bringing cannon, horses, and supplies. From Avziano-Petrovsk they rode through the surrounding area promising “to shut down all the factories.” At each enterprise the pattern was the same. Swearing an oath to the emperor, the ascribed peasants (but only a fraction of the skilled workmen) attacked the factory office, plundered the strongbox, burned official documents, and pillaged the homes of the administrators. News of the tsar’s return was received with wild excitement. Nor did the workers trouble themselves about Pugachev’s real identity so long as he told them what they wanted to hear. As one of them put it: “They are all tsars to us, whoever they are!” Pugachev, indeed, was more than a tsar. He was a Christ-like messiah heralding the dawn of a new age. With a millennial fervor the workers rejoiced that “our resplendent sun, hidden beneath the earth, now rises in the east, shedding rays of mercy over the whole universe and warming us lowly orphans and slaves.”

Khlopusha’s mission was a great success. In November 1773 he returned to Berda laden with cannon, rifles, powder, and money, and with 1000 recruits for the rebel army. For the duration of the winter Pugachev pressed his siege of Yaitsk, Ufa, and Orenburg, laid siege to half a dozen lesser administrative centers, and sought additional forces to guarantee the success of these operations. When volunteers did not suffice, he sent detachments into the countryside to gather recruits by force. By the end of the year his army numbered between 10,000 and 15,000, of whom there were some 1500 Cossacks, 5000 Bashkirs, and 1000 workers, the rest including serfs, Tatars, and Kalmyks, with a sprinkling of other tribesmen, religious dissenters, convicts, priests, and an occasional merchant or nobleman. It was a motley body, loosely organized, poorly armed, short of horses and supplies, fluctuating in numbers and quality, and except at the outset when the government was unprepared, not particularly effective. The Cossacks, it is true, formed a seasoned and comparatively well-armed nucleus that could deploy more than eighty cannon obtained from captured factories and forts. But the infantry was inexperienced and badly equipped. Rifles and pistols were in short supply, so that the ragtag troops had to rely on knives, cudgels, and sharpened stakes, and occasionally fought with nothing but rocks and bare fists. Discipline, moreover, was a constant problem, which Pugachev answered with severe measures. One rebel was hanged merely for boasting that he knew where “the emperor” really came from. To increase their efficiency Pugachev formed his men into regiments according, so far as possible, to national or social origins, placing each under the command of a trusted associate. The Yaik Cossacks, for example, comprised a regiment under Andrei Ovchinnikov, Pugachev’s ablest commander. Similarly the factory peasants were organized under Khlopusha, the Bashkirs under Kinzia Arslanov, and so on. Each regiment was in turn divided into companies which elected their own officers in the Cossack manner. But the regimental commanders, or “colonels,” were appointed by Pugachev himself, each having his own banner of red or gold silk embroidered with Old Believer crosses and with images of Christ or of St. Nicholas the Miracle Worker. Near every major target—Orenburg, Yaitsk, Ufa, or the newly beleaguered towns of Ekaterinburg, Cheliabinsk, and Kungur—local headquarters were established by one of the colonels, who enjoyed considerable autonomy in his own bailiwick. To impose a measure of control, however, a “War College,” modeled after the one in St. Petersburg, was set up at Berda in November 1773, and strove with limited success to coordinate operations. Beyond this, it functioned as a logistical center, maintaining supply
lines with the Urals factories, from which it ordered cannon, mortars, and ammunition.

Pugachev was by all accounts an able commander-in-chief. In the most difficult engagements, his confederates later testified, he was to be seen at the head of his troops issuing orders and urging them forward. Foreign observers compared him—both as a rebel and as a military leader—to Oliver Cromwell. From his Cossack upbringing and long army experience he was acquainted with tactics and organization, but his particular strength was artillery. At the height of the rebellion he had 100 cannon (captured from government forts or forged in the Urals foundries), which gave him a military might of which Bolotnikov, Razin, and Bulavin could scarcely have dreamed. His gun emplacements at Berda were of such outstanding quality that, according to Governor Reinsdorp, “Vauban himself could not have constructed better.” To give the impression of even greater strength, he ordered decoy cannon to be fashioned from wood and painted to look like the real thing. In the field, moreover, his guns were mounted on sledges for easy mobility, and by a series of lightning marches, such as only Cossacks were able to perform, government outposts were overwhelmed and, except for the more strongly defended administrative centers, the vast territory from the Urals to the Volga fell under effective rebel control.

At the same time, Pugachev inaugurated a rebel government over which he ruled as Peter III. Choosing for his palace the finest house in Berda, he assumed the role that people would expect from a true emperor and played it with evident relish. He surrounded himself with a personal guard of twenty-five Cossacks who called him “your excellency” and “dear father” (batiushka) as they would the real tsar. On special occasions he wore a white embroidered shirt, a robe of red velvet, and a black lambskin hat with a crimson lining. As the Duke of Holstein (a title of Peter III) he displayed an old Holstein banner that one of his men had captured during the Seven Years’ War. And on a wall of his headquarters hung a portrait of the Tsarevich Paul, of whom he spoke with feigned paternal affection.

Berda, in short, became a grotesque parody of the Russian capital, though Pugachev called it his Moscow instead of St. Petersburg, perhaps because the old capital, the traditional center of serfdom, remained the foremost symbol of aristocratic oppres-

sion. But he had his Petersburg too, in the town of Kargala, and a Kiev as well, in Sakmarsh. Moreover, aping the imperial court, he dubbed his closest confederates with the names of Catherine’s favorites, so that Ovchinikov became Count Panin, Zarubin Count Chernyshev, Shigaev Count Vorontsov, and Chumakov Count Orlov. In Pugachev’s mock court the rebels amused themselves with heavy drinking, peasant dances, and bawdy Cossack songs. Pugachev himself seemed a curious mixture of Petersburg emperor and people’s tsar, a Cossack warlord in velvet robes at the head of a popular government. With his colonels and counts and other Western paraphernalia, he distinguished himself sharply from earlier rebel leaders, who had rejected European customs. Yet his up-to-date image was superficial. Unlike his predecessors, he was playing the role of an emperor, and for this his imperial trappings were necessary props. But beneath the thin exterior was a traditional popular rebel whose goal was a popular tsardom with extensive local autonomy. “If God sees fit that I should conquer the throne,” Pugachev declared, “then I shall allow everyone to pursue the old faith and to wear Russian clothing. But none shall be allowed to shave his beard, and I shall command everyone to cut his hair in the Cossack style.” To make this dream a reality, he would “go to Moscow and then to Petersburg and conquer the whole state” and eliminate the boyars. With such a program it was not hard to convince the people that he was their true ruler. They wanted desperately to believe it, and he in turn, because of their response, tried to live up to his role, becoming the servant of his own myth. To some extent, perhaps, he may actually have come to believe it. At any rate, it was with a measure of genuine conviction that he spoke of liberation and proclaimed a new era of popular justice.

4. Bibikov

It was several weeks before news of the uprising reached St. Petersburg, and the government’s response was desultory. Pugachev’s claim to be Peter III, and his declared intention to join
with the tsarevich and depose Catherine, may have irritated the empress, but she was not unduly alarmed. For Pugachev was merely one of a long line of false Peter Ills, and his outbreak seemed merely another local Cossack disturbance on the fringes of the empire, which the Orenburg governor could handle without difficulty. In any case, with her troops engaged against the Turks, Catherine was unable to spare more than a small force to suppress the revolt, and it was not until November that these reinforcements made their appearance. Nor did the delay pass unnoticed. In fact it added to the rumors that the true tsar had returned. For if Pugachev was an impostor, asked the workers of one Urals factory, why were no troops sent to put him down? 43

Some troops were actually on the way, though an insufficient number to contain the rebellion. To prevent speculation by foreign observers, the government maintained a strict curtain of silence, so that Sir Robert Gunning, the British ambassador, could not even learn the correct name of the officer sent from Moscow to deal with the insurgents. It was not “Bauer,” 44 but Vasili Kar, who was ordered in mid-October to raise the siege of Orenburg. Of Scottish lineage, though born and educated in Russia, Kar was a veteran of the Seven Years’ War who had risen to major general, yet despite his rank and experience he was a mediocre officer, and he had only 500 men and 6 guns at his disposal. Fortunately, a larger force was dispatched about the same time from western Siberia under General Ivan Dekolong (de Colongues), an officer of French extraction and a veteran of numerous campaigns. Two additional detachments were summoned from the Volga, one from Simbirsk under Colonel Chernyshev (no relation to the minister of war) and the other from Kazan led by Brigadier Korf.

With four government parties converging on him, Pugachev would appear to have been in grave danger. But this was not at all the case. Kar and his colleagues had vast distances to cover; communications between them were virtually nonexistent; none knew the plans or precise whereabouts of the others; and so they were unable to mount a concerted attack. Moreover, they had little reliable information about the activities of the rebels, while the rebels received a good deal about theirs from sympathetic tribesmen and peasants, and were of course better acquainted with the terrain. Thus Pugachev had the advantage of surprise; and he was able to deal with his opponents singly rather than as one formidable army.

Orenburg was heartened by the news of Kar’s approach. But his progress was slowed by heavy snowfall and severe frost. At last he reached the area, only to discover that the rebel army was much larger and better armed than he had expected; and “owing to faint-heartedness and poor behavior,” as a contemporary put it, he “allowed himself to be beaten.” 45 On November 8 a large rebel force under two of Pugachev’s ablest commanders, Andrei Ovchinnikov and Ivan Zarubin, encircled Kar at the village of Yuzeevka. With the Cossacks shouting at them not to oppose “the emperor,” Kar’s troops were thrown into confusion, and nearly a hundred defected when the rebels promised them “the lands, seas, and forests, the cross and beard, and full freedom.” 46 Worse still, according to a French officer exiled in Kazan, Kar had gone into battle without reconnoitering his opposition. As Kar himself testified: “The rogues swept in like the wind from the steppe, and their artillery did much damage.” Nor, he said, did they “shoot the way one might expect of peasants.” 47

Kar beat a swift retreat to Kazan, where news of his defeat threw the gentry into a panic. Many decided to flee, and though the governor, Yakov von Brandt, tried to calm their fears, his efforts failed when it became known that he had sent his own family to safety and emptied his house of its furniture. From Kazan, Kar proceeded to Moscow “with as much haste as he had left it,” 48 and Catherine, furious at his “weakness of spirit,” cashiered him and instructed the Moscow governor to tell him “not to dare show himself before my eyes.” 49 Meanwhile Pugachev was not idle. Following up his victory over Kar, he led the defeat of Chernyshev near Orenburg and had him executed with 32 other officers and one of their wives. But Korf managed to slip past him and into the besieged city with his badly needed contingent of 2500 men and 22 guns.

By now Catherine realized the gravity of the situation. At the end of November she offered a 1000-ruble reward for Pugachev’s capture, a figure which would increase sharply as the revolt expanded. But a more important step was her appointment of General Alexander Bibikov to take charge of the pacification.
Bibikov was an excellent choice. Born of a military family, he had twice been cited for bravery in the Seven Years' War and had later distinguished himself against the Poles. Moreover, he had proved his ability to tame domestic unrest by crushing factory riots in the Urals. A statesman as well as an officer, he had served in both the Senate and the War College and as Speaker of Catherine's short-lived Legislative Commission. "His known probity," noted the British ambassador, "his unaffected patriotism and his great military knowledge gave him the justest title to favour and confidence of his mistress." 46 Bibikov, in short, was a model imperial servant. He and Pugachev represented two distinct worlds, as Catherine understood when she advised him to use the "superiority which courage, education, and culture always afford against an ignorant mob driven only by the stormy fanaticism of religious and political superstition and obscurantism." 56 To Catherine the Bibikovs stood for enlightenment, civilization, progress, the Pugachevs for superstition, barbarism, reaction. Pugachev, in her eyes, was not merely a brigand and a traitor; he was a "monster of the human race," an offender against the public order and against those divine and secular laws without which no empire could stand.

