
The period between the death of Peter the Great and the accession of Catherine the Great, 1725 to 1762, has been considered by some historians as an era of shallowness, confusion, and decay, whereas others attribute to it much of Russia's spiritual growth and political advancement. The truth seems to lie on both sides. Rapid and violent changes, as under Peter, were discontinued, but slowly the process of Westernization went on, gaining in depth and leading to a better proportion between the ambitions and the actual potentials of the country.

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With the second quarter of the eighteenth century a new period of Russian social history begins.

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RUSSIAN HISTORY from the death of Peter the Great to the accession of Catherine the Great has been comparatively neglected. Moreover, the treatments available turn out not infrequently to be superficial in nature and derivitive in tone. Sandwiched between two celebrated reigns, this period—"when lovers ruled Russia," to quote one writer—offers little to impress, dazzle, or inspire. Rather it appears to be taken up with a continuous struggle of unfit candidates for the crown, with the constant rise and fall of their equally deplorable favorites, with court intrigues of every sort, with Biren's police terror, Elizabeth's absorption in French fashions, and Peter III's imbecility. Florinsky's description of the age, although verging on caricature, has its points. In the course of thirty-seven years Russia had, sardonic commentators remark, six autocrats: three women, a boy of twelve, an infant, and a mental weakling.

But the tragicomedies at the top should not be allowed to obscure important developments which affected the country at large. Westernization continued to spread to more people and broader areas of Russian life. Foreign relations followed the Petrov pattern, bringing Russia into an ever-closer relationship with other European powers. And the gentry made a successful bid to escape service and increase their advantages.

Catherine 1. Peter II

When the first emperor died without naming his successor, several candidates for the throne emerged. The dominant two were Peter, Alexei's son and Peter the Great's grandson, and Catherine, Peter the Great's second wife. The deceased sovereign's daughters, Anne and Elizabeth, and his nieces, daughters of his half-brother Tsar Ivan V, Catherine and Anne, appeared as more remote possibilities at the time, although before very long two of them were to rule Russia, while descendants of the other two also occupied the throne. Peter was the only direct male heir and thus the logical successor to his grandfather. He had the support of the old nobility, including several of their number prominent in the first emperor's reign, and probably the support of the masses, Catherine, who had been crowned empress in a special ceremony in 1724—in the opinion of some, a clear indication of Peter the Great's intentions with regard to succession—possessed the backing of "the new men," such as Taganrozhsky and especially Menshikov, who had risen with the reforms and dreaded everything connected with Peter's son Alexei and old Muscovy. The Probratshenskii and Senevovskii guard regiments decided the issue by demonstrating in favor of the empress. Opposition to her collapsed, and the dignitaries of the state proclaimed Catherine the sovereign of Russia, "according to the desire of Peter the Great." The guards, as we shall see, were subsequently to play a decisive role in determining who ruled Russia on more than one occasion.

Catherine's reign, during which Menshikov played the leading role in the government, lasted only two years and three months. The empress's most important act was probably the creation, in February 1726, of the Supreme Secret Council to deal with "matters of exceptional significance." The six members of the council, Menshikov and five others, became in effect constant advisors and in a sense associates of the monarch, a departure from Peter the Great's administrative organization and practice. Catherine I died in 1727, having appointed young Peter to succeed her and nominated as regent the Supreme Secret Council, to which Anne and Elizabeth, her daughters and the new ruler's aunts, were added.

Peter II, not yet twelve when he became emperor, fell into the hands of Menshikov, who even transferred the monarch from the palace to his residence and betrothed him to his daughter. But Peter II did not like Menshikov; he placed his confidence in young Prince Ivan Dolgoruky. The Dolgoruky family used this opportunity to have Menshikov arrested. The once all-powerful favorite and the closest assistant of Peter the Great died some two years later in exile in northern Siberia, and the Dolgorukys
replaced him at the court and in the government. Two members of that family sat in the Supreme Secret Council, and late in 1729 the engagement of Peter II to a princess Dolgorukaya was officially announced. But again the picture changed suddenly and drastically. Early in 1730, before the marriage could take place and when Peter II was not quite fifteen years old, he died of smallpox.

