The Reforming Tsar: The Redefinition of Autocratic Duty in Eighteenth-Century Russia

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Don't lead the people to expect miracles. It is necessary to expunge from people's minds a belief in the "good tsar," in the assumption that someone at the top will impose order and organize change.

—Mikhail Gorbachev, 1988

The idea of the "good tsar" originated in Muscovite times and obviously has since become a commonplace of Russian political culture.\(^1\) However, Gorbachev's statement does not really define a "good tsar" but what should instead be called a "reforming tsar," a term that more aptly characterizes the changed expectations of a ruler in the Imperial period of Russian history.

This distinction illustrates a significant aspect of the transition in Russia from a "medieval" to a "modern" frame of political reference. The duties of the Muscovite "good tsar" had been liturgical in form and static in content: to uphold Orthodoxy, to maintain order, to defend the land, to provide justice, to protect the downtrodden and overall to rule po starine.\(^2\) A different concept of rulership arose in the seventeenth century and was realized during the reign of Peter I (1682–1725). The new duties enshrined in a "reforming tsar" were secular in form and progressive in content: to advance Russia along rational west European lines; to modernize economic, social, political and cultural life; and to increase power and prestige abroad. The Russian projection of an imperial idea in the eighteenth century is well known and requires little further elaboration.\(^3\)

This interpretive essay will focus on the redefinition of domestic

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1. Gorbachev's impromptu remark was made while addressing a meeting of Soviet editors; he is quoted in Philip Taubman, "A Soviet Paradox," *The New York Times*, 3 October 1988. The opportunity to examine primary sources for this article and for a forthcoming book on the autocratic principle in eighteenth-century Russia was afforded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright-Hays Program, the City University of New York and the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study Center.


*Slavic Review* 51, no. 1 (Spring 1992)
duty which developed in the course of the eighteenth century and which lent a modern dimension and a new elasticity to the autocracy. Indeed, it can be argued that the idea of the "reforming tsar" was one factor that enabled the autocracy to survive in good health well into the nineteenth century and that abandonment of the idea was one factor that led to its demise in the early twentieth century.

Of most significance, the notion of the "reforming tsar" invested Russian politics with a dynamic, progressive quality. Peter the Great bound the ideas of autocracy and reform into a symbiosis that revolutionized the scope of a ruler's duty. The concept did not then ossify or become Peter-bound but continued to expand both diachronically and synchronically. Each generation expected its own "reforming tsar" to accommodate whatever was perceived as necessary for progress; furthermore, each generation's changing expectations reflected the ongoing penetration of the ideas of the Enlightenment into Russia.

In addition, although the political structure retained its traditional underpinnings, the change from a passive to an active autocrat signaled a different form of conservatism. In the Muscovite realm, the "good tsar" had represented stability and a kingly duty to preserve the status quo. In the twilight of the tsars, Alexander III and Nicholas II seemed drawn to a reactionary quest for some mythical past. But, for over 150 years, from the reign of Peter I to that of Alexander II, the autocracy adhered to what historians call reform conservatism. This doctrine maintained the state's priority over the individual and stubbornly resisted fundamental change; on the other hand, it meant actively pursuing forward-looking goals that lent the autocracy a progressive, albeit still conservative, quality.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the notion of the "reforming tsar" was absorbed by Russian political culture. Like any beliefs or symbols that comprise such a culture, it was partly political ideal, partly operating norm and partly a myth that colored expectations and perceptions of autocratic activity. Because political culture is shared by the community as a whole—although more commonly articulated by the educated elite—this paper surveys an array of primary sources: official documents, diaries, sermons, political tracts, folklore and belles lettres whose widely divergent authorship, motivation, audience and context illustrate the widespread acceptance of this notion by 1800.

The term "reforming tsar" (or reforming emperor or tsar-reformer), of course, is not new; it is usually applied to Peter himself or


to his image of reformer that inspired and haunted his eighteenth-century successors. In addition, the overt claim of imitating Peter's program of reform was often used to legitimate rulers and reigns. By 1801, however, as Nicholas Riasanovsky has noted, Alexander I (1801–1825) no longer identified himself with Peter when casting himself as a "reforming tsar." Reform was accepted as an intrinsic attribute, a principal legitimizing activity and a sign of sovereignty of the autocracy itself. One may be reminded of Max Weber's "routinization of charisma" or Sidney Verba's "institutionalization of innovation" or Marc Raeff's "well-ordered police state;" however, Peter's reforms not only turned Russia toward modernization and westernization but, by 1800, altered the very nature of autocratic duty. For this reason, the term "reforming tsar" has merit not only for occasional use in the historical vocabulary but also as a thematic device which evokes one source of the autocracy's legitimacy and endurance as a central institution in Russian political culture.

Within the European context, Peter the Great's conscious crafting of the role of reforming tsar, with its incumbent duty to follow a western path of development, paradoxically resulted in his pioneering a new monarchical idea throughout the continent. With boundless energy and a capacity to learn, he became the first ruler to seize upon the general political drift toward an enlightened (though still absolute) monarch which called for a redefinition of royal duty both in Russia and in the rest of Europe during this "age of kings."

When Peter came to the throne, France provided the most imitated model of kingship: her history seemed to prove that an absolute monarch, pure and simple, best suited the problems of the age. Earlier, from medieval times to about 1500, the principal duty of a ruler had been to act as judge and champion of the common good over local or

7. Consult, for instance: Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); or the classic by E.F. Shmurlo, Petr Velikii v otsenke sovremennikov i potomstva (St. Petersburg, 1912).
9. Riasanovsky, Image, 64.
11. This paper will not discuss the English monarchical tradition as it differs so markedly from the development of the monarchical idea in continental Europe. Among the many monographs that analyze continental monarchy, one may cite: John N. Figgis, Studies of Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius: 1414–1625 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907); George H. Sabine, A History of Political Theory (New York: Henry Holt, 1937); Harold Nicolson, Monarchy (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962); David Parker, The Making of French Absolutism (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983); and Patrick Simon, Le Mythe royal (Lille: Atelier national, Réproduction des thèses, Université Lille III, 1987).
corporate interests—by which, it should be added, royal power had been constitutionally limited. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, civil wars and near anarchy, brought about by wars of religion and frondist activity, had provided a rationale for a more powerful monarch. Only a single authority had seemed capable of providing order, stability and national unity, and political thinkers had rushed to enhance royal prerogative and person for the effective fulfillment of these new duties.

