



# Romanov

THE LAST TSARIST DYNASTY

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## **The Last Tsarist Dynasty**

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# Chapter One: The Early Romanovs

## Michael I (1613-1645)

Before the Romanovs, there were the Rurikids, the dynasty of Ivan the Terrible, who ruled from 1547 to 1584. Ivan the Terrible—or, Ivan IV—had two sons by his first wife, Anastasia Romanova Zakharina-Yurieva. Ivan Ivanovitch, the eldest, was murdered by his father when he was 27, after the tsar attacked Ivan's pregnant wife and caused her to suffer a miscarriage. When Ivan confronted his father over this ill deed, the tsar hit him over the head with his scepter. He regretted the deed instantly, but it was too late. The younger Ivan died a short time later.

Ivan the Terrible's second son by his Romanov bride, Fyodor I, assumed the throne after Ivan's death and reigned for fifteen years. Sometimes called Fyodor the Bell-ringer or Fyodor the Blessed, he was shy and retiring, extremely pious, and more interested in religion than in government. By Fyodor's own wish, his brother-in-law, Boris Gudonov, acted as his de facto regent until Fyodor died childless at the age of forty, bringing the Rurikid dynasty to an end.

Boris Gudonov succeeded Fyodor as tsar, but when he died in 1598, his son, Fyodor II, ruled for only a few months before he and all the rest of his family were assassinated. Over the next fifteen years there ensued a period of civil war, famine, and political chaos, known as the Time of Troubles. Russia had no more tsars until 1613, when a delegation of nobles and bishops approached Michael Romanov, the frail teenage nephew of Ivan the Terrible's wife, Anastasia, and begged him to accept the throne.

Michael Romanov was sixteen, physically weak, and beleaguered after having spent years as prisoner and in hiding with his mother, Martha. Their family had fallen into difficulty when Michael was very young, after Boris Gudonov accused Michael's father of treason. They had lived under threat ever since. In fact, when they were told that the delegation had arrived from Moscow, Michael and his mother were at first reluctant to leave their hiding place in the Ipatiev Monastery, because they knew there was a chance that this was a trick to deliver them into the hands of their enemies. But they agreed to meet the delegation regardless.

As the legend goes, the nobles greeted them on bended knee, begging Michael to accept the throne and deliver Russia from the turmoil that had engulfed it. As

Romanov scholar Simon Sebag-Montefiore writes, they addressed him as, “Sovereign Lord, Lord of Vladimir and Moscow, and Tsar and Grand Prince of all Russia,” and proceeded to implore him:

“‘Muscovy couldn’t survive without a sovereign...and Muscovy was in ruins,’ so an Assembly of the Land had chosen him to be their sovereign who would ‘shine for the Russian Tsardom like the sun,’ and they asked him to ‘show them his favor and not disdain to accept their entreaties’ and ‘deign to come to Moscow as quickly as possible.’ Michael and his mother were not pleased. ‘They told us,’ reported the delegates, ‘with great fury and crying that *He* did not wish to be Sovereign and *She* wouldn’t bless him to be Sovereign either and they walked off into the church.’”

The delegates did not give up. Point by point, they addressed each objection that Michael had made to their offer, and when he refused a second time, they pleaded with him for six hours, asserting that Russia would be destroyed utterly unless he saved them. Finally, he assented, and made his way slowly to Moscow.

Michael had been chosen to be tsar for the same reason that many leaders appointed by committee are chosen: he was the only candidate everyone could agree on. His family connection to the wife of Ivan the Terrible gave him legitimacy. His young age, and the fact that his father was in captivity in Poland, were also points in his favor. He was a mere child during the political turmoil of the Time of Troubles, so he hadn’t made any enemies or committed any unforgivable deeds in the pursuit of power. Lastly, he had no nearby male relatives who might seek to exert power by influencing him. “Let us have Misha Romanov,” wrote one member of the Assembly, “for he is still young and not yet wise; he will suit our purposes.”

Michael’s coronation took place on July 11, 1613, in the Kremlin, which was practically in ruins. The coronation of Russian tsars was a semi-mystical ceremony of tremendous religious significance. Because he was only descended from Anastasia Romanov, and not from Ivan the Terrible, Michael could not claim hereditary right of rule; but once he was crowned, he was God’s anointed ruler, a legitimacy that could not be gainsaid. Russia was heavily influenced by Byzantine culture. When Michael was crowned, he was seated on the throne of Monomakh, named for an emperor of Constantinople, and given a Mongol helmet to wear. Following the ceremony, he established a precedent that every Russian tsar that followed him would continue: he visited the nearby Archangel Cathedral and prayed at the graves of Ivan the Terrible and Fyodor I.

No sooner had Michael taken the throne than his throne was in jeopardy. Russia was under threat from Sweden and Poland, and a pretender to the throne, claiming to be the son of Ivan the Terrible's dead son Dmitry, was still at large. Furthermore, Russia was bankrupt. In order to restore the grandeur of the throne and establish the supremacy of the dynasty he was founding, Michael had to rely on the wealth of his loyal retainers. Their money and jewels provided Michael with the necessary elements of royal showmanship, and Michael, as tsar, in turn granted them favor and influence, allowing them a place at court in proximity to the seat of power. Many of the families that grew close to Michael in the early days of the Romanov dynasty kept their elevated and influential status until the fall of the monarchy.

The style of the Russian monarchy held that the tsar was the "little father" to his people, especially the peasants, who saw him as kind and benevolent, as opposed to their more immediate rulers, the land-owning nobles, whom they blamed for their miserable lot in life. Likewise, the nobles and courtiers who served the tsar acknowledged his paternalistic role over them, signing their letters to him with childish diminutives such as "Sasha" and "Misha", and referring to themselves as his humble slaves. This was one of the chief differences between the Russian court and the royal courts of Europe. Elizabeth I of England, who was a contemporary of Ivan the Terrible, addressed, for example, the Duke of Northumberland as "your grace" and lesser nobles as "my lord". This form of balance of power was unknown in Russia, where the tsar ruled his court and his nobles as a father ruled his family, brooking no challenge to his authority. In exchange, the tsar allowed his nobles uncontested authority to rule their hundreds of thousands of serfs exactly as they pleased, tsars on their own estate as surely as Michael was tsar in Moscow.

For all this, Michael's reputation as tsar was for gentleness, meekness, and piety; he was known for the docility of his temper, and scarcely ever indulged in angry outbursts against his courtiers. Some tsars guarded their personal security by maintaining a fearsome and implacable persona, but Michael chose to rely on his "personal enforcer", Prince Yuri Suleshov, who kept his ear to ground for any treasonous rumblings in the court.

The other vital step necessary to securing Michael's position on the throne was choosing a wife. In later centuries, the tsars of Russia would select brides from amongst the royal houses of Europe, but in Michael's day, when Russia was still considered strange, savage, and politically unstable, European families were largely unwilling to send their daughters there as brides. Thus, royal marriages were arranged via "brideshows".

A brideshow was essentially a beauty contest for the daughters of the lower gentry,

in which the winner became tsarina. Since the tsar inevitably made his highest government appointments from members of his family first and his wife's family second, the girl who won the contest won great power and influence for her relatives. As many as five hundred girls participated in the bridesshows, and from this throng a committee of doctors and courtiers selected sixty of the strongest, healthiest girls from the best pedigrees—in other words, the girls that seemed to them most likely to produce healthy children.

The competition was fierce, both for the girls and their families, and intense behind-the-scenes politicking narrowed the final group of contestants from sixty down to six. Rather like horses at the tracks, each of the final six girls had “backers” from the highest ranking noble families who carefully maneuvered them into position. In this way, the tsar's most powerful courtiers exerted some control over who he married. But out of those last six girls, the tsar's choice was up to him and could not be influenced.

There was usually some attempt at interference after the tsar had made his selection, however. Michael's choice of bride, Maria Khlopova, displeased both his chief advisor and his mother, who conspired to give the girl food poisoning. They then claimed that Maria was sick and unable to have children, and that her family had deliberately concealed this from the tsar. Her family was ruined and sent into exile. Four years later, however, Michael was still in love with Maria Khlopova, and he ordered a different doctor to examine her. When this doctor discovered that Maria was in excellent health, the conspiracy against her came to light. Enraged, he banished the advisor who had masterminded the plot to poison her, but Michael's mother still refused to consent to the marriage. She proposed another bride, Princess Maria Dolgorukaya. Michael married Dolgorukaya, who died a mere four months after the wedding. Two years later, after yet another brideshow, Michael married Eudoxia Streshneva; she was kept under heavy guard for her own safety until the wedding could take place in February of 1626. Eudoxia would go on to have ten children. Michael's first son and heir, Alexei, was born in 1629.

Michael could barely read or write when he became tsar, but Alexei was given a tutor when he was five years old. The tutor taught him Latin, Greek, and Polish, and acquainted him with the wider world of European learning. His tutor arranged for him to be taught in a class with other boys his age, and the result was that Alexei's childhood was far happier and more emotionally stable than that of many Romanov princes who would come after him.

Michael was prone to sickness throughout his life. (Though it is possible that contemporary documents make him out to be more sickly than he actually was,

since it would have suited the Assembly that appointed him as tsar to make him seem frail and easy to control.) But he did not become seriously ill until 1639, when two of his younger sons died. By 1645, the doctors were prescribing daily purgatives and emetics to cure his depression. On July 12 of that year, Michael fainted in church and complained of a terrible pain in his stomach. His family was summoned to his deathbed, where he passed his final hours surrounded by priests and courtiers.

The death of Michael Romanov was to be the first real test of the stability of the new Romanov dynasty. Would the son and heir, Alexei, step smoothly into his father's role as tsar, or would ambitious elements at court attempt to rush into the power vacuum and overthrow their family? As it turned out, Michael need not have feared for his legacy. When he died shortly after two in the morning on July 13, 1645, courtiers lined up to swear oaths of loyalty to his son. Alexei was sixteen years old when he became tsar, the same age Michael had been when the delegation from Moscow offered him the throne of Russia.

### **Alexei I (1645-1676)**

One Romanov scholar says of Alexei that “the new tsar looked the part and lived it too.” He was tall, healthy, and strong, well-educated by 17<sup>th</sup> century Russian standards, and he enjoyed vigorous outdoor activities like hunting and falconry. Sebag-Montefiore writes that:

“Alexei was one of the best-prepared heirs. His personal papers reveal an intelligent, restless and sharp-tongued reformer who did not suffer fools gladly. He wrote poems, made sketches and constantly wrote down ideas on every possible subject; he always sought foreign technology to improve his army and palaces—foreshadowing the approach of his son, Peter the Great. His rages were dangerous and he was quite capable of thumping a minister in the middle of a Council meeting. When the steward of his monasteries got drunk, he wrote him a letter calling him ‘a God-hater, Christ-seller, single-minded little Satan, damned scoffing enemy, wicked sly evil-doer’; but typically, the man’s punishment was merely to have this read out in public and to atone sincerely.”

Alexei's nickname was “the young monk”, a testament to his rigid devotion to religious ceremony. He rose at four each morning for hours of private prayers, then attended mass at nine. Supposedly, his devotional exercises were so extreme that even bishops and priests found it a challenge to keep up with him when they visited his court. While Michael had kept a number of dwarfs and “freaks” at his palace to entertain him, Alexei sent them all home with pensions and replaced



them with poor monks and pious cripples, a monarchical display of Christian charity.

When it came time in 1648 for Alexei to review the bridesshows and marry, his chosen wife met a similar fate to the poor maligned Maria Khlopova. During the wedding ceremony, she fainted when the heavy crown was placed on her head. Her family's enemies were quick to spread rumors that she was secretly epileptic. She was sent away from court, and the unconsummated marriage was annulled. Instead, Alexei married Maria Miloslavsky, whose father, a secretary in the Foreign Office, was friends with Alexei's former tutor and father-figure, Boris Morozov. The reason Morozov favored Maria was simple: she had a sister, Anna, whom he intended to marry, thus elevating himself to the rank of the tsar's brother-in-law. Despite this manipulation, Alexei and Maria were fairly happy together. Their marriage produced thirteen children, including five sons.

During Alexei's reign, a new Russian legal code was introduced in response to civil unrest provoked by the abuses of Alexei's ministers, including Morozov, who was forced to flee Moscow and only narrowly escaped the mobs seeking his life. To pacify the nobles, Alexei awarded them vast tracts of land that would belong to them permanently. To ensure that these properties retained their value, serfs were thenceforth forbidden from leaving the estates where they had been born. Traditionally, serfs had retained the right to "vote with their feet" once a year, on St. George's Day—if their masters were cruel, they could pack up and move to a different nobleman's territory. When this became illegal, the lot of serfs, who composed over ninety percent of the Russian population, worsened considerably. Little was done to alleviate their suffering until they were freed by Alexander II more than two hundred years later.