Anne, Ivan VI

The young emperor had designated no successor. Moreover, with his death the male line of the Romanovs came to an end. In the disturbed and complicated deliberations which ensued, the advice of Prince Dmitri Golitsyn to offer the throne to Anne, daughter of Ivan V and childless widow of the Duke of Courland, prevailed in the Supreme Secret Council and with other state dignitaries. Anne appeared to be weak and innocuous, and thus likely to leave power in the hands of the aristocratic clique. Moreover, the Supreme Secret Council, acting on its own, invited Anne to reign only under certain rigid and highly restrictive conditions. The would-be empress had to promise not to marry and not to appoint a successor. The Supreme Secret Council was to retain a membership of eight and to control state affairs: the new sovereign could not without its approval declare war or make peace, levy taxes or commit state funds, grant or confiscate estates, or appoint anyone to a rank higher than that of colonel. The guards as well as all other armed forces were to be under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Secret Council, not of the empress. These drastic conditions, which had no precedent in Russian history, stood poles apart from Peter the Great's view of the position and function of the monarch and his translation of this view into practice. But Anne, who had very little to lose, accepted the limitations, thus establishing constitutional rule in Russia.

Russian constitutionalism, however, proved to be extremely short-lived. Because the Supreme Secret Council had acted in its narrow and exclusive interest, tension ran high among the gentry. Some critics spoke and wrote of extending political advantages to the entire gentry, while others simply denounced the proceedings. Anne utilized a demonstration by the guards and other members of the gentry, shortly after her arrival, to tear up the conditions she had accepted, asserting that she had thought them to represent the desires of her subjects, whereas they turned out to be the stratagem of a selfish cabal. And she abolished the Supreme Secret Council. Autocracy came back into its own.

Empress Anne's ten-year reign left a bitter memory. Traditionally, it has been presented as a period of cruel and stupid rule by individual Ger-
Holy Gates of the Rizopolozhenskii Monastery in Suzdal, seventeenth century.

Preobrazhenskii Church, 1714, in Kirysh near Petrozavodsk. It has 22 cupolas.
Sixteenth-century view of the city of Moscow.

Red Square in Moscow, 1844.

Church of St. Basil the Blessed, Moscow, 1555–60.
Zagorsk, with Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery, Kremlin, and Assumption Cathedral. Fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and later.

Moscow Kremlin

Soviet architecture: Moscow State University, on Lenin Hills.

Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, 1852.
mans and even "the German party" in Russia. And while this interpretation should not be overdone—for, after all, the 1730's, in foreign policy, social legislation, and in other major respects constituted an integral part of the Russian evolution in the eighteenth century rather than anything specifically German—it remains true that Anne brought with her from Courland a band of favorites, and that in general she patronized Germans as well as other foreigners and distrusted the Russian nobility. The sovereign herself proved largely unfit and thoroughly disinclined to manage state affairs. Certain departments, such as the foreign office with Osternmann at the head and the army with Münnich, profited from able German leadership of the Petrine vintage; but many new favorites had no qualifications for their positions, acted simply in their personal interest, and buttressed their remarkable ignorance of Russia with their disdain of everything Russian. Ernst-Johann Biron, or Biron, the empress's lover from Courland, acquired the highest honors and emoluments and became the most hated figure and symbol of the reign. Bironzavchchina—that is, Bironism—refers especially to the police persecution and political terror during the reign, which led to the execution of several thousand people and to the exile of some twenty or thirty thousand to Siberia. Although many of the victims were Old Believers and even common criminals rather than political opponents, and although the cruelty of Biron and his associates perhaps should not be considered exceptional for the age, the persecutions excited the popular imagination and made the reign compare unfavorably, for example, with the rule of Elizabeth which was to follow it. It might be added that after the abolition of the Supreme Secret Council Anne did not restore the Senate to its former importance as the superior governing institution, but proceeded to rely on a cabinet of two or three members to take charge of state affairs.

