THE PRETENDER PHENOMENON IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RUSSIA

This paper is concerned with claimants to a throne who, so far from being of royal descent (like the Stuart pretenders), originated from the lower strata of society. Such imposters have been a feature of ancient Persia, medieval Germany and Flanders and sixteenth-century Portugal among other countries at various periods; but as the great historian Solov'ev remarked, "nowhere do they occur with such frequency and with such significance as in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Russia".

There were at least twenty-three such pretenders in seventeenth-century Russia and no fewer than forty-four during the eighteenth century. (These numbers must be regarded as minimum: evidence of others may yet be found in the archives of the old Russian security agencies.) Indeed the frequency of pretenders constitutes a historical phenomenon demanding explanation. Yet it is one which has intrigued historians for the last two hundred years without ever gaining the status of a major historical issue.

In 1774, when the massive uprising led by the pretender Pugachev was at its height, Prince Shcherbatov wrote a treatise on false tsars, in which he dealt with the pseudo-Dmitriis of the early seventeenth century and with Sten'ka Razin (who was not himself a pretender), while failing unaccountably to mention many others, some of whom staked claims to the Russian throne during his own lifetime. Subsequent historians have endeavoured to repair these omissions. Solov'ev


2 S. M. Solov'ev, "Zametki o samozvantsakh v Rossi" [Remarks on Pretenders in Russia], Russkiy Arkhiv, vi (1868), cols. 265-81.

3 For a recent analysis of the Pugachev revolt and the function of Pugachev's pretension as Peter III, see Philip Longworth, "The Last Great Cossack- Peasant Rising", Jl. of European Studies, no. 3 (1973), pp. 1-35.

4 [M. M. Shcherbatov], Kratkaia povest' o byvshykh v Rossi samozvantsakh [A Short Account of Previous Pretenders in Russia] (St. Petersburg, 1774).
himself, besides devoting an article to the subject, made frequent references to pretenders in his History of Russia; Kliuchevskii and Kostomarov, among others, touched rather tentatively on some aspects of the problem, and Mordovtsev devoted a volume to false tsars. More recently, the Soviet historians K. V. Sivkov and S. M. Troitskii have published relevant work, and K. V. Chistov has examined the phenomenon in the context of an excellent study of social myths. The material contained in these and a wide scattering of other printed sources together provide sufficient data on which

---

*S. M. Solov'ev, Istor'ia Rossi s drevneishikh vremen [A History of Russia from the Earliest Times], 2nd edn., 29 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1894–5).*

*D. Mordovtsev, Samozvantsy i ponizovaia vol'nitva [Pretenders and the Bandits of the South-East], 2 vols., of which only vol. i deals with pretenders (St. Petersburg, 1887).*


*In addition to the works already mentioned, reference should be made to the following: “Samozvantsy” [Pretenders], in I. E. Andreievskii et al. (eds.), Entsiklopedicheskii slovar', xxviii (St. Petersburg, 1900), pp. 208–10; N. B. Golikova, Politicheskie protessy pri Petre I [Political Trials under Peter I] (Moscow, 1957); “Tainaia kantsel'iaria v tsarstvovanii imperatritsy Elizavety Petrovnoi” [The Secret Chancellery in the Reign of the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna], Russkaia Starina, no. 12 (1875); D. N. Bludov, “O samozvantsakh iavlivshikhsia pri Ekaterine II v voronezhskoi gubernii” [On the Pretenders who appeared under Catherine II in Voronezh Province], in E. Koval'sevskii, Graf Bludov i ego vremia [Count Bludov and his Time] (St. Petersburg, 1866), appendix, pp. 191–2; G. V. Esipov, “Samozvantsy tsarevichii Aleksei i Petr Petrovich” [The Pretender Tsareviches Alexei and Peter Petrovich], Russkii Vestnik, xlvi, no. 9 (1863), pp. 393–412; G. V. Esipov, Liudi starogo veka: rasskazy iz del preobrazhenskogo prikaza i tainoi kantseliarii [People of the Old Century: Stories from the Affairs of the Preobrazhenskii Office and the Secret Chancellery] (St. Petersburg, 1880); A. I. Baranovich et al. (eds.), Ocherki istorii SSSR: period feodalizma: vtoria chetvert' XVIII veka [Essays in the History of the U.S.S.R.; the Period of Feudalism: the Second Quarter of the Eighteenth Century] (Moscow, 1956), especially the contributions of K. V. Sivkov (pp. 166 ff.) and P. G. Ryndzunskii and M. P. Viatkin (pp. 238 ff.); I. D. Beliaev, “Russkoe obschestvo ot konchnyi Petra Velikogo do Ekateriny II” [Russian Society from the Death of Peter the Great to Catherine II], Biblioteka dlia chtenii, no. 3 (1865). Other works on individual pretenders and groups of pretenders in particular areas include: A. I. Andrushchenko, “O samozvansvte E. I. Pugacheva i ego otoshenii k Iaikskim kazakam” [On E. I. Pugachev's Pretension and his Relation with the Iaik Cossacks], in Voprosy sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoi istorii i istochnikovedeniiia perioda feodalizma v Rossi [Questions of Socio-Economic History and Studies in the Sources for the Feudal Period in Russia] (Moscow, 1961), pp. 146–50; “Kazak Fedor Kamenshchikov” [The Cossack Fedor Kamenshchikov], Pamiatniki novoi*

*cont. on p. 63*
to base a general analysis of the phenomenon, even though some of
the conclusions to be ventured must be regarded as provisional.