In 1654, Alexei sent Russian troops to Ukraine, where people of the Orthodox faith were chafing against the rule of Catholic Poland. He considered this a religious crusade against infidels, and he was encouraged in this belief by a peasant named Nikon, who rose to the rank of patriarch in the Orthodox church thanks to Alexei's patronage. The religious fervor stirred up by Nikon led to systematic purges, not only of Catholics, but of Jews, who were dismembered, cannibalized, raped, and disemboweled by Russian soldiers. As many as 100,000 Jews were brutally slaughtered during these campaigns. At first, Alexei's crusade was successful; he was the first tsar since Ivan the Terrible to win significant victories against the Polish. These victories were reversed in 1659, however, by a Polish-Swedish alliance.

Alexei's oldest son, also named Alexei, was given the same careful and thorough education that the tsar had received when he was a boy. But Alexei died in 1670 at

the age of fourteen, leaving his sickly brother Fyodor as Alexei's heir. When his wife Maria died shortly after giving birth to their thirteenth child, Alexei decided that he needed more sons; Fyodor had only two brothers left, and both were as sickly as he was. On January 22, 1671, Alexei married Natalya Naryshkina, who, at eighteen years old, was less than half the age of his oldest daughter. In fact, all of his daughters resented her, particularly Sophia, who would one day act as regent for Natalya's son, Peter, who was born in May of 1672.

Alexei's marriage to Natalya opened the door of Russian culture to the westernizing reforms that Peter would champion during his reign. Natalya had been supported during the bridesshows by Alexei's childhood friend Arteem Matveev, who was married to a Scotswoman named Mary Hamilton. Hamilton did not adhere to the *terem* life of highborn Russian women; she wore close-fitting European fashions rather than flowing caftans and veils. Natalya reflected some of these western influences. When she went out in her carriage, she let the windows stand open, though women of the royal household normally did not show their faces in public; even at church and in court, they were expected to remain behind grills.

On January 22, 1676, precisely five years after his second marriage, Alexei suddenly succumbed to heart and kidney failure. Moments before his death, he placed his scepter in the hands of his son Fyodor, who was fourteen years old. "Alas," he said, as he lay on his deathbed. "I am a great emperor, yet I hold the smallest worms in dread." He died on January 29, 1676, at the age of forty-seven.

### **Fyodor III (1676-1682)**

For the first decade of his life, no one expected Fyodor to become tsar. Not only did he have an older brother, but his health had always been poor, and like several of his younger siblings he was not expected to survive childhood. Yet, he was given an excellent education, and he was intelligent and broadminded. Had he been physically stronger, his six-year reign might have had a different character.

When Alexei died, the court was divided into factions: the "western" faction was led by Arteem Matveev, and the "Muscovite" faction, reactionary and puritanical, was led by the family of Alexei's first wife, the Miloslavskys, including Fyodor's eldest sister Irina. Animosity towards the dowager tsarina, her son Peter, and all those who supported them, was high. The Muscovites forced Matveev out of office, and servants in his household were accused of making the tsar ill with poison. Natalya and Peter were exiled from the tsar's court and sent to live at the

Preobrazhensky estate in 1676.

Fyodor had little strength with which to defy his powerful courtiers, but in one thing he managed to have his way. In 1680, during a rare public appearance, he met a beautiful girl who spoke several languages and played musical instruments. Her name was Agafia Grushetskaya. Under pressure to maintain the tradition of the bridesow, Fyodor allowed other girls to be presented to him for consideration, but he was resolute in his choice. Agafia was subject to the same conspiracies as the tsarinas before her, but when she and her mother were accused of prostitution, two of Fyodor's closest friends launched an investigation to clear their names. Fyodor and Agafia were married in July of 1680 in a small private ceremony. Exactly a year later, in July of 1681, Agafia gave birth to a son; both mother and child died three days later. Fyodor's health never recovered from this blow. In the hopes of producing an heir, he remarried in February of 1682, but two months later, at the age of twenty-one, he was dead.

### **The regency of Sofia Alekseyevna (1682-1689)**

A succession crisis loomed after Fyodor's death. He had no son. His only heirs were his two younger brothers, Ivan, who was sixteen, and Peter, who was ten. The Miloslavskys supported Ivan, son of the dead tsarina Maria, but they were not in a position to force his accession, for two reasons. Before Fyodor's death, he had recalled Natalya Naryshkina from exile, and the Matveev faction was once against predominant at court; in fact, they had been trying to persuade Fyodor to disinherit his brother Ivan in Peter's favor at the time of Fyodor's death. This was because of the second reason: Ivan was just as sickly as Fyodor had been, and more disastrously, he was regarded as slow or simpleminded, unfit to rule.

No matter which of his brothers were chosen to succeed Fyodor, the boy would have to have a regent. But the Miloslavskys were not willing to tolerate the appointment of a regent from the Naryshkin family, and vice versa. A compromise was reached by naming Ivan and Peter co-tsars, with their older sister—half-sister, in Peter's case—as their regent.

Sofia Alekseyevna was extraordinarily clever. All of Alexei's daughters had been well educated, but Sofia was intelligent besides, and the narrow world of the terem could not hold her for long. By the time of Fyodor's death, she had positioned herself as the most powerful member of his court, and while the succession was still being determined, she attempted to force matters to a resolution by spreading rumors that Tsar Fyodor had been poisoned, and the rightful new tsar, Ivan, had

been strangled. It was not common knowledge that Ivan was unfit to rule, and the Russian people, unable to understand why he had not been permitted to take the throne immediately, found an assassination conspiracy to be a plausible explanation for events.

The Streltsy regiments of Moscow musketeers were already discontented with palace authority, because their complaints over stolen pay had been met with the threat of flogging. They were quick to believe that the same powerful nobles who had allowed them to be cheated had murdered the young tsar in secret. Twenty-five thousand of them mobbed the Kremlin, demanding proof that Ivan was still alive. Natalya Naryshkina brought both Ivan and Peter out to meet them, but they were not satisfied. They wanted Ivan to be named tsar then and there—and they wanted to kill all of the Naryshkins. The musketeers rushed into the palace, where Natalya, Ivan, and Peter were standing at the bottom of the staircase with Arteem Matveev. Matveev was seized and thrown off a balcony onto sharp pikes, while the ten-year-old Peter watched. It was the defining moment of the future emperor's early life. Some historians have even theorized that it was the traumatic source of the epilepsy he suffered as an adult.

The Moscow rebellion of 1682 claimed a number of lives, and Matveev was not the only person whom the young Peter witnessed being dragged away to a brutal death that night. His mother's brother, Ivan, willingly surrendered to the musketeers to spare the women and children of the palace from the violence that would ensue if they carried out their threats to come looking for him. Sofia Alekseyevna emerged as the hero of the evening: she persuaded the musketeers to spare her half-brother's remaining Naryshkin uncles, and in return, they hailed her as their *Gosudarina*, sovereign lady. It was the musketeers who asked her to place both Ivan and Peter on the throne and rule in their name as regent. Sofia had played a large role in stirring up the rebellion through her retainers, primarily to protect the interests of her brother Ivan from her half-brother's Naryshkin relatives, but she was ready and willing to take power when the opportunity arose. In being named regent, Sofia became the first woman ever to rule Russia—first in a string of empresses and regents that would dominate the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, before female rule was ended by the edict of Catherine the Great's embittered son, Paul I.

Sofia's rule was met with an immediate challenge. Prince Ivan Khovansky, who had led the musketeer uprising on Sofia's instigation, believed she should step aside for him. A religious schism had overtaken the Orthodox church in the last years of Tsar Alexei's reign, and new ceremonial rules were introduced, the most emblematic of which was that the Orthodox faithful were to cross themselves using three fingers instead of two. A significant number of Russians, known as Old

Believers, resisted these reforms. Khovansky, and a number of his musketeers, were among the Old Believers, and they demanded that Sofia overturn the religious reforms of her father. Sofia agreed to all of Khovansky's demands, but told him that, before she could do anything else, she had to arrange Ivan and Peter's double coronation.

Once the boy tsars had been crowned, Sofia reneged on her promises. In July of 1682, she and the other women of the royal family—her elderly aunts, and the dowager tsarinas Martha and Natalya—walked out to meet the musketeers who clung to the old faith. She informed them haughtily that she would not overturn Alexei's religious reforms, because to do so would deny the autocratic prerogative of the tsars. When they threatened to send her to a convent, she had 20,000 of them executed for their role in the Moscow rebellion. Khovansky escaped this purge; Sofia had placed him temporarily in charge of the government while she and her brothers went on pilgrimage. Sofia had arranged a test of Khovansky's loyalty. She sent word to him in Moscow that the royal bodyguards were to attend her at the house where the young tsars were staying. When Khovansky hesitated to send her men and arms, she concluded that he intended to stage a coup. Sofia had Khovansky publicly denounced as a traitor who was conspiring against the lives of the tsars; he was executed by beheading shortly afterwards, in Sofia's presence.

By 1684, Sofia was embroiled in a war against the Ottoman empire, which had staged an invasion of the west by attacking Vienna. She agreed to join with other Christian rulers, including hereditary enemies of Russia such as Poland, to repel the Ottoman advance, in exchange for perpetual rights over Kiev and a large portion of Ukraine. Sofia included her two brothers in the negotiations. Ivan, who was not mentally equipped to understand the nuances of foreign policy, sat in a specially constructed throne with a curtain behind him so that advisors could whisper words for him to repeat. Peter, by contrast, though only twelve years old, was listening avidly, so eager to ask questions and take part in official proceedings that he sometimes had to be restrained. Sofia was already beginning to fear the day when she would have to allow Peter a larger role in government; his education had been sparse, due to his inability to sit still and mind his tutor, but Peter was physically vigorous, and just as intelligent as Sofia. He knew that supreme power was his birthright, and he was looking forward to the inevitable day when he would rule without his older sister's interference.

Like his mother Natalya, Peter came under western influence at an early age. Seeing that he was too energetic for the classroom, his tutor arranged for him to learn carpentry and falconry, and Peter soon began to play at military drills. When he was still a boy, he formed the Preobrazhensky Guards out of a motley collection

of friends, playmates, servants, personal retainers, and despised foreigners who lived in Moscow's "German quarter". What began as a play regiment for the amusement of the boy tsar would later become the most prestigious regiment in the Imperial Guards; it was the Preobrazhensky regiment that would place Catherine the Great on the throne in a few decades' time.

Peter spent a great deal of time in the German quarter as a teenager, where he was introduced to Protestantism, western technology, and friendly German girls who weren't cloistered away behind veils and grilled partitions. Though he undoubtedly spent plenty of time sowing his wild oats in this disreputable part of Moscow, he was also learning valuable lessons that would define the course of his reign; among his carousing companions were some of Russia's best soldiers, including foreigners who taught him western military tactics. He would not be of age to seriously threaten Sofia's regency for a few years yet, but it was evident to everyone that he was preparing for the day when he would take power.

## Chapter Two: Peter the Great (1682-1725)

### End of the Regency

In 1688, Peter, son of tsar Alexei, turned sixteen, the same age as his father and grandfather when they came to the throne. He had the support of the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky regiments, and he had qualities that his older brother and co-tsar, Ivan, sorely lacked: intelligence, drive, and physical vigor. At sixteen he had reached his full adult height of six feet, eight inches, whereas Ivan, at age twenty-one, was so ill, thin, and twitchy that, had he not been a tsar, it would have been impossible to marry him off. But Sofia Alekseyevna's only hope of retaining power in the face of Peter's approaching majority was through Ivan, and Ivan's only hope of retaining his throne once Peter reached adulthood was to produce an heir. A brideshow was held for Ivan in January of 1684, and he married Praskovia Saltykova later that month. Five years later, in January of 1689, Peter married a wife of his mother's choosing, Eudoxia Lopukhina. Shortly after Peter's marriage, Ivan and Praskovia had a daughter, the first of three. But even though one of Ivan's daughters, Anna, would become empress of Russia, daughters were not enough to secure Ivan's position on the throne—or Sofia's position as his regent.

An outburst of temper on Peter's side forced the crisis to a head. When Sofia's lover and chief minister, Vasily Golitsyn, returned from a series of unimportant but more or less successful skirmishes against the Tatar people of the Crimea, Peter stormed out of the church where Sofia and Ivan were preparing to welcome him, claiming he would not treat a defeat as if it was a victory. A tense stand-off followed; Sofia was afraid that Peter would order his "play regiments" to attack her; Peter, remembering how Matveev and others had been murdered before his eyes in his boyhood, feared that Sofia would order her foreign policy advisor, Fyodor Shaklovity, to send the Streltsy regiments after him.

On August 4, 1689, Peter decided to test his authority as tsar against the authority of his sister and regent: he ordered the arrest of Fyodor Shaklovity. His orders were carried out, but just a few days later, Sofia had Shaklovity released and ordered him to stir the musketeers up against Peter, who, she claimed, intended to murder her and Ivan. Shaklovity obeyed orders, but Peter was warned. He fled in the middle of the night to a fortified monastery, where he was joined by the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky Guards. Then, he made a second, and even more crucial test of his authority; rather than attempting to fight the musketeers, he simply ordered them to Trinity Monastery to await his orders. When they

obeyed, he knew that he no longer had to wait for Sofia to resign power voluntarily.