Anne died in the autumn of 1740. Shortly before her death she had nominated a two-month-old infant, Ivan, to be her successor on the throne. Ivan was a great-grandson of Ivan V and a grandson of Anne's elder sister, Catherine, who in 1716 had married the Duke of Mecklenburg, Charles Leopold. A daughter from this marriage, Anna Leopoldovna, became the wife of Duke Anthony Ulric of Brunswick-Bevers-Lüneburg. The new emperor was the child of Anna Leopoldovna and Anthony Ulric. But, although both of his parents resided at the Russian court, Empress Anne appointed Biron as regent. The arrangement failed to last. First, within a month Biron was overthrown by Münnich and Anna Leopoldovna became regent. Then, in another year, late in 1741, Ivan VI, Anna Leopoldovna, and the entire "German party" were toppled from authority and power. This last coup was executed by the guards led by Peter the Great's daughter Elizabeth, who then ascended the throne as Empress Elizabeth of Russia.
Elizabeth. Peter III

Just as Anne and her reign have been excessively blamed in Russian historiography, Elizabeth has received more than her fair share of praise. Kind, young, handsome, and charming, the new monarch symbolized to many contemporaries and later commentators the end of a scandalous "foreign" domination in Russia and even, to an extent, a return to the glorious days of Peter the Great, an association which the empress herself stressed as much as she could. But in truth there was little resemblance between the indolent, easy-going, and disorganized, although by no means stupid, daughter and the fantastically energetic, active, and forceful father. Although the cabinet was abolished, the Senate was restored to its former importance, and certain other administrative changes were made that also harked back to the reign of Peter the Great, the spirit and vigor of the celebrated reformer could not be recaptured, nor in fact was a serious attempt made to recapture them. Moreover, the social and economic evolution of the country continued under Elizabeth as under Anne: neither ruler made a strong personal impress on it. Even Elizabeth's abolition of capital punishment, enlightened and commendable in itself as strikingly different from the practices of Anne's government, pales into insignificance when compared to the enormous, persistent, and in fact growing evil of serfdom.

Favors continued to occupy the stage, although their identity changed, and the new group proved on the whole more attractive than the one sponsored by Empress Anne. Alexis Razumovsky, who may have been morganatically married to Elizabeth, was closest to the monarch. His rise to eminence represents an earlier and truer version of Anderson's tale of the princess and the swineherd. He was a simple cossack in origin, who tended the village flock in his native Ukraine. Because of his magnificent voice, the future favorite was brought to the court as a singer. Elizabeth fell in love with him, and her attachment lasted until her death. Yet, while Alexis Razumovsky became a very close associate and perhaps even the husband of the empress, his impact on state affairs remains difficult to discern. Indeed one historian, in a rather typical evaluation, dismisses the favorite as follows:

He became the bearer of all Russian decorations, a General Field Marshal, and he was raised to the position of Count of the Holy Roman Empire. He was very imperious, even lived in the palace. But he was distinguished by an honest, noble, and lazy character. He had little influence on the governing of the country: he constantly dodged state affairs. He did much good in Ukraine and in Russia, and in his tastes and habits he remained more a simple Ukrainian than a Russian lord. In the history of the Russian court he was a remarkable individual, in the history of the state — an entirely insignificant actor.
his father was a son of Charles XII's sister. After Elizabeth's decision, he was educated to succeed to the throne of the Romanovs. Although he lived in Russia from the age of fourteen, Peter III never adjusted to his new country. Extremely limited mentally, as well as crude and violent in his behavior, he continued to fear and despise Russia and the Russians while he held up Prussia and in particular Frederick II as his ideal. His reign of several months, best remembered in the long run for the law abolishing the compulsory state service of the gentry, impressed many of his contemporaries as a violent attack on everything Russian and a deliberate sacrifice of Russian interests to those of Prussia. While not given to political persecution and in fact willing to sign a law abolishing the security police, the new emperor threatened to disband the guards, and even demanded that icons be withdrawn from churches and that Russian priests dress like Lutheran pastors, both of which orders the Holy Synod did not dare execute. In foreign policy Peter III's admiration for Frederick the Great led to the withdrawal of Russia from the Seven Years' War, an act which probably saved Prussia from a crushing defeat and deprived Russia of great potential gains. Indeed, the Russian emperor refused to accept even what Frederick the Great was willing to give him for withdrawing and proceeded to make an alliance with the Prussian king.