While admitting that prescription, morality and religion—those blurry "laws of God and nature"—limited a sovereign's power, French theorists later had begun to emphasize the full and absolute nature of that power. Jean Bodin (1530–1596) had forcefully argued that the essence of sovereignty is its supreme and unrestrained nature and its authority to enact positive law; he thus had rendered the more passive judicial function secondary and, at the same time, had placed all power—executive, judicial and legislative—in the hands of an activist monarch who would bind the nation together under his rule.13 Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642) had continued this trend and had suggested that, for raisons d'état, a ruler use his prerogatives, first, to remove all constitutional obstacles to royal power and thus ensure domestic order and stability and, second, to achieve gloire in foreign affairs.14 Bishop Bossuet (1627–1704) elevated the normal human reverence for a ruler into a divine right of kings; "the royal throne is not the throne of a man," he intoned, "but the throne of God himself," which demands obedience as an article of faith.15 Louis XIV (1643–1714) embraced both the doctrines of divine right and raison d'état with inimitable style and became the widely imitated model for the modern absolutist monarch. Louis, however, found alien the other and eventually dominant theory of kingship that Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694) had developed in their Dutch and German contexts during the seventeenth century. As in France, the pandemic wars of religion had instilled in them a belief in the need for an absolute monarch, and they had trusted that the "laws of God and nature" provided sufficient limitation to assure the security of person and property. But they had then put fresh sparkle into the contract theory of government by lending the monarch a legitimacy based on popular consent, not divine right, and an honor-bound central duty to care for the common good in precedence over external affairs.16

16. Consult, for example: David Ogg, Louis XIV (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
By around 1700, this political doctrine emerged as the most progressive in Europe. For example, the enlightened court of the Duc de Bourgogne, Louis XIV's planned successor, accurately concluded that war and the quest for dynastic prestige were ruining France. Instead, like Fénelon’s Téléméaque, the fictional embodiment of the ideal eighteenth-century monarch, a ruler was to nurture the economy, foster the arts and sciences and raise the level of his country’s civilization. In the age of the contractual theory, power needed to justify itself by serving a high moral purpose. This theory, once linked to an ideology of progress, then informed the age of enlightened absolutism which prevailed in the second half of the eighteenth century.17

Like the rest of Europe, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Russia had experienced troubled times that had confirmed the necessity for a single, strong ruler. In Russia, however, the tsar, strapped by religious ritual and trapped in the Kremlin, had been a more passive figure than his European counterparts. Traditional lore had given to the "good" or "true" tsar a collection of standard royal attributes: he was to be a wise patriarch, an impartial and merciful judge, a protector of the downtrodden, open to petitioners and humble enough to seek good advice and avoid flatterers. In the eyes of the people, the ruler's will had become identified with God's, and he was revered as the meek, Most Pious Russian Tsar.18

In the course of the seventeenth century, a more positive and secular concept of the monarch's duties had infiltrated Muscovite political culture as it had that of the west. Its thrust—that the monarch alone could rise above group interests and rule for the "common good"—had first been echoed at the conclusion of the Time of Troubles in 1613 and reinforced by ideas transmitted via the Kievan Academy after the annexation of Ukraine in 1667. Tsar Feodor (1676–1682) had made the first official use of the phrase "the common good" in the 1682 edict abolishing mestnichestvo.19 That same year, when awarding a charter to


19. Polnoe sobranie zakonov, II, 905 (12 January 1682), 368–79, hereafter PSZ. A
the Moscow Slavo-Greco-Latin Academy, whose preamble listed as one of his two principal duties "the expansion of commerce," he had encouraged the Academy to disseminate secular knowledge. His first duty, though, the preservation of the Orthodox faith, had dominated, and the aura of the autocrat had remained heavily liturgical and hide-bound, indeed wrapped in a "nightmarish religiosity."20

Seen in this context, the reign of Peter the Great marked a turning point in the history of both the European and the Russian monarchies. His rule fell midway, both chronologically and conceptually, between the glorious absolutism of the latter half of the seventeenth century, to which he added much, and the enlightened absolutism of the latter half of the eighteenth century, for which he served as an example. He retained an absorption with military affairs but shed the divine aura and aloof royal luster cultivated by Louis XIV. Also in contrast to the Sun King who is credited with the aphorism "l'état c'est moi," Peter cast himself as subordinate to the state an entire generation before Frederick II of Prussia (1740–1786) more famously promoted himself as the "first servant of the state."21 Overall, Peter closely reflected the most progressive doctrines of the era: those of the cameralists, proponents of a well-ordered police state; those of Pufendorf and Grotius, whose works he ordered translated; and those of their disciple, Christian von Wolff (1679–1754), a favorite philosopher of both Peter and Frederick.22

Peter’s application of absolute power to the enormous task of reconstructing a state based on the latest counsel fostered the new model of absolute monarch that came to dominate Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century: the secular, hardworking, reforming ruler capable of creating through force and fiat. Voltaire, the chief sponsor


of enlightened absolutism, marveled at Peter’s audacious example: “He coerced nature in every respect, in his subjects, in himself, on land and on sea. . . . and Russia was created.”

More precisely, a new Europeanized Russia was created. Indeed, in hindsight, Peter’s reforms add up to a revolution, and nowhere is this more evident than in the infusion of a new style and substance into autocratic leadership. To be sure, many Muscovite tsars had been reformers, and serious programs of reform and modernization had existed in the seventeenth century, for example during the regency of Sophia Alekseevna from 1682 to 1689. But Peter’s new dynamism and activism fill the edicts, memoirs and projects of his time with a recognition that reform from above had become the central driving duty of the tsar, not just a normal adaptation to change that would preoccupy any decent ruler and his ministers.