Peter set about dismantling Sofia's power base. He ordered Shaklovity arrested again, and this time he was tortured until he confessed to being part of a plot to kill Peter and make Sofia tsarina. Vasily Golitsyn, and all the foreign mercenaries who had been fighting the war in Crimea for Sofia, surrendered to Peter. Now he could safely order the arrest of Sofia, who underwent the traditional fate of highborn Russian woman who needed to be got out of the way—she was sent to Novodevichy Convent, although she did not become a nun and her quarters were richly furnished, as befit a tsar's daughter. Peter returned to the palace and explained to his brother Ivan that their sister had been sent away; they alone ruled Russia now. Contrary to Sofia's fears, Peter made no effort to remove Ivan from the throne, and treated him with all the affection and respect due a brother and a co-monarch. By this time, Peter's position was secure enough that he could afford to be magnanimous; his wife, Eudoxia, had just given birth to a son, Alexei, named for his grandfather.

## **Tsar Peter I**

With Sofia out of the way, Peter assumed power without significantly altering the lifestyle he had preferred during the regency. He left all the solemn ceremonies and formalities of court life to his co-tsar Ivan and his most trusted retainer, Fyodor Romodanovsky, whom Peter elevated to the new rank of prince-caesar. His mother's brother, Ivan Naryshkin, ran the government. Peter held his own informal traveling court away from the palace, where he was surrounded by the same colorful personalities that delighted him when he was a boy: foreigners, mercenaries, peasants, dwarfs, giants, and other "freaks", old soldiers, and a small number of trusted relatives. He formalized his "play regiments" by testing them in maneuvers against the musketeers. In 1691, he convened his informal, unofficial, but very real cabinet: the All-Mad, All-Jesting, All-Drunken Synod. What passed on the surface as a company of whoring, hard-drinking revelers was in fact "the government of Russia in brutally drunken disguise." Peter was not interested in the ceremonial duties of the tsar, but his court was, in effect, Russian military headquarters.

Peter had been irrevocably shaped by the violence he witnessed in early childhood, and from that perspective, it makes perfect sense that he surrounded himself at all times with soldiers who were intensely loyal to him personally, and that he neglected all other duties to immerse himself in military life. His wife Eudoxia could not tempt him away from his raucous lifestyle, and the more he neglected



her, the more her family began to grow paranoid that she would be set aside and they would lose their influence at court. Eventually, all their fears would be realized—Eudoxia would be forced into a convent, while Peter took a second wife, a peasant who would succeed him as empress upon his death.

Tsar Ivan V died in 1695, leaving Peter sole tsar and autocrat of all Russia. Peter returned to Moscow for Ivan's funeral, but he did not take over Ivan's ceremonial duties; the old days of tsars who performed pious Orthodox rites from sun up to sundown were buried with him. Peter had other business to attend to, namely, fortifying the Russian navy. After building the first Russian naval stronghold near the Black Sea, where the Ottomans had ruled unchallenged for centuries, he did something that no other tsar had done in Russia's history: he left the country. All his life he had studied western military strategy, but now he intended to carry his education a step further by traveling incognito under the name of Peter Mikhailov to see firsthand how ships were built for the great navies of Europe. He traveled first to the port of Riga, in Sweden, then to the German principalities, where he made an extraordinary impression on his hosts. In Holland, he worked as a humble shipwright in the port city of Amsterdam, quietly recruiting talented individuals from all manner of backgrounds to return with him to Russia. From Amsterdam, he traveled to London, where he met the English king, William III, and then to Vienna, where he met the Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I. In 1698, on his way back to Moscow, he visited Poland, where he planned an assault against Sweden with the newly-elected Polish king, Augustus the Strong.

Peter returned to Moscow full of new ideas and plans for the modernization and westernization, not only of Russia's military and navy, but its people and culture. When his nobles came to greet him, he welcomed them warmly and promptly ordered their beards shaved off. This was not a mere cosmetic change; in the Orthodox faith, as in Islam, men grew beards as a sign of piety and obedience to God. Peter was himself clean-shaven now, and he soon demanded that his subordinates emulate his western style of dress as well. European doublets and hose were not especially suited to protect the wearer against Russian winters, but Peter was resolute.

He had other problems besides the stubbornness of his Muscovite courtiers. While he was in Vienna, Peter had received word that the musketeers were once again plotting against him in Sofia's name, intending to liberate her from her convent and place her on the throne. Peter's many departures from tradition had earned him the nickname of "anti-Christ" from many of his traditional Muscovite subjects, who compared Peter unfavorably to his pious predecessors. Peter responded by constructing fourteen torture chambers, which were put to continual use extracting confessions from suspected conspirators. Unlike many

kings, he did not distance himself from the dark and violent deeds done in his name. Peter attended the torture sessions personally and demanded that his retainers accompany him. After torture came hangings. Hundreds of bodies were hanged from Moscow's city walls and in the midst of Red Square; some of them were hanged outside the windows of Sofia's convent cell. It was never clear whether Sofia had instigated this new wave of rebellion, or whether the musketeers had taken up her cause on their own initiative. But Peter, however much he disliked her, considered Sofia to be the only person in Russia clever and capable enough to pose a true challenge to his authority. Until her death, he believed that she was at the heart of any and all conspiracies against his throne.

In August of 1700, Peter began to pursue his revenge against the ungracious Swedes who had cut short his attempt to study their navy by ordering him out of Riga. Their new king, Charles XII, had inherited the throne at the age of fifteen; he was eighteen now, and still vulnerable, in Peter's estimation. But Charles was soon to prove himself a military genius. He defied all expectations by defeating the Russian allies, Poland and Denmark, and besieging 40,000 Russian troops with a force of 10,000. Charles was like Peter, military-mad since boyhood and as good a soldier and rider as anyone in his army. Unbeknownst to either monarch, the war would last another two decades, catapulting Russia into the modern era and marking the first serious expansion of Russian borders since the time of Ivan the Terrible.

In 1703, at the home of a friend, Peter met a woman who would change his life and the course of Russian history. Alexander Menshikov, one of Peter's oldest compatriots, was the son of a meat-pie vendor; Peter had drawn him into his circle when he was still a boy drilling his play regiments in the barracks courtyards. Under Peter's patronage, Menshikov became the de facto head of the Russian government, and when he conquered the Swedish fortress of Nöteborg, Peter appointed Menshikov its governor. Menshikov's household was full of female serfs who were required to act as both domestic and sexual servitors. One of them, a nineteen-year-old Lithuanian peasant girl, caught Peter's eye. Her name was Martha Scavronskaya, and she had been captured by the Russians after her husband, a Swedish soldier, was killed. She became Peter's mistress immediately after they met, and nine months later gave birth to the first of their twelve children. Only two of this brood would survive to adulthood, among them the charismatic future empress, Elizaveta.

Martha was an extraordinary individual whose cheerful good nature, innate cleverness, and physical and mental strength made her indispensable to Peter. Even after they married she was tolerant of his other mistresses; lacking the pedigree of other royal brides, she seemed to regard them as peers of a sort.

Because she came to the conjugal throne unencumbered by family relationships that would change the balance of power in court, she was free to make her own alliances, and she proved so adept at amassing power that towards the end of Peter's reign he made her his co-monarch. Such were her personal qualities that Alexander Menshikov, whose servant she had once been, became the most powerful supporter of her faction. In 1708, after Peter had disposed of his first wife, Eudoxia, by sending her to a convent, he and Martha (now going by the Orthodox name of Catherine) were married in secret.

In 1708, Charles XII of Sweden invaded Russia with 44,000 troops. Rather than engage him in a decisive open battle, Peter sent his commanders, including Menshikov, to follow the Swedish army on a harassment campaign, gradually wearing down their numbers. The vastness of Russia's terrain made this a winning strategy—Charles would have to penetrate deeply into the Russian heartland in order to seriously inconvenience the tsar in Moscow. He chose to make a push into Ukraine instead, where Menshikov trounced the Swedish commander on the banks of the Lesnaya River, destroying half of his army. Then, Peter received word that Mazeppa, the Cossack hetman to whom he had entrusted the defense of Ukraine, had betrayed him to Charles in exchange for Sweden acknowledging an independent Ukraine under Mazeppa's rule. Menshikov rewarded Mazeppa's treachery by destroying the Ukrainian capital of Baturin, burning it to the ground and killing all 10,000 of its inhabitants.

In the winter of 1708, Peter assumed personal command of the Russian army during an attack on Poltava, a small town under siege from Charles's dwindling forces. His wife Catherine was with him, along with Menshikov. Luck was on their side; Charles was wounded in the foot prior to the battle, and had to command his forces from a stretcher borne on horseback. Peter suspected that Poltava would be the decisive battle of the war, and at first it seemed that he would be proven correct; the Swedish forces were overwhelmed, and, in the aftermath, Charles himself was nearly captured. To assert his dominance over the territorial gains he had wrested from Sweden, Peter began to build the city of St. Petersburg. His victory against the Swedish had secured Russia's position amongst the great European powers. Always before, Russia had been seen as a barbarian land containing nothing but snow and wolves. Now, it was the equal of Austria, Prussia, France, and England. Even after this great victory, however, the war was not quite over. By 1710, after Peter had captured important Swedish port cities, including Riga, Charles enlisted the aid of the Ottoman sultan, Ahmet III, who obliged him by declaring war on Russia.

## **Peter the Great, Emperor of Russia**

Peter anticipated an easy victory over the Ottomans, but they surprised him by attacking Poland and Ukraine while he was still making preparations in Moscow. He failed to reach the Danube river before the sultan's forces did, and when he arrived to take command of his army, he discovered that the Russians were hugely outnumbered by the Turks. Conditions on the front lines were so perilous that Peter was forced to consider the possibility that he might die or be taken prisoner. He wrote to his newly created Senate (an advisory, rather than a parliamentary body, meant to govern Russia in his absence) that if he should be lost to them, they should select whomever they thought most fit to be tsar in his place—he did not ask them to make his son Alexei tsar, and he did not want them to waste time trying to re-capture or ransom him. Despite the desperate position of Peter's army, his artillery did enough damage to the Turkish forces that his officials were able to negotiate a cease-fire and a retreat, though they lost the port town of Azov on the Black Sea in the process. The terms of the agreement with the Turks were so favorable to Russia that Charles made a desperate ride to the Ottoman camp to attempt to dissuade the sultan from signing it, but he was too late.

Weakened and dispirited by his defeat, Peter grew ill and was forced to lessen the frantic pace of his activities. This was just as well, for he had domestic concerns to attend to. His son and heir, Alexei, the child of his marriage to Eudoxia, had reached an age to be married. Where past tsars had sought in vain to attract brides from the royal houses of Europe, the parents of noble girls were now considering the House of Romanov in a new light. Peter had succeeded in marrying his niece, Ivan's daughter Anna, to the Duke of Courland. Now, he was preparing to marry Alexei to Charlotte von Brunswick-Lüneberg-Wolfenbüttel. She was the first in a series of German princesses who would become Romanov brides over the next two hundred years.

Peter did not entirely trust Alexei, as is made evident by the fact that he had not pressed the matter of Alexei's succession during the Danube expedition. Alexei was his mother's son, despite the fact that he had been forced to part with Eudoxia when he was nine years old, when she was confined to a convent. Peter's western ways and preoccupation with all things military had alienated his son. They were little alike, save that they were both heavy drinkers. Furthermore, Peter had entrusted Alexei's education to Menshikov, who was brutal and ignorant. The marriage Peter had arranged for Alexei did not suit his Muscovite tastes; he would have preferred to select a Russian wife from the now-obsolete bridesshows, rather than be married to a foreigner. All signs pointed to Alexei being unsuited to inherit the new Russian empire Peter was building. He felt that he could not rely on Alexei's loyalty—it was well known that Charles of Sweden had intended to put Alexei on the Russian throne in the event he managed to reach Moscow. The tsar needed more legitimate heirs; it was time to make his secret marriage to Catherine

officially recognized, so that their children would no longer be bastards. In February of 1712, Peter and Catherine were married—or re-married—in a cathedral in Petersburg. Alexei refused to attend the service, probably out of respect for his disgraced mother.

Charlotte, Alexei's unhappy, neglected wife, gave birth to a son named Peter in October of 1715; she died just a few days later. Shortly afterwards, Peter's wife Catherine gave birth to a son, also named Peter. Alexei was now expendable, and Peter warned him to mend his ways or risk disinheritance. Alexei, spurred on by his advisors, began to consider his options. Peter had enemies, many of whom feared that he would leave Russia in the hands of the brutal, corrupt Menshikov when he died—unless he was deposed before he had the chance. Alexei's friends suggested that he flee to Germany, where he would be well-concealed and could amass support for a coup. In August of 1716, Peter wrote to his son, demanding that he join him in planning the second Russian campaign against Sweden. If he did not wish to do this, he could choose to become a monk. Otherwise, he would find himself permanently cut off from the line of succession.