Such, at any rate, were the terms in which she denounced the pretender in a manifesto of December 1773, on the eve of Bibikov's departure for Kazan. That Pugachev should take the name of her late husband was a source of particular irritation, owing perhaps to an uneasy conscience over his death. "It would be superfluous here," she wrote in the manifesto, "to prove the absurdity of such an imposture, which cannot even put on a shadowy probability in the eyes of sensible persons." But the empress was plainly troubled—so much so that she conjured up the memory of the Time of Troubles, when, "because of an impostor, towns and villages were ravaged by fire and sword, when the blood of Russians was spilled by Russians, and when the unity of the state was in the end destroyed by the hands of Russians themselves." It was an unwise analogy, as her advisors pointed out, since it could "only recall unpleasant events and encourage the insurgents." 51 The parallels between Peter III and Tsarevich Dmitri—their sudden and mysterious death followed by their miraculous reappearance under the banner of insurrection—were better left unstated.

In December 1773 Bibikov hurried to Kazan with a regiment of cavalry and two of infantry and wide powers to deal with the rebels. Meanwhile the contagion continued to spread. Toward the end of the month, following a three-month siege, Yaiisk fell to the insurgents, except for the stockade, to which a force of Cossack loyalists and the garrison commander had retired. Repeated attempts to breach the walls were rebuffed at considerable cost, and as time wore on the loyalists were reduced to eating their horses, and "cold and hunger," one of them recalled, "brought us to a state of despair which increased with each day." 52 At one point there was a momentary respite when the attackers paused to celebrate Pugachev's marriage to a local Cossack girl who had caught his fancy. It was a lavish wedding, as befitted a royal couple, the ceremony performed to the accompaniment of cannon and church bells. Yet its effect was to damage the pretender's image and to sow doubts among his followers. How can an emperor marry an ordinary Cossack? it was asked. And what about the empress Catherine (to say nothing of his real wife and children on the Don)?

For the moment, however, such doubts were put aside, and by January 1774 the revolt, according to a foreign witness, had 30,000 adherents and was growing "more serious every day." 53 At Ufa and Orenburg the situation became desperate, as provisions dwindled and morale sagged. Further east a force of Bashkirs and ascribed workers placed Cheliabinsk under siege and a mutiny broke out within the town in which an angry mob dragged the governor through the streets by his hair before his troops could restore order. The rebel commander, Ivan Griznev, an Old Believer with a talent for millenarian propaganda, bombarded the inhabitants with leaflets which cast Pugachev in the combined role of Christ rescuing the poor and Moses leading the Israelites to the Promised Land:

Our Lord Jesus Christ wishes through his holy providence to free Russia from the yoke of servile labor. We all know who has brought Russia to this state of hunger and exhaustion. The gentry own the peasants, and though in God's law it is written that the
peasants too are God’s children, yet they treat them not merely as servants but as lower than the very dogs with which they hunt rabbits. The company men have got hold of most of the factories and have so burdened the peasants with work that there is nothing at all like it, not even in exile at hard labor. How many are the tears shed to the Lord by the workers and their wives and small children! But soon, like the Israelites, you shall be delivered out of bondage.34

To this was added another popular myth: that Peter Fyodorovich, having liberated the gentry, had drawn up a manifesto freeing the serfs as well, but that the landlords had suppressed it and deposed the tsar, who, wandering like Christ in the wilderness for eleven years, had now returned to carry out his intentions. Pugachev, said Griaznov, was no impostor. He was the true Russian tsar, come at last to emancipate the poor.

Throughout the winter factory peasants and Bashkirs continued to provide the Cossacks with their most zealous supporters. While Khlopusha and Kinzia remained indispensable leaders, new men of equal ability now made their appearance. A notable example was Ivan Beloborodov, about the same age as Pugachev and born near Kungur in the heart of the Urals mining region. When the Seven Years’ War broke out, Beloborodov was conscripted to work in a munitions factory near St. Petersburg. After seven years of hard labor, with no prospect of release, he feigned illness and was allowed to return to Kungur, where he married and set up shop as a trader in beeswax and honey. But in January 1774, when a Pugachev courier read a manifesto in the market square, Beloborodov was won over. Organizing a force of workers from a Demidov foundry near Ekaterinburg, he moved from factory to factory emptying the strongboxes, burning official records, and seizing a large quantity of supplies and ammunition. At each enterprise Beloborodov told the workmen that the “great sovereign” was coming to free them from compulsory labor and to cancel their dues and taxes. Calling his adherents Cossacks, and himself their ataman, he divided them into hundreds and distributed loot in equal portions. He put his own factory experience to good use by supervising the production of weapons and teaching his men how to use them. One by one the large enterprises of the Ekaterinburg area were taken, and the city itself was gradu-

ally encircled, for which the government commander, Colonel Vasili Bibikov, must be held partly responsible. For unlike his namesake, the colonel was a listless officer whose preparations for the assault were grossly inadequate—indeed at one point he even considered fleeing to save his own neck. Yet despite his incompetence Ekaterinburg managed to hold out until reinforcements arrived.

Among the Bashkirs the outstanding new leader was Salavat Yulaev, the son of a prominent elder, Yulai Aznalin, who had fought against the Prussians in the Seven Years’ War and had been decorated for bravery against the Polish Confederation. Yulai was thus a Bashkir loyalist, a common phenomenon within the tribal hierarchy. In fact he and his son had been sent by Governor Reinsdorp to fight the insurgents but were taken prisoner by Ovchinikov and promptly defected. Salavat, though only twenty-one, already had three wives and two sons; and with his dark hair and eyes and tall green cap, as a Bashkir song describes him, he cut a handsome figure. What was more, he was a popular folk poet who read and wrote Tatar and knew the Koran by heart. Highly esteemed by his fellow tribesmen, he had little trouble recruiting an army “to serve the sovereign,” 55 and, occupying Krasnoyurinsk without a struggle, he marched on Kungur, whose voevoda fled in panic, leaving the defense of the city to the local merchants and gentry and a small contingent of troops.

With Ufa and Orenburg under siege, Kungur and Ekaterinburg threatened, and Yaitsk all but taken, General Bibikov had his work cut out for him. Arriving at Kazan toward the end of December, he reprimanded Governor von Brandt for his lack of initiative and set about organizing the local gentry into an effective fighting force. In addition, he posted a 10,000-ruble reward for Pugachev’s capture, while Pugachev, for his own part, ordered a gibbet constructed with a sign in gold letters “For Bibikov.” Bibikov was quick to size up his adversary. He saw that Pugachev’s rising, like those of the past, was a broad social struggle of the have-nots against the haves, a clash of two cultures, of the two social and spiritual worlds into which the nation was divided. Pugachev “may be even more dangerous to the nobility and the rich than he is to the empress,” he told the Kazan aristocracy. “This is a revolt of the poor against the rich, of the slaves against
their masters." The pretender, Bibikov recognized, could have made little headway but for the widespread unrest, the ground swell of discontent, which underlay his movement. "Pugachev himself is not important. What is important is the general indignation." 57 A similar observation was made about the same time by the future poet Gavriil Derzhavin, then a young lieutenant under Bibikov's command:

One must determine whether, in the event we kill him, there will not appear a new and even more dastardly swine calling himself the tsar. Is he the only one who calls himself by that name, or are there many who do so? Do the people look on him as the real deceased sovereign, or do they know that he is in fact just Pugachev, though their coarse instincts for insurrection and robbery do not allow them to reject him? 58

Nor was Catherine herself blind to what the Pugachevshchina represented: a rising of peasant Russia against its ruling aristocracy. In a letter to Bibikov she pointedly numbered herself among the landowners of Kazan and pledged that the security and well-being of the gentry "are inseparable from our own and our empire’s security and well-being." 59 She increased the reward on Pugachev’s head, and ordered his house on the Don burned, the ashes scattered to the winds, and his family sent to Kazan, where Bibikov tried to use them to discredit the pretender by telling the people his true identity. 60

All this was to no avail. But Bibikov had other weapons that were far more effective. Between January and April a number of capable officers with well-armed troops came under his command, and one by one they relieved the Urals towns. Toward the end of January the siege of Kungur was lifted by Major Dmitri Gagrin with two rifle companies from Dekolong’s Siberian army. For several days Salavat had tried to capture the city, but he had not reckoned on Major Alexander Popov, whom Bibikov ranked among his best garrison commanders. Popov ordered drums beaten to drown out rebel demands for surrender. Then, launching a sudden attack, he caught Salavat off guard and forced him to withdraw to Krasnoufimsk, where Gagrin overtook him and dealt a decisive blow. Gagrin next headed his troops toward Ekaterinburg to deal with Beloborodov. In a series of savage engagements

factory after factory was cleared of insurgents, Beloborodov fled to Berda, and Ekaterinburg was out of danger. Gagrin then moved against Griaznov, who had occupied Cheliabinsk on Dekolong’s premature withdrawal, and again the rebels were defeated, although what became of Griaznov, a remarkable figure about whom little is known, remains a mystery.

Meanwhile, Ufa had also found its liberator in Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Mikhelson, second only to Bibikov himself as the outstanding hero of the government forces during the rebellion. A brilliant young officer from the Baltic nobility, Mikhelson enjoyed a well-earned reputation for courage in battle. He had served under Bibikov in the Seven Years’ War, had been wounded at both Zorndorf and Kunersdorf, and had fought with equal distinction against Turkey and Poland, receiving the Order of St. George for bravery in combat. Little wonder that Bibikov, his former commander, should choose him now to lift the siege of Ufa. Since the previous November Ufa had been under continuous attack by Zarubin’s predominantly Bashkir army. Cold and hunger gripped the inhabitants, whose stores were seriously depleted. Yet Zarubin (like Bolotnikov at Moscow) was unable to impose a total blockade, so that a trickle of supplies continued to flow into the city. The defenders, fearing a massacre by the tribesmen, were determined to hold out at all costs, and repeated rebel attacks were thrown back with heavy losses. Quarreling broke out between the Bashkirs and the Russians in Zarubin’s camp, and energies were further squandered in raids on factories and estates, so that by mid-March, when Mikhelson’s crack carbine regiment arrived in the area, the insurgents were tired and discouraged. Still, they outnumbered their opponents by more than ten to one; and the tribesmen were fighting on native territory which they were loath to surrender to the invaders. On March 24, under cover of darkness, Mikhelson mounted a swift attack, with his troops on skis to increase their mobility. Once again training and equipment told heavily against the rebels, who offered fierce resistance before being dispersed. Many of the Bashkirs refused to be taken alive, and hundreds were left dead in the snow, while Mikhelson, if government figures are to be credited, had only twenty-three killed and thirty-two wounded.

While Mikhelson was liberating Ufa, a large army under Gen-
eral Golitsyn, Mansurov, and Freiman converged on Orenburg to lift the six-month siege, of which Pugachev himself was in charge. Here again the rebels, though superior in numbers, were vastly outdistanced in arms and discipline. Of their 9000 adherents fewer than a third were Cossacks, the rest being a disparate assortment of Bashkirs, Tatars, Kalmyks, serfs, factory peasants, and va-grants, with an arsenal ranging from axes, stones, and clubs to the latest cannon and carbines. Apprised of the government's strength, Pugachev moved his motley forces to Fort Tatishchev, the scene of his first major victory a half year before. It was here that he made his stand. Using an old technique, the defenders piled snow around the fort, over which they poured water to form a solid barrier of ice. The device, however, was outdated. On March 22 the generals brought up their heavy artillery and, in a three-hour bombardment, reduced the defenses to rubble. When the barrage ended, infantry rushed in from three sides and overwhelmed all resistance. More than 2000 rebels were killed—their corpses littered the fort and the surrounding roads and woods—and all their cannon were taken. By comparison the government's losses (150 dead and 500 wounded) were trivial. The site of Pugachev's initial triumph became the site of his first shattering defeat, after which, as always, support quickly evaporated.

But the pretender was still at large. Retreating to Berda, he tried desperately to regroup his forces. But his camp was buzzing with intrigue, and, fearing betrayal, he collected what followers he could and raced through Kargala (his "St. Petersburg"), then on to Salmarisk (his "Kiev"), where disaster overtook him. On the night of April 1 General Golitsyn quickly encircled the town, and of the rebel leaders only Pugachev and Ovchinnikov managed to escape, leaving most of their confederates—Khlopusha, Shigaev, Pochitalin, Gorskhov, Padurov, Miansikov—in Golitsyn's hands. (Zarubin had already been captured at Ufa.) All told, nearly 3000 were taken prisoner. Pugachev, fleeing northward into Bashkiria with a remnant of his once-powerful army, became the object of a determined manhunt that kept him in hiding for several weeks.