While Peter III rapidly made enemies, his wife Catherine, who had married him in 1745 and who was originally a princess of the small German principality of Anhalt-Zerbst, behaved with far greater intelligence and understanding. Isolated and threatened by her boorish husband, who had a series of love affairs and wanted to marry one of his favorites, she adapted herself to her difficult environment, learned much about the government and the country, and found supporters. In mid-summer 1762 Catherine profited from the general dissatisfaction with Peter III to lead the guards in another palace revolution. The emperor was easily deposed and shortly after killed, very possibly by one of the leaders of the insurrection, Alexis Orlov, in a drunken argument. Catherine became empress, bypassing her son Paul, born in 1754 during her marriage with Peter III, who was proclaimed merely heir to the throne. Although the coup of 1762 appeared to be simply another one in a protracted sequence of overturns characteristic of Russian history in the eighteenth century, and although Catherine's chances of securing her power seemed, if anything, less promising than those of a number of her immediate predecessors, in fact her initial success meant the beginning of a long and celebrated reign. That reign will form the subject of another chapter.

The Gains of the Gentry and the Growth of Servdom

While rulers changed rapidly and favorites constantly rose and fell in Russia between 1725 and 1762, basic social processes went on in a con-

tinuous and consistent manner. Most important was the growth of the power and standing of the gentry together with its complementary process, a further deterioration in the position of the serfs. As we know, Peter the Great's insistence that only one son inherit his father's estate could hardly be enforced even in the reformer's reign and was formally repealed in 1731. Empress Anne began giving away state lands to her gentry supporters on a large scale, the peasants on the lands becoming serfs, and Elizabeth enthusiastically continued the practice. These grants were no longer connected to service obligations.

In 1731 Empress Anne opened a cadet school for the gentry in St. Petersburg. The graduates of this school could become officers without serving in the lower ranks, a privilege directly opposed to Peter the Great's intentions and practice. As the century progressed the gentry came to rely increasingly on such cadet schools for both education and advancement in service. Also to their advantage was the Gentry Bank that was established by Empress Elizabeth in St. Petersburg, with a branch in Moscow, to supply the landlords with credit at a moderate rate of interest. The gentry became increasingly class-conscious and exclusive. An order of 1746 forbade all but the gentry to acquire "men and peasants with and without land." In 1758 the members of other classes who owned serfs were required to sell them. A Senate decision of 1756 affirmed that only those who proved their gentry origin could be entered into gentry registers, while decisions in the years 1758–60 in effect eliminated the opportunity to obtain hereditary gentry status through state service, thus destroying another one of Peter the Great's characteristic arrangements. At the same time "per-

sonal," or non-hereditary, members of the class came to be rigidly re-
stricted in their gentry rights.

The most significant evolution took place in regard to the service ob-
ligations of the gentry to the state. In 1736 this service, hitherto termless, was limited to twenty-five years—the gentry themselves had asked for twenty years—with a further provision exempting one son from service so he could manage the estates. Immediately following the publication of the law and in subsequent decades, many members of the gentry left serv-

ice to return to their landholdings. Moreover, some landlords managed to be entered in regimental books from the age of eight or ten to complete the twenty-five-year period of service early in their lives. Finally, on March 1, 1762 —February 18, Old Style—in the reign of Peter III, compuls-
sory gentry service was abolished. Henceforth members of the gentry could serve the state, or not serve it, at will, and they could even serve foreign governments abroad instead, if they so desired. The edict also urged upon the gentry the importance of education and proper care of their estates.