Alexei's solution to the dilemma that Peter had forced him into was to leave Russia in secret and seek refuge in the court of the Austrian emperor, Karl VI. Alexei's wife Charlotte had been the sister of the emperor's wife, and Alexei could reasonably expect to be welcomed there. This decision made it impossible for Peter and Alexei ever to reconcile; Peter would regard his unauthorized departure as a betrayal. Alexei's friends warned him that he could never return to Russia. Even if his father sent someone with an offer of reconciliation, it would be a trap, to lure Alexei to his death. With this warning to drive him, Alexei arrived in Vienna prepared to betray Peter and ensure his inheritance by force of arms. He spoke openly of inciting a revolt against his father, and candidly invited the Austrian emperor to support him.

Peter soon learned that Alexei was in Vienna. He wrote immediately to the emperor and to his ambassador in Austria, demanding that Alexei be returned to Russia. In the mean time, Peter traveled to France, where he attempted to negotiate a marriage between his daughter, Elizaveta, and the boy king, Louis XV. Both children were seven years old. Despite Russia's newfound glory, the French were unwilling to marry their king to a possibly illegitimate girl whose mother had been a peasant. Peter left France unsuccessful, but his efforts to uncover Alexei met with better luck. The Austrians had moved Alexei to Naples; thither went Peter Tolstoy, a crafty statesman who had grown old in the tsar's service. Tolstoy quickly realized that Alexei would do whatever his mistress Afrosina, whom he had brought with him from Russia disguised as a pageboy, advised him to do. Peter had sent a letter, promising to forgive Alexei if he returned, or disinherit him

and bestow a father's curse upon him if he did not. Armed with this missive, and with a number of presents to win the good opinion of Afrosina, Tolstoy managed to persuade Alexei to return to Russia. All he desired, he said, was to live quietly in the country, and marry the girl whose persuasion had effected his reconciliation with his father.

In February of 1718, Peter and Alexei met again at the Kremlin. Peter offered to forgive him if Alexei renounced his place in the line of succession, and Alexei agreed. Peter and Catherine's son Petrushka was now next in line for the throne. But Peter could not permit the matter to end there. He relentlessly interrogated everyone who had been close to Alexei, including ministers and retainers who had been part of Peter's government since the days of the All-Drunken Synod. Dozens of people were put to tortures, including being broken on the wheel and the rack, impaled through the anus on sharp stakes, and burned with hot irons. Even Afrosina, Alexei's mistress, was interrogated, and she confessed that Alexei had dreamed of returning to Russia at the head of a deposing army. Alexei too confessed that, though he had no plans to instigate a revolt, he would have willingly accepted the crown had a coup taken place in Peter's lifetime. Alexei was tried for treason and tortured, subject to repeated beatings with a knout, which could kill a strong man in forty strokes. By the time he was sentenced to death, he was already dying; a final torture session, which Peter oversaw personally, brought an end to his life. Afrosina, however, was spared, and eventually married, spending the rest of her life in Petersburg.

With his younger children, Peter enjoyed much closer relationships. He was careful with the educations of his daughters; he hoped to marry them to the most prestigious royal houses in Europe. Elizaveta, whom he intended to marry to Louis XV, studied the French language and French court manners. Petrushka was the only one of his sons who survived infancy, and Peter supervised his education personally, teaching him to "[drill] soldiers and fire cannon." But he would not survive to adulthood; Petrushka died on April 25, 1719, at the age of four. Peter and Catherine were both heartbroken. However, before he could consider the complicated succession issues created by the boy's death, he had to exploit a sudden opportunity: Charles XII, king of Sweden, was dead, struck by a musket ball that passed through his temples. The resulting chaos in Sweden meant that Peter had a chance to end the war for good. A peace treaty with Sweden was signed in August of 1721. The Russian Senate rewarded Peter for this victory by declaring him, "Peter the Great, Emperor of All Russia"—an act which not only bestowed upon Peter his famous title, but formally recognized a change of name for the nation. Muscovy was now Russia, and tsars were now emperors. Peter the Great's legacy was secure.

He was not prepared to rest on his laurels, however. The last four years of his life were filled with the same furious activity that had characterized Peter since his youth. In 1722, he began to prosecute a new war in defense of Christians in the Caucasus. At home, he introduced civil reforms, making life-long service to the state mandatory for all nobles. The idea was that courtiers and nobles should rise to power and influence by merit, as men were promoted through the ranks of the army by merit. That same year, Peter settled his plan for the succession. Henceforward, male primogeniture was to be regarded as having no basis in Scripture. Each tsar, beginning with himself, would have the authority to name whomever he wished as his heir and successor. This measure reflected his lifelong policy of raising anyone of merit, be they peasants or pie-sellers, to the highest ranks in society and government. This decree would stand until the accession of Paul I.

In 1724, Peter announced that he was naming his wife, Catherine, his official co-ruler: “since Our best beloved Spouse Consort and Empress Catherine has been a great support to us, we have decided she shall be crowned.” To mark the occasion, he created the Order of St. Catherine for the exclusive use of herself and the empresses and grand duchesses who followed her.

By January of 1725, Peter’s health was in fatal decline. He had contracted venereal disease from his French mistress during his visit to the court of Louis XV years before, and had suffered from infections and kidney stones ever since. Bravely, considering the crude state of surgical medicine in the early eighteenth century, he underwent a surgical procedure to insert a catheter and drain the infection, allowing the stones to pass, but within a few months he was ill again. An infection led to gangrene; by late January he was in extreme pain, confined to his bed. As his wife, daughters, nieces, and ministers gathered round his deathbed, he slipped into a coma. He died without regaining consciousness.

Because Peter had not explicitly named a successor before his death, it was left to the factions of the court to decide who would be the next tsar—or tsarina, rather, as the only candidates were almost all female. Alexei’s son, Peter, was still a child, and those members of the court who had helped Peter torture and execute his father feared that he would grow up to avenge Alexei by visiting the same fate upon them. There had never been an empress before, and no one was especially eager to place a woman on the throne. But Catherine, Peter’s wife and co-ruler, had the support of Menshikov, still the most powerful member of court. Catherine was also beloved by the Guards, who had witnessed her standing by Peter’s side on the front lines of many battles, risking capture or death alongside them.

The reign of Catherine I was inaugurated with a Guards parade and a drumroll,

proclaiming, “Our Father is dead! Our Mother lives!” The body of Peter the Great was taken to the unfinished Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul; it remained unburied until the cathedral was completed in 1731.



## Chapter Three: Three Empresses

### Catherine I (1725-1727)

The first sovereign empress of Russia, Catherine I, reigned for two years. On her accession, she promised to rule in Peter's spirit, and she did this, in part, by continuing the drunken revels he had been so fond of. Her only nod to restraint was the rule that, "No ladies are to get drunk upon any pretense whatever, nor shall gentlemen, before 9 p.m." If these revels began before her mourning period officially ended, it might have been because she had so much to mourn. She had lost not only her husband, but her youngest daughter, Natalya, who died just a few days after Peter. Moreover, she was about to part with her oldest daughter Anna, or Annushka, who was engaged to the German duke of Holstein; though she could not have known it at the time, this marriage would have implications that reverberated through the next two hundred years of Romanov family history.

Though Menshikov had been her old friend for many decades, and had thrown his support behind her while the succession was still being decided, as empress she wished to limit his influence. He was brutal and corrupt beyond all restraint, feared by all and loved by no one. To check him, she instituted the Supreme Party Council, composed entirely of the old emperor's aged retainers, including Peter Tolstoy, who had delivered Alexei to his doom. The youngest member of the council, at the age of forty-four, was Baron Andrei Osterman, whom Catherine put in charge of the young Peter's education. As Alexei's son, Peter would succeed her upon her death.

Catherine's death followed Peter's swiftly. It would not be fair to say that her reign was composed of nothing but debauchery, but she did drink a great deal. She enjoyed the attentions of several lovers, and amused herself by playing practical jokes on the entire city of Petersburg by ordering the church bells to be rung in alarm at midnight, only to announce to the startled citizens, who had rushed from their beds expecting a fire, that it was an April Fool's Day prank. She also had the capacity for serious government. When England threatened to declare war on Russia for endangering the supply of Baltic timber that supplied the shipwrights of the British navy, Catherine was prepared to command the Russian army in person, as Peter had done. But her health began to decline in late 1726 during the period of 24-hour sunlight known in St. Petersburg as the White Nights.

In January of 1727, a severely ill Catherine, who was suffering from nosebleeds, asthma attacks, and fevers brought on by excessive alcohol consumption,

participated in the Blessing of the Waters, an old Muscovite ritual celebrated each Epiphany. The Blessing of the Waters was one of the last public rituals Peter had taken part in before his death, and it presaged Catherine's as well. In May of that year, she died. But on this occasion, at least, the succession was guaranteed. Just as the aging Menshikov had ushered Catherine to the throne, he saw to it that Alexei's son was proclaimed Tsar Peter II. Catherine was laid to rest next to her husband in the Peter and Paul cathedral.

## **Peter II (1727-1730)**

The grandson of Peter the Great was eleven years old when he became tsar and emperor of all Russia. His young aunts, Elizaveta and Annushka, were named to the Supreme Party Council. Baron Osterman continued as the governor of his household, and Menshikov ruled Russia in his name. The young tsar despised Menshikov, but could do nothing to dislodge him until Menshikov fell suddenly ill. When it seemed likely that he would die, Peter found his courage; Menshikov had been attempting to force Peter into a marriage with his own daughter, Maria, but Peter declared that he would not marry until he was twenty-five. With Elizaveta's help, he moved out of Menshikov's house, and publicly declared that he would show Menshikov who was emperor. By the time Menshikov arose from his sickbed, he found that all his power had crumbled away, and the many enemies he had made were united against him. Peter ordered him arrested, and he and his family were sent to Siberia. All of them, including his daughter Maria, died in the Arctic winter that year.

The young tsar, delivered from the hands of his tyrannical minister, was determined to rule in his own right from now on. But he did not pay close attention to affairs of state. Government documents were delivered to him, but he did not read them. Salaries went unpaid, and in the absence of an attentive head of state, the government functioned, when it functioned at all, through corruption and graft. His best friend, Ivan Dolgoruky, somewhat older than him but still very young, became his chamberlain, and Peter spent every moment in his company. The Supreme Party Council ceased to meet. "There is no tsar here, nor any ministers," wrote the Spanish envoy, the duke of Liria.

In 1729, when Peter was fourteen, he agreed to a marriage with Ivan Dolgoruky's sister, Ekaterina, who was seventeen. They were both in love with other people; he with his aunt Elizaveta, she with an Austrian count. But the Dolgorukys were determined to cement their position in court by bringing the match to fruition. The marriage was scheduled for mid January of 1729, but come Epiphany, the Blessing of the Waters once again heralded the death of the emperor. Peter

complained of a headache during the ceremony, and he was quickly diagnosed with smallpox. He died on January 18<sup>th</sup>, the day his marriage was to have taken place.

Peter had died without naming a successor; supreme power in Russia was once again up for grabs. Catherine I had left a will indicating that her daughter Elizaveta should inherit the throne if Peter II died without naming an heir, but, at this point in her life, Elizaveta was not interested in becoming empress. She felt that she was too young and too unsuited to the task. The six remaining members of the Privy Council chose instead to offer the throne to the second of Ivan V's three daughter—Anna, Duchess of Courland, who had been living in poverty, exile, and misery for the last twenty years on the orders of Peter the Great.

### **Anna I (1730-1740)**

Anna of Courland, or Anna Ivanovna, had been unhappy for years. Dominated by her mother, the intractable tsarina Praskovia, she had a reputation for obstinacy and meanness that earned her the nicknamed “Ivanna the Terrible”. She was well educated and fairly intelligent, but her uncle, Peter the Great, had disposed of her at the age of seventeen in a short-lived marriage to Frederick, Duke of Courland. Three weeks after the wedding, possibly as a result of consuming too much alcohol during the festivities, Frederick died. Anna wished to return to her home immediately, but Peter refused to allow it. He wanted the duchy of Courland (located in present-day Latvia) to remain under Russian control, and Anna was his regent there. But for reasons that are unclear, he did not support her in her widowhood, and ignored her many pleading letters over the years begging for a basic allowance to buy the necessities for maintaining household. Likewise, she was not allowed to remarry, and when she took a lover in the person of Count Bestuzhev-Ryumin, he was recalled to Russia, for no reason, in her opinion, save to deny her his company.