Ovchinnikov, with a small party of Cossacks, rode west to Yaitsk, the sole remaining rebel stronghold. The Cossack capital, where the revolt had originated, was the last town to be relieved.

On April 15, when General Mansurov arrived, Ovchinnikov was already there, but his tired followers, outnumbered and outgunned, were quickly dispersed. The next morning Mansurov entered the town in triumph, amid cries of joy from the exhausted and half-starved garrison, whose commander, Colonel Simonov, received an estate with 600 serfs from a grateful empress.

In the end, none of the major administrative centers of the Urals was taken, with the sole exception of Cheliabinsk, and then only briefly. Orenburg, Ufa, Kungur, Ekaterinburg, and the Yaitsk citadel all held out until government relief arrived. Similarly, during the coming summer, rebel forces entering the towns of the Volga would be quickly put to flight. Why did Pugachev fail where his predecessors had succeeded? Why did his revolt fail to take root in the towns, where Bolotnikov and Razin (though not Bulavin) had found so much of their support? Lack of organization and discipline—internal discord, national antagonisms between Russians and Bashkirs, the dispersal of forces over a wide territory, the waste of energy in raiding and plunder—undoubtedly played a part. But more important than the weaknesses of the rebels were the strengths of their opponents. Both economically and politically the towns were more developed and less given to popular disturbances than in the past century. The improved quality of troops and equipment was another critical factor. Thus the government, for all its inefficiency, proved more than a match for the destructive whirlwind from the southeastern frontier.

In Moscow and Petersburg it was widely believed that the rebellion was over. The pretender's army was smashed, his support vanishing, his confederates captured, his movement in disarray. In March 1774 Bibikov could report that the rebels had "been defeated, and hour by hour we are approaching peace and tranquility." But Bibikov did not live to see his victory consummated. Toward the end of March, while his troops were dispersing the remaining rebel concentrations, he suddenly fell ill at his field headquarters, between Kazan and Orenburg. Doctors sent from Moscow arrived too late, and on April 9, at the brink of success, he died. Bibikov "came to get the sovereign, but seeing him face to face took fright, and from a button of his coat drank a powerful poison and died." Such was the interpretation of a
Urals workman, to whom no boyar malefactor could be a match for the true emperor. Bibikov, at any rate, died before his work was finished; and his death, the British ambassador feared, could "give new courage to the insurgents." The rebel movement, though damaged, was not completely broken, while the government's drive was interrupted, allowing Pugachev a much-needed respite during which, deep in the hills of Bashkirtia, he could begin to raise a new army. The first act of the rebellion was over. But a second and more formidable act was soon to begin.

5. Kazan

On May 1, 1774, Bibikov's second in command, General Fyodor Shcherbatov, was appointed to succeed him. Shcherbatov, though an experienced officer and a veteran of Zorndorf and Bender, was a disappointment compared with his predecessor. He had little of Bibikov's imagination or ability to command devotion. His gravest defect was a quarrelsome nature which embroiled him in continual disputes with his subordinates, who on the whole were a capable lot with whom Bibikov had maintained smooth relations. During the spring and summer, owing partly to Shcherbatov's limitations, the rebellion again flared out of control, and more than six months were to elapse before it was finally extinguished.

Pugachev, meanwhile, his army dispersed and his "War College" in prison, had taken refuge in the hills of Bashkirtia where, after lying low for most of April, he began to collect a new following. After their defeat at Yaisk, Ovchinnikov and Beloborodov came to join him, and by the middle of May they had gathered nearly 8000 recruits. The rebels, in the words of a Swiss journal, had been "reborn from their own ashes." Hubbanding his strength, Pugachev shook off pursuing detachments and avoided pitched battles. He fought only when forced to fight. He was constantly on the move, sweeping through villages, factories, and stockades, carrying out hit-and-run raids and gathering men and equipment. Shcherbatov and his officers seldom knew his exact whereabouts. Mobility was his chief strength, enabling him to appear quite suddenly where least expected, attack his target by surprise, and withdraw as quickly as he had come. His adherents, largely Bashkirs from the surrounding area, could make their way through mountains and valleys impenetrable to regular government formations, with their cumbersome weapons and supply trains.

Yet, for all Pugachev's evasiveness, his pursuers were never far behind. On May 21 Dekolong and Gagrin surprised the rebels in their camp, groggy with drink like Razin's Cossacks at Resht, and cut them to pieces. Pugachev managed to escape, only to run headlong into Mikhailov, who inflicted heavy casualties and seized the bulk of his munitions. But the impostor again got away and soon drew a fresh batch of recruits. Word of his reappearance had meanwhile swept through the Urals and western Siberia. "Under Pugachev," declared a convict in Omsk prison, "salt is sold for twenty copecks and wine for a ruble a bucket. Maybe this will happen in Omsk if we live to see the day when Pugachev comes here to the fortress." Whereupon he was hanged on Dekolong's orders for spreading malicious rumors.

Even more than before, Pugachev relied on the Bashkirs and the factory peasants as his chief source of volunteers. The government made every effort to stem the flow from these groups into the rebel ranks. Shcherbatov, for instance, sent emissaries to the Bashkir elders with a promise of subsidies if they shunned the revolt; and more than a few, fearing class war within their tribe, now broke with Pugachev just as the service gentry had broken with Bolotnikov and the Cossack oligarchy with Razin. When persuasion failed, the tribesmen were threatened with violence. "I will execute you, hang you by the legs and ribs, burn your homes, your property, your grain and hay, and destroy your cattle," declared one of Shcherbatov's officers. "Do you hear me? If you do, then take care, for I am not in the habit of lying or joking." Such language, however, merely strengthened their will to resist. Nor was the Holy Synod's denunciation of Pugachev as "the disciple of Antichrist Mahomer" calculated to win their allegiance.

During the spring of 1774 the Bashkirs attacked Russian villages and factories with unprecedented fury. On May 26, according to a government report, the huge Avziano-Petrovsk metal
works was “reduced to ashes” by raiding tribesmen. At another large enterprise, the foundries, the office, the church, the dwellings—“everything was burned down,” noted an eyewitness. The extent of the damage was enormous. Of some 120 Urals factories, at least 90 were forced to stop production at some point during the rebellion, 74 were attacked and plundered, and 56 were occupied by rebel detachments. All told, more than half were destroyed or seriously damaged. For several months production was at a near standstill, and it took the rest of the decade for output to reach former levels. The raids, moreover, unleashed a mass exodus of ascribed peasants, most of whom returned to their villages, so that by the end of the rising only half the workers were still on the job.

At the same time resistance to the raiders was often quite fierce, particularly in the larger factories equipped with garrisons, watchtowers, and artillery. Nor was it only the soldiers and administrators who fought against the rebels. Skilled artisans and year-round workmen, for whom the factory was the sole means of existence, often aligned themselves with the defenders. As the number of raids increased, more and more workers complained that the Bashkirs were threatening them with ruin. And as national antagonisms sharpened, a growing number of ascribed peasants began to side with their fellow Russians against the “heathens.” But in most cases they either fled to their villages or joined in the plunder and destruction, and at one factory they warned a supervisor against resisting “while your belly is still in one piece.”

The previous fall and winter there had been comparatively little destruction, for Pugachov’s lieutenants had been able to restrain their tribal adherents. But the situation had changed. Zarubin had been captured and Pugachov severely trounced. For the Bashkirs it was now or never. They were determined once and for all to remove the monuments of colonialism from their midst: “Go home! Your time is done! Our fathers who gave you land are dead, and we will suffer you no longer.” By now, moreover, Pugachov’s own position had changed. He no longer wished to restrain them. On the contrary, he himself ordered the factories destroyed and personally led raiding parties against them. There were several reasons for this shift. In the first place he wanted to placate the Bashkirs, his mainstay of support, whom he in any case could no longer control. A second motive, as Roger Portal has suggested, was sheer military necessity: the factories, having been reoccupied by the government, were no longer sources of munitions, but were enemy strongpoints which had to be destroyed by lightning raids. Finally, Pugachov no longer needed them, for he had decided to abandon the Urals and strike at the heart of the empire.

In June 1774 the rebellion took an ominous turn. Where before it had been confined to the peripheries beyond the Volga and Kama, now came the alarming news that Pugachov was marching westward toward the central core of Muscovy. “Instead of being crushed, he is become more formidable than ever,” reported Sir Robert Gunning to the foreign secretary. “This rebel spreads terror and devastation wherever he turns; and according to the last accounts seems inclined to correct his first error, and march towards Casan and Moscow, that is to say, into the heart of the empire; where it is much feared that he will find a great number of discontented persons.” This was indeed his intention. He would march on Kazan, he told his confederates, “and after taking it go to Moscow and then to Petersburg and conquer the whole state.” Before him rode his couriers with their leaflets and manifestoes, and ascribed peasants, returning to their native districts, spread the news of his coming. The peasants of the Volga and Kama, astir with promises of freedom, suspension of taxes, and relief from compulsory military service, awaited their savior with eager anticipation. Some, unable to wait, sent deputies to the insurgent with a plea to come at once and deliver them from their masters. Disturbed by these reports, Catherine ordered her governors not to exact unusual work from their peasants or provoke them in any way, but rather to remove the causes of unrest and restore “peace and quiet” to their provinces.

But her celebrated favorite, Grigori Potemkin, sounded a less conciliatory note. Incensed by Pugachov’s promise to abolish taxation and recruitment, he firmly defended the existing system: “Who will guard the borders of our state when there are no soldiers? And there will be no soldiers without recruiting. How will the soldiers be maintained without the soul tax? Where would the Turks have got to by now if Russia had no troops?”
same vein he denounced Pugachev’s egalitarian pretensions and his war on landlords and bureaucrats: “Try to imagine who would administer the towns and villages if we had no officials. Who would judge in court, restrain wickedness and injustice, and ward off the oppressor if there were no legal authorities? And who would command the armed forces if there were no distinctions of rank? How patently absurd are the malicious delusions of Emelka Pugachev!”

Yet precisely such “delusions” had inspired a mass movement which pointed directly at Moscow. On June 21 the rebels occupied Osa, a small town on the Kama River southwest of Kungur. Behind them forts, factories, and estates lay in ruins, the countryside was ravaged, and Russian settlements were in embers from Bashkir assaults. Osa put up a determined struggle, pouring a hail of missiles and boiling oil upon the attackers, but when Pugachev prepared to set the walls alight, the townsman decided to surrender. The pretender entered in triumph. In a scene repeated elsewhere, an old soldier who claimed he had once seen Peter III came forward and confirmed that Pugachev was the emperor. But though the town had capitulated, Pugachev ordered it burned anyway, a sign of things to come.

It was early July when the rebels, some 7000 strong, forded the Kama and advanced on Kazan. Kazan was the chief administrative and commercial center of the middle Volga region and the gateway to central Moscovy. Yet it was ill-prepared for an attack. The inhabitants, wrote General Pavel Potemkin (a cousin of Catherine’s favorite), who was in charge of defending the city, were in “great desperation and terror,” and many had fled to points west. Pugachev’s sudden move against Osa had taken Shcherbatov unawares. Most of his troops were still hunting the rebels in the remote Bashkiria highlands, and frantic calls were issued for reinforcements, but they arrived too late. Meanwhile, to bolster the garrison at Kazan, which contained only 700 regulars, ordinary civilians, including students of the local gymnasium, were mobilized and armed. But they were of little use against Pugachev’s savage followers, and on July 12, when the attack began, they hastily retired to the citadel.

The outer city was quickly overrun and given up to pillage and destruction. The streets swarmed with insurgents who moved from house to house laden with stolen goods. The prison was thrown open, reuniting Pugachev with his wife and three children, though at first he refused to recognize them, insisting they were the family of an ordinary Don Cossack of his acquaintance. Also liberated was the Old Believer Abbot Filaret, who had set the impostor on his rebellious path and had afterward been arrested. Buildings, once ransacked, were burned. The wooden structures went up like tinder. Fires blazed out of control in every part of the city. On the main street, according to a local merchant, “not a post was left standing.” Of 2873 houses in the city, only 810 survived the holocaust. Twenty-five churches and three monasteries were stripped of their valuables (largely by Bashkirs and other tribesmen) and gutted. Townsmen without beards or in “German” clothing were set upon and beaten or killed. In a single day of violence Kazan lost 162 dead, 129 wounded, and 468 missing without a trace. Survivors recalled the scene with horror for many years to come.