What emerges at once is that none of the eighteenth-century
Russian pretenders were puppets exploited by established political
interests in the sense that Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck had
been in England. Moreover very few of them were simply adven-
turers or cranks as most of the pseudo-Louis XVIIIs of France
appear to have been. With rare exceptions they were indigenous
products of the lowest orders of Russian society, and most of them
offered some programme for reform. On these grounds the pretender
phenomenon in eighteenth-century Russia may be characterized as
a manifestation of social protest alongside peasant flight, arson,
banditry and uprising.9

Nevertheless there were seven pretenders who failed to conform
to the general pattern, and it will be as well to dispose of these before
reverting to the general theme. In the first place there was the
celebrated “Princess Tarakanova” — a lady who used various aliases

(note 8 cont.)
while pursuing a chequered and adventurous career through a number of European cities, including London, before declaring herself to be the daughter of the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna by Count Razumovskii (and the wrong Razumovskii at that: the Hetman, not her lover, the Master of the Hunt). She was eventually inveigled to Russia from Italy by Count Orlov on the instructions of a distinctly unamused Empress Catherine II who promptly incarcerated her in the fortress of Saints Peter and Paul. "Princess Tarakanova" was an adventuress who operated outside Russia and will therefore be excluded from the investigation.

Also atypical was Opochinin, the son of a major-general in the Russian army who claimed to the product of a union between the Empress Elizabeth and George II of England (who was said to have visited Russia incognito in the suite of his own ambassador). Unlike Tarakanova, Opochinin did present a rudimentary political programme directed against Catherine and the Orlovs and towards placing her son Paul upon the throne. Nevertheless his inquisitors attributed his crime to "drunkenness and mental imbalance", and his insignificance is further suggested by the fact that he seems to have been the only pretender not to have been severely punished.

Lieutenant-Colonel Tiumenev is another candidate for exclusion because of his atypical social position, while Andrei Ivanov (better known as Kondratyi Selivanov, founder of the skoptsy, the sect of self-castrators) constitutes a special case for different reasons. Although active during the eighteenth century he does not seem actually to have identified himself as Peter III until somewhat later (having been flogged for his proselytizing activities and sent to Siberia). Moreover his adherents not only believed him to be the "true tsar" but the incarnation of Jesus Christ as well. As we shall see, similar links between pretension and religious messianism are detectable in other cases, but Selivanov is exceptional in the passive spirituality of his appeal, which presents a sharp contrast to the more active forms of social protest characteristic of most pretenders.

Nikolai Kretov, a member of the gentry and an army captain serving with the garrison at Orenburg who suggested that he was the real tsar just at the time Pugachev began his rebellion in September 1773, presents another contrasting type. Though a somewhat shadowy figure his pretension seems to have been consistent with

---

10 See Troitskii, "Samozvantsy v Rossi".
11 See M. Ovchinnikov, "Olekminskie skoptsy" [The Self-Castrators of Olekminsk], Siberiskii arkhiv, no. 2 (1911), pp. 83 ff.; F. V. Livianov, Raskol'ники i ostrozhniki [Schismatics and Gaol-Birds], ii (St. Petersburg, 1870).
the action of a man who exploited the rumours of Peter III's survival (which were then rampant in the area) in order to take advantage of gullible peasants and extract money from them.

Finally, there are two more eighteenth-century pretenders who, though they may have had more in common with the archetypal pretender as I shall shortly define him, should be dismissed from the reckoning because, like Tarakanova, they made their claims abroad. One, who claimed to be Ivan Ivanov, son of Ivan V (and thus, by implication, brother of the Empress Anne) approached the Russian envoy at the Porte with this story in 1747, and was promptly thrashed and sent off to Russia. The other, a fascinating figure not least in his significance in terms of a nascent Panslavism, was Stepan Malyi (Little Stephen, otherwise Stepan Rajčević) — another pseudo-Peter III who in 1767 gained the allegiance of the feuding mountain tribes of Montenegro.

Having excluded these seven we may now proceed with an analysis of the remaining thirty-seven cases. In doing so we shall first establish when and where they staked their claims (attempting to account for the patterns which emerge) and also which monarchs they pretended to be. We shall then examine their careers — their social origins and occupations, their literacy, experience of the world outside their own communities, their marital status etc. — making cautious inferences from generalized evidence where precise biographical information is particularly scarce, as it is with regard to literacy, marital status and religion.

Having constructed a picture of the archetypal pretender we shall proceed to examine the phenomenon in relation to the prevailing peasant ideology and to popular and specific grievances as reflected in the various programmes advanced by individual pretenders. Next we shall discuss the problem of the pretenders’ credibility and comment on the extent and social composition of the followings they were able to muster; evaluate the relevance of Old Belief to the phenomenon and also the importance of rumours about pretenders which swept various parts of Russia at different times during the century. Finally, certain conclusions (some less tentative than others) will be ventured about the nature and significance of the pretender phenomenon and the reasons for its decline.

It is immediately apparent that the distribution of pretenders through the century is very uneven. In the first decade of the eighteenth century only two pretenders are referred to (it should be borne in mind always that these must be regarded as minimum figures). In the second decade there were also two, followed by
three in the 'twenties and five in the 'thirties. Yet in the following twenty years there is evidence of only four, including "Ivan Ivanov", who has been classified as atypical. In the 1760s, by contrast, there were seven — in addition to the atypical Opochinin and Stepan Malyi; and in the 'seventies eight (and if one were to include Selivanov, Kretov, and Tarakanova, eleven). In the 'eighties there were another seven, but in the last decade of the century, only one, and he the dubious Colonel Tiumenev.

The large concentration of some twenty-six pretenders in the reign of Catherine II (1762-96) is striking. It cannot be accounted for simply by reference to the length of her reign or popular resentment engendered by a woman sitting on the throne, even though male chauvinism probably played some part. During Anne's reign, for instance, one pretender, Iakov Tatarinov observed that the empress "has long hair but a short mind". Yet Elizabeth, whose hair was just as long as Anne's, was challenged only three times during her twenty-year reign — and only once, incidentally, by someone claiming to be the infant tsar she had deposed. Nor was it merely that Catherine was a foreigner. Catherine I had also been a foreigner, yet she experienced comparatively little trouble of this kind in her admittedly brief reign. Moreover, under Catherine II pretenders appeared in distinct clusters — there were no fewer than six in the years 1764-5, another six between 1772 and 1774, and another five between 1782 and 1786, although these last attracted significantly less support than the others. The only other comparable concentration were three or four in 1731-2.