The law of 1762 has attracted much attention from historians. To many older scholars, exemplified by Kliuchevsky, it underlined the basic struc-
ture of Russian society, in which everyone served: the serfs served the landlords, the landlords served the state. In equity the repeal of compulsory gentry service should have been followed promptly by the emancipation of the serfs. Yet — again to cite Kluchevsky — although the abolition of serfdom did take place on the following day, the nineteenth of February, that day came ninety-nine years later. The serfs themselves, it would seem, shared the feeling that an injustice had been committed, for the demand for freedom of the peasants, to follow the freedom of the gentry, became a recurrent motif of their uprisings. By contrast, some specialists, such as V. Leontovich and Malin, have emphasized the positive results of the law of 1762: it represented the acquisition of an essential independence from the state by at least one class of Russian society, and thus the first crucial step taken by Russia on the road to liberalism; besides, it contributed to the growth of a rich gentry culture and, beyond that, to the emergence of the intelligentsia.

As the gentry rose, the serfs sank to a greater depth of misery. In the reigns of Peter II they were already prohibited from volunteering for military service and thus escaping their condition. By a series of laws under Empress Anne peasants were forbidden to buy real estate or mills, establish factories, or become parties to government leases and contracts. Later, in the time of Elizabeth, serfs were ordered to obtain their master’s permission before assuming financial obligations. Especially following the law of 1731, landlords acquired increasing financial control over their serfs, for whose taxes they were held responsible. After 1736 serfs had to receive the permission of their masters before they could leave for temporary employment elsewhere. Landlords obtained further the right to transfer serfs from one estate to another and, by one of Elizabeth’s laws, even to exile delinquent serfs to Siberia and to fetch them back, while the government included these exiles in the number of recruits required from a given estate. The criminal code of 1754 listed serfs only under the heading of property of the gentry. Russian serfdom, although never quite the same as slavery and in the Russian case not concerned with race or ethnicity, came to approximate it closely, as demonstrated in the works of Kolchin and other scholars.

The Foreign Policy of Russia from Peter to Catherine

Russian foreign policy from Peter the Great to Catherine the Great followed certain clearly established lines. The first emperor, as we know, brought Russia forcefully into the community of European nations as a major power that was concerned with the affairs of the continent at large, not, as formerly, merely with the activities of its neighbors, such as Turkey, Poland, and Sweden. From the time of Peter the Great, permanent — rather than only occasional — representatives were exchanged between Russia and other leading European states. Ostensibly in the years immediately following the death of Peter the Great, and Bestuzhev-Riumin in the time of Elizabeth, together with lesser officials and diplomats, followed generally in the steps of Peter.

As Karpovich, to mention one historian, has pointed out, Russian foreign policy from 1726 to 1762, and immediately before and after that period, approached what has been called the checkerboard system: Russia was to a considerable degree an enemy of its neighbors and a friend of its neighbors’ neighbors, with other relations affected by this basic pattern. France, for example, consistently remained an antagonist of Russia, because in its struggle for the mastery of the continent it relied on Turkey, Poland, and Sweden to envelop and weaken its arch-enemy, the Hapsburgs. France had maintained an alliance with Turkey from 1526, in the days of Suleiman the Magnificent; with Poland from 1573, when Henry of Valois was elected to the Polish throne; and with Sweden from the time of the Thirty Years’ War in the early seventeenth century. Russia, of course, had repeatedly fought against the three eastern European allies of France.

Austria, ruled by the Hapsburgs, stood out, by contrast, as the most reliable Russian ally. The two states shared hostility toward France and, more importantly for Russia, also toward Turkey and Sweden, which, beginning with its major intervention in the Thirty Years’ War, acted repeatedly in Germany against the interests of the Hapsburgs. In Poland also both Russia and Austria found themselves opposed to the French party. The first formal alliance between the two eastern European monarchies was signed in 1726, and it remained, with certain exceptions, a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy until the Crimean War in mid-nineteenth century.