Pugachev meanwhile trained his guns on the citadel and launched a continuous bombardment, which took a heavy toll. As casualties mounted, more and more defenders wanted to surrender, and Potemkin hanged two of his men as an example to the rest. “The greatest misfortune,” he wrote on the day of the attack, “is that the people are not trustworthy.” The whole province, he said, was ready to revolt. But help was on the way. Mikhelson, after a forced march from the Urals, arrived the next day, July 13, and though his men were tired and woefully outnumbered, he immediately formed them in columns and charged the rebel positions. “The soundrels greeted me with a great shout and with such a hail of fire as I, who have fought against many different opponents, seldom have seen and from such barbarians did not expect,” he wrote. By nightfall, however, the rebels were compelled to withdraw, leaving 800 dead and an equal number of prisoners.

Three times Pugachev regrouped his forces and returned to the fight, but each assault was driven back with heavy losses of men and equipment. The final encounter lasted several hours, and the pretender, sacrificing 3000 followers and all his artillery, barely managed to escape, fleeing across the Volga with Mikhelson in pursuit. Kazan was liberated. The rebels were again dispersed; and
though Pugachev had slipped away, Beloborodov, having found refuge in a nearby forest, rashly returned to the city, where he was recognized and arrested.

With the sacking of Kazan panic seized the residents of Moscow. The upper classes feared that Pugachev, having reduced Kazan to a heap of blazing ruins, would now make directly for the heartland. St. Petersburg too was alarmed, so much so that the court even considered retreating to Riga. According to a contemporary, "a panic seized half the country; and the same spirit of sedition which animated Pugatcheff had infected the rest." 78 For the moment, however, it was Moscow, where lower-class discontent had been dramatically revealed during an outbreak of cholera in 1771, that experienced the greatest terror. The geographical heart of the empire and the bastion of serfdom, the old capital remained the chief target of mass revolts long after Peters burg had replaced it as the official seat of government. A sprawling congeries of gentry residences, markets, shops, and hovels of the poor, it was densely populated with household serfs and peasant laborers whose sympathies were overwhelmingly with the pretender. Each week saw hundreds arrested, some merely for drinking to Pugachev's health, so that the prisons were crammed with "seditious people." 79 Records of the secret police reveal that throughout the surrounding countryside the peasants were ready to rise for the "third emperor." "Praise God, we shall not have to live for our masters much longer," a villager declared, "for now Peter Fyodorovich is coming to us and he will ascribe all the peasants as his own and hang the nobles. He is the true tsar." 80

Given such expectations, it is small wonder that Moscow was gripped by panic. It was a moment of immense danger and terrifying suspense. If Pugachev could arouse the central provinces, the classical region of serfdom, the whole existing order might collapse. Would he try to make for Moscow? Would he touch off a general rising of the serfs against their masters? Such questions, arising at the climax of the Turkish War, provoked great interest all over Europe, where the revolt was widely reported in the press. In fact word of the Pugacevskaya spread as far afield as the New World, where it was carried in the Virginia Gazette in the summer of 1774. The interest displayed abroad encouraged a tendency among Russian officials to see the revolt as a plot hatched by hostile foreign powers: some thought Pugachev an agent of the Polish Confederation, others of the Turks or the French or the Swedes. But no evidence has come to light of any foreign complicity, though the Swedish king wryly remarked that Catherine had cause to be grateful that he did not conclude an alliance with the pretender. The Secret Commission in Kazan, charged with examining the causes of the revolt, made a thorough investigation and concluded that Pugachev had received "neither outside guidance nor assistance" but had been backed only by the "ignorance of the people of this land, their simplicity and gullibility." 81

One question was on everyone's lips: Would Pugachev, having crossed the Volga, now head his movement toward Moscow? Nervous officials in the former capital could already scent the smoke of burning manor houses. Yet had they recalled the history of past rebellions they might have been less pessimistic. For Razin and Bulavin had faced a similar decision and both had opted to remain in the peripheries lest, like Antaeus, they would lose their strength if cut off from their native soil. The government might have taken comfort from this fact. Indeed, for Pugachev there was even greater reason to avoid the central districts. For the second time in less than six months his army had been defeated, whereas Moscow was strongly defended and expecting reinforcements at any moment. Furthermore, Mikhailov had swept around his flanks to cut off any attempted drive into the heartland. Thus Pugachev chose to follow the example of his predecessors. For a few days he clung to the west bank of the Volga, heading upstream in the direction of Moscow; but at the town of Kurnysh he turned abruptly southward in hopes of igniting the Volga valley as Razin had done before him. Should he suffer defeat, however, he would hold to his course and, as he had planned the previous autumn, lead his followers to safety in the south.
6. The Volga

During the summer of 1774 an immense jacquerie broke out along the western bank of the Volga, marking the climax of the rebellion. Though defeated at Kazan, the movement had not been broken. In fact, as the pretendre moved down the Volga, he touched off new outbreaks on a greater scale than ever. "Pugachev was fleeing," noted Pushkin, "but his flight seemed an invasion."  

For as he fled he scattered the sparks of sedition in all directions, and for two months insurrection engulfed the Volga valley from Nizhni to Tsaritsyn, from Simbirsk to Tambov, the same peasant and tribal districts which had rallied to Razin a century before. "The damned owl frightened Kazan on July 12," wrote the archimandrite of Our Savior of Kazan Cathedral, "and though his wings are damaged, it is evident that his bats are flying all over the outskirts, barring all the roads, so that during this month there have been neither couriers nor post from or to Kazan."  

The months of July and August were the high-water mark of the rebellion. A vast stretch of territory—Kazan, Nizhni Novgorod, Arzamas, Alatyr, Sviatsk, Simbirsk, Penza, Shatsk, Saransk, Tambov, Veronozh—became the scene of savage violence encompassing more than three million people, or nearly an eighth of the population of the empire. It was the third time in nine months that revolt had flared up over a broad area. But now its social composition was somewhat altered. As the scene shifted from the Urals to the Volga, so too did the base of rebel support, with a sharp increase in numbers but a decline in military efficiency and in the degree of control imposed from above. In place of Cossack and Bashkir horsemen and Urals gunsmiths it was peasants and agricultural tribesmen who filled the rebel battalions. The largest group were serfs from private estates, who rose on a scale and with a fury unmatched in rebellions of the past.

Why were they so ripe for revolt? The answer is not far to seek. The reign of Catherine marked the golden age of the Russian nobility and the zenith of Russian serfdom. With their emancipation from compulsory service, many landowners returned to their estates, where they exercised virtually absolute power over their peasants. By Pugachev's time the government had all but ceased to interfere in the nobleman's treatment of his serfs. He could reduce their land allotment, raise their dues and quitrents, increase their labor obligation, and compel them to work in his factories. And his control over their private lives was more complete than ever. He might seize their property, interfere with their marriages, convert them into domestic servants, or sell them apart from the land and even from their wives and children. The trade in peasants reached a peak during Catherine's reign, breaking up families and immeasurably increasing frustration and despair. The empress herself, by giving away hundreds of thousands of crown peasants—many of them in provinces to be affected by Pugachev's revolt—transformed them overnight into private serfs at their master's beck and call. The lord, moreover, exercised manorial justice. He could have a peasant beaten or put in chains. He could send him to prison or into the army or to Siberia—and at government expense. Finally, he might emancipate—that is, cast off—old or infirm serfs who were no longer useful as servants or field hands. By the 1770s, in short, the serf had become a mere chattel at his owner's disposal. As a leading authority on the Russian peasant has noted, "the landlord ruled a little monarchy within the great one."  

Against the arbitrary powers of his owner, the serf had no legal redress, which goes a long way to account for the frequency of flight and rebellion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He was forever at the mercy of his master's moods and appetites. Nor did the state intervene to protect him. During Catherine's long reign only twenty cases are on record where landlords were punished for mistreating their serfs. In August 1767, as we have seen, Catherine went so far as to forbid complaints against masters on penalty of the knout and of banishment to hard labor in Siberia. Some lords, no doubt, dealt humanely with their peasants, looking after them in times of hardship and famine, but unbridled power is not conducive to humanitarian behavior; rather, it tends to bring out the worst in men, corrupting even the most enlightened, so that brutality and exploitation remained constant features of the master-serf relationship.

During Catherine's reign, moreover, the economic position of most serfs deteriorated. In some provinces the average quitrent (obrok) more than tripled, while on estates where servile labor (barschina) was performed the accepted standard of two or three
days a week was increasingly ignored, and some landowners required their serfs to work continuously until the harvest had been gathered and prepared for market. As the demand for grain increased both at home and abroad, driving prices steadily higher, more and more proprietors switched from obrok to barshchina in order to raise their output. For the peasant this represented another serious setback, entailing as it did closer supervision by his owner and less freedom in managing his own affairs. Like the conversion of state peasants to serfs, it meant a sudden reverse in terms of autonomy and status as well as economic position, and it is significant that some of the worst rioting of Pugachev's revolt occurred in districts where barshchina was emerging as the dominant form of obligation.85

At bottom, then, the grievances of the peasantry were as much a matter of status as of economic oppression. Their aspirations were essentially the same as those of other disaffected groups who flocked to Pugachev's banner. Like the Cossacks and schismatics, the Bashkirs and ascribed workers, they yearned to recover the traditional "liberties" of which the gentry and the state had deprived them. As they saw it, the emancipation of the nobility by Peter III had overturned the only legitimate foundation on which servitude had rested, as part of the overall service in which service was required of all segments of the population. With Peter's manifesto of 1762 the peasants felt that their masters, being freed from their obligation to the state, had no further claim to their services; and, as has been seen, rumors became rife of a second manifesto liberating the serfs from their proprietors.

What the 1762 manifesto inspired, however, was not so much the desire for absolute freedom as for the relative freedom of the crown peasantry, a status which some of Pugachev's followers had enjoyed until Catherine transferred them to her favorites. For the private serf the dream of emancipation assumed the concrete shape of conversion to a state peasant, by which he would become the property of the sovereign rather than of the noble. Nor was Pugachev blind to this aspiration. As he moved down the Volga he issued a flood of proclamations releasing the serfs from their masters and converting them into crown peasants. More than that, he promised them free use of the land and unrestricted personal liberty, as well as free distribution of salt and exemption from taxes and recruitment. Catherine dismissed this propaganda as "essentially that of simple Cossacks."86 But this was precisely what made it so effective. For it told the people what they wanted to hear, and in terms they could understand. The manifestoes, wrote Pushkin in The Captain's Daughter, a novel based on the Pugachev revolt, were written "in crude but forceful language, and must have produced a strong impression upon the minds of the simple people." Catherine, steeped in Western culture, could not appreciate that other world of folk eloquence embodied in Pugachev's appeals.

The most striking of these manifestoes, issued in July 1774, deserves to be quoted at length:

By this decree, with sovereign and paternal mercy, we grant to all hitherto in servitude and subjection to the landowners the right to be faithful subjects of our crown, and we award them the villages, the old cross and prayers, heads and beards, liberty and freedom, always to be Cossacks, without recruiting levies, soul tax or other money taxes, with possession of the land, the woods, the hay meadows, the fishing grounds, the salt lakes, without payment or rent, and we free all those peasants and other folk hitherto opposed by the malefactor gentry and the bribe-takers and judges in the towns from the dues and burdens placed upon them. We wish you the salvation of your souls and a peaceful life here on earth, for we too have tasted and suffered from the malefactor gentry much wandering and hardship . . . Those who hitherto were gentry in their lands and estates, those opponents of our rule and disturbers of the empire and ruiners of the peasants—seize them, punish them, hang them, treat them in the same way as they, having no Christian feeling, oppressed you, the peasants. With the extermination of these enemies, the malefactor gentry, everyone will be able to enjoy a quiet and peaceful life, which will continue evermore.87

This was by far the most extraordinary document to emerge from the rebellion. It expressed in vivid language the essence of Pugachev's program. By canceling taxes and military service, converting private serfs into state peasants, restoring the old faith, and declaring war on bureaucratic despotism, it fulfilled all the popular expectations associated with the late emperor. With strong millenarian overtones it cast the pretender in the role of a messiah who had come to eliminate the oppressors and to restore the
ancient bond between the people and their anointed fater. Biblical myth was mingled with a pagan demonology in which the nobility formed an alien breed of parasites sucking the blood of the people. Pugachev’s was a Manichaean vision which pitted the forces of good, embodied in the common folk, against the forces of evil, embodied in the landlords and officials. And though the tsarist framework was retained, Pugachev himself emerged as the sovereign ruling in the people’s interests.