Of these four concentrations, one coincided with the Pugachev rising, in a period of intense social discontent; another occurred in its aftermath and owed much to that movement's effect in popularizing the legend of Peter III's survival. However, the concentrations in the 'thirties and mid-'sixties present something of a puzzle. Considerations of political legitimacy — resentment of Anne's edict demanding an oath to an unnamed successor, and the accession of another empress (Catherine II) who had no Romanov blood in her veins — though relevant, do not of themselves provide an adequate explanation (Elizabeth, who was illegitimate and had ousted an emperor of impeccably imperial descent, had very few pretenders to contend with). On the other hand, patterns of socio-economic change during the century, though still far from clear, go some way towards accounting for fluctuations in generalized discontent which

12 Troitskii, op. cit.
THE PRETENDER PHENOMENON IN RUSSIA

influenced the numbers of pretenders produced — given Russia's cultural climate and the mentality of her overwhelmingly peasant population.

Tastes for increasingly luxurious living undoubtedly permeated the gentry during the period, inducing many of them to spend beyond their means and to squeeze their peasants more (not least, probably, in their capacity as official tax-collectors). However, this was a continuous and cumulative process which began early in the century and reached its apogee under Catherine the Great. The effect of increasing population (which in many areas resulted in a diminishing acreage available to feed each peasant) was also gradual. Both factors contributed to a rising tide of peasant discontent, but they cannot of themselves account for the first two clusters of pretenders.

Nor can the incidence of famine do so. Outbreaks of pretender activity notably fail to coincide with the remarkable increases in rye prices which occurred in 1735-8 and 1749-51 — as does the fourth cluster of pretenders in the 1780s which preceded the notorious famine of 1787, rather than accompanying or following it as might have been expected. Wars, which served to trigger sharp outbursts of social protest under Peter I and again during the 1770s, also fail to coincide with three out of the four main periods of pretender activity. Nevertheless, both the earlier clusters — like that of the 1770s — occurred at times when the economic conditions of the peasantry appear to have been deteriorating.

The 'thirties proved to be an unusually hard time for state peasants (that is non-seigneurial peasants living on state-owned property administered by the Treasury) in particular, and the 'sixties saw a marked rise in the demands made on the peasantry as a whole. These included a startling increase of 47 per cent in combined quitrent (obrok) and poll-tax demanded from serfs (that is privately-owned, seigneurial peasants) — compared with rises averaging only 15 per cent in the previous three decades, the rate of price inflation during the same period remaining steady by comparison — and a cumulative rise in indirect taxation which increased almost two and

---

a half times between 1724 and 1769. I therefore incline to the view that discontent in eighteenth-century Russia, of which pretenders were a symptom, tended to be linked with deteriorating rather than with improving economic conditions.  

The appearance of seven or so pretenders under Peter the Great coincided with the generalized discontent during his reign; there followed a five-year lull in pretender activity during the reigns of Catherine I (under whom direct taxation was eased) and Peter II, and then a distinct rise under Anne's harsh rule, followed by a marked drop under the popular Elizabeth. There was immense activity in the first two-thirds of Catherine II's reign; and then a sharp decline, coincident with some improvement in the legal and economic condition of the peasantry.

Of the forty-four pretenders, three, as we know, appeared abroad, and there is doubt about the precise area of operations of six others. Of the remaining thirty-five, only one staked his claim in north Russia — in Vologda — and only one in Moscow. Two others appeared in the north-west (in Courland and at Narva); four in the Ukraine or the Slobodskaiia Ukraine; five in the mid-Volga area around Nizhni-Novgorod and Kazan'; six along the lower Volga; four in the region of Orenburg; three in Siberia; and no fewer than nine in south-central Russia, that is in the areas of Orel, Belgorod, Tambov, Kursk and Voronezh — with Tambov as a particular favourite.

This suggests another distinct pattern. Pretenders tended to arise within specific areas located along a sweeping curve stretching from the Ukraine, along the Black Earth belt and into the Orenburg region, with a particularly heavy concentration around Tambov and Voronezh, and along the middle and lower Volga. This belt coincides with the rolling steppe zone, with those regions once crossed by marauding Tatars and populated by Russian warrior farmers, settled more recently by peasant runaways seeking freedom, and eventually taken firmly in the grip of serf-owning lords.

14 The percentage increases in quitrent and poll-tax have been calculated on the basis of the tables presented in Strumilin, op. cit., p. 273. On the increases in indirect taxation see S. M. Troitskii, Finansovaiia politika russkogo absolutizma v XVIII veke [The Financial Policy of Russian Absolutism in the Eighteenth Century] (Moscow, 1966), p. 219. A. Kahan's attempt to show that in real terms the burden on the serfs lessened steadily between the 1730s and the 1790s, apart from a "kink" in the 1770s ("The Costs of Westernization in Russia: The Gentry and the Economy in the Eighteenth Century", Slavic Rev., xxv, no. 1 [March 1966], pp. 40-66) is unsatisfactory insofar as his calculations are based on quitrents and the poll-tax only, taking no account of labour-service, indirect taxation, land resources, peculation, nor the effect of accumulating poll-tax arrears.
Its population was sparser, and labour scarcer, than in the central regions. In consequence (the province of Voronezh apart) local lords were tending to demand more labour-service, as opposed to quitrent, of their serfs than was the case elsewhere, labour-service tending to be a heavier, and more sharply increasing, burden even than quitrent. For the same reason, lords were vigorously extending their authority to neighbouring peasants and odnodvortsy, descendants of privileged landholding servicemen of the old frontier, who as a group were experiencing an exceptionally sharp decline in socioeconomic and legal status, and who were remarkably active in the pretender movements of the mid-sixties.

The available statistics pertaining to regional variations in grain prices, famine-incidence, the proportion of serfs to state peasants, and the relative weight (as opposed to distribution) of quitrent and labour-service do not permit firm conclusions to be drawn as to why the geographical distribution of pretenders should have been as it was. Nevertheless, these regions were peculiar both in terms of their social composition and of their distinctive trends in socio-agrarian relations (with once-free peasants undergoing a process of enserfment, and aspiring serfs, increasingly burdened, seeing the prospect of freedom recede over the years). This correlation suggests a causal relationship. So do the related facts that the regions concerned were adjacent to the Cossack settlements of the Don, the Volga, Zaporozh’e and the Iaik (Ural), from which all large-scale revolts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries emanated. Moreover these peripheral areas seem to have been significantly less efficiently policed than were the central provinces, and the Volga region in particular was inhabited by an unusually high proportion of restless hired labourers and marginalized men.