When the Privy Council met to select a new empress out of the five possible candidates, their principle concern was to preserve the power and influence they had enjoyed during the reign of the malleable, inattentive boy-tsar, Peter II. They chose Anna of Courland mainly because she was unmarried and childless, and thus, they thought, she would be easier to control. When the council offered her the throne, it was under conditions that had never been imposed on any emperor or empress before her. The conditions limited her authority to declare war, sign treaties, impose new taxes, appoint generals, or create new boyars, among other things, without the council's approval. “Should I not fulfill any part of this promise, I shall be deprived of the Russian throne,” the document concluded. This

was, in effect, the first Russian experiment in constitutional monarchy—but it didn't work, mainly because it was supported by nothing save the personal greed and ambition of Dolgoruky, Golitsyn, and their compatriots.

But the Privy Council had underestimated both Anna and the resourcefulness of their enemies at court, who were swift to support the empress against them. Baron Osterman, who had been governor of Peter II's household, established a secret line of communication with Anna by appointing the wives of his allies as her ladies-in-waiting. Through them, Osterman informed Anna that if she chose to defy the council, the council members had few friends who would risk her anger by backing them. Immediately upon Anna's arrival in Russia, she made a point of cultivating the Preobrazhensky Guards, the regiment created by Peter the Great, whose sole loyalty was to the rightful tsar. On February 25, 1730, about a month after Anna was declared empress, she presented herself to greet her new subjects in the Kremlin. There, the general staff of the Russian army presented her with a petition, asking that she abrogate the council's conditions and rule as her uncle had ruled, as supreme autocrat. Before the eyes of the Privy Council, Anna tore the list of conditions in half. When she was crowned in April, she immediately dissolved the Privy Council. Her chief advisors were now Osterman, her lover Ernst Biron (who had once been a horse groom and was still more interested in horses than people) and General von Münnich, a handsome German who had been chief of artillery under Peter II.

Anna lacked the chief vulnerability of the previous empress—she was not a heavy drinker and was scarcely every drunk. But she had a strangely cruel sense of humor. She once deceived the father of a newborn child into believing that the baby had been born with deformities. Like Peter the Great, she surrounded herself with dwarfs, giants, cripples, and other “freaks”, and made old women fight one another for her amusement. She forced some of her highest ranking ministers to dress up like clowns and chickens and perform tricks alongside the court jesters. Those Privy Council members who had conspired against her, especially the Dolgorukys, who had attempted to forge Peter II's will and place their niece Ekaterina on the throne, met with especially malicious and vindictive treatment. Most of the Dolgorukys were beheaded, and Golitsyn, the clucking chicken of Anna's circus, was forced to marry a woman of the Kalmyk people, one of the “barbarous” Russian races, and spend his wedding night in a bed carved from solid ice. In truth, Anna's extravagancies and cruelties hardly approached those of her famous uncle, but Peter the Great had the luxury of being male—in an empress, such behavior was less cheerfully tolerated.

Anna had a complicated relationship with her cousin, Elizaveta, sometimes treating her affectionately, more often regarding her with intense suspicion,

banishing her lovers, cutting off her allowance, and interrogating those closest to in the hopes of discovering treason and treachery. This was partly due to jealousy. Elizaveta was in her early twenties, and so beautiful that she was called “the Russian Venus” for her large blue eyes, thick golden hair, and milky complexion. But Anna was also aware that some people regarded Elizaveta as having a better right to the Russian throne than the empress herself. Anna was the daughter of the weak, disabled Ivan V, while Elizaveta was the daughter of Peter the Great, and seemed to possess his commanding personality. After her father failed to accomplish his cherished scheme of marrying Elizaveta into the French royal house, she became engaged to Charles Augustus of Holstein-Gottorp, who was first cousins with the husband of her beloved older sister Annushka. But Charles Augustus had contracted smallpox in Russia, and, after a medicinal bloodletting, died two weeks before the wedding. Elizaveta was extremely attached to her fiancé, and his death came as a cruel blow.

There was no real chance of Elizaveta making another match now. As the daughter of a tsar, she could only marry someone of high birth, and that, only with Anna’s permission, which she was not likely to give, since marriage could only make Elizaveta more of a threat. Under these circumstances, Elizaveta felt free to flirt and take lovers as she pleased. She spent a great deal of her spare time in the barracks of the Preobrazhensky Guards, drinking and offering toasts to their health, offering to stand as godmother to their children. The soldiers were immensely flattered that the daughter of Peter Great condescended to pay them so much attention, and they became intensely loyal to her. Though she had no interest as of yet in claiming the throne for herself, Elizaveta’s relationship with the soldiers made Anna nervous, and for good reason. The Guards regiments would support Elizaveta when she took the throne after Anna’s death. Had she chosen to attempt a coup during Anna’s lifetime, it may well have been successful.

Because Anna was so suspicious of Elizaveta, she could not reasonably name her as her heir. The heir to the throne always attracted the flattery and attentions of powerful court factions; it suited Anna to deprive Elizaveta of any such political support. Instead, Anna named as her heir the daughter of her sister Ekaterina, who had married the duke of Mecklenburg. Anna Leopoldovna, as she was known, was a young teenager, thirteen years old when the empress brought her to Russia. Anna lost no time in arranging a marriage for her. The chosen bridegroom was Prince Anton of Brunswick, nephew of the Holy Roman Emperor. Anna Leopoldovna and Anton hated one another almost on sight, but the marriage took place regardless. She was pregnant within the year, and in August of 1740 gave birth to a son, Ivan.

By the autumn, the tsarina Anna was seriously ill. She fainted and began vomiting

blood. Before she died, however, she recovered enough strength to name the infant Ivan as her heir, replacing his mother, Anna Leopoldovna. Nor was Anna's niece to be regent; the empress's lover, Biron, persuaded Anna that unless he was named regent, his enemies at court would destroy him as soon as Anna died. She altered her will accordingly, and when she drew her last breath on October 17, 1740, Ivan VI was proclaimed tsar and emperor of Russia. Ernst Biron, the former groom, was now in charge of the government as regent.

Biron, however, was immensely unpopular, and not even the will of the deceased empress could keep him in power with so many courtiers and officials arrayed against him. During Anna's reign, he had maintained an uneasy balance of power with Osterman and Münnich, but less than a week after her death, Münnich approached Anna Leopoldovna with a proposition. If she would order Biron's arrest, he, Münnich, would undertake to see it done. As the mother of the tsar, Anna Leopoldovna possessed the necessary moral authority to command the loyalty of the guards. When she asked them to safeguard the six-week-old emperor, they obeyed her, and allowed Münnich to lead them in an assault on the Summer Palace. Biron was dragged from bed, naked and screaming. He was interrogated and banished to Siberia. Anna Leopoldovna was now regent of Russia for emperor Ivan VI.

## **The regency of Anna Leopoldovna**

Anna Leopoldovna, Duchess of Brunswick, had been a mother for just a few weeks when her son Ivan VI became tsar and emperor of Russia. She was twenty-two years old. When the empress Anna brought her to the Russian court at thirteen, she was regarded as stupid and not very good looking, but now she was "handsome, with a very pretty figure, extremely capricious, passionate, and indolent". Her marriage with the Duke of Brunswick was loveless. Anna preferred the company of her supposed lovers, Julie von Mengden, daughter of a German courtier, and Count Lynar, the Saxon ambassador. Anna met with Lynar by night in Julie's rooms while Julie guarded the door, and according to the British ambassador, she loved Julie "as passionately as only a man loves a woman... the passion of a lover for a new mistress is but a jest to it." Julie was, reportedly, also in love with Lynar, but she shared Anna Leopoldovna's bed.

The regency of Anna Leopoldovna was a blessed reprieve from the cruelty and excess known in Russia since the time of Peter the Great, but like the teenage Peter II, Anna Leopoldovna had no head for affairs of state and paid them little attention. She was intelligent enough, however, to understand that her regency, and the security of the infant tsar, was under threat. Like the former empress, her

suspensions came to center around the last surviving child of Peter the Great, Elizaveta. Regencies were inherently unstable; as long as there was a strong, charismatic adult ready and able to replace the regent, people would always speculate that they would be better off under her rule. For her part, Elizaveta was willing to be loyal to the new tsar and his mother, but she could not prevent others from acting in her name. In July of 1741, Sweden went to war against Russia; the true goal was to win back the territories they had lost to Peter the Great, but they acted on the pretext of placing Elizaveta on the Russian throne. Elizaveta was thirty-two now, no longer the untried teenager who felt herself too young to be fit for the throne.

Anna Leopoldovna began to consider how she might get Elizaveta out of her way. Marriage was the ideal solution, and she began pressuring Elizaveta to marry her husband's brother, Ludwig of Brunswick. Elizaveta resisted, however, and before the matter could be settled, another suitor applied for her hand: the shah of Persia. His envoy appeared in Petersburg armed with magnificent gifts of elephants and jewels, and also with a threat. If Elizaveta did not marry the shah, the envoy said, Persia would declare war against Russia. Such a marriage could never take place, and Anna Leopoldovna did not seriously consider it, however convenient it might have been to bundle her rival off to a harem in distant Persia. She had a different plan in place to protect herself and her son from any threat the popular Elizaveta might pose. She intended to promote herself from regent to empress; her coronation date was set for December 7, 1741.

Elizaveta's advisors, particularly her French physician, Armand de Lestocq, began to urge her to act. If Anna became empress, Elizaveta's life or freedom would certainly be in danger. The only way she would be safe was if she took the throne for herself, and if she intended to do this, she must act quickly. It was, after all, one thing to depose a regent; deposing a crowned empress would be a different matter. Anna Leopoldovna received intelligence that a coup was imminent, but she complained to Count Lynar that she heard such different accounts from different people that she couldn't decide who to believe. Elizaveta was equally indecisive, until Lestocq confronted her a week before the planned coronation. The critical moment had arrived. The Guards regiments that were loyal to her were about to be sent away from St. Petersburg in the war against Sweden. Once Anna was crowned, Elizaveta could expect to find herself imprisoned in a monastery, or killed. According to several accounts, Lestocq burst into Elizaveta's chambers and placed before her a sheet of paper. On one side, he had drawn a nun in a veil, surrounded by instruments of torture. On the other side appeared a crown. These were the options before her, Lestocq said. It was time to choose between them.

Elizaveta hesitated no longer. On November 25, 1741, she donned armor and strode into the barracks of the Preobrazhensky Guards. “You know whose daughter I am,” she told them, and explained that she was taking back her father’s throne. The guards, all three hundred of them, acclaimed her their empress, and bore her on their shoulders to the Winter Palace. Elizaveta greeted each of the palace guards and sentries, inviting them to take up their arms and follow her; all of them complied.

Accounts vary as to how Anna Leopoldovna was informed that she had been ousted in a coup without a single shot being fired. Some histories have it that Elizaveta made the guards wait outside while she went into Anna’s room alone, where she knelt by the bed and said, “Little sister, time to wake up.” According to this version, Anna wept, but accepted the turn of events quietly, only begging Elizaveta to spare her life and the lives of her family, which Elizaveta promised to do. Other versions claim that Anna and the Duke of Brunswick were dragged from their beds by guards and thrown half-naked into a sleigh, which conveyed them to prison. As for the tsar, less than eighteen months old, the guards stood by his crib until he woke up, then placed him “under arrest” by picking him up and carrying him to Elizaveta.

Elizaveta would keep her promise to Anna Leopoldovna. Her life, and the life of Ivan VI, was spared, though in Ivan’s case it would perhaps have been more merciful to have killed him outright. At first, Elizaveta intended to send the entire family to Brunswick, before deciding that it would be safer to keep them in Russia under armed guard. After a plot was discovered to depose Elizaveta and restore the four-year-old Ivan to the throne, the Brunswicks were moved to an Arctic prison, where Ivan was taken from his family and placed in solitary confinement. He lived in miserable conditions for the rest of life. When Peter III succeeded Elizaveta as emperor, he visited the adult Ivan and found him mentally impaired as a result of the abuses he had suffered during his imprisonment. Ivan was murdered in 1764 at the age of twenty-four on secret orders from Catherine the Great, after he became the focus of a plot to depose her. When the Duke of Brunswick died two years later, Anna Leopoldovna and her other four children were sent to Denmark, where they lived under house arrest at the court of Queen Julianna until their deaths.

## **Elizaveta I (1741-1761)**

When Elizaveta became tsarina and empress of Russia, she became embroiled almost immediately in a multi-national conflict that would last for the rest of her reign. She was the last in a crop of newly-crowned sovereigns, including Frederick



the Great of Prussia, and Maria Theresa of Austria, who had been at war with one another since Frederick invaded the border territory of Silesia, wresting it from Austrian control. Elizaveta's principle retainers were Mikhail Vorontsov, brothers Peter and Alexander Shuvalov, and Alexei Bestuzhev-Ryumin, and they fell into factions according to which European nation they supported in the conflict. Bestuzhev had Austrian sympathies; Vorontsov and Lestocq supported Prussia, and, in consequence, France, Austria's hereditary enemy. Both Frederick and Maria Theresa were waiting to see on whose side Elizaveta would land. But any firm foreign policy statements from the new empress would have to wait.