The manifesto had an enormous impact. Up and down the Volga, wrote Derzhavin to Shcherbatov, the peasants “eagerly awaited Peter Fyodorovich on whom they have set all their hopes.” According to Frederick the Great, who followed the revolt with keen interest, “the rural population went in crowds to meet Pugachev and greeted him as their savior.” The excitement began in advance of his arrival. It was enough to hear that the “third emperor” was on the way to set off a violent reaction. “In their blind ignorance,” wrote General Golitsyn, “the common people everywhere greet this infernal monster with exclamations of joy.” It was said that he was Stenka Razin come to life again to punish the wicked and liberate the peasants. In Penza province villagers and priests met him with icons and hailed him as their true sovereign: “We never believed he was dead, and here he is alive, and henceforth all will be state, not landlord’s, peasants.”

Nor was it mere ignorance or superstition that led the peasants to believe in the pretender. They were always inclined to believe what favored their interests and to reject what did not. For them Pugachev was the true tsar whoever he was, as they sometimes put it. And his strength owed much to their conviction that they were rising not only for themselves but for their sovereign, whose manifestoes set the royal stamp of approval on their actions. Captured serfs often claimed innocence of wrongdoing on grounds that “Peter Fyodorovich” had removed them from the jurisdiction of their masters. When they attacked their owners and put them to flight, orders from the tsar had given them legal sanction.

In this connection, the role of the parish priest was of critical importance. As in the risings of Razin and Bulavin, the lower clergy—priests, sextons, monks—participated in large numbers. They greeted the pretender with icons and crosses, conducted services on his behalf, and prayed for his safety and success. All this, of course, strengthened the peasants’ conviction that they were fighting for the legitimate sovereign. Indeed, one village priest assured his congregation that “there is no empress, but there is an emperor, Peter III.” Nor was he alone in doing so. Whether from sympathy or fear of reprisals, the vast majority of parish priests sided with the pretender, identifying their cause with that of the peasants to whom they ministered. Such was the attitude of two priests in a village near Penza who drank a toast “to the health and success of the former emperor, Peter III.” For us common folk, they said, Pugachev is “not a rogue but our friend and protector.” Some clergy, however, remained steadfast in their loyalty to the empress. A village priest near Kazan, for example, urged his parishioners “to defend the faith and the fatherland against the insurgents.” But the peasants refused to listen. Pugachev, they insisted, was the “real emperor” who had come to free them from their masters and who, so they heard, would pay five rubles to whoever served him—whereupon they drove the priest from the village. Recalcitrant clergymen were sometimes the victims of rebel violence. During the course of the rising more than 200 priests and their wives were killed, and 63 churches and 14 monasteries were sacked, mostly, however, by marauding Cossacks and vengeful tribesmen rather than local peasants.

The non-Russian peoples of the Volga responded to Pugachev with the same enthusiasm with which they had greeted Stenka Razin a century before. By Catherine’s time most of the tribesmen had been baptized and classed as state peasants, and economically they were better off than their Russian counterparts. Yet they continued to harbor strong resentment against the Muscovite intruders, so that when Pugachev arrived with promises of land and liberty and freedom of worship they hailed him as their “own father.” A group of Chuvash villagers near Kazan cast their lot with the rebels because their Russian landlord had taken their livestock and compelled them to till his fields as virtual slaves. “Nor are we the only ones to suffer such insults,” they said, “but there are many villages that weep because of him.” Similarly, Votiak tribesmen testified that they joined because forced baptisms, heavy tribute, and the confiscation of their lands had reduced them to “unbearable exhaustion and privation.”
Another group that played an important part in the rebellion were the so-called однодворцы, or homesteaders, who were especially numerous in the black-soil districts of Tambov and Voronezh, where they constituted a majority of the taxpaying population. As we have seen, several of the pretenders who preceded Pugachev came from the homesteader class, and whenever a would-be messiah appeared in their midst they were eager to respond. The reasons are not hard to discover. Descended of impoverished gentry, стreltsy, and other petty service men, the homesteaders were relics of the age of Muscovite colonization beyond the Oka River, where they had been settled during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for defense against the Kalmyks and Tatars. In return for service, they had received, like the gentry, a plot of land and other privileges, including exemption from taxes and the right to own serfs. Additional homesteaders were settled on the northern Don and Donets by Peter the Great after Bulavin’s insurrection in that region. By the end of his reign, however, Peter, hungry for recruits and taxpayers, reclassified them as state peasants, with all the obligations of that group, and ever since, they had been trying unsuccessfully to regain their former status.

The однодворцы, then, occupied an anomalous position on the social ladder. An in-between class with features of both the peasantry and the lesser nobility, they aspired to the position of the latter while sinking to the level of the former. Like the gentry, they held their own land in return for service, and some continued to own a few serfs, though they were now prohibited by law from purchasing more. But, like the peasantry, they were liable to the poll tax and оврок and to regular military service. Caught in a squeeze between the peasantry and the gentry, distrusted by the one and despised by the other, the homesteaders suffered a kind of social schizophrenia from which they desperately tried to escape. Many became Old Believers, in quest of a happier past. Some worked as bailiffs for the nobility, others as merchants in the provincial towns, but the majority carried on their traditional occupations of cattle breeding, sheep herding, and agriculture, while being victimized by their gentry neighbors, who coveted their land and livestock, and who prevented them from entering their ranks. Again and again the homesteaders petitioned Catherine to recognize them as petty noblemen, but their appeals went unanswered. Small wonder, given their blurred identity and uncertain position, that they were susceptible to the blandishments of a pretender. Like the Cossacks and tribesmen, they were victims of an order in which they held no secure place, and they dreamed of a bygone age when they were distinguishable from the common herd of peasants.

Thus Pugachev’s following was a varied lot, ranging from serfs and tribesmen to small landholders and petty merchants. What held them together was a common hatred of the nobility and of the existing social order. Whether prosperous or impoverished, all were victims of the so-called aristocratic reaction which followed the emancipation of the gentry from obligatory service. For serfs this had meant closer supervision and heavier exactions, for state peasants the threat of conversion to serfs, for Cossacks and однодворцы the barring of their ascent to the nobility, for tribesmen further encroachments on their shrinking domains. All had been overtaken by the juggernaut of modernization, by the growth of the centralized state and of a more sophisticated economy of which they were not the beneficiaries. All had suffered a loss of autonomy and status as well as of economic prosperity. And all, as a result, looked back to a lost past which they yearned to recapture.

Pugachev was fully alive to their grievances; indeed, he himself shared them. And in a language they dreamed of hearing he put forward a program which played on each group’s aspirations while promising land, liberty, and equality to all. But the aims of his followers were not always egalitarian. Said one captured rebel: “Who Pugachev was did not trouble us, nor did we even care to know. We rose in order to come out on top and take the place of those who had tormented us. We wanted to be masters and to choose our own faith. But we lost. What’s to be done? Their luck is our misfortune. Had we won, we would have had our own tsar and occupied whatever rank and station we desired.” Another said he knew Pugachev was a simple Cossack but “served him faithfully, hoping that when he conquered the state, he, Ulianov, would become a great man.” Such sentiments, however, were strongest among the Cossacks and однодворцы, whose chief aim was to raise their status. Among the rural and
urban poor, by contrast, social equality remained an instinctive and deeply rooted virtue.

It was a diverse and loose-knit movement that Pugachev inspired during his five-week sweep down the Volga. From Kazan to Cherny Yar hundreds of bands sprang up, with little or no central control, a "Pugachevschina without Pugachev," as several historians have described it. Ranging in size from a handful to several hundred (twenty or thirty was considered quite large), they were led by self-styled "aitmans" or "colonels" who acted independently but invoked Peter III's name. Some of the leaders went so far as to call themselves the emperor. In a Penza village, for instance, "Peter Fyodorovich" was a local peasant named Ivanov, a fact of which his followers were aware, but so desperately did they crave a deliverer that they "fell on their knees and swore an oath of loyalty to the sovereign." Little effort was made by the scattered contingents to consolidate their forces or to coordinate their operations. Nor did they attempt to secure a territorial base from which to extend their movement into the center. The rebellion, rather, remained splintered in hundreds of local risings in which the overriding object was plunder. Peasants normally confined their activity to their own villages, settling old scores with the landlords or bailiffs, but sometimes they went to the larger towns to join the marauding "Cossacks," and in a few cases they were recruited by forced levy into the roving partisan detachments. In every Volga district granaries were pillaged, livestock confiscated, timber felled, and manor houses burned. In the towns treasuries were emptied and the houses of the wealthy sacked and burned. "You cannot imagine the intensity with which the whole population of this region are rebelling," reported one government commander.

Acts of violence occurred on an unparalleled scale. For the growth of serfdom, now at its apogee, had sharpened class antagonisms, and hatred of the nobility was never so strong. Where Bolotnikov, Razin, and Bulavin could invite the gentry to join them, for Pugachev this was quite unthinkable. His one conciliatory gesture came at the start of the rebellion when, surprisingly, he considered compensating landowners for the seizure of their estates. But such generosity was short-lived. By the time the revolt reached the Volga, the gateway to peasant

Russia, it had changed to bitter hostility, sending the gentry fleeing from their homes in terror. Besides the development of serfdom, the widening cultural gap between master and serf played a part, not to mention the traditional hatred of boyars and officials, so that any significant collaboration, as had occurred in the past, was out of the question. Few nobles, then, could be found among the insurgents. In one band, captured in September 1774, only three of a hundred were from the gentry, and even this was exceptional. Those who did join came mostly from the lower ranks, and though one can only speculate about their motives, few if any were prototypes of the "conscience-striicken" noblemen of the following century, moved by compassion for the poor and by a need for personal repentance. On the contrary, some were clearly tempted by material gain, some (like the villain of The Captain's Daughter) were paying off private grudges, while others served under duress: Ensign Mikhail Shvanovich, a captured grenadier who drafted a letter in German to the governor of Orenburg, apparently did so to save his own neck.

Pugachev's own hatred of the gentry was unbridled. As he moved down the Volga he issued numerous appeals to exterminate the landlords, which helps account for the violence committed against them. His famous July manifesto called on the peasants to "seize them, punish them, hang them, treat them in the same way as they, having no Christian feeling, oppressed you." Bounties were promised for their scalps, and serfs were told to "take their homes and estates as your reward." Thus, with the "emperor's" seal of approval, a great manhunt took place, and gentry blood was spilled as never before. Landlords and their families were tortured, strangled, drowned, impaled, set aflame, beaten to death, or conveyed to rebel headquarters for execution by hanging. In the towns of the Volga hundreds of officers and bureaucrats were seized and executed. Occasionally Pugachev himself held court, sitting on a portable throne guarded by Cossacks with axes. All told, several thousand landlords, officials, merchants, and priests lost their lives during the terrible summer of 1774. The figures given by General P. I. Panin were 1572 gentry (including many wives and children), 1037 officers and officials, and 237 clergyman. Other sources reckoned the total at 2791, among them a scattering of peasants who were com-
paratively well off or who were loyal to their masters, though such cases were not numerous. None of the available estimates is complete, however, and the actual figure probably exceeded 3000. Startling though this is, during the same period, according to Panin, 10,000 rebels were killed and almost as many captured. 102

What stands out regarding the gentry victims is that most of them were small landholders. Of the 392 estates attacked in Voronezh province (which included the large districts of Tambov and Shatsk) more than half had less than 50 male serfs; and, even more significant, of the 54 proprietors who were killed only three owned more than 100 serfs. 103 This was partly because the larger estates were better defended—in some cases even with light artillery—and partly because their owners were often absentees who lived in the cities or on other estates in the central provinces which the rebellion failed to reach. Another reason was simply that the number of small estates in the Volga region, indeed throughout the country, was very large. The majority of landowners in Penza province, for instance, owned fewer than 20 male serfs, and a third of all the proprietors of European Russia as a whole had no more than half that number. 104 But the character of the petty nobility also played a part. Like their counterparts in France, the so-called sparrow hawks, they were usually more grasping and made heavier demands on their peasants than the larger proprietors. This was especially true in the black-soil districts, where the small landlords were heavily in debt and where barshechina was emerging as the chief peasant obligation. For all these reasons the minor nobility became the objects of the strongest animosity and the most horrifying acts of revenge.