Who did the pretenders claim to be? Some made generalized claims, purporting to be a non-specific emperor or autocrat, but most of them assumed the name of a particular tsar or tsarevich. Of these, at least eight pretended to be Peter the Great’s son Alexei, one of them, A. I. Krekshin, advancing his claim while the real

---

17 On the relevance of the Cossack communities to peasant uprisings and other forms of social protest, see P. Longworth, The Cossacks (London, 1969); also P. Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600-1800 (New York, 1972).
Alexei was still alive and indeed before his final break with his father. Furthermore, half of the “Alexeis” appeared not, as might be expected, under Catherine I (who was, after all, a foreigner of humble descent) but under Anne. One of them presented himself as Peter, son of Peter the Great by Catherine; and another, Ivan Evdokimov, put himself out to be Peter II — and that no less than thirty-five years after the real Peter II’s death. There were, in addition, three false Ivan VIIs and three who claimed to be Catherine II’s son Paul — these also when the real Paul was still alive. As against this there were no fewer than sixteen false Peter IIIs — the first of them in 1764, two years after the real Peter’s death.

So far as the social origins and occupations of the pretenders are concerned, at least ten were peasants — that is more than a third of those whose status has been established. Three of the ten are described as serfs, one as a peasant of a monastic estate, and four were court peasants (that is peasants belonging to estates of the imperial family). Of the rest, five were Cossacks, and no fewer than four were odnodvortsy (a surprisingly large number from a relatively small social group) while one was the son of an impoverished reitar (mounted officer). Semikov was the son of a Siberian sexton but born in the Ukraine, and Andrei Khol’shchevikov, was a posadskii chelovek (registered member of a commercial suburb). Ivan Minitskii, supposedly descended from a Polish shliakhtich (member of the nobility), is described simply as a worker; Anton Aslanbekov, who posed as Peter III, was a merchant of Armenian origins; Castéra describes yet another as a shoemaker.

In view of this, and bearing in mind the exceptions listed earlier, the pretender syndrome in Russia was clearly a phenomenon of the lower social orders. Moreover many pretenders, more particularly those belonging to marginal social groups like the Cossacks and odnodvortsy, are known to have personally experienced a fall in economic status.

It might reasonably be argued, of course, that the mass of Russians belonged to the lower orders, who for much of the period under review seem to have been experiencing economic difficulties. But there is at least one factor which distinguishes the pretenders from their fellows: extra-community experience.

The vast majority of Russians were peasants or near-peasants. Peasants are notorious for their conservatism, backwardness and

---

ignorance of the outside world, their lives being dominated by the traditions of the isolated village and by the grinding demands of the peasant farm. Clearly anyone from such a background who tries to enlist his fellows in any massive movement of social protest — and it appears, as we shall see, that many if not most of the pretenders were trying to do so — must somehow have broken the bounds of these considerable constraints. In effect, he must have had some experience of the outside world, insofar as he must realize that people in other villages and communities have similar grievances to his own.

Such experience might conceivably be gained at second hand — from the gossip of pedlars and other rare visitors from the world outside, from tradesmen in a nearby town, from merchants and other peasants at a fair. It could also be gained from reading. However, there was comparatively little printed literature in eighteenth-century Russia and virtually none that was overtly hostile to the established power. Moreover, the vast majority of eighteenth-century Russians were illiterate. It is doubtful if as many as one peasant in a hundred could read at all, and though literacy was somewhat higher among merchants and tradesmen, these categories do not seem to have figured very prominently among the ranks of the pretenders.

Only three of the eighteenth-century Russian pretenders (excluding the oddities from the gentry class) had learned to write or read. At 8 per cent of the total this is a higher proportion than might have been expected. But most pretenders had gained the experience which qualified them to act, or to attempt to act, as cultural brokers between the outside world and the villagers they tried to raise to their cause by direct means — and not at second hand. Their eyes were opened by what they themselves had seen and heard and suffered in the outside world.

By far the most common sort of experience was military service. At least thirteen of the pretenders had served in the army, that is about 40 per cent — an extraordinarily large proportion in view of the fact that no more than about 3 or 4 per cent of all male Russians could have done military service.

However, army service was by no means the only way. A very high proportion had fallen foul of the law and were fugitives of one kind or another. It is a striking characteristic of pretenders that they wandered about the country extensively — their equivalent of going into the wilderness, as it were, before leading their people to the promised land. Several of them had also experienced life in prison, had suffered floggings and other punishments. Fedor Kamenshchikov who, in 1764, proclaimed himself to be Peter III
was one such; Nikolai Shliapnikov (the "Tsarevich Paul" of 1782), who had served a hard-labour sentence at Taganrog, was another. At least one can be classed as a professional brigand — Grigorii Riabov from Astrakhan', the leader of a band of robbers who had escaped from a hard-labour sentence at Nerchinsk. Two more, Khripunov and Khanin, had been involved in the Pugachev movement.19

Others, of course, gained their experience more or less legally as petty traders, by working for merchants or boat-hauling. Work in transport constituted one of the more obvious means by which a man might gain experience of the outside world. Conversely, workers in the transport industry were among the most important disseminators of news to the isolated peasantry. From this point of view it is probably no chance that the Volga, one of the chief routes of communication, figures so often in the story of peasant protest in Russia.