The childless Elizaveta needed an heir, and soon, that heir would need a wife. Both teenagers would come to her by way of German principalities. The fourteen-year-old son of her beloved sister Annushka, Karl Peter Ulrich, was living in the duchy of Holstein. The bride Elizaveta had selected for him, Sophie Fredericka Augusta of Anhalt-Zerbst, was the niece of her beloved, prematurely deceased fiancé, Charles Augustus. Karl Peter's proximity to Prussia meant that Elizaveta could not afford to antagonize Frederick by backing Austria until he was safely in Russia. She had him spirited away from Holstein in the utmost haste and secrecy to avoid any interference. He arrived in Moscow just in time to attend Elizaveta's coronation.

Elizaveta was a maternal soul deprived of children; on her sister's son, she intended to heap the bounty of her affection. But her nephew quickly proved a disappointment. Karl Peter had led a miserable existence. His mother had died when he was a baby, and his father, who paid little attention to him, died when he was eleven. The young prince was not only the hereditary Duke of Holstein but also next in line to the thrones of both Sweden and Russia. After his father's death, he was left in the care of his cousin, the Prince Bishop of Lübeck, who placed a Swedish count, Otto von Brümmer, in charge of his education. Brümmer was brutal, sadistic, and cruel beyond all reason, especially considering his young student's prospects. He had the boy beaten, humiliated, and starved on a regular basis. Karl Peter took refuge in playing at soldiers; he idolized Frederick of Prussia and wanted nothing more than to be a Prussian officer of high rank. He was heartbroken when he was forced to leave Holstein; he cared nothing for Russia, or the throne he was to inherit.

When Elizaveta met him, she was dismayed to discover that he looked and behaved like a child much younger than his years. His tutors could make nothing of him. But the fact that he failed to thrive in Moscow is not surprising, considering that the sadistic Brümmer accompanied him to Russia and remained in charge of his household. Elizaveta was not aware of Brümmer's abusive tactics, and Karl Peter did not, or could not, enlighten her. Elizaveta was forced to the

conclusion that she had pinned her hopes for the future of Russia on a boy who was unfit for the role of monarch. The only solution she could devise was to marry him off as quickly as possible. A wife, she hoped, would turn him into a man.

However Frederick felt about Karl Peter's secret defection, he proved perfectly willing to facilitate Sophie von Anhalt-Zerbst's journey to Russia a year later. Almost as soon as Sophie's mother, Johanna, received Elizaveta's letter, urging her to bring her daughter to Moscow, she received a second letter from Frederick, intimating that he too had come to the conclusion that Sophie would be an excellent match for the newly created grand duke. He invited Johanna and Sophie to his court for an audience on their way to Russia. Frederick's goals for this visit were twofold. First, he wanted to see for himself what sort of person Sophie was. He could not have had any idea that she was destined to become the greatest monarch in Russia's history, but as the wife of the future tsar, she would one day be in a position to do Prussia much good or ill.

Secondly, Frederick wished to put Johanna von Anhalt-Zerbst to use. The role that Elizaveta would play in the Prussian-Austrian conflict was still uncertain. If Johanna should gain the empress's confidence, she might influence Elizaveta in Frederick's favor. Johanna was delighted to represent Frederick's interests, but she proved a terrible choice of envoy. Johanna was shallow and narcissistic, continually putting herself forward at the expense of other people, especially her daughter Sophie. Had she possessed greater intelligence or a subtler personality, she might have done Frederick some good, but as it was, she was too conceited to understand the delicate nature of her position in the Russian court. She ended up in the middle of a conspiracy against the Austrian-allied Count Bestuzhev, which he exposed by the simple expedient of intercepting and copying all of Johanna's letters and showing them to the empress. When Elizaveta learned what Johanna had been up to, she was furious. Johanna gained nothing for herself or for Frederick, and only succeeded in humiliating herself and jeopardizing Sophie's position in Russia.

Elizaveta was fond of Sophie, despite her unfortunate mother. The German princess was everything her intended husband was not: intelligent, patient, studious, and dutiful, especially when it came to learning the language and customs of her adopted country. Immediately after her arrival she began lessons in Russian and in the Orthodox faith. Though she had been raised by an intensely pious Lutheran father, it would be necessary for her to convert before the marriage could take place. Despite her application, however, the marriage was nearly derailed by two illnesses. First, Sophie contracted pneumonia by staying up late in the cold Russian nights to study. Elizaveta nursed her like a mother through the illness, while Sophie's own mother had to be banished from the

sickroom for interfering with the doctors. Then the grand duke Peter contracted smallpox; for a time, his life was despaired of, and though he recovered, his face was horribly altered. Elizaveta feared that Sophie would balk at marrying a disfigured husband, but she was resolute. She had come to Russia to marry the future emperor, and even if she had not felt pity and sympathy for Peter, she would have married him because of that. The marriage took place in August of 1745, the day after Sophie underwent her conversion to Russian Orthodoxy and took the name of Catherine, for Elizaveta's mother, empress Catherine I. Elizaveta was so impatient for the couple to get down to the business of producing an heir that she allowed them only half an hour's attendance at the nuptial ball before sending them off to bed. Catherine undressed and awaited her new husband, who arrived six hours later, drunk, and promptly fell asleep.

The marriage went unconsummated for five years, and Elizaveta grew desperate for an heir. It is possible she intended to bypass the unsuitable Peter and leave the throne to his son; she grew daily more disgusted with his behavior, and referred to him as "the little Holstein devil". But ever since she had first come to Russia, Peter had treated Catherine as a playmate, rather than a lover or wife. She was the only person who would listen patiently to his longwinded speeches about the minutiae of military drills, and soothe his complaints about his servants, who joined him in drunken revels but would not obey his orders. It was to Catherine that Peter confided when he fell in love with maids and ladies-in-waiting; he never seemed to grasp that she might be offended by this. Elizaveta knew nothing of Peter's affairs, or rather, his romances, since he was not sexually active, but she knew that something stood in the way of the couple's sexual intimacy. In an effort to drive them closer together, she made them miserable.

Any time Catherine became friends with one of her ladies-in-waiting, Elizaveta had the girl sent away from the court. Peter's German retainers were likewise dismissed. A friend of Elizaveta's, a Madame Chogloкова, was made the governess of the grand duchess's household; her husband, Choglov, likewise became governor of the grand duke's household. Husband and wife were stupid, dull, and ill-mannered, and together, they tyrannized the newlyweds. Catherine was not permitted to see Elizaveta without an express invitation, which never came; furthermore, Count Bestuzhev, fearful that the daughter would emulate the mother and conspire against him with the pro-Prussian faction at court, forbade her any private correspondence. The letters Catherine received from home were read, and Catherine's replies were drafted by the foreign office and sent to Catherine for her signature; she was not even allowed to write a postscript in her own hand. Neither Catherine nor Peter were permitted to speak with any person unless one of the Choglokovs were present. In one sense, this had the desired effect. Catherine and Peter had no one for company save each other, and the enforced intimacy made Peter dependent on his wife. But Catherine, more careful

than he, only listened to his complaints and confidences. Even if she had wished to make a confidante of Peter in turn, he was too selfish and impatient to listen to her. Ultimately, these heavy-handed tactics did nothing to hasten the production of a child.

Elizaveta put additional pressure on Madame Chogloкова to spur Catherine in her marital duties, but Chogloкова knew two things that the empress did not: Catherine was a virgin, and she had no idea how the act of sex was accomplished. Furthermore, Chogloкова strongly suspected that Peter was equally naïve. He certainly had not had sex with Catherine, but despite his roving eye, he had never fathered a bastard. It is possible that the smallpox had rendered him sterile; some historians have also conjectured, on the basis of some gossipy contemporary reports, that Peter suffered a condition which made erections physically painful. Whatever the reason for the lack of consummation, Chogloкова came up with a wildly unorthodox solution to the problem. To start with, she hired a young, pretty, respectable Dutch widow to initiate Peter into sexual intimacy. Then she took Catherine aside, and hinted strongly that if she chose to take a lover from among the handsome young men of the court, no one would interfere. Catherine was deeply startled; as it happened, a certain courtier by the name of Sergei Saltykov had been attempting to seduce her for months. Saltykov fancied himself something of a Don Juan, and a lonely, beautiful, virginal grand duchess was an irresistible target for him.

The affair commenced, and Catherine became pregnant in short order. Her early pregnancies ended in miscarriage, but she gave birth to a son, Paul, in September of 1754. Catherine later claimed that Saltykov, not Peter, was the future tsar's true father. Historians are divided as to the reliability of this claim. Robert Massey, Catherine's biographer, regards Saltykov's paternity as a near certainty; if this is true, then the genetic Romanov line came to an end with Catherine's reign. Romanov scholar Simon Sebag Montefiore speculates that Catherine may have denied Peter's paternity merely to wound a husband at whose hands she was to suffer much. Portraits of Peter and Paul reveal a distinct resemblance between the two. Paul did not much take after his mother, and he certainly looked nothing at all like Saltykov. In any event, Elizaveta never expressed any doubt that Paul was her descendant. Just as the empress Anna had done when Anna Leopoldovna gave birth to Ivan VI, Elizaveta effectively kidnapped baby Paul mere seconds after his birth, leaving Catherine alone on the pallet on the floor where she had delivered him. Elizaveta took the infant into her care entirely, and Catherine did not see him again for weeks.

Catherine spent months recovering from the birth in complete isolation, in a cold, drafty room, neglected by Peter and unable to meet with Saltykov or anyone else

who was friendly to her. She read French political philosophy to pass the time—Voltaire and Montesquieu, principally. When she finally rejoined the court, she was a changed woman. The Choglokovs had been replaced in their duties as the governors of Catherine and Peter's households by Elizaveta's latest favorite, Ivan Shuvalov, and his wife. Catherine made no secret of the fact that she despised the Shuvalovs. Up until now, she had taken care to keep her opinions to herself, to listen to everyone and confide in no one. But now, as the mother of a future tsar, she had a new status in the court, and she made it clear that those who had treated her poorly were no longer safe from her retaliation. Elizaveta did not reprimand her; as far as she was concerned, Catherine had discharged her duty. If the grand duchess could not quite do as she liked, she at least had a measure of autonomy.

Catherine formed an alliance with the very man who had increased her isolation by forbidding her to write to her family—Count Bestuzhev, who also happened to be the Shuvalovs' principle rival in court. Bestuzhev had watched Catherine closely since her marriage, and he no longer suspected her of secretly serving Prussian interests, as her mother had done. In fact, he had come to the conclusion that Russia's best hopes for the future rested on the grand duchess's shoulders. Peter had no interest in affairs of state. He would not even bestir himself to deal with his administrative duties as the duke of Holstein. Catherine read his papers for him, and told him which policies he should authorize and which ones he should refuse. It was entirely possible that she would continue in this role when Paul was tsar, entrusted by him to administer his government as a sort of shadow-empress. Bestuzhev was keenly aware of her potential, and pronounced himself delighted when Catherine approached him to put their old animosity to rest.

Bestuzhev was especially keen to have Catherine on his side because he was firmly entrenched as the enemy of Prussia. Peter, on the other hand, was mad for all things Prussian. He frequently bemoaned the sad fate which had made him grand duke in a savage, backwards country like Russia, when he should have been a field-marshal in the grand Prussian army of Frederick the Great. This irritated Elizaveta to no end. In 1756, the Seven Years' War broke out, when Frederick invaded Saxony with funding from Britain. Austria was compelled to ally with its old enemy, France, and Russia joined the fray on their side. Elizaveta despised Frederick, not only because he had attempted to interfere in her court through such inept intermediaries as Johanna von Anhalt-Zerbst, but because he was loudly derisive of female rulers such as herself and Maria Theresa of Austria—he referred to their regimes as “the rule of cunts” and alluded to Elizaveta's love affairs by calling her the “Messalina of the North”, after a famously debauched Roman empress. She was determined to defeat him; and naturally, she was worried that if she died, Peter would reverse all of Russia's gains in the war by renouncing the alliance with Austria and France and rushing to Prussia's aid. Elizaveta's normally robust health was beginning to fail her. The crisis was

imminent.

Catherine feared Peter's accession as much as Elizaveta or Bestuzhev, because he had grown to despise her. He had a permanent mistress now, Elizaveta Vorontsova, one of Catherine's own ladies-in-waiting, and he publicly flaunted their relationship. This was nothing new to Catherine, who had witnessed his infatuations before, but Peter began to hint that he meant to pack Catherine off to a convent when he was emperor so that he and Vorontsova could marry. As Catherine saw it, three potential fates awaited her: "1. To share the Grand Duke's fortune; 2. To be exposed constantly to everything it pleased him to devise against me; 3. To take a path independently. A question of perishing with him or by him or saving myself, my children, and perhaps the state." (By now, Catherine had a daughter, fathered by her lover Stanislaus Poniatowski. Elizaveta had celebrated the birth without questioning who the child's father might be, and Peter had been persuaded that if he renounced the child, the empress would be just as angry with him as she would be with Catherine.)