In its cyclonic fury the Pugachevskaya surpassed the most terrible scenes of Razin’s revolt a century before. “Everyone was gripped with fear,” wrote an eyewitness. “Death hung continually over the heads of the landowners. All of them fled their estates, and the estates were laid waste.” 105 The worst violence occurred in such areas as Alatyr, Saransk, Penza, Tambov, and Kersk, where memories of Razin were still alive. In these districts, observed General Golitsyn, the destruction was immense and a “large number of gentry perished.” Another officer reported seeing “countless bodies” everywhere—hanged, decapitated, mutilated. 106 In Penza province alone there were 600 vic-

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tims, while more than 300 were massacred in Saransk. On July 27 a rebel mob attacked the provincial seat of Saransk and in a drunken spree—alcohol often magnified the violence—hanged the town’s leading aristocrat, a retired general named Sipasgin, along with 62 others. In the province of Alatyr a resourceful officer was able to save a few lives only by telling the peasants that it was forbidden to kill their masters themselves but that they should bring them into town, where Pugachev would pay them ten rubles for each male and five for each female. Since the pretender was indeed known to offer such bounties, this advice was accepted, giving some of the landlords a chance to flee. Elsewhere local peasants and tribesmen used the opportunity to settle old accounts, however petty, with the most brutal methods. In one town, for instance, a rebel party invaded a government distillery and hanged its manager on the complaint of local Mordva that he had refused to pay for wood which they had delivered. After consuming a quantity of wine the raiders proceeded to slaughter three more employees, an example of how alcohol increased the violence.

Apart from the killing, the plunder and destruction of property were more extensive than ever. Whole herds of cattle were seized or driven off, stores of grain confiscated, and money, clothing, and valuables taken in large quantities. At one estate the peasants unearthed a cache of 10,000 rubles, which they divided in equal shares. But manor houses were attacked for more than booty. Title deeds, account books, and tax rolls went up in smoke, and gentry factories were torn down with the same destructive passion with which the Bashkirs had wrecked the enterprises of the Urals. The smashing of dishes, porcelain, and statuary, moreover, bespoke not only the rage of the peasants but their determination to drive their oppressors from their lives with all their alien works.

Unfortunately for the victims, there were few government troops to stop the devastation and slaughter. And those who were available often were local tribesmen or state peasants of poor quality and dubious loyalty. In only a few districts, such as Shatsk, for example, were self-defense units formed, with gentry or Tatar marzy as cavalry and their peasants as infantry armed with axes and pikes. Most landowners fled to the towns, spreading panic with tales of the horrors they had witnessed. In Saransk, a
province which experienced heavy destruction, “not one nobleman thought of self-defense,” complained Mikhelson, “but all of them scattered like sheep into the woods.” Many were afraid to arm their serfs, warning that it was a dangerous practice which might backfire. “They will be the first to go over,” wrote Andrei Bolotov, “and turn their weapons against us.” The whole nobility was gripped with terror: “Thoughts about Pugachev never left our heads, and we were all convinced that all the vulgar rabble, and especially our own bondsmen and servants, secretly sympathized with the scoundrel and in their hearts were all in revolt and ready at the tiniest spark to burst into flames.”

The rebels showed no mercy for peasants who aided their master. They threatened to impale even those who continued to pay him dues or till his fields, let alone take up arms in his defense. Following a raid on his estate, one landowner lamented that he had lost not only his family and possessions but all his peasants who showed him the least compassion.

Yet some humane landlords were protected by their serfs, the Radischev estate near Penza being a case in point. Though Alexander Radischev, the “Russian philosophe” whom Catherine was to banish to Siberia for favoring the abolition of serfdom, was away at the time, the serfs concealed his father in the woods and disguised his younger brothers and sisters as peasant children until the danger had passed. But few families were so fortunate. Landlords found on their estates, however well liked by their serfs, were seldom spared. “I cannot adequately express to your excellency,” wrote Mikhelson to General Panin, “how much hatred lies rooted in the hearts of these people. All the barbarities in these villages against the gentry and other worthy men have been committed with the aid of the peasants, who try by every means to catch the masters and bailiffs hiding in the forests and to convey them to Pugachev to be hanged.” More typical than the case of the Radischevs was that of the Merzvagos family of Alatyr province, one of whom, a boy of fourteen, survived to describe the nightmare he experienced. In July 1774 the peasants of the district, aroused by news of Pugachev’s coming, went on a rampage of burning and looting and hanged the bailiff of an adjoining estate. Fleeing to the woods, the Merzvagos sent a servant to the village for supplies, which only brought a posse in pursuit. Shouts of hostile voices and the whistling of bullets sent the family scurrying for safety. The boy, separated from the rest, lay silent, terrified, till finally caught by a peasant. He promised a reward for his release when order should be restored. “Liars!” the peasant snarled. “That will never be—your time is past.” Brought to Alatyr, he was rescued from death by the arrival of government forces. Though reunited with his mother, brothers, and sisters, he learned that his father had been overtaken in the forest and hanged. A similar account was left by a German tutor on a large estate near Arzamas: murder of a neighboring landowner with his wife and daughter, headlong flight into the forest, terror, near capture, and ultimate rescue.

While similar scenes were being repeated up and down the Volga valley, Pugachev continued on his southerly trek, encountering few government troops and little resistance from the local populace. Everywhere he went he received the same enthusiastic reception. Innumerable processions greeted him with bread and salt, icons and crosses, and the jubilant clanging of church bells. Most of the larger towns opened their gates at his approach and surrendered without a struggle. Those that chose to resist—and even some that did not—were given over to plunder. Jails were thrown open, treasuries pillaged, officials hanged, houses ransacked, warehouses emptied, and wine and salt distributed free to the poor. As he went from town to town Pugachev gathered adherents. His own detachment, which numbered 800 at Saransk, swelled to 2000 at Penza and more than 4000 at Saratov, where he rejoined the path of the river. In the meantime, his agents fanned out toward the central provinces in an effort to extend the rebellion. In the district of Kaluga, not far from Moscow, the gentry were put on the alert against possible outbreaks. Serpukhov and Kolomna redoubled their watch for rebel agitators, and roadblocks were set up throughout the area at which all strangers and transients, all “lower types of men” and all “who shout and sing songs,” were stopped for questioning. At the same time Catherine ordered 70,000 rifles from the factories at Tula to keep the gunsmiths busy so that “for four years or more they will not raise a rumpus.”

Penza and Saratov were the last major towns that Pugachev entered unopposed. For lack of adequate defenses and fear of
7. Defeat

As he neared his home territory, Pugachev's hopes of winning the support of his fellow Don Cossacks, as Razin and Bulavin had done, ran high. From Dmitrievsk he ordered three detachments to sweep down the Medveditsa, the Ilovlia, and the Khoper, the main tributaries of the upper Don, in an effort to ignite the area, while the bulk of his army continued down the Volga toward Tsaritsyn. At the same time he appealed to the Don Cossacks to join his movement, promising to eliminate "German" customs and to restore their autonomy, subsidies, and old ritual. In a few upstream settlements his emissaries were met "not only with bread and salt but also with flags." But the participation of the Host failed to materialize. In the first place, peace with Turkey was concluded on July 10, and seasoned regiments—one of them led by Colonel Ilya Denisov, who during the Seven Years' War had had Pugachev flogged for losing his horse—were rushed to the Don to form a barrier against the rebels. Furthermore, owing to bad harvests and to the demands of the war, food on the Don was extremely scarce, and the Cossacks were reluctant to share what little they had with the insurgents. But the underlying reason was a transformation in the character of the Host. Over the past century, although divisions between the oligarchy and the rank and file persisted, the Don community had gradually evolved from its former turbulence to a more settled life with substantial agricultural and commercial interests. Indeed, it was because of this change that the torch of rebellion had passed to the volatile Yaik Cossacks, whose frontier existence resembled that of their Don cousins three or four generations earlier. For all these reasons few Don Cossacks responded to Pugachev's appeal for help. The overwhelming majority, following their ataman and elders, remained loyal to the government, and some actually joined in suppressing the revolt, for which they received an appreciative letter from the empress.

Meanwhile the peasants too were losing their taste for rebellion. For one thing, the conclusion of peace with the Turks took the edge off popular discontent. But more important was the lack of grain and livestock created in large measure by the general pandemonium. By the middle of August famine on the
Volga had sapped the strength and enthusiasm of the rebel bands. The population of the area, reported Count Pavel Panin, Catherine's new commander-in-chief, was reduced to eating shrubs, acorns, and moss.\textsuperscript{117}

At the same time, victory over the Turks gave the government new confidence in dealing with the insurrection. It was on July 29 that General Panin, the victor of Bender and younger brother of Catherine's foreign minister, was put in charge of the suppression. Shortly thereafter, experienced troops were transferred from the front “to wipe out the villainous insurgents.”\textsuperscript{118} In the middle of August Panin issued a manifesto denouncing Pugachev as a “man of Hell in whom, without doubt, there lies the spirit of evil that is inimical to human nature.”\textsuperscript{119} Panin promised amnesty to rebels who laid down their arms, and he offered money and exemption from taxes and recruitment to whoever turned in the pretender either dead or alive. As in the past, moreover, the church was called into service against the rebels. Pugachev and his accomplices were anathematized by the Holy Synod and condemned to “eternal damnation.” A circular went out to parish priests reminding them of their sacred duty to oppose the insurgents. Pugachev, it read, was a chosen instrument of the Devil, “a wolf who falls upon the sheep of Christ's flock.” A second proclamation warned that only damnation awaited the impostor’s supporters: “He is the scourge of humanity. He is an enemy of God and the Church and the fatherland. Pay him no heed if you wish to hold the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven and eternal salvation.”\textsuperscript{120}

Meanwhile Pugachev experienced the first serious setback of his Volga campaign. Arriving at Tsaritsyn on August 21, he expected it to follow the example of the upstream towns and yield without resistance. But the garrison, reinforced by a contingent of Don Cossacks, launched a heavy bombardment which compelled him to withdraw. While he regrouped his forces for a second attack, a message arrived with news of Mikhailson’s approach. Breaking off his maneuvers, Pugachev fled down the Volga toward Cherny Yar, with the Muscovites in pursuit. Though he outnumbered his adversary by more than six to one, his men were hungry and exhausted, and their quality was never poorer. Of some 6000 adherents only 300 were Cossacks and even fewer were Bashkir horsemen or Urals workers with mortars and cannon. The majority were poorly armed peasants, some traveling with their families in slow-moving wagons. As for the rest—tribesmen, convicts, boatmen, “and other scum,” in the description of a hostile observer\textsuperscript{121}—their military capacity was scarcely any better; indeed, their hopeless inefficiency against a disciplined army would soon make itself felt.

Mikhailson was clearly the pretender’s most formidable opponent. With his small regiment he dogged the insurgents relentlessly, allowing them no respite. “From January 1774,” in the words of a French contemporary,

he pursued the rebels without intermission, how numerous soever their swarms, how remote the expedition, and whatever fortune attended his enterprise. It almost exceeds belief with what toilsome perseverance Mikhailson pursued his march over the deserts of trackless snow, without a guide, without succours, at times almost without food; how his company, always small, and often spent with fatigue, whenever they met with the great host of the rebels, always attacked, and always beat them: only by the prudence and the bravery of the colonel, and the confidence he had acquired from his troops.\textsuperscript{122}

That this tribute was well deserved Mikhailson now showed in his last and most decisive victory. On August 24, after a three-day forced march, he caught up with the rebels a dozen miles above Cherny Yar. In a desperate maneuver Pugachev turned on his pursuer and charged in full strength. But Mikhailson stood his ground and, mounting a fierce counterattack, sent his opponent reeling. After a brief struggle Pugachev was completely routed. His motley army had been cut to pieces, with thousands killed or captured and all their cannon taken. What was left of his following, except for a battered remnant, quickly melted away. But the pretender again escaped, driven into the Urals, from which, rumor had it, he intended to follow the path of Nekrasov and flee to Persia or Turkey.