Nevertheless there was usually a military and/or criminal record of some sort. To give some brief biographical examples: Ivan Evdogkimov was born in 1722, was recruited into the army but deserted in 1747, whereupon he spent the next eighteen years on the run. Fedor Bogomolov was born on Count R. I. Vorontsov's estate at Saransk, ran away to Saratov as a child, worked on boats for a merchant and for Cossack settlers, and travelled extensively as a hired worker in south-east Russia before being enrolled in the Moscow Legion under the pseudonym Fedot Kazin. Khanin was also a runaway, an itinerant hired hand, who had served in the army and acquired a criminal record for robbery quite apart from serving Pugachev. Ivan Kurdilov, the Courland pretender of 1788, had wandered right across Russia as far south as Zaporozh'e and the Crimea, while Pugachev himself, the most successful of them all, was a Don Cossack deserter who had fought as far afield as Germany, had experienced life in gaol and travelled widely about southern Russia before declaring himself to be Peter III to the Iaik Cossacks.

Besides travelling quite widely in the world outside the village, a large proportion of pretenders had thus also received some brutalizing experiences. Indeed, the archetypal pretender seems to have

19 There were other linkages between various pretender movements. In 1732 the false Tsarevich Peter Petrovich (Larion Starodubtsev) proposed joint operations with the false Tsarevich Alexei Petrovich (Timofei Truzhenik); two Don Cossacks who supported the pretender Grigorii Riabov had been involved in the Bogomolov movement, and some Iaik Cossacks who had followed Pugachev were later involved with the pretender Khanin.
been an embittered man motivated initially by the injustices he had suffered at the hands of the authorities. He was tough and desperate, a man for whom even the considerable risks of punishment up to and including the death penalty seemed worth taking, provided the stakes were high enough.

All in all, the archetypal pretender seems to conform pretty closely to the social bandit as defined by Eric Hobsbawm. As we have seen, outlawed runaways, deserters and bandits figure prominently among them; and insofar as peasant flight, or desertion from the army, made a man an outlaw, and the condition of outlawry often forced a man to banditry as a means of subsistence, this is hardly surprising. Moreover it would seem that since the government, in defining both the law and the outlaw, blurred distinctions between runaways and other criminals, discontented peasants who identified with runaways tended to sympathize with outlaws generally, whatever their crime, regarding them as social rebels who stood up against a régime which they themselves hated too. Certainly a bandit sub-culture similar to that of Mexico in Zapata’s time existed in eighteenth-century Russia. The many songs and legends of the period which glorify the outlaw provide additional testimony to that fact.

Men like Hobsbawm’s typical bandit (the young unmarried or divorced man, the shepherd, cowherd or military man, the watcher rather than the watched, the stiff-necked peasant standing out against injustice) are thus to be found not only among the leaders of the bigger insurgencies of the seventeenth as well as of the eighteenth century (notably Bolotnikov, Razin, Bulavin, and Pugachev and most of their chief lieutenants), but also among the pretenders who led less successful movements. Cossacks were fishermen and herdsmen; deserters were, or had been, military men; convicts were often men who stood out against perceived injustices, as were peasants who risked punishment by fleeing from their lords. However, there are some divergencies from the Hobsbawm prototype.

Young unmarried men, for example, did not predominate among the Russian pretenders of the eighteenth century. Of the ten who derived from the lower orders of society and whose ages have been established, the youngest was eighteen and the oldest fifty. Their average age was thirty-six to thirty-seven. Again, while there is little reliable information about their marital status, we know that a high proportion of them were peasants of one kind or another, and that it was usual for peasants (excepting those drafted into the army in their youth), as also for Cossacks, to marry at a comparatively early age. The average age of thirty-six to thirty-seven is therefore reasonably old in the context of eighteenth-century Russia — old enough to be married and have children if pretenders conformed to social norms. Young men, therefore, so far from constituting the majority, were exceptional among pretenders, and it seems reasonable to assume that many were family men.

The archetypal pretender was a would-be revolutionary, albeit of a primitive type, a man who exploited the device of pretension as the only possible means of acquiring the necessary charisma to raise mass support among the Russian people. In order to explain this interpretation one must consider the mentality of the illiterate, isolated and culturally backward peasantry, people for whom the demarcation lines between objective reality, perceived view of the world, and imaginative flight of fancy became blurred when they attempted to account for changes affecting their lives which emanated from outside the village — a world of which most had little knowledge and no experience.

The ideology of the Russian peasant consisted of two basic and related concepts. Firstly, they had an idea of natural justice (the land really belongs to us; the landlord or official has no right to make such demands of me, etc.); and secondly a belief (also prevalent in medieval England, for example) that the monarch was always just. When these two notions were shown to be incompatible and irreconcilable, as they often were, recourse was had to some imaginative, but nonetheless rational device which served both to maintain the validity of the basic concepts and to legitimize revolt — namely, a belief that the monarch, in acting unjustly, was being misled by evil advisers; that these evil courtiers were perverting the monarch’s instructions (the line taken during the revolt of Sten’ka Razin as well as by Wat Tyler); or, if the reigning monarch was perceived to

\[\text{\textsuperscript{22} For other (compatible) interpretations of popular myths about the tsar, see M. Cherniavskii's ingenious study } \textit{Tsar and People} \text{ (New Haven and London, 1961), esp. pp. 44-100.}\]
be palpably unjust (if he had lost charisma in the Weberian sense),
that he or she could not be the real monarch at all, but must be a
usurper. The corollary of this, a tsar-less Russia being inconceivable,
was the belief that the real tsar, the just tsar, was wandering about
the country waiting for his people to restore him to the throne,
whereupon he would remedy their grievances.23

The rationalistic myth of the monarch as usurper had been born,
apparently, during the reign of Boris Godunov following the extinc-
tion of the Riurikid dynasty and had gained force during the “Time of
Troubles” early in the seventeenth century. The succession crises
of the eighteenth century served to strengthen its popularity as a
means of legitimizing social action, and “just tsars”, however doubtful
their credentials, became increasingly effective in rallying fraction-
alized groups of discontented people. Indeed, by the latter part of
the eighteenth century, with a real usurper on the throne, only a
pretender could serve as a magnet to attract mass support for an
insurrectionary grass-roots movement directed towards change.