Prussia, the other leading German power, represented a threat to Russia rather than a potential ally. Prussia’s rise to great power rank under Frederick the Great after 1740, together with Russia’s rise under Peter the Great which had just preceded it, upset the political equilibrium in Europe. Bestuzhev-Riumin was one of the first continental statesmen to point to the Russian menace. He worried especially about the Russian position on the Baltic, called Frederick the Great “the sudden prince,” and spoke in a typically eighteenth-century doctrinaire manner of Russia’s “natural friends,” Austria and Great Britain, and its “natural enemies,” France and Prussia. The hostile Russian attitude toward Prussia lasted, with some interruptions, until the time of Catherine the Great and the partitions of Poland which satisfied both monarchies and brought them together. In the period under consideration, Great Britain could well be called a “natural friend” of Russia. After the scare occasioned by the achievements of Peter the Great and his navy, no serious conflicts arose between the two until the last part of the century. On the contrary, Great Britain
valued Russia both as a counterweight to France and as a trade partner from which it obtained raw materials, including naval stores, in exchange for manufactured goods. Thus it is no surprise that Russia concluded its first modern commercial treaty with Great Britain.

In line with its interests and alliances, Russia participated in five wars between 1725 and 1762. In 1733–35 Russia and Austria fought against France in the War of the Polish Succession, which resulted in the defeat of the French candidate Stanisław Leszczyński and the coronation of Augustus II's son as Augustus III of Poland. In 1736–39 Russia, again allied to Austria, waged a war against Turkey who was supported by France. Münch and other Russian commanders scored remarkable victories over the Ottoman forces. However, because of Austrian defeats and French mediation, Russia, after losing approximately 100,000 men, gained very little according to the provisions of the Treaty of Belgrade: a section of the steppe between the Donets and the Bug, and the right to retain Azov, captured during the war, on condition of evacuating its fortifications and promising not to build a fleet on the Black Sea. In 1741–43, Russia, supported by Austria, fought Sweden, who was supported by France. Sweden started the war to seek revenge, but was defeated, and by the Treaty of Abo ceded some additional Finnish territory to Russia.

In its new role as a great power Russia became involved also in wars fought away from its borders over issues not immediately related to Russian interests. Thus in 1746–48 she participated in the last stages of the War of the Austrian Succession, begun in 1740 when Frederick the Great seized Silesia from Austria. That conflict saw Bestuzhev-Rumiantzov's theory of alliances come true: Russia joined Austria and Great Britain against Prussia and France. The Russian part in this war proved to be, however, entirely inconsequential.

A much greater importance must be attached to the Russian intervention in the Seven Years' War, 1756–63, fought again largely over Silesia. The conflict was preceded by the celebrated diplomatic revolution of 1756 which saw France ally itself with its traditional enemy Austria, while Prussia turned for support to Great Britain. In the war Russia joined Austria, France, Sweden, and Saxony against Prussia, Great Britain, and Hanover. Yet it should be noted that Russia never declared war on Great Britain and that she found it natural to aid Austria against Prussia, so that in the case of the empire of the tsars the diplomatic revolution had a rather narrow meaning. Russian armies participated in great battles, such as those of Zorndorf and Kunersdorf, and in 1760 Russian troops even briefly held Berlin. Moreover, Russia and its allies managed to drive Prussia to the brink of collapse. Only the death of Empress Elizabeth early in 1762, and the accession to the throne of Peter III, who admired Frederick the Great, saved the Prussian king. Russia withdrew without any compensation from the war and made an alliance with Prussia, which in turn was discontinued when Catherine the Great replaced Peter III.

Although Russian foreign policy between 1725 and 1762 has been severely criticized for its cost in men and money, its meddling in European affairs which had no immediate bearing on Russia, and its alleged sacrifice of national interests to those either of Austria or of the "German party" at home, these criticisms on the whole are not convincing. In its new role Russia could hardly disengage itself from major European affairs and conflicts. In general Russian diplomats successfully pursued the interests of their country, and the wars themselves brought notable gains, for example, the strengthening of the Russian position in Poland and the defeat of the Swedish challenge, even though Peter III did write off in a fantastic manner the opportunities produced by the Seven Years' War. Catherine the Great would continue the basic policies of her predecessors. Militarily the Russians acquired themselves well. The Russian army, reorganized, improved, and tempered in the wars, scored its first major victories against Turkey in 1736–39, and played its first major part in the heart of Europe in the course of the Seven Years' War. Such famous commanders as Peter Rumiantsev and Alexander Suworov began their careers in this interim period between two celebrated reigns.