The transformation from a medieval to a modern concept of autocratic power and duty occurred on several planes. First, Peter jetisoned its religious moorings. He had no use for theories of divine right and his attempts to shake off the religious trappings of office began as early as 1697 when he enjoined officials from writing “theology,” as he put it, when referring to his titles in state documents. By the end of his reign, a fully secular formula was adopted, “We, Peter the First, Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russians.” Similarly, one memoirist recorded that Peter ordered people to stop kneeling before him since they should learn the “difference between God and tsar” and that “the homage appropriate to a tsar is devotion to duty.” Even in a sermon, Feofan Prokopovich (1681–1736) asserted that a tsar’s “deeds” held a higher priority than his prayers; for if duty were not done but a tsar prayed, “Oh, how can this prayer be anything other than sinful!” While Peter believed his power ultimately came from God, his was a doctrine of divine duty rather than divine right.

Peter also transformed the paternal duty of a tsar. He abandoned the old image of “Most Pious Tsar” for the more forceful and modern “Father of the Fatherland” (Otechestva). This momentous change shifted emphasis from the preservation of religious morality and


26. PSZ: vol. 3, no. 1611 (22 December 1697), 413; vol. 6, no. 3893 (5 February 1722), 496.

27. L.N. Maikov, Rasskazy Nartova a Petre Velikom (St. Petersburg, 1891), 53 (c. 1701). Earlier, Feodor decreed that petitioners should cease asking him for mercy in words that were similar to prayers, as though he were God: PSZ, vol. 2 (8 June 1680).

28. F. Prokopovich, Slova i rechi (St. Petersburg, 1760), 1: 7–8.
Orthodoxy to the inculcation of a work ethic and civic virtue. Peter considered it fundamental to reform the character and attitudes of the Russian people in order to reform the state; as early as 1702, he claimed it was his goal to modernize “the behavior of our subjects”; twenty years later, he credulously explained to a group of foreigners that “formerly, Russians were given to idleness” and that his first and most frightening task as ruler had been to acquaint them “with knowledge and with courage and with loyalty and with honor.” A tsar needed to act as the example, for “everyone looks to the ruler to follow his inclinations... in what he takes interest all take interest, what he spurns all spurn.” Indeed, in Peter’s opinion, all European peoples had languished in ignorance until “the constant work of their leaders opened their eyes” to arts, sciences and a more civilized way of life. 

Although paternalistic, Peter had no use for the Muscovite patriarchal-votchina realm. He broke the identification of the person of the tsar with the state and insisted that the populace take two separate oaths, one to the ruler and one to the state. On the eve of the Battle of Poltava, he chose to inspire his soldiers by telling them that they were fighting not “for Peter but for the state entrusted to him.” Peter even sacrificed his own son to the state since he could not be expected to continue his father’s reforms. By affirming the right to pick his own successor, Peter disparaged the traditional dynastic or genetic basis of rule in the same way that he tried to disclaim edenic, theological associations. Among the populace, of course, these older views of a Saint-Prince or Orthodox Tsar persisted or, better said, coexisted. Thus, Peter’s justification for power, the telic criterion of the common good, only strengthened the autocracy by adding yet another source of legitimacy.

29. “Manifest o vyzove inostrantsev v Rossii,” Pis’ma i bumagi Imperatora Petra Velikogo (St. Petersburg, 1887–1912), vol. 2, no. 421 (16 April 1702), 41; F.B. Berkhol’ts, Dnevnik vedeniya s 1721–1725 g. (Moscow, 1858), 2: 83–85 (6 February 1722); and Makov, Rasskazy, 101–3 (c. 1718); S.M. Solov’ev, Istoriia Rossii, IX (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo sotsial’no-eekonomicheskoi literatury, 1963), 141–42.
30. Pis’ma i bumagi, vol. 9, no. 3251 (27 June 1709).
31. PSZ, vol. 6, no. 3893 (5 February 1722), 496; N.A. Voskresenskii, Zakonodatel’nye akti Petra I (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1945), 164–69, reprints Peter’s manifesto (3 February 1718) denying his son Aleksei the throne because of his hostility to his father’s reforms.
33. Here, I disagree with one of Cherniavsky’s conclusions, namely that Peter’s secularization resulted in a vision of a sovereign emperor where only “power sanctified power” since Peter provided reform as sanctification: Tsar, 89, 99 passim. For the best
While his edicts repeatedly stress that the rationale for new measures and for his own power was the general welfare and the interest of the polity, Peter went even beyond the notion of ruling for the common good—which can just as easily connote a static as a progressive doctrine—to ruling in order to effect reform. His edicts spoke not of protecting the clergy, but “correcting” their state of affairs; not of providing justice and protection, but “improving” the judicial system and police; not of regulating commerce, crafts and manufacturing, but of “creating a new basis for prosperity.”

Peter was not a theoretician of power but one who exulted in its pragmatic application. He became a reformer in part by attempting to imitate west and central European models of development and in part by reacting to the necessities that emerged in fighting the Great Northern War. His intention from the start was to reform Russia, but once he realized that he had created something new and spectacular—a developing European country transformed from a backward Slavic outpost—he enshrined reform as a principle of and justification for power. Indeed, Peter’s “system” epitomized the dominant European power pattern in the eighteenth century. Naturally, he understood that to become a great power, a country needs an army, taxes to support that army, bureaucrats to collect those taxes, economic prosperity to increase the tax base and arts and sciences to improve that process and keep it in motion. But, above all, by linking the concepts of the well-ordered police state and enlightened absolutism, he proved that the creative forces of an absolute monarch could unleash the potential of even a backward society and thus provide the best assurance for progress in the eighteenth century.

Peter inspired Ivan Pososhkov (1652–1726) to write that “everything in our great Russia must be reformed.” And he was confident it would be, principally because “we have a most powerful and unlimited monarch, while other kings cannot create of their own free will.” However, an autocratic asset, the ability to act rapidly and use force, is also its worst negative feature. Peter himself regretted that both at home and abroad he was called a tyrant or an “Asiatic despot,” when he worked only for the common good, when he ruled not by caprice but out of “a duty . . . to carry out useful reforms and reform rude ways.” He tried to justify his heavy handedness as necessity in a still


34. Nevertheless, M.A. Reisner, in his “Obshchestvennoe blago i absoliutnoe gosudarstvo,” Vestnik prava (1902): 1–128, sees the notion of the common good alone as justifying the autocracy.