What did Catherine mean by taking "a path independently"? In her memoirs, she asserts, perhaps falsely, that the notion of deposing Peter and ruling in his stead had not yet seriously occurred to her. But it had occurred to Bestuzhev, who approached her with the suggestion that Peter be deposed after Elizaveta's death, the infant Paul declared emperor, and Catherine named as his regent. Catherine refused to give him a straightforward answer. But in 1758 Bestuzhev's intrigues caught up with him, and Catherine came very close to being implicated. Russia had recently won a great victory against Frederick the Great's forces, but the Russian commander, Apraxin, for reasons nobody could determine, retreated when he ought to have chased after the vanquished Prussians and extracted a surrender. When Elizaveta suffered a fainting spell in September of 1757, Bestuzhev's enemies, namely Shuvalov, took advantage of her weakened state to convince her that Apraxin's bewildering retreat had been undertaken on Bestuzhev's orders. Bestuzhev was arrested and interrogated. When Catherine heard the news, she was terrified; somewhere, amongst the chancellor's papers, were documents pertaining to the coup he had proposed. She suffered agonies before Bestuzhev managed to get a message to her, indicating that he had managed to burn all of his papers before he was taken.

Catherine was safe for the present, but Elizaveta's suspicions had been aroused against her. The grand duchess began to long for the empress's death, despite the uncertainty it would bring. She was shoring up her own power base by making important allies, including her latest lover, Gregory Orlov. Orlov was an officer of the Guards, and he had several brothers who were also Guardsmen. When his affair with Catherine commenced, his family felt that the grand duchess was doing

them a great honor. They despised grand duke Peter for his Prussian sympathies, which made a mockery of the wounds they had sustained in the war against Frederick. Much as Elizaveta had won the loyalty of the Preobrazhensky Guards, ensuring that they would come to her aid during the coup against Anna Leopoldovna, Gregory Orlov and his compatriots would assure that the Guards were loyal to Catherine during the upcoming coup to depose her husband.

The war against Prussia was draining Russia of its resources, but such was Elizaveta's hatred of Frederick that she was determined to prosecute it to her last penny, even if she had to sell her extraordinarily lavish wardrobe. (The empress was discovered to have 15,000 gowns after her death; it was said that she never wore a dress more than once.) In 1759, Russian forces under the command of Peter Saltykov took the German city of Frankfurt; Frederick's army was devastated. By 1761, the war seemed nearly concluded, with a guaranteed Russian victory in the offing, but Peter refused to believe it. "I know Russians can never beat Prussians," he declared, to general outrage. Then, in July, Elizaveta, now fifty, suffered a complete collapse. She had convulsive fits, and her legs became so swollen she could not walk. She saw no one save Ivan Shuvalov and her five-year-old grandson, Paul. One last, decisive blow was needed to permanently humble the Prussian king, but a series of inept command decisions by Russian generals delayed victory. Elizaveta knew that she was close to death, and that if Peter succeeded her, the war would never be won. She began discussing plans to bypass her nephew and place Paul on the throne—with Catherine as his regent, just as Bestuzhev had suggested to the grand duchess in secret. But before these plans could be finalized, Elizaveta suffered a stroke. When she died on Christmas Day, Peter held his breath, lest a will be produced that would deprive him of his throne. But no such will was forthcoming. He was proclaimed tsar and emperor under the name Peter III. His wife, Catherine, watching from the shadows of the late empress's chamber, was pregnant with Gregory Orlov's child.

### **Peter III (January 1762-July 1762)**

"Nature made [Peter III] a mere poltroon, a guzzler, an individual comic in all things. In one of those outpourings of his heart to me, he observed, 'See how unhappy I am. If I had only entered into the service of the King of Prussia I would have served him to the best of my ability. By this present time, I should, I am confident, have had a regiment and the rank of major general and perhaps even of lieutenant general. But far from it. Instead, they brought me here and made me a grand duke of this damned country.' And then he railed against the Russian nation in his familiar, low, burlesque style, yet at times really very agreeably, because he did not lack a certain kind of spirit. He was not stupid, but mad, and as he loved to

drink, this helped scramble his poor brains even further.”

Stanislaus Poniatowski, king of Poland

When considering the brief reign of Peter III, historians sometimes describe it as moderate—meaning that the tsar did not entirely neglect to look after the good of his people. He achieved early popularity by lowering the salt tax, and by overturning Peter the Great’s decree that nobles serve mandatory lifelong tenures in government service. But any goodwill he garnered by these actions were eroded by a series of missteps: first, he secularized the Orthodox church, seizing lands and forcing priests to cut their beards and change their cassocks to plain black robes. Then he attempted to “reform” the Russian army by giving them Prussian uniforms and having them run Prussian military drills. Furthermore, there were rumors that he intended to disband the Guards regiments entirely, which outraged Gregory Orlov and his brother officers. And then there was the matter of Russia’s involvement in the Seven Years’ War.

Surprising absolutely no one, the first significant act of Peter III’s six-month reign was to make peace with Frederick of Prussia. For Russia, this was snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. For Frederick, it was nothing less than a miracle from heaven. By the time the empress Elizaveta died, Frederick’s army, once the strongest on earth, was reduced to 3000 men, and Frederick himself was ill with depression and rheumatism. His surrender was inevitable and imminent. Nothing less than the irrational personal devotion of the monarch of one of the largest kingdoms on earth could have saved him, but that was precisely what tsar Peter offered him. Simple Russian officers like Gregory Orlov were incandescent with fury over what they saw as a betrayal heaped upon insults. Peter, on the other hand, was happier than he had ever been. If he could not be spared the onerous duty of ruling Russia, a fate which had deprived him of the honor of serving as Frederick the Great’s field marshal, then at least he was the instrument by which God had delivered his hero.

Frederick and Peter signed a treaty in which Peter pledged to recognize and defend the territorial conquests Frederick had made during the recent war, while Frederick pledged to extend the same honor to any territory Peter should happen to gain during the upcoming war with Denmark, which Russia was undertaking in order to defend Peter’s home of Holstein. Frederick was worried about his new ally waging another war so early in his reign. Peter had not even been crowned yet, but he was proposing to command the defense of Holstein himself. Frederick was worried that the deposed and imprisoned Ivan VI would become the target of a coup in Peter’s absence, but Peter reassured himself on this point by going to see Ivan in person. Peter found Ivan in such poor mental and physical health that he was stirred to pity; but he also confirmed Elizaveta’s standing orders that Ivan was



to be killed if anyone should try to take him from his prison. Frederick's intelligence on the Russian court must have been incomplete, or he would have understood that the most likely source of threat to Peter's throne came not from the deposed emperor, but from a source much closer to home.

By the spring of 1762, Catherine knew that, not only was there little chance that Peter intended to make her his empress, but that her freedom or even her life might be in danger. At one point, he ordered Catherine to bestow the Order of St. Catherine upon Vorontsova, the honor created by Peter the Great exclusively for empresses and grand duchesses. Catherine bore with all these slights and insults patiently. She was approaching the end of her pregnancy and had little strength to spare for intrigues, though friends and allies were visiting her in secret to assure her of their support should she make a bid for the throne. On April 11, 1762, Catherine gave birth to a son by Gregory Orlov; he was named Alexis Gregorovich, later to be known as Count Bobrinsky. The birth was witnessed by no one save Catherine and her midwife; immediately after delivery she sent the boy to the home of one of her most loyal retainers, whose wife had volunteered to nurse him. Now, at last, she was physically unencumbered; and when Peter finally stepped over the line, Catherine was ready to strike.

In May of 1762, Peter hosted a state banquet, partially in honor of his two uncles from Holstein, who had been summoned to Russia by Peter to help him run his army and government, despite the fact that neither man had relevant experience. In due course, the other guests rose to toast the health of the emperor's family; Catherine, as Peter's wife, naturally felt that she was included in this toast, and kept her seat. From the head of the table, Peter shouted at her, calling her "*Dura!*", or "fool". Catherine, humiliated, burst into tears, but forced herself to recover her poise, and all who observed her at the table were stricken by the contrast between husband and wife—he, immature, headstrong, reckless, she, intelligent, self-controlled, gracious.

Peter seemed to sense that he had made a dangerous mistake during the banquet, because he ordered her arrest later that night, only to have the newly appointed chief of the Russian army convince him to rescind the arrest. Prince George Lewis of Holstein was the brother of Catherine's mother; he had proposed marriage to Catherine when she was fourteen. Prince George was aware of Catherine's popularity with the Guards, and he warned Peter that the army might revolt if he imprisoned her. Peter backed off, but when Catherine learned what had happened, she realized that if she did not act soon, she would lose everything.

In mid-June of 1762, Peter was preparing to set out to Oranienbaum, the tsar's summer estate, for a short holiday before taking command of the army and going

to war against Denmark. Catherine was also preparing: Gregory Orlov and his brothers were winning support for her amongst the Guards, and a document announcing the emperor's abdication had been created, ready to be dispersed as soon as the coup had taken effect. The original intention was to arrest Peter at Oraniebaum, and then, when he was safely in custody, proclaim Catherine as empress. But on June 27<sup>th</sup>, when one of the officers involved in the plot was arrested, the Orlov brothers decided that they could no longer afford to wait. Alexis Orlov woke Catherine at 5 in the morning and rode with her twenty miles to the barracks of the Izmailovsky Guards; she told them that her life, and the life of her son Paul, was in danger. They were quick to believe her. They loathed Peter as a Prussian and a foreigner, whereas Catherine, they knew, had devoted herself wholeheartedly to her adopted country since she first arrived in Russia as a teenager. By birth, Catherine was just as German as her husband was, but she had gone out of her way to win the esteem and affection of everyone around her, and this counted in her favor. The Izmailovsky Guards proclaimed her their empress, and the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky regiments were swift to follow.

The city of St. Petersburg accepted Catherine as Russia's new sovereign without any bloodshed. Her triumphal entry there was accompanied by the blessing of the bishop and the ringing of church bells. It happened to be Peter's name-day, the feast day of the saint after whom he was named—and although Catherine had been replaced by Vorontsova in the tsar's the annual summer retreat to Oraniebaum, she was expected to offer Peter formal congratulations at her house in Peterhof before he set off for Denmark. When Peter and Vorontsova arrived in Peterhof, however, Catherine was not there; she too was on her way to Peterhof, in the uniform of a colonel of the Guards, to arrest her husband. Peter soon began to hear rumors of what had occurred in St. Petersburg. His bodyguard tried to convince him to flee to Prussia, where Frederick would undoubtedly shelter him and probably give him an army to mount a counter-revolt, but Peter refused. At first, he was truly convinced that the majority of Russians were more loyal to him than to Catherine. But as each fortress and regiment proclaimed their loyalty to Catherine II, Peter became resigned to the inevitable. He sent away all of his household, except for his mistress Elizabeth Vorontsova, and wrote to his wife. At first he offered to share his throne with her, as Peter the Great had shared his with Catherine I. When Catherine did not reply to this offer, he wrote a second time, offering to abdicate. Catherine indicated that she was willing to accept the offer, so long as he signed a written statement renouncing the throne. Peter, by then under the guard of Gregory and Alexis Orlov, wrote:

“I, Peter, of my own free will hereby solemnly declare, not only to the whole Russian empire, but also to the whole world, that I forever renounce the throne of Russia to the end of my days. Nor will I ever seek to recover the same at any time or by anybody's assistance, and I swear this before God.”

Now no longer emperor, Peter wanted nothing more than to return to his native Holstein in the company of Elizabeth Vorontsova. In truth, he hated Russia and had never wanted to live anywhere but Holstein. The loss of his throne was humiliating, but if he had lived, perhaps it would not have been a great personal tragedy.

At first, Catherine told him that he could return to Holstein, but then she changed her mind; she dared not allow Peter to be within reach of Frederick. Instead, she allowed Peter to choose one of his country estates for his retirement. He chose the estate of Ropsha, where he retired with his dog, his violin, and his servant, under the guard of Catherine's most trusted retainers. These included Bariatinsky, who had saved her from being arrested by Peter by persuading Prince George Lewis to intercede for her; Gregory Potemkin, a young officer who had loaned Catherine the use of his ceremonial sword knot when she was preparing to lead the Guards to Peterhof; and Alexis Orlov, among others.

According to the letters that Alexis Orlov wrote to Catherine during the first few days of the former emperor's imprisonment, Peter became ill almost immediately. In light of what followed, some historians believe that Orlov exaggerated the severity of Peter's condition because he intended to kill him and hoped to pass his death off as the result of natural causes. After all, neither Catherine nor her closest supporters would truly be secure so long as Peter lived. And while Catherine did not dare order the execution of her own husband and the father of her son, Alexis Orlov and his compatriots probably saw it as their duty to do what their empress could not.