This particular mythology was related to others which were
religiously rather than politically orientated. Peasants trained in the
vocabulary of Russian Orthodoxy tended, not unnaturally, to interpret
mysterious goings-on in the outside world in terms of miracles and
apocalyptic happenings, and peasant aspirations were commonly
expressed in terms of salvation rather than of mundane change.
Many pretenders communicated in such terms to their potential
followers, and their adherents often regarded them as messianic
saviours. Timofei Truzhenik was only one of many to talk of
miracles. Aslanbekov “cured people”, and his parting cry was
“Save me: I am your God on earth”.24 The followers of Gavrila
Kremnev claimed to see the stigmata of the Holy Cross upon his
feet; Nikita Seniutin prophesied that his followers would be free of
their lords in exactly nine months’ time; and the followers of Sel-
ivanov, of course, believed him to be Christ as well as tsar.25

Yet the element of fantasy in such claims to be an apocalyptic
agent was grounded in a certain rationality — given a situation in
which social change could only be obtained by, and expressed in
terms of, some formula of legitimacy. Moreover such fantastic

23 For an interesting analysis of the legends about “returning tsar-liberators”,
see Chistov, Russkie legendy, esp. pp. 30-2.
25 For comparable mythologies about “royal messiahs”, see Cohn, Pursuit
of the Millennium, pp. 108 ff.
claims did not obviate the need for a practical political programme, crude though its expression usually was.

Andrei Khol'shchevikov was exceptional in apparently making no promises and yet gaining a following. Truzhenik, by contrast, advanced one of the more far-reaching programmes, promising not only to reward his followers with gold, silver and bread, but to abolish the poll-tax, to put all the unjust aristocrats on trial, and, more particularly, to relieve the *odnodvortsy* from the onerous local watch-service duties — for he staked his claim in Tambov province where *odnodvortsy* formed an important segment of his potential constituency. Starodubtsev made a point of promising support for the poorer Don Cossacks; Minitskii directed a particular appeal to the soldiers of the Kiev regimental area. Such particular attention to the aspirations of soldiers and para-military groups such as Cossacks and *odnodvortsy* was common, reflecting a pretender's need to gather a force of experienced fighting men to form the core of an insurgent army.

A prospectus would often include reference to an immediate issue of a limited nature. A major plank of Ivan Minitskii's programme in 1738 was the ending of the war with Turkey, although he also made generalized promises of freedom. In 1740, Tatarinov castigated the Empress Anne for giving way to her "boyars" and generals, "who", as he accurately put it, "beat their soldiers without mercy", and promised to release convicts and to be merciful, ensuring that "judges will judge like the tsars of old".26 And for all the messianic mumbo-jumbo that surrounded Kremnev in 1765, he was quite specific about what he would do once he held power — grant twelve-year exemptions from the poll-tax, exemptions from recruiting, and the free distilling of vodka for everyone.

Pugachev's programme was the most far-reaching of all, but his promises tended to become broader as his campaign proceeded and his movement lasted longer than the others. Of Pugachev's successors, Khanin promised to kill all the "great" people in the Empire; Khripunov (who claimed to be Pugachev as well as Peter III) apparently limited his programme to nine years' tax-relief; Seniutin — and he was not alone in this — promised complete peasant emancipation.

Most pretenders, then, reinforced their appeal as the just tsar with specific promises calculated to appeal to the discontented, and from these promises we can gain some idea of what the more general sources of discontent were. Grievances were usually focused against

---

26 Quoted by Troitskii, *op. cit.*
the gentry and particularly against the "great men" who ruled Russia; resentment of the poll-tax was expressed in almost every instance, while more specific complaints tended to relate to particular social groups — the once-autonomous Cossacks beginning to feel the heavy hand of central government; odnodvorlys whose resources failed to match the demands made upon them and who were consequently being sucked down to peasant level; Old Believers suffering religious persecution.

Nevertheless, however favourably disposed a group of disaffected people might be towards a "just tsar" come among them, a pretender did not usually take their gullibility entirely for granted, whatever he promised. Tatarinov's followers, in 1740, might have been satisfied with his bold assertion that he was "born and called to be tsar over all the state", but fabricated "proofs" of title were commonly provided in order to reinforce a claim. Kamenshchikov, the false Peter III of 1764, for example, brandished two mysterious printed decrees (in fact copies of the official announcement of Elizabeth's death and the oath to Peter III) to prove his identity. Warts, pock-marks and scrofula scars were revealed as imperial birth-marks, and sometimes a pretender took an accomplice in tow to vouch for him. Thus Gavrila Kremnev was supported by a priest who claimed to have been a cantor at court where he had helped to educate the real Peter, and could therefore assure all comers that this Kremnev really was the emperor.

A negative requirement in maintaining the credibility of a pretension was, of course, to avoid any situation in which the false emperor might be recognized for the ordinary mortal he really was. It is for this reason apparently that most pretenders took the precaution of staking their claims in an area far distant from their places of origin. Pugachev, a Don Cossack, appeared near Kazan'; Artem'ev came from Simbirsk but registered his pretence at Astrakhan', and so on.

Pretenders also had to account for their sudden reappearances perhaps years after their reported deaths. Pugachev claimed to have spent eleven years wandering abroad as far afield as Egypt and Constantinople, and Evdokimov presented one of the more engaging alibis, explaining his thirty-five-year absence from the scene as Peter II by asserting he had been kidnapped by a group of courtiers while out hunting and taken to Italy where he had languished in prison for twenty-four and a half years, after which passage of time he had finally managed to escape.

One might imagine that a pretender also needed to look the part he
played if he was to attract any considerable following. Yet it is unlikely that many of them bore much resemblance to the real tsars and tsarevichs they impersonated, and none of the many “Peter IIIs” is known to have spoken German. However, a few imperial trappings, a minimal display of pomp and, above all, some talent as an actor, seem to have been sufficient to produce an impression consistent with the popular image of a monarch. Pugachev’s own appearance, for example, was not altogether prepossessing, yet when wearing a fine red coat, a large silver medal and the sash of the Order of St. Anne he was transformed in the eyes of his followers. Moreover he could also talk impressively and movingly, shedding tears “whenever he wanted to, which served to convince the simple people that what he told them was the truth”, and he bore himself well — in short he played his charismatic rôle convincingly. Minitskii, alias the Tsarevich Alexei, was another to provide himself with a minimal aura of pomp, having church bells rung and guns fired off to mark his entrance into a Ukrainian village, whereupon priests were persuaded to lead their flocks forward in submission to kiss the cross he held before them.