35. PSZ: vol. 6, no. 3718 (25 January 1721), 314; no. 3534 (28 February 1720), 111; no. 3708 (16 January 1721); I. Golikov, Deiania Petra Velikago, mudrago preobrazitelia Rossii 8 (Moscow, 1796):10.

backward country: “It is necessary to know how to rule a people. English style freedom would be out of place here, like being up against a brick wall.” All that notwithstanding, the inhuman pace, the demand for sacrifice and the use of force exacerbated pervasive opposition to reform and constant rebellion during his rule.37

Peter promised to appoint a “worthy” successor to the throne, one who would continue his work of reform. Irresponsibly, he died before doing so, and the era of recidivism that he had feared set in. In the first five years after his death, two weak rulers yielded their power to favorites, the traditionally reviled vremenshchiki, and, in practice, Russia was ruled not as an autocracy but as an oligarchy under the auspices of the newly formed Supreme Privy Council.38 Peter’s loyal but low-born wife, the Empress Catherine I, was cast as a caretaker monarch; even official documents referred to her as the “Babka,” not autocrat, of Russia.39 Her dubious succession, the reign of favorites and the plight of the peasantry led to an outburst of public denunciations (“anonymous letters”); according to an edict, “villains in various cities and districts” were uttering “obscene and antagonistic words” against the Empress.40 Catherine’s response showed a desire to reflect the style of rule that she knew from her husband:41 an edict in early 1727, prompted by her “maternal concern” for her subjects, demanded that the Supreme Privy Council end its “private strife for disagreement” which had led to general unrest. “The peasants are mired in poverty and headed for destruction from huge taxes and constant corporal punishment. Other areas—trade, the mint, justice—are likewise in a state of ruin.” What her subjects needed and expected, she wrote, “to rectify the dreadful conditions as soon as possible” were “reforms.”42

When Catherine died in May 1727, and Peter the Great’s young grandson came to the throne, his first speech ignored the concept of


39. PSZ, vol. 8, no. 5070 (7 May 1727), 788.

40. PSZ, vol. 7, no. 5004 (30 January 1727), 731.


a reforming tsar and stated that “though young, my effort now will be
to fulfill the duty of a good Emperor.” But the definition of duty that
his advisors imposed upon him reverted completely to the meek, pre-
Petrine formulation “to rule the people subject to me . . . with justice
and with fear of God; to defend the poor, the wretched and the unjustly
burdened . . . and never to send away from me anyone who has a
grievance.” 43 Early in 1730, at the age of fourteen, Peter II died of
smallpox. Peter the Great’s niece, Anna Ivanovna of Courland, a widow
in her thirties and reputedly weak in will and intellect, was then named
to the throne on the advice of the Supreme Privy Council.

After the forceful, some would say ruthless, reign of Peter the Great,
which was followed by two incapable successors and the expectation
next of a frivolous female, it is not surprising that the Supreme Privy
Council began a movement to institutionalize limitations on autocratic
power. Whether for better or ill, the architects of constitutionalism
failed to convince the rest of the elite that they were anything other
than an oligarchical movement whose possibilities for tyrannical be-
behavior and rule through favorites were even less appealing than an
autocracy. 44 In effect, the autocracy won by default, and an unfettered
Anna Ivanovna ascended the throne.

In the aftermath of the “Events of 1730,” Anna’s advisors rushed
to define her as a reforming tsar. With a flurry of legislative activity,
she issued edicts that met the specific demands raised by the nobility
in the course of the “Events”: the improvement of conditions in the
military, the establishment of a cadet corps, the abrogation of primo-
geniture, the organization of a commission for devising a new law code.
To the other classes, such as merchants and peasants—who were by
and large ignorant of the “Events of 1730”—she offered tax relief;
clergy were also enjoined to repair their churches, set up schools and
reform the liturgy. 45 With these actions, the “Events” faded into the
background and, as one scholar concludes, left untouched “the

43. As quoted in Detstvo, vospitanie i leta iunosti russkikh imperatorov (St. Petersburg,
1914), 24–25.

44. The “Events of 1730” have spawned a large literature, and interpretations are
raucously divided; one might sample: D.A. Korsakov, Votsarenie imperatritsy Anny Ioan-
novny (Kazan, 1880); P.N. Miliukov, “Verkhovniki i shliakhetsvo” in Iz istorii russkoi
intelligentsii (St. Petersburg, 1903), 1–51; Walter Recke, “Die Verfassungsplane der rus-
sischen oligarchen im Jahre 1730 und die Thronbesteigung der Kaiserin Anna Iva-
skoe proekt 1730 goda,” Istochnikovedcheskie raboty 2 (1971): 61–102; David L. Ransel,
Crummey (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 45–71; Alexander Yanov, “The
Drama of the Time of Troubles, 1725–1730,” Canadian-American Slavic Studies 12, no.
1 (1978): 1–59; Isabel de Madariaga, “Portrait of an Eighteenth-Century Russian States-

45. For this legislation see: Korsakov, Votsarenie, 298–303; S.M. Soloviev, History
of Russia, vol. 34, trans. Walter J. Gleason Jr. (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International
Press, 1984), 28–54; and vol. 8 of the PSZ, passim.
triumphant image of a crowned reformer bringing light into the Russian darkness."46

Feofan Prokopovich, the most gifted man of his era and an unabashed supporter of the Petrine autocracy, advised Anna in her first days in power.47 But she soon displayed grand incompetence and a near total reliance on German favorites; yet Feofan continued to justify the autocracy by brandishing the notion of the reforming tsar—an indication that it was beginning to function in part as a myth. In a coronation festival speech, he told his audience to imagine a guest visiting from some exotic place like Ethiopia, Japan or even America and that Russians should say to him:

Look, dear guest, at the stature, bravery and craftsmanship of the Russian army, and please realize that all this is new and hardly existed before; look at the many cities and fortresses, look at the strong and well-organized army. What is your opinion of the border fortifications which you saw on your journey here? What do you think about the newly conquered provinces? Behold our really wondrous mining establishments, our diverse arts and crafts, our revived and numerous mercantile, our import and export trade. What is your opinion about the regulations or statutes that have corrected our judicial and administrative functions? ... Also know that many foreign people, who used to hold us in low repute, now seek alliances and friendship with us, while belligerents have come to fear us. All these benefits and gains come to us from our autocrats.48