For his triumph over the rebels Mikhailson was lavishly rewarded, receiving a large estate near Vitebsk with a thousand serfs, as well as the Order of St. George and promotion to full colonel. Like Bibikov before him, he was the hero of the aris-
tocracy, lionized for his courage and for the efficiency with which he had defeated the enemy. In glowing terms the German tutor from Arzamas paid tribute to Mikhelson's achievement. "I must confess," he wrote of the victory, "that this piece of news brought me greater joy than I had ever experienced in my life. Proud of the German name of our deliverer, my heart overflowed with admiration for his character, and as long as I live I shall pronounce the name of Mikhelson with the utmost respect." 121

But Pugachev was still at large, having disappeared into the no-man's-land east of the Volga. To his fellow survivors he proposed fleeing south to Turkey or west to Zaporozhie or across the Urals into Siberia. But all such thoughts were rejected. Tired and hungry and embittered by their defeat, his confederates fell to quarreling. Some said it was "better to abandon our lawlessness and transgressions and to accept our well-earned execution rather than perish unrepentant on the steppe like wild animals." 124 Disillusioned with their leader, they began to question his identity before the others. If he is the true sovereign, they asked, why did he suffer defeat? Why is he unable to write his name? And why do the Don Cossacks call him Emelian Ivanovich? Having raised these doubts, they decided it was better not to die at all for a false messiah. Instead they would turn him in and save their own necks.

Thus it was that Pugachev, like Razin and Bulavin before him, was betrayed by his fellow Cossacks. He was seized with his wife and children and brought to Yaisk and put in irons. From Yaisk he was taken under heavy guard to Simbirsk, where Panin was anxious to question him. There, after preliminary interrogation, he was put in an iron cage specially built for the occasion and carried like a wild beast to Moscow. The cage being too small, Pugachev was forced to crouch throughout the long journey; and in this position, clothed in rags and inspiring more pity than awe, he arrived in the old capital. All Moscow went out to have a look at him, recalled Andrei Bolotov, and gaped "as at some sort of monster." 125 In government circles his capture was greeted with jubilation. "The marquis," wrote Catherine sardonically, "has been caught, shackled, and im-

prisoned"; he is "trussed and bound like a bear, and in Moscow a scaffold awaits him." In a letter to Voltaire, however, she conceded that Pugachev was "an uncommonly brave and resourceful person," though illiterate and as destructive as Tamerlane. 126 The poet Sumarokov composed a special ode on the occasion of his capture, and in Kazan portraits of the pretender were burned in a triumphant celebration.

Meanwhile General Panin had been given unlimited powers of repression, and he was using them to the hilt. Lest severity should touch off fresh outbursts, Catherine entered a mild plea for clemency, directing that "executions not take place save in extreme circumstances." 127 But her halfhearted recommendation did not weigh heavily, given the mood of revenge which gripped the nobility after the massacres on the Volga. In a fury of reprisal whole villages were leveled and, in addition to gibbets and breakwheels, wooden glagoli were erected, special devices in the shape of the Russian "G" with metal hooks for hanging victims by the rib. Cossacks, tribesmen, and peasants were flogged and tortured; their nostrils were slit and their ears torn off; their foreheads were branded and their hair and beards shorn. The fortunate got off with beatings and fines. In a typical case from the files of the secret police, a peasant named Rodion Loshtarev was sentenced to fifty strokes of the knout and exile at forced labor "because he willingly joined the rebel mob, received the rank of ataman, and returned to his village of Baitalovskoe with a copy of a sham manifesto from which he proclaimed the monster Pugachev to be Emperor Peter III; and he incited the peasants to steal money and wine and to pillage the home of Assessor Bryzgalov, whose books and papers they burned." 128 It was several months before the whirlwind of punishment had spent itself, during which tens of thousands were killed or banished at hard labor. In Bashkoria the revolt continued long after Pugachev's capture. General Suvorov, who arrived on the scene after the pretender's defeat, was sent to pacify the tribesmen. A determined effort was made to track down the principal leaders, notably Kinzia and Salavat. The former vanished without a trace, but Salavat was not so fortunate. At the end of November he was surrounded and captured in the woods.
and taken to Ufa, where he was branded, beaten with the knout, and sent in chains with his father to Rogervik, a traditional place of deportation for rebellious Bashkirs. As late as 1797 both were still alive, according to a recently discovered list of prisoners, as was Pugachev's secretary Ivan Pochivialin.129

At the end of December Pugachev was tried in the Kremlin by a court of landowners, officials, and high-ranking clergy. The outcome was hardly in doubt. "In a few days the farce of the Marquis de Pugachev will be over," wrote Catherine on December 21. "His sentence is already prepared—only a few formalities must be observed."130 The pretender's sole defense was to try to shift the blame to the Yaik Cossacks who, so he claimed, had made a pawn of him and now sought to use him as a scapegoat. Whatever truth lay in these charges, they were of no avail. The court announced the anticipated sentence: "Emelian Pugachev will be quartered, his head mounted on a stake, the parts of his body carried to the four quarters of the city and put on wheels and then burned."131

There was one small concession, however. The empress, who had already refused to allow torture at Pugachev's interrogation and trial, directed the executioner to decapitate him first rather than quarter him alive, lest he should become, like Razin, too much of a popular martyr. Some influential aristocrats, by contrast, wanted to make an example of the pretender and to strike terror in the lower classes by administering the severest punishment. Prince A. A. Viazemsky, the procurator of the Senate, wrote Catherine that even quartering was not enough. He urged her to break Pugachev on the wheel "and thereby distinguish him from the others," namely the four Yaik Cossacks—Shigaev, Perfiliev, Padurov, and Tornov—who were to be executed with him.132 But her orders were carried out. On January 10, 1775, Pugachev was taken to a square on the banks of the Moscow River below the Kremlin walls. There he was beheaded at a blow and then quartered. His head was mounted on a pike and the sections of his body put on wheels and exposed in different parts of Moscow for all to see. The next day the scaffold and the wheels were burned. The execution was witnessed by a large crowd. So many noblemen attended that Andrei Bolotov, noting that Pugachev had revolted chiefly against that class, called the spectacle "the true triumph of the gentry over this their common foe and villain."133

It remains to describe the fate of Pugachev's accomplices. Apart from the four who were executed with him, Zarubin was beheaded in Ufa and Beloborodov in Moscow. Lesser figures, such as Miasnikov and Kozhevnikov, were exiled to Siberia or the far north, while the nine Cossacks who had betrayed the impostor were pardoned. Pugachev's three children and both his wives were imprisoned in the fortress of Keksgolm, which they were never to leave. They were still listed on prison records as late as 1796, the year that Catherine died. One daughter survived until 1834. That year Tsar Nicholas I, hearing that Pushkin was writing a history of Pugachev, informed him that the pretender's sister had just died, meaning, of course, his daughter, who had languished in the Keksgolm dungeons for sixty years.134

Catherine, by a series of edicts, vainly sought to erase the memory of the pretender. On January 15, 1775, five days after his execution, she decreed that the Yaik River be renamed the Ural, the Yaik Cossacks the Ural Cossacks, and their capital city Uralk. Zimovetskaya Stanitsa, the birthplace of both Pugachev and Razin, was moved to the other side of the Don and renamed Potemkinskaya after the empress's favorite. What remained of Cossack independence was largely destroyed. The Zaporozhian and Volga Cossacks were transferred to the Kuban and the Caucasus, and a permanent garrison was installed in Uralsk, where the Cossacks were reorganized and henceforth kept under tight government control. Finally, by an edict of March 15, 1775, all matters concerning the rebellion were consigned to "eternal oblivion and profound silence."135

Yet, for all these measures, traces of the rising remained long after. Though an amnesty was granted at the end of 1775, sporadic flare-ups occurred on the Volga the following spring and summer. As late as 1778 Sir James Harris, the new British ambassador, warned that the sparks of discontent "are not yet extinguished; and it is much to be apprehended, that, in case of any national calamity, they would blow out afresh."136 For the remainder of Catherine's reign the peasants were fairly quiet,
but the three-year rule of her son Paul saw nearly 300 disturbances in 32 provinces, often requiring stringent repressions to put them down. The memory of Pugachev and his forerunners could not be eradicated. It was to survive not only in the scattered outbursts of the nineteenth century but in the great upheavals of 1905 and 1917, and even beyond, as the next chapter of this work will attempt to show.

8. Conclusion

The revolt of Pugachev was the last and the most famous of the Cossack and peasant risings which shook the Russian state during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was, indeed, the most formidable mass upheaval in all of Europe between the Puritan and French revolutions, and the largest in Russia prior to the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, surpassing its predecessors in scope and violence, claiming the greatest number of gentry victims, and leaving a specter to haunt future generations of landlords and officials. In most respects, however, Pugachev's rising conformed to the pattern of its forerunners. It was an extremely complex affair, combining a Cossack mutiny with social rebellion, religious protest, and anticolonial resistance. Its immediate cause, the dispute on the Yaik, was of course unique; but its long-range causes—the rise of serfdom and autocracy, the heavy burdens of war, the loss of land and freedom and of former habits and customs—were the same as in the past. Once again, it was a sectional as well as a social conflict, pitting the expanding center against the vanishing frontier. In geographical terms the Pugachevshchina was probably the most extensive rising Russia had ever known, engulfing the whole basin of the middle Volga together with the Yaik valley and the southern and central Urals, an eruption vaster than even Razin's a century before. Pugachev's greatest strength lay in the newly colonized region east of the Volga and Kama, where government conquest had been too recent and too rapid to be secure. The pretender's pledge to make Yaitsk his capital was a token of the sectional nature of the conflict. But his failure to penetrate the center, the territory within the

Oka perimeter, spelled the downfall of his movement. As a result, regional autonomy continued to decline under the weight of the expanding autocracy, and by the end of the eighteenth century there was no more "untamed steppe" except in central Asia or the remote stretches of Siberia.

The extension of the Russian frontier heralded the final destruction of Cossack independence. By the middle of the eighteenth century, after the defeats of Razin and Bulavin, the Don community had fallen within the orbit of government control. Now the Yaik Host met the same fate. The failure of Pugachev's revolt sounded the death knell of Cossack autonomy. In the aftermath the Cossacks were transplanted to remote corners of the empire or reduced to loyal instruments of the central government. The Cossack oligarchies came more and more to resemble their former gentry rivals, while the rank and file were gradually deprived of much that distinguished them from ordinary peasants. Flight beyond the Caucasus, following Nekrasov's example, became the only means of escape, but few were attracted by the prospect of starting life anew in an alien land and subject to the whims of an alien monarch. Henceforth the Cossacks ceased to be the catalysts of social rebellion. The wind from the steppe, as a modern historian has noted, would carry no more firebrands to the towns and villages farther north.137 On the contrary, the Cossacks became a pillar of the autocracy, a praetorian guard to quell popular disturbances, a symbol of imperial authority rather than of freedom and independence as before. In the future the prophets of revolt would spring from a new class of radical intellectuals, "Pugachevs of the university," as Joseph de Maistre dubbed them.138

Yet, for all these similarities with the revolts of the past, there were a number of significant differences. For one thing the element of banditry was less conspicuous, especially in comparison with Razin's movement, though the looting of towns and estates took place on a wide scale. For another—and this is perhaps the most striking difference—the Pugachevshchina failed to take firm root in the towns, where Bolotnikov and Razin had won their greatest support. Of the more important Urals cities only Chelyabinsk was occupied by the insurgents, and even that for a short period. The same was true on the Volga, where rebel detach-
ments moved swiftly from one town to the next, never establishing a solid territorial base from which to extend their activities into the heartland. The reasons for this have already been noted, the most important being that with the passage of time the frontier towns had lost much of their turbulent character and had evolved a more settled population with a larger stake in social stability. Moreover, with the rise of trade and manufacture and the emergence of a nationwide market, merchants and craftsmen developed stronger ties with the center, such as the commercial towns of northern Russia had enjoyed since the sixteenth century, making them bulwarks of the Muscovite order.