Whether it was a deliberate plot by the Orlovs, Bariatinsky, Potemkin and the rest or not, Peter III died at Ropsha on July 7, 1762. Alexis Orlov wrote the letter bearing the news to Catherine. He claimed that Peter had felt well enough to join them for dinner, but that he had grown drunk, attacked Bariatinsky, and been killed by accident in the struggle that followed. The news left Catherine distraught. She was at once too humane to have wished for her husband's death and too wise not to see that his death benefited her. Across Europe, she would be pilloried as a murderess; her foreknowledge of the plot was assumed. In private, she agonized over the fate of the Orlovs. They had raised her to the throne by rousing the support of the Guards in her favor, and she would need them in the coming months. Either she must accept their explanation that Peter's death had been an accident, or subject them to the excruciating tortures reserved for those who conspired to murder a tsar.

In the end, Catherine released a proclamation declaring that Peter III had died of

colic. Later, in her personal memoirs, she described the circumstances of her husband's death thus:

“Fear had caused a diarrhea which lasted three days and ended on the fourth when he drank excessively...A hemorrhoidal colic seized him and affected his brain. For two days he was delirious and then delirium was followed by extreme exhaustion. Despite all the help the doctors could give him, he died while demanding a Lutheran priest. I feared that the officers might have poisoned him so I had him opened up, but not the slightest trace of poison was found. The stomach was quite healthy, but the lower bowels were greatly inflamed and a stroke of apoplexy carried him off. His heart was extraordinarily small and quite decayed.

“So at last God has brought everything to pass according to His designs. The whole thing is rather a miracle than a pre-arranged plan, for so many lucky coincidences could not have coincided unless God's hand had been over it all. Hatred of foreigners was the chief factor in the whole affair and Peter III passed for a foreigner.”

Because Peter had neglected to arrange his coronation before he was deposed, Catherine could not, or would not, have him buried alongside previous emperors and empresses in the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul. He was instead interred in a plain coffin in Nevsky Monastery, where he remained until Paul I came to the throne and had him interred in the cathedral alongside Catherine. As a child, Paul was uncertain as to whether the mythical Saltykov was his father, or whether his father was Peter, but as he grew older the more he grew to revere Peter's memory and emulate his interests and habits. By the time of Catherine's death he had grown to resent her bitterly, and he blamed her for Peter's murder until he discovered Alexis Orlov's letters amongst Catherine's papers. Orlov's account satisfied him at last that his mother was innocent of deliberate wrongdoing in his father's death.

## Chapter Four: Catherine the Great (1762-1796)

“You must know with whom you have to deal... You will find that I have no other view than the general welfare and glory of the fatherland, and I wish for nothing but the happiness of my subjects... I am very fond of the truth, and you may tell me the truth fearlessly, and argue with me without any danger if it leads to good results in affairs. I hear that you are regarded as an honest man by all...I hope to show you by experience that people with such qualities do well at court. And I may add that I require no flattery from you, but only honest behavior and firmness in affairs.”

Catherine II to her procurator-general

### The early years of Catherine II's reign

The coronation of Catherine the Great took place on September 22, 1762, at the Kremlin. She was thirty-three years old, the same age Elizaveta had been when she organized a coup against Anna Leopoldovna. Her son Paul was eight. Right away, she felt the precariousness of her position. She was not a Romanov. Neither was her namesake, Catherine I, but the former empress at least had the legitimacy of being chosen by Peter the Great. No one had chosen Catherine. She complained that every person, from “the least Guardsman” to her own ladies-in-waiting felt that she owed her throne to their work, and expected her to reward them accordingly. For the first few years of her reign, she made certain to cement the loyalties of her early supporters by showering them with promotions, noble ranks, cash, and serfs. But always, she reserved for herself the privilege of supreme autocrat. Russia was not a constitutional monarchy, like Sweden. As historian Robert Massie puts it, “her signature, inscribed on a decree, was law, and, if she chose, could mean life or death for any one of her twenty million subjects.”

Catherine reversed Peter III's reforms, restoring to the Orthodox church all the land that had been secularized, restoring the old uniforms and structure to the Guards regiments, and cancelling the war with Denmark. There was an outbreak of serf revolts early in her reign, and she became the first monarch to attempt to better their condition since tsar Alexei revoked their right to leave the estates where they were born. Her interest in political philosophy, born in the isolation that followed the birth of her son, continued when she was empress. Catherine struck up a correspondence with the French philosophers Voltaire and Diderot. When Diderot lost his annual income, he decided to sell his collection of books in order to finance his daughter's dowry. Catherine, hearing of this, purchased his

library for sixteen thousand pounds, on the condition that the books remain in his care until his death. Until then, she would pay him an annual salary for acting as her librarian.

It was due to Catherine's studious contemplation of political philosophy that she undertook one of the most ambitious projects of her reign—the complete reform of Russia's legal code. The last tsar to undertake a similar project was Alexei I in 1649. By the time Catherine set to work in 1765, the legal code was desperately in need of just such an overhaul. Catherine's intention was to create a Legislative Commission composed of representatives from every class of Russian society, including Muslims, Jews, and the “barbarian” peoples, whose job it would be to draw up a complete set of new laws. The commission could not enact those laws, but they would present them to the empress, who would review and enact them as she saw fit. In order to help the commission draw up laws that would actually be an improvement on the old ones, Catherine drew up a set of “Instructions”: essentially a crash course in law, government, and, to a certain extent, human rights.

Ultimately the Legislative Commission failed to overhaul the Russian legal code, but Catherine's “Instructions” is considered one of the most remarkable state documents generated in a century that abounded with interesting ideas about government. The Russian Senate rewarded Catherine's unprecedented condescension in consulting her own people regarding the laws that were to govern them by conferring upon her a new title: henceforward, she was known as Catherine the Great. Only one other Russian ruler had received this honor, but Peter the Great had been tsar for thirty years when it was given to him. Catherine had ruled for only three.

## **Catherine the Great and the partition of Poland**

Catherine's personal and romantic attachments, like those of every monarch, had political repercussions. Gregory Orlov's love of Catherine had helped raise her to the throne, but Catherine's love for Orlov threatened her supremacy. He wished, not so much to be emperor, as to simply be an old fashioned Russian husband. But Catherine's closest advisor, Nikita Panin, warned her that “Madame Orlov could never be empress of Russia”, and Catherine acknowledge the wisdom of it. Orlov responded by carrying on affairs with other women under Catherine's nose. Meanwhile, she had other men's egos to manage: Stanislaus Poniatowski, who had been her lover before Orlov, wished for Catherine to bring him back to Russia from Poland so that they could resume their affair, but Catherine had other uses for him—she wanted to make him king of Poland. (In the eighteenth century,

kings of Poland were chosen by election; technically, elections took place with the Polish Diet, but Catherine's ambassador to Poland was in a position to bribe, threaten, and otherwise secure as many votes as needed to make Stanislaus king.) While Catherine was trying to persuade Poniatowski to give up on his naïve hope of marrying her, she was keeping a close eye on the career of her lover-to-be, Gregory Potemkin. Those whom Catherine loved, she made use of. She sent Orlov to Moscow to organize the city in the wake of a deadly outbreak of bubonic plague. Afterwards, she sent Orlov and Potemkin to the Ottomans at Fokshany, to negotiate for the independence of Crimea. Getting the Ottomans to acknowledge Crimea's independence was the first step in Russia's making a claim on it. But Catherine also had her eye on Poland.

Poland was Roman Catholic, and only Roman Catholics were permitted to hold seats in the Diet. But to the east, where Poland shared a border with Russia, there were large populations of Russian Orthodox Poles, and to the north, near the border with Prussia, lived a significant number of Lutheran Poles. Through her ambassador, Catherine attempted to coerce the Diet into permitting religious liberty for non-Catholics, but she underestimated the vehement strain of nationalism that a challenge to Polish Catholicism would unleash. Uprisings broke out, challenging Russian influence; Catherine responded by sending an occupying force of Russian troops to Poland. This was at best a temporary solution, however. Frederick of Prussia would not stand by while Poland became a Russian satellite state. Furthermore, the Ottomans were not likely to let Russia assume uncontested control of a country which had always served as a buffer between their empires. The Russo-Turkish War broke out in 1768 as a result. The Russians enjoyed a string of early victories; victory seemed certain, until Austria threatened to assist Turkey, which would activate Prussia's treaty with Russia. Rather than be plunged into a sequel to the Seven Years' War, Frederick proposed the partitioning of Poland into three parts—he would take the Lutheran north, while Catherine would take the Orthodox east, and Maria Theresa of Austria the Catholic south. All three monarchs found this solution preferable to war.

## **The romances of Catherine the Great**

Rumors and legends abound where the private, romantic, and sexual life of Catherine the Great is concerned. She has been accused of all sorts of debaucheries, but in fact, all the rumors regarding nymphomania, bestiality, and other paraphilia have also been attributed in equal degree to other female rulers, who, like Catherine, were unmarried during their reign. Catherine's love affairs certainly provided plenty of material for court gossips, but this was because she was empress, not because she was indiscreet or lewd. Her first affair, with Sergei

Saltykov, had ended unhappily for Catherine. Her affair with Stanislaus Poniatowski had ended in Poniatowski fleeing Russia to avoid a diplomatic incident, after Peter III discovered him leaving the palace in disguise. Gregory Orlov helped Catherine gain the throne, then made her miserable when she could not give him the traditional Russian marriage he wanted. Her next lover, Alexander Vasilchikov, was suggested to her by her advisors, but he bored her profoundly, and she later wrote that “his caresses made me cry”. The nickname that Catherine bestowed on Vasilchikov was “soupe à la glace”—“Cold Soup”. The relationship ended when she quietly pensioned him off and sent him away from the palace. Vasilchikov left without protest.

Potemkin was next. He was ten years Catherine’s junior, the son of a distinguished Russian family, brother to five sisters. As a young man, he attended the University of Moscow to study theology, but once he had carried off every honor and prize he abruptly abandoned his academic career and joined a Guards regiment. He was a devastating mimic, capable of reproducing Catherine’s German accent with such aplomb that the empress couldn’t help but laugh. Once Potemkin came to her notice, he never left it. She rewarded him for his service with cash and promotions, and positions of trust later in her reign. He returned home from the war with the Turks in 1774 after Catherine wrote him a carefully phrased letter which seemed to suggest that she was in love with him. Upon receiving it, Potemkin expected that he would waltz through the doors of the palace and into the empress’s arms. But Catherine had taken up with Vasilchikov by then, and Potemkin, either from genuine lowness of spirits or from a desire to force Catherine’s hand, retired to a monastery and declared his intention of becoming a monk. Catherine proved susceptible to this, as she would be susceptible to his tantrums and fits of passion throughout their relationship. She wrote to him, suggesting that a man of his talents and his abilities was needed in the world, not cloistered behind monastery doors. Potemkin returned to court, and was installed in the bedroom suite directly above hers, which communicated with the empress’s chamber by a connecting staircase.

Potemkin was, in Catherine’s description “one of the greatest, most bizarre, and most entertaining eccentrics of this iron age.” He was jealous of her previous lovers and made her account for each liaison she’d had since she was married. Catherine was unwilling to live “for one hour without love”, but she had been faithful to each of her lovers while she was with him, and she wrote Potemkin a long letter explaining why each of her affairs had ended. Potemkin’s extraordinary abilities made him more Catherine’s equal than anyone she had taken up with in the past. “They may as well be in love because they are exactly the same,” one of her friends commented. But Potemkin was made uneasy by the power she possessed. Catherine was often obliged to soothe and reassure him. “We quarrel about power,” she complained once, “never about love.” There is a possibility that



she married him in a secret ceremony, as Elizaveta is said to have done with her lover Razumovsky. Their sexual affair only lasted for a few years before they decided to end it, but Potemkin would remain her closest friend and advisor for the duration of her reign.

Around the time that Catherine and Potemkin ended their intimate relationship, a tragic turn of events forced the empress's attention to her son Paul.

### **“Heavy Baggage”**

In September of 1772, Paul had celebrated his eighteenth birthday. Catherine had not enjoyed a close relationship with Paul in his early childhood, principally because the empress Elizaveta had essentially kidnapped him and kept him entirely to herself for the first eight years of his life. Once Catherine became empress, she endeavored to spend more time with him, but she was extremely busy and Paul was left mostly to his tutor Panin, who had helped Catherine take the throne but felt that she ought to have become regent instead of empress. Panin had much to say to Paul on the subject of female monarchs and the unfitness of women to rule. It is uncertain whether Catherine knew for certain who Paul's father was, but whether he had been sired by her faithless lover Saltykov or her hated husband Peter III, he was a reminder of a singularly painful period in her life. Growing up, Paul saw Catherine principally in the company of Gregory Orlov, whose brother, everyone whispered, had murdered Paul's father. It was as difficult for him to know or understand her as it was for her to put aside the associations he conjured. Mother and son grew close briefly when Paul was a teenager, and Catherine nursed him through an illness the way that Elizaveta had nursed her through pneumonia and pleurisy. But as he grew older, he began to test the limits of Catherine's indulgence. No sooner had he turned eighteen than he became the focus of a plot to force Catherine to