Feofan’s “Scholarly Guard” of defenders of autocracy included Vasilii Tatischchev (1686–1750) who also contended, despite Anna’s ineptitude, that “one can see how our monarchical form of government is more beneficial than other forms since with it our wealth, strength and glory increase, while with others they dwindle and perish.”49

The Petrine model of rule not only influenced intellectuals but also started to penetrate peasant lore. Russian peasants since early in the seventeenth century had cherished the notion of a “true” or “just” tsar as one who sympathized with the lot of the common people and, especially, took vengeance on their oppressors.50 At about the time Anna came to the throne, petitions, oral culture and police investiga-

48. F. Prokopovich, “Slovo v den’ vospominaniiia koronatsii Anny Ioannovny (28 April 1734),” Slova i rechi (St. Petersburg, 1760), 211–12.
tions began to indicate an emergent idealization of Peter the Great; even the dozens of pretenders, including Pugachev, who rose up in the eighteenth century began to adopt Petrine imagery.\footnote{51} The more traditional legends depict Peter as working day and night to rectify problems both big and small: he brings two lovers together, saves a child from a burning hut, executes a foreman who mistreated coal miners. A famous folksong of the era tells of the serf Sidorka who defends common people against officials and landowners and who is then visited and thanked by a just, caring Peter for this effort to assist his reforms. More suggestively, even though Peter's policies actually led to greater enserfment, peasant petitions held up his numerous decrees as models, as attempts of tsars "to root out the injustice of the people's burdens." One domestic serf under interrogation cited a specific Petrine measure that allowed peasants to engage more freely in trade and then waxed nostalgic: "Under that Peter, everything sure was okay, but now it ain't."

But police reports show Anna being reviled as an "extortioner," a "dog" surrounded by "foreign scoundrels" who caused "a great weeping" by taking recruits and horses from her people but giving nothing in return and leaving them in "ruin." One serf, hardly a forerunner of feminism, aphorized: "We have no tsar now but a woman and what do women know—they're long on hair and short on brains."\footnote{52} When Anna died in 1740, the regency of her grandnephew, the infant Ivan VI, was likewise dominated by "foreign scoundrels" and a woman "short on brains." A generous observer wrote of Ivan's mother, Anna Leopoldovna, that "she loved to do good, but did not know how to do it properly." Tellingly, advisors made sure that the coronation manifesto adopted the new criterion for tsarist rule by promising to govern "according to Peter's laws" and "for the good of the State." Still the regency was overturned after thirteen months.\footnote{53}

Elizabeth came to the throne in 1741 and also vowed to rule in the spirit of her father, Peter the Great. The Empress, in fact, encouraged the notion that the highest obligation of a Russian ruler was to carry on Peter's work of reform.\footnote{54} She could thus, in Max Weber's terms,


\footnote{52} The quotations are from: 	extit{Petr Veliki v anekdotakh} (St. Petersburg, 1901), 192–246; P.K. Alefirenko, 	extit{Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie i krest'ianskie vopros v Rossii v 30–50kh godakh XVIII veka} (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1958), 292–325; and N.P. Luzhin, "Dva pamfleta vremen Anny Ioannovny," 	extit{Izvestia Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk po otd. russkogo izyka i slovesnosti} 8, no. 1 (1858): 49–64.


\footnote{54} This is one of many interesting themes in Rasmussen, "Catherine II and Peter I: The Idea of a Just Monarch. The Evolution of an Attitude in Catherinian Russia" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1973).
aspire to two types of legitimate authority: the traditional, through heredity; and the charismatic, through routinization of the duty to reform.\textsuperscript{55} For the next twenty years, the Empress—who fostered just enough reform to keep the allusions of continuity with her father alive—was mythologized as Peter's branch (otrasl'), his fruit (plod) or simply The Daughter (dshcher').\textsuperscript{56}

Indeed, for the rest of the century, this "Peter praise" was ubiquitous. Every ode, every manifesto, every sermon that addressed the duties of a new autocrat made its central theme the need to continue Peter's work of reform. While it might be normal to praise predecessors, the salient fact remains that in 125 of 129 works reviewed, no other member of the Riurikid or Romanov dynasty is named. Peter became the criterion and model. For instance, in 1732, Vasili Trediakovskii (1703–1769) prematurely intoned: "What Peter began, Anna will perfect, adorn and multiply." Later, Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–1765) imagined Peter appearing to his daughter Elizabeth and ordering: "And all my works bring to fruition." Alexander Sumarokov (1718–1777) wished of Peter III: "Oh, that you, Peter, would become a Peter the Great." When he did not and was overthrown by his wife and killed, Sumarokov never missed a beat: "With Catherine on the throne / Again is Peter the Great reborn." Another poet, Vasili Maikov (1728–1778), had Peter assert confidently of Catherine II: "She will supplement my laws / She will reform rude ways."\textsuperscript{57}

Trediakovskii listed the spectrum of activity expected from the Petrine model of monarch in a coronation day ode to Elizabeth. His overarching concern was for a monarch to resume the pace of Peter's reform; who and what would benefit implied a tsar's omnipotence: "Officers, officials, noblemen / Cities, buildings and ships / Sciences, trade and gardens / Civilized mores and skills." In another hymn of praise and thanksgiving, one Gregorii Kuz'menskii sang out the words "Peter is alive" and expected under Elizabeth to witness the flourishing of the "Senate, Synod, the Colleges / The military, factories and schools."\textsuperscript{58}

"Peter praise" signified that the Russian monarchy was justified by its perceived ability to reform; this was the crux of the redefinition of autocratic duty in the eighteenth century. Of equal importance, each

\textsuperscript{55} Weber, Theory, 328.

\textsuperscript{56} For a point by point analysis of Elizabeth's continuation of her father's policies, see: E.V. Anisimov, Rossiia v seredine XVIII veka: Bor'ba za nasledie Petra (Moscow: Mysl', 1986).

\textsuperscript{57} V.K. Trediakovskii, Panegirik . . . Anne Ioannovne (St. Petersburg, 1732); M.V. Lomonosov, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, vol. 8 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1959): 55 (1742); A.P. Sumarokov, Polnoe sobranie vsekh sochinenii, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1781): 29 (1761) and 40 (1762); V.I. Maikov, Izbrannye proizvedeniia (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1966), 198 (1767).

\textsuperscript{58} V.K. Trediakovskii, Stikhotvoreniia (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1935), 135–40 (1742); G. Kuz'menskii, Pohval'naia rech' Petru Velikomu (St. Petersburg, 1744), 33 (22 August 1744).
generation felt called upon to redefine the autocrat's program of reform, generally in keeping with the influx of Enlightenment ideas into Russia. Prokopovich and Tatishchev (born in 1681 and 1686) represented the first phase and witnessed the Petrine reforms. Their Early Enlightenment enthusiasm rested with secularization and with the rational criticism of every institution, which would divest traditional forms of their authority and install the new with éclat.

Antiokh Kantemir (1709–1744), Lomonosov (1711–1765) and Sumarokov (1718–1777) represented the next generation, whose paramount concern lay with the dissemination of knowledge; hence they isolated the promotion of education as the monarch’s most needed reform, the “core” of all other progress. “Peter our father founded schools,” Prince Kantemir proclaimed; he then menacingly warned that rulers should fear “the judgment of an all-powerful Providence . . . if all measures are not employed for the propagation of knowledge in the fatherland, of what is most precious of all in its life.” Sumarokov tersely phrased the new priority: “Trade enriches, the military defends, but learning enlightens a state”; he likewise threatened that Russia, like Rome, would perish without the dissemination of knowledge.

Lomonosov’s wide-ranging brilliance provides an excellent barometer of mid-century beliefs since, recalling the centuries-old tradition of hortatory literature, he believed his duty was to teach monarchs theirs. In over twenty odes and essays, the most characteristic verb is obraziit’ (to reform or renew). He constantly refers to Peter, who “reformed,” “renewed,” opened “new paths,” indeed “changed the course of the river” and concludes “in praising Peter, we praise Elizabeth” because she imitates him. Along with the traditional encomia and lists of Peter’s concrete achievements, Lomonosov makes paramount the point that while “he wanted to enlighten Russia” and “sowed the seeds,” much work remained: “The wise monarch has the foresight to see as her necessary task that every type of knowledge be disseminated in the fatherland.” The Daughter should “open wide the door to learning across Russia, and know . . . that, having disseminated it, Russia will acquire a new expanse, a new adornment, a new enlightenment . . . and she will leave the night of barbarism far behind. . . .”

59. The various problems connected with the Russian Enlightenment, for instance the differentiation between German and French influence, are outside the scope of this essay; the reader is referred to David M. Griffiths’ overview, “In Search of Enlightenment: Recent Soviet Interpretations of Eighteenth-Century Russian Intellectual History,” Canadian-American Slavic Studies 16, no. 3–4 (1982): 317–356.
61. Lomonosov wrote twenty jubilee odes and speeches to monarchs from 1739 to 1764 on the occasion of the birth of an heir, accession to the throne, coronations and namedays; they are reproduced in Ody i pokhval’nyia slova Lomonosova (Moscow, 1837). The best expressions of his overall attitude were his hymns of praise to Elizabeth (1749) and Peter the Great (1755).
Also a scientist, Lomonosov had his own agenda and, after a healthy nod to the liberal arts, presciently spoke of the value of studying ship and canal building, metallurgy, chemistry, astronomy and geography, in fact any study that would harness the “force of nature,” the new concern of the Middle Enlightenment. Sometimes, one can trust a monarch to listen to sound advice: in 1755, in the edict establishing Russia’s first university, Elizabeth claimed that she was “rushing to propagate all useful knowledge . . . for the common good, in imitation of Peter, the obnovitel’ of our country.”

In short, as successive generations of Russian thinkers developed new agendas and priorities, they found it natural to expect the tsar to incorporate their ideas into his reforming duties. Thus, while Peter effected the basic redefinition of autocratic duty, it was continually redefined both by the public and by the autocrat in the ongoing intersection of the forces of tradition, foreign influence and contemporary experience.

When Catherine II, born in 1729, ascended the throne after a coup d’état, her claim to power was shaky and she worked to buttress it by projecting the image of a reforming tsar, but within the framework of her own generation; she announced: “. . . state your grievances; say where the shoe pinches you. We will try to reform it. I have no particular system. All I want is the common good.” Her early “reforming zeal” embraced a reorganization of the Senate, local administration, the procuration, the Baltic Provinces and armed forces; the secularization of church land; improvements in town planning, medical care and public health; the abolition of most state monopolies; and a review of commercial policy. This breathtaking activity could only enforce a picture both at home and abroad of a hardworking, enlightened monarch. However this now traditional program of reform was no longer enough. Lomonosov presciently foretold the new priority of the last third of the century, the need for monarchs to rule by law: “Listen, earthly judges / And all you heads of state / Restrain yourselves from breaking rules / From breaking holy laws.”

At the time of Catherine’s ascent to the throne in 1762, the era of enlightened absolutism was underway in the rest of Europe, and Peter’s equation between absolute monarch and reformer had become com-

64. On Catherine, in general, consult the encyclopedic Isabel de Madariaga, Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), where the phrase “reforming zeal” is often used.
mon property. Rulers no longer found their legitimacy in prescription, custom or divine right but in a contractual political obligation to do good, and this included a conspicuous obligation to reform bad institutions and bad laws. Absolute power thus seemed a natural and rational monarchical attribute. During most of the Enlightenment, philosophers had failed to be explicit about any limitations on the power of monarchs and indeed had flattered them shamelessly. Of course, most political thinkers of the Enlightenment assumed an absolute monarchy based on natural and fundamental laws and hence differed from a tyranny.66

Wanting to conform to this general European pattern and to the new expectations it raised in Russia, Catherine embraced as her reforming duty the establishment of rule by law. She, her early advisors and the educated public all recognized Russia’s need for defined fundamental laws—established rules and procedures that a sovereign, because of natural and religious prescripts, would not violate and that would check arbitrariness and favoritism. Catherine’s accession manifesto accused Peter III of flagrantly transgressing Russian laws by his despotic “unrestrained use of power.” She, in contrast, would work “to give the force of law to government statutes . . . in order to ensure that in the future every institution has its limits and rules, by which means good order will be preserved in all things.”67

Catherine’s reforms aimed at rationalizing and legalizing the bureaucratic monarchy that Peter the Great had put into place and she acknowledged the continuity of policy. However, in keeping with a “sense of changing times,” she asserted the superiority of the legislative methods of the well-ordered police state over Petrine coercion.68 But there were limits. When Nikita Panin (1718–1783) tried to institute an imperial council to regulate the legislative process, Catherine rejected the plan. Still, her calling of a Legislative Commission in 1767 to codify Russian law and her genuinely progressive Instruction or Nakaz containing general principles for good government were attempts to serve notice that Russia was a true monarchy not a despotism, a state ruled by law not autocratic will. The Senate rewarded Catherine with the title the Great for these legislative deeds.

In general, the Empress was given appropriate “Peter praise” for fulfillment of her reforming duty and especially for her emphasis on rule by law. An introduction to Peter the Great’s Notebooks, published in the 1770s, depicted her, like her forebear, as zealously attending to the strength and expansion of her state as well as to the improvement

67. Catherine’s manifesto may be found in V.A. Bil’basov, Istoriia Ekateriny II, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1906): 89–87.
68. Consult Rasmussen, “Catherine II,” 54; Ransel, The Politics of Catherinian Russia: The Panin Party (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) also provides a description of Catherine’s and her advisors’ complex attitudes toward Peter I.
of education, arts and sciences, trade, mores and the common good. The author then lauded the Empress for surpassing Peter by understanding that “the first duty of a Monarch, the one that maintains a nation’s happiness is justice, which preserves the divine deposit of laws . . . which maintains the security of person and property.”

An ode of 1780 by Ermil Kostrov (1755–1796) has Catherine speak “in the voice worthy of true tsars”: “O burden pleasing, but distressing! . . . Diverse the duty, diverse the rights . . . A tsar must know his subjects’ mores . . . And lead their paths so varied . . . To achieve the bliss of all . . . Similar to the Creator . . . But responsible to the Creator . . . For law, reason and liberty . . . These are monarchical deeds.” One journalist from Iaroslavl enthused that “her desire zealously to fulfill her duties” led to “miraculous creations”: “The laws, traced by the finger of her Majesty’s right hand . . . have become a radiant light. . . . The benefit of her innovations has . . . transformed everything into a kind of flourishing kingdom.” Disturbing this idyll, the ideas of the Late Enlightenment predicated reforms that Catherine found inimical.

As public opinion became more sophisticated and more critical, the fourth generation among the educated elite—those born in the 1740s and 1750s but including crossovers—expected even more fundamental reform. A new cry was raised to transform the self-limiting monarch ruling by law, but above it, into a monarch subject to the law who “would do good but have his hands tied against evil.” A program crystallized around an urgent need for legal guarantees to provide security of person and property, to check against arbitrary actions on the part of a ruler or his favorites and to divest the ruler of unlimited personalized power. This is, of course, the logical and ironic consequence of enlightened absolutism: the monarch so enlightens his people that they no longer need or want his absolute rule.

Although neither Catherine nor any of her successors chose to move from a personal despotism to a limited or constitutional monarchy, the call for this next redefinition of autocratic duty came from several quarters. Professor Semeon Desnitskii (d. 1789), a disciple of Adam Smith, in 1768 presented the Empress with a project for the separation of powers and for elections every five years of an advisory, representative Senate; he could then envision a Russia more enlightened than other nations: “Neighboring powers, having witnessed such good reforms in your Realm, will never cease to give Your reign eternal praise.”

Mikhail Kheraskov (1733–1807) also indicated that the next reforming duty for the autocrat was to move from enlightened absolutism to constitutional or limited monarchy. In a political novel, *Numa Pompilii* (1768), he used traditional criteria to describe the ideal monarch: wise, modest, simple, humble, avoiding flatterers and favorites and carrying out a series of reforms for the common good. But Numa is further portrayed as a constitutional monarch who grasps that the “key” to ruling is “to establish laws based on nature” and to pass laws “dictated to him by the people” in a “national council” where “all members ought to be equal.” Kheraskov’s *Rossiada* (1779), Russia’s first epic, repeats this theme; the tsar muses: “My title of Monarch only can be enjoyed / If I share my power with all the people . . . And await laws from my subjects . . . There you have the duty of the tsar.”

Another example is provided by Sumarokov’s writings which display the transition from admiration to alarm that many among the educated elite experienced during Catherine’s reign. Upon her accession, he greeted her as “our hope,” foresaw “the golden age of Catherine” and in an ode had her announce: “I am mother to all in Russia . . . And everything in it will I reform.” In fact, he confidently presented her with a full-scale project of reform that included subsidizing the mercantile, refashioning the penal code and setting up institutes of jurisprudence. By the 1770s, however, his plays *Dmitrii the Pretender* and *Mtsislav* warn of the nearly inevitable degeneration of unlimited monarchs into tyrants who “hold the people in contempt . . . and constrict the freedom of our souls.”

Similarly, Denis Fonvizin (1745–1792), in his *Discourse on the Permanent Laws of the State* (1780s), reflected the general tendency to revere a monarch and his beneficent power but simultaneously to fear his capacity for evil or even “for the good which he has left undone” unless he is subject to “unalterable laws”: “Supreme power is entrusted to a sovereign solely for the benefit of his subjects . . . A monarch being invested with unlimited power . . . will himself straightaway feel that power achieves real majesty only when it deprives itself of the capacity for doing evil” since “liberty is the first right of man, the right to be subject only to the law.” At the same time, Fonvizin’s associates, Nikita and Peter Panin, drew up a critique of government which correctly claimed that Peter’s legacy led inexorably to a “constitutional order in Russia” since he had placed it on a western path of development.

72. M.M. Kheraskov: *Numa Pompilii* (Moscow, 1768), passim; *Rossiada: Istoriccheskaia poema* (Moscow, 1779), 172–73.
73. A.P. Sumarokov: “Oda (1762),” *PSS*, vol. 6 (Moscow, 1787): 37–38, 43; “Slova (1762),” *PSS*, vol. 6 (Moscow, 1787): 229–38; “Dmitrii Samozvanets (1771),” *PSS*, vol. 4 (Moscow, 1787): 73.
Another playwright of the 1780s, Vasiliy Kapnist (1757–1824), declared that freedom was "the gift of true God-Tsars." When Catherine enserfed the Ukrainian peasants, he wrote in an "Ode on Slavery": "O you, Tsars! For this, to you was given power similar to a creator... To create evil instead of the common good." In the same decade, Iakov Kniazhnin (1742–1791) wrote Vadam of Novgorod (1789), which Catherine ordered burned; it concludes that people enjoy no freedom but "to give to tsars the freedom to be tyrants." This seemed assuredly proved by some of Catherine's actions, in particular her arrest of Alexander Radishchev (1749–1802) and Nikolai Novikov (1744–1818). When her son, Paul I (1796–1801), crazily lurched toward despotism, he was stopped by the most readily available alternative to constitutionalism, assassination.

As a final example, Radishchev in a letter of 1782 praised Peter as truly Great for having fulfilled all his duties as tsar but wished he could have fulfilled one more—"to assert the freedom of the individual." But, he lamented, there was as yet no example in history that "a tsar sitting on a throne would willingly let go of any of his power," a fitting epitaph for the Russian autocracy. Significantly, toward the end of his life when Alexander I became tsar, as Allen McConnell has noted, Radishchev "turned realistically to support of what he hoped would be a reforming monarchy." And so too did the majority of the Russian educated public through most of the nineteenth century.

However, many men and women surmised that reforming tsars would, like Catherine, never compromise their personalized arbitrary authority, unless forced by revolution. Nor would they have the strength or will to contradict the interests of the Russian ruling class which was intent on maintaining its old regime privilege and place. Nor would they have enough faith in the populace to allow the development of public initiative or institutions outside government control. Thus, into the twentieth century, the autocracy continued to cloak itself in eight-


76. Opinions remain divided on the reign of Paul I. A.G. Briker, Kaiser Pauls I Ende, 1801 (Stuttgart, 1897), considers him a deranged despot while E.S. Shumigorskii, Imperator Pavel I: Zhizn' i tsarstvovanie (St. Petersburg, 1907) considers him a progressive reformer with character defects that wrecked his policies.


eenth-century enlightened absolutism and resisted taking the next step into constitutional monarchy. Those who justifiably lost hope in reforming monarchy soon “parted ways” with the autocratic state and gave birth to an intelligentsia dedicated to a revolutionary movement.79 Ironically, the revolutionaries did not escape their political culture but retained an un tarnished faith in the ability to effect transformation from above.

One hundred years of historical analysis has amply documented the revolutionary movement and other causes for the collapse of the Russian autocracy. A more puzzling phenomenon is the ability of that autocracy to have lasted until 1917, long after other European monarchies had either changed into constitutional dress or collapsed. One clue to its survival is that the idea of the reforming tsar acquired the strength of a myth which operated in two dimensions. According to Michael Cherniavsky, one function of a myth is “to allow individuals and groups to express, with ever-growing variety, their personal and collective problems and aspirations within its framework.”80 As noted, each generation of the cultivated elite expected the Russian ruler to adopt its agenda for progress. Popular monarchism operated in a similar way; a radical of the 1870s rued: “The peasants have projected their desires, their concepts of justice onto the tsar, as if they were his desires and his concepts.”81 The “reforming” tsar thus served for the educated elite the same function as the “good” or “true” tsar served for the common people. This rare intersection between high culture and popular culture in Russia helps account for the autocracy’s durability.

In addition, this concept became, to borrow Robert C. Tucker’s felicitous phrase, a “sustaining myth” of Russian political life, a definition of its ideal cultural pattern.82 Such a “myth” is rooted in a historical reality, with enough subsequent manifestations of similar activity to sustain hope for the future. Peter the Great, the original reforming tsar, marched ahead of other European rulers in demonstrating the awesome transformations that could be effected by absolute monarchs. Catherine the Great ranked on a par with her fellow


80. Cherniavsky, Tsar, 95.

81. As quoted from M.N. Pokrovskii’s Tsarizm i revoliutsiia (Moscow, 1918), 46 in Field, Rebels, 13. An article by D.K. Shipler in The New Yorker (25 June 1990) is relevant. He reported on the March 1990 meeting of the Congress of People’s Deputies and observed the various deputies addressing President Gorbachev: “Their arguments were curious. Each one seemed to see what he wished to see in the leader. There were the Westernizers, the economic reformers, the military men, the nationalists from various republics, and the tough-minded law-and-order advocates, each with his own agenda, which he somehow imagined Gorbachev pursuing as President.”

enlightened despots. While Russian rulers fell behind on the nineteenth-century path to constitutional monarchy, their failure to place legal limitations on their absolutism was for a time offset: first, by the many reforming efforts of Alexander I, Nicholas I and Alexander II, especially in the earlier more progressive years of their reigns; and, second, by a faith that someday they would effect the ultimate reform and turn themselves into constitutional monarchs without Russians’ having to undergo the scourge of revolution. Alexander III and Nicholas II, however, fell back onto the old Muscovite doctrines of religious legitimacy and patriarchalism. Their harshly rigid bureaucratic regimes underscored the ever present repressive potential of absolutism, and their hostility to reform fully identified autocracy with regression, an identification that was read back into the entire history of the autocracy and thus destroyed the myths surrounding it.

But good myths die hard. As recently as February 1990, Andrei Karaulov, a Soviet theatre critic, attributed the popularity of a play about Alexander I, a reforming tsar, to the fact that “the audience is interested mainly in the parallel with the current reforming tsar—Gorbachev.”83

83. Karaulov is quoted by David Remnick in “Changes in Moscow,” The Washington Post (20 February 1990). The play, “Pavel I,” while written in 1908 by D.S. Merezhkovskii, projects two themes prominent at the end of the eighteenth century, the fear of tyranny in the person of Paul I and the hope for a constitutional monarch in the person of his successor, Alexander I; the drama was staged in 1989–1990 at the Red Army Theatre in Moscow.