The social composition of the revolt was much the same as in the past, with Cossacks, peasants, and tribesmen constituting the bulk of the adherents. Yet here too there were noticeable differences. To begin with, Pugachev's was the first of the mass revolts to include a significant proletarian element, foreshadowing, however dimly, the revolutions of the twentieth century. The ascribed workers of the Urals, it is true, retained their peasant identity and outlook; but they were early prototypes of the future industrial workers. Moreover, by manufacturing arms for the rebels without the help of factory administrators, they not only played a key role in the rebellion but inaugurated a primitive form of workers' control which anticipated the more sophisticated experiments of 1917. The Bashkirs, too, took part in unprecedented numbers, continuing their century-long revolt against Russian colonization. Bulavin's outbreak, it will be recalled, had coincided with a large-scale Bashkir rising. But now the two movements—Russian and Bashkir—were combined under a single banner. It was the first time that such an alliance had been concluded—and also the last. The defeat of Pugachev marked an important step in Russia's eastward expansion at the expense of the seminomadic tribes beyond the Volga.

Another group which joined forces with the Cossacks for both the first and last time were the odnodvorst' homesteaders, whose participation in the Pugachevichchina was a last-ditch effort to recover their independence. They failed, however, and over the next few decades they rapidly faded from view, merging by and large with the state peasantry or the petty tradesmen of the provincial towns. A large proportion of the odnodvorst', as well as of the Yaik Cossacks, were Old Believers, who occupied a prominent place in a mass uprising for the second time in the century. Yet the extent of their participation must not be exaggerated. Most schisms, apart from Cossacks and homesteaders, preferred nonviolent methods of protest against government persecution. They shrank from open rebellion not only on religious grounds but also out of concern for their own possessions, many of them enjoying considerable prosperity as merchants and tradesmen. In some cases, potential supporters were alienated by the excesses of Pugachev's followers, by their indiscriminate killing and destruction, or they were mollified by Catherine's comparatively enlightened attitude toward religious nonconformity, and therefore maintained a passive stance throughout the revolt. As for Pugachev himself, he was probably not an Old Believer but merely exploited religious grievances as a means of drawing adherents into his camp. He issued appeals to the Old Believers, as he did to Moslems and Orthodox Christians, to broaden his base of support.

Whatever their religious affiliation, disaffected elements in the empire shared a common desire to recapture an idyllic past. They looked back with nostalgic yearning to a Garden of Eden before the emergence of centralized autocracy. More than anything else, it was this desire that Pugachev attempted to satisfy. His program, though somewhat more elaborate than those of his predecessors, was still rather vague and primitive. As Catherine put it, he promised his followers "castles in the air." He was not opposed to tsardom itself but to the unbearable shape it had recently assumed. Like Razin before him, he aimed to inaugurate a popular government with a popular tsar. Above all, this meant eliminating the tyrannical landlords and officials, converting the serfs into state peasants with free use of the land, and replacing the autocracy with local self-rule in the Cossack manner. His propaganda, however, seemed better calculated to arouse a thirst for revenge than to present a clear vision of the future society. Serfdom being further developed, class antagonisms were correspondingly sharper; and his leaflets and manifestoes inspired a greater destructive passion, particularly among the peasantry, than ever before. At the same time, his was a cultural protest as well as a Cossack mutiny and a peasant jacquerie. His program, like those of Razin and Bulavin, was a reflection of growing nativist resentment against foreign innovations and the modernization of
Russian Rebels

Russian life, resentment which found expression in popular hatred of German officers and bureaucrats—the Traubenbergs and Freimans, the Reindorfs and Brandts—not to speak of the murder of the astronomer Löwitz or the raiding of German settlements on the lower Volga. But cultural antagonisms took a back place to economic and social grievances and must not be given undue emphasis.

As before, myths and rumors occupied a central place in the rebellion. What is remarkable, however, is that the same myth—of a just tsar whom the aristocracy had conspired to eliminate in order to oppress the people—should have dominated all four upheavals spanning nearly two centuries. It was the persistence of this legend that paved the way for the appearance of a pretender—indeed, as in the Time of Troubles, a whole series of pretenders—which attests to the people’s faith in a messianic ruler who would rescue them from their tormentors. But this time there was a difference, for Pugachev, unlike his forerunners, did not claim merely to represent the legitimate sovereign; instead he cast himself in the role, which may help to account for his large following.

Yet he never stirred the popular imagination as much as Razin had. Nor did he command the same devotion or acquire so exalted a place in folklore and legend. This is not easy to explain. Men were perhaps more deeply impressed by Razin’s swashbuckling adventures or moved to greater compassion by his more terrible death. Moreover, with none of Pugachev’s imperial trappings to taint his image, Razin perhaps seemed a truer “peasant tsar,” even if he himself never claimed the role. Pugachev, some may have felt, was animated as much by personal ambition as by compassion for the oppressed. Indeed, the followers of Bakunin in the 1870s sometimes distinguished between the two great rebels, criticizing Pugachev’s statist pretensions while praising Razin’s selfless devotion to the poor. Yet the “third emperor” was, after all, a product of his times. Coming a century after Razin, he reflected the values of imperial rather than of Muscovite Russia, and behaved as he thought “Peter Fyodorovich” himself would have done.

This, however, is by no means to suggest that Pugachev was not a popular figure. On the contrary, he was widely regarded as Razin’s legitimate heir. When he appeared among the Yalk Cos-

sacks, noted a contemporary observer, he “renewed to their imagination the transactions of the Don Cossack Stenka Razin.” Nor was the parallel lost on the empress. “His history,” she wrote of the pretender, “corresponded exactly to the history of the brigand Stenka Razin.” 140 For the lower classes the analogy went even further: he was nothing less than a reincarnation of his predecessor, “the second coming of Razin after a hundred years.” 141 The progression from Razin to Pugachev, as has been noted, was a kind of apostolic succession in which the myth of the Christ-like rebel, martyred for the sake of the people, passed from one century to the next. Legend attributes to Pugachev some of the same magical powers which Razin had supposedly possessed—for instance, by drawing a horse on his prison wall he might escape from his enemies.142 The peasants saw him as their returned messiah and called him (as they had called Razin) their “resplendent sun,” a symbol of good against evil, of life against death, of renewal and resurrection. A lament sung in the Urals after Pugachev’s execution is a striking illustration of this point:

Emelian, our own dear father,
Wherefore have you forsaken us?
Our resplendent sun has gone down.

In the same spirit, for many years after his death the peasants of Saratov reckoned the date as before or after Pugachev in place of Christ.143

Yet, for all his charismatic qualities, Pugachev went down in defeat. And his failure was all too predictable, the reasons being much the same as in the rebellions of the past. Most important, perhaps, was a lamentable absence of unity in the rebel camp. Once again it was a heterogeneous assortment of Cossacks, peasants, and tribesmen that made common cause against the authorities. Although their weapons and organization were somewhat better than before, they were still no match for the trained and disciplined army at the government’s disposal. Moreover, the insurgents were plagued by chronic internal rivalries. In the Urals it was a division of interests between the skilled and unskilled workers that prevented unity of action, in addition to which the ascribed peasants were more bent on settling private scores with their employers or on returning to their native vil-
lages than on undertaking the broader task of defeating the government. At the same time, both national and religious differences hampered effective collaboration between Pugachev’s Russian and Bashkir followers. At one point tensions ran so high that Salavat was moved to appeal for unity: “In our hearts there is no malice toward Russians. There is no reason for Bashkirs and Russians to quarrel and to destroy each other.” But his plea fell on deaf ears. Throughout the rebellion real harmony was never achieved.

Nor was there effective coordination among the scattered rebel detachments. And considerable energy was wasted in pillage and destruction, which reached such a pitch that some of the more prosperous adherents—Bashkir elders, petty merchants, independent peasants—turned in fear against their allies and passed to the government side. Beyond all this, the disappointing response in the towns and the lack of a constructive program have already been noted. Finally, like his predecessors, Pugachev chose to remain in the peripheries rather than attack the vital core of the empire. On this last point Sir Robert Gunning laid special emphasis to account for the pretender’s failure:

the miscreant who was lately the author of so much confusion and devastation was, for want of common understanding, incapable of forming any plan; for had that of marching hither, either occurred, or been suggested to him, and that he had executed it, there is not the least doubt that he would have been joined here by the whole of the populace . . . in which case the flames must have spread through the whole Empire.

For all these reasons Pugachev met the same end as his forerunners. But he, by contrast, had no successors. He was the last of the great Cossack rebels. And for 130 years, though there were numerous local disturbances, the military-bureaucratic state remained sufficiently strong to forestall another general outbreak.

Despite the immense shock of the Pugachevskaya, the autocracy emerged unimpaired. To the upper classes, in fact, the traditional justification of absolute rule seemed more persuasive than ever. The urge of the masses for spontaneous rebellion, it was argued, required a strong centralized government to maintain domestic order, not to speak of defending the empire against its foreign enemies. Thus the revolt buttressed the shaky alliance between crown and gentry against the lower orders of society. Pugachev’s appeal for a class war against the nobility led to a healing of the frictions which had plagued the empress throughout the first decade of her reign. Instead of seeking to limit her powers, the aristocracy looked to Catherine for protection against the rebellion. Catherine, in turn, declaring herself the “first landowner” of Russia, relied more heavily on the nobility, who received a corporate status and a wide range of authority in matters of local government.

Pugachev’s revolt, coming at the height of the Turkish War, was the most critical moment of Catherine’s reign. Afterward she took an increasingly dim view of popular movements whenever they occurred, denouncing the American and French revolutions and describing the deputies of the National Assembly as so many Pugachevs. At the same time, however, the rising brought home to her the need for reform. In a series of measures she lowered the price of salt, eliminated wartime taxes, and amnestied debtors, military deserters, and fugitive state peasants. Already in 1773, the year of Pugachev’s outbreak, she had begun to soften government policy toward non-Russian peoples. The revolt gave further impetus to this trend. For the conversion of Moslem tribesmen the authorities relied increasingly on persuasion and incentives. Baptisms were rewarded by exemptions from taxes and conscription, and the construction of mosques and of Moslem schools was permitted over a broad area. The revolt also stimulated reform in the Urals metal factories, where fines and punishments were curtailed, hours reduced, and wages substantially increased. In 1807 the whole system of ascribed labor was finally scrapped.

But above all, the revolt paved the way for the reform of local administration. Under the impact of mass insurrection the inefficiency of the provincial authorities had been glaringly exposed. Officials had panicked and even abandoned their posts, leaving the populace defenseless before the rebel onslaught. Wherever the pretender had encountered firmness, Catherine noted, he had achieved little success, but “weakness, indolence, dereliction of duty, idleness, bribery, disagreements, extortions, and injustice on the part of individual officials” had facilitated the spread of rebellion in many areas. Appalled by the behavior of her ad-
administrators, the empress introduced a comprehensive reform in the Statute of Provinces of 1775, which aimed at placing the management of local affairs in the hands of the nobility under the general supervision of government representatives.

For the peasantry, however, there was no fundamental relief. On the contrary, their lot became harder than ever. Owing to the extension of serfdom to the Ukraine and to Catherine's grants of state peasants to her favorites, the number of private bondsmen sharply increased. Moreover, the powers of the nobility over their serfs were in no way diminished. Indeed, the bloodshed of 1774 led some to favor even further restrictions on the lower classes. On the other hand there were a few who, either from sympathy or fear, called for the immediate alleviation of the peasantry's plight. Radishchev was the most celebrated case in point. "Enticed by a crude pretender," he wrote in his Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow,

they hastened to follow him, and wished only to free themselves from the yoke of their masters and in their ignorance they could think of no other means to do this than to kill their masters. They spared neither sex nor age. They sought more the joy of vengeance than the benefit of broken shackles. This is what awaits us; this is what we must expect. Danger is steadily mounting, peril is already hovering over our heads. Time has already raised its scythe and is only awaiting an opportunity. The first demagogue or humanitarian who rises up to awaken the unfortunate will hasten the scythe's fierce sweep. Beware! 148

But Radishchev's call went unheeded. He himself was arrested and sent into exile. Catherine, in the end, confined herself to limited measures of reform, and even these were carried through to strengthen her administration in the face of popular discontent. In the long run, perhaps, the fear of another Pugachev revolt helped to bring about the emancipation of the peasantry. But for the time being, autocracy and serfdom remained intact. Indeed, the whole question of fundamental reform was postponed for nearly a century. And by then, it would seem, it was already too late to prevent another popular outbreak on a scale unimaginined in the past.

V

The Legacy

Catherine Breshkovskaya (future Socialist Revolutionary) as a child: Did you know Pugachev? Did you hear about him?

Nurse: Oh yes, I heard of him, but it is forbidden to chatter too much. What have you to do with Pugachev?