Once a following had been collected, it was common to form an imperial entourage. Pugachev formed a court, his cronies assuming the styles and titles of notabilities who surrounded the Empress Catherine. Kremnev was accompanied by a spurious “Count Rumiantsev” and a “General Pushkin”, while Peter Chernyshev also had “generals” in his retinue. Such masquerades reinforced a pretender’s credibility. Yet by no means all who followed actually believed the claims their false tsar made. There was collusion both explicit and unspoken. Many followers, though sceptical, evidently wished to believe; some pretended to believe in order to further the common cause. Iaik Cossacks, as one of them confirmed, noticed Pugachev’s “quickness and ability” and therefore decided to “make him lord over us”. So a successful pretender had to be credible as a leader, not simply as a tsar — the ability to inspire confidence, to carry conviction and to dissemble being as much requirements for successful pretenders as they are for successful politicians.

Pretension constituted an overt challenge to established authority. It was quintessentially seditious and its practitioners were severely punished. Krekshin, who was flogged and exiled for fifteen years,

was treated with comparative lenience. Kremnev, by contrast, was knouted, pilloried, branded and sent to Siberia for life. Aslanbekov, Chernyshev and Bogomolov suffered similar punishments, the latter dying on his way into exile. Selivanov and Khrupunov were consigned to madhouses. Semikov, Truzhenik, Starodubtsev, Pugachev and most of the others were executed. These terrible fates reflected the fear in which the state regarded the pretender phenomenon; they also indicate that, insofar as the wages of pretension was death, pretenders needed to be possessed of a desperate form of courage or else believe in their ability to defeat the established order by raising mass support extremely quickly. How successful then were eighteenth-century pretenders in doing this?

None of the others, of course, was remotely as successful as Pugachev, who attracted a minimum of two million supporters and created a viable form of administrative machine and military organization. Nevertheless, several others gathered sufficient adherents to alarm regional authorities and even the central government. The restless serfs on Prince Cherkasskii's considerable estate at Arzamas, for example, responded enthusiastically to the call of Andrei Kholshevikov; Truzhenik and Starodubtsev gained more than a modicum of support, the latter particularly among local boat-haulers. Minitskii, also in Anne's reign, attracted soldiers and priests as well as peasants; Tatarinov, Chevychelov and Randachich in Elizabeth's reign each gained a following; Kamenshchikov mustered over four hundred partisans in Isetsk in 1764 (mostly ascribed peasants, pripisnye — that is state peasants assigned to work for a factory either permanently or for part of the year), and in the following year Kremnev excited hundreds, if not thousands, in the Voronezh-Belgorod area, including mainly odnodvortsy, soldiers, peasant runaways, and priests. Evdokimov and Aslanbekov in the same year were rather less successful, however, as was Chernyshev, though his followers did include a few soldiers and priests. Six years later, however, Bogomolov raised several thousand people, among them a sizable contingent of Don Cossacks, and this was probably the closest approach to lift-off into a full-scale popular revolution of any pretender movement before Pugachev's. Riabov in 1773 and Mosiagin in Tambov a year later were not remotely so successful, while the followings of most pretenders after Pugachev could be numbered in dozens and sometimes a mere handful (Shliapnikov in 1782 gathered only nine adherents).

29 See Longworth, "The Last Great Cossack-Peasant Rising".
The frequency with which "white" (secular) clergy were involved throws an illuminating sidelight on the shady phenomenon of pretension, suggesting that wide sections of the rural clergy were disaffected — or at least rather more sympathetic to the people they lived among than to the authorities whose interests and image they were intended to promote. How many of them were more or less covert Old Believers it is impossible to guess, but the south-eastern regions, so favoured by pretenders, were strong centres of Old Belief — and in challenging the legitimacy of the established church as reformed by the Patriarch Nikon in the seventeenth century, Old Believers mirrored the pretenders' challenging of the legitimacy of individual emperors and empresses. The connection between these schismatics and protest movements of the eighteenth century, whether or not they involved pretenders, thus presents itself as one meriting further exploration.

Such a link is certainly apparent in the Pugachev revolt, despite attempts by some Soviet historians to discredit the idea.30 Moreover, there is at least one other case in the eighteenth century (there had been others again in the seventeenth) where Old Believers are known to have been involved with a pretender: Evdokimov was sheltered by Old Believers who taught him to read. However, while there is strong circumstantial evidence indicating the existence of an Old Believer underground network in Russia which sheltered runaways and seems to have supported (if not founded) promising opposition movements, its precise ramifications and the nature of its operations present a problem as difficult to assess as, say, the influence of smuggling or peculation on the eighteenth-century Russian (or English) economy.

One further issue relating to the pretender phenomenon suggests itself — the prevalence of rumours to the effect that a real tsar was alive and about to appear.31 In 1763 word spread about Orenburg

30 See I. Z. Kadson, "Vosstanie Pugacheva i raskol" [The Pugachev Uprising and the Schism], Ezhegodnik muzeia istorii religii i ateizma, iv (1960), pp. 222-30. M. Cherniavskii, by contrast, ventures the strong assertion that Old Believers "represented the ideology and aspirations of the Russian masses": see "The Old Believers and the New Religion", Slavic Rev., xxv, no. 1 (March 1966), pp. 1-39. The issue has a parallel in English historiography: the idea that Lollardy had much to do with the uprisings of 1381 used to be regarded with considerable scepticism (notably by K. B. McFarlane — see, for example, his John Wycliffe and English Non-Conformity [London, 1952], pp. 99 ff.), but it has recently been resurrected (see, for example, R. H. Hilton in H. A. Landsberger [ed.], Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change [London, 1974], p. 89).

31 See, for example, the material in "Otgoloski Pugachevskago bunta". The best evaluation of the force of such rumours in relation to social myths is provided by Chistov, op. cit., pp. 30-2 passim.
province to the effect that Peter III was alive, in hiding and due to reappear. Similar rumours were reported in Kursk and St. Petersburg in 1764, in Astrakhan' in 1767 and in Schlüsselburg in 1769 — by which time a belief in Peter’s continued existence had become endemic in south-eastern Russia.

In 1772 an odnodvorets called Trofim Klishin was caught disseminating the information that Peter was living among the Don Cossacks; in 1776 a Ukrainian, Dmitrii Popovich, was found wandering over the southern steppes declaring Peter to be alive (and suggesting that he himself was of princely origin); and similar rumours, spread by soldiers, odnodvortsy and peasants, remained prevalent throughout the ’seventies. Towards the end of the ’eighties, however, they subsided and continued to do so thereafter, as did the incidence of pretenders themselves.

Some of these rumours may relate to actual pretenders who were never tracked down or to rebellious characters preparing to proclaim themselves tsar (it being a frequent device for pretenders to test out the ground with some care before declaring themselves — to talk of the “real tsar’s” existence, then hint at something like royal blood — before finally committing themselves). Certainly the prevalence of such rumours — which may legitimately be regarded as a legend of hope for the oppressed — created an environment in which pretenders might flourish, and probably encouraged would-be pretenders to declare themselves.

Strong and widespread currents of rumour were noted in 1763-4, for example, at a time when no pretender is known to have appeared for several years, and immediately preceding a sudden crop of them. Such rumours also seem to have kept the idea strongly in popular consciousness, especially in south-eastern Russia between 1767 and 1772, when Bogomolov created such excitement and where he was shortly to be succeeded by other pretenders including Pugachev himself.

This discussion of the pretender phenomenon suggests the following conclusions. First, the general coincidence between periods of deteriorating socio-economic conditions and the incidence of pretender movements (with peaks during Anne’s reign, in the mid-’sixties and again the ’seventies); the promises to effect social and economic improvements which the pretenders made; and the fact that the vast majority of them derived from the ranks of the oppressed are consistent with the view that pretender movements were movements of social protest.

By extension it may be suggested that most pretenders (a very
high proportion of whom were runaways, deserters, brigands or branded as outlaws for some other reason) were would-be leaders of peasant revolts — men whose own sense of grievance allied to their knowledge of widespread discontent gained through their extensive travels as fugitives around the countryside ("I have been in the Ukraine, on the Don and in many towns in Russia", remarked Pugachev on one occasion, "and everywhere I have seen the people ruined").\textsuperscript{32} induced them to attempt to solve their own difficulties, or take revenge on their oppressors, by canalizing the discontent of others.

Thirdly, pretension to be the just and rightful tsar was not only a traditional means of attracting mass support for a movement of social protest, it soon became virtually the only way, given the cultural climate of rural Russia at that time. The image of the just tsar was one of great strength; it could bestow on a potential leader the necessary charisma, invest him with the magic properties of a leader-hero, unite various classes of the oppressed, offer them hope, and induce them to take action under a banner of legitimacy. Given the absence of revolutionary ideology in the Marxist sense and of any continuing organization around which opposition by the lower social strata could crystallize, pretension provided the only effective boost to get a revolutionary movement off the ground.

Nevertheless, to achieve any measure of success, a pretender had to offer a minimum credibility. He had to play his chosen rôle effectively, offer convincing alibis, reveal an imperial birthmark or stigmata, live like an emperor (preferably surrounded by "nobles" and "generals"), and above all make promises consistent with those which a just tsar might be expected to make (usually a matter of expressing the peasants' aspirations).

Although pretenders continued to appear until well into the nineteenth century and some Populists were to toy with the idea of exploiting the myth of the "tsar-liberator" as a means of articulating diffuse peasant discontent and concerting it into revolutionary action,\textsuperscript{33} the numbers declined sharply after the 1780s. The coincidental decline of large-scale rural disturbances suggests that a common explanation may be applicable to both. The generally improved policing system in the provinces and in particular the harnessing of the once-turbulent Cossacks as instruments of the

\textsuperscript{32} Pugachevshchina [Collection of Documents on the Pugachev Uprising], ed. S. A. Golubtsov, 3 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1926-31), ii, p. 131.
central power\textsuperscript{34} played an important part in this decline. So did a certain amelioration in peasant conditions after the Pugachev revolt, an improvement which stemmed from a greater sensitivity to the dangers of popular unrest on the part of the bureaucracy, and, increasingly, among some sections of the gentry. The creeping growth of the idea that social reforms were necessary (although such social critics were rarely close to the peasantry) injected a fresh element into the situation, and the abolition of serfdom in the 1860s cut away much, though by no means all, of the ground on which pretenders and rural violence had flourished.

However, there are certain factors which relate more particularly to the decline of the pretender phenomenon: notably the death of the usurper Catherine and the accession of a legitimate ruler, Paul; the effectiveness of loyalist propaganda disseminated by the state-controlled media, and, not least, changes in mentality. The strange (albeit incomplete) transformation of Old Belief, for example, from a movement of religious fundamentalism closely connected with manifestations of political and social protest into a preoccupation with mysticism combined with a profitable engagement in industry and trade is indicative of this.\textsuperscript{35} The myth of Peter III remained, however. It continued to be fostered, more especially among the skoptsy, until well into the nineteenth century,\textsuperscript{36} while the less specific myth about the "good tsar" lingered on into the twentieth century,\textsuperscript{37} when mass literacy at last delivered it the coup de grâce.

\textit{Philip Longworth}

\textsuperscript{34} See Longworth, \textit{The Cossacks}, pp. 224-34.

\textsuperscript{35} The issue has recently been suggested by A. Gerschenkron, \textit{Europe in the Russian Mirror} (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 11 and 17 ff. See also V. V. Andreev, \textit{Raskol i ego znachenie v narodnoi russkoj zhizni} [The Schism and its Significance in the Life of the Russian People] (St. Petersburg, 1870), p. vi and passim.

\textsuperscript{36} See Chistov, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 182.

\textsuperscript{37} For an example, see Avrich, \textit{Russian Rebels}, pp. 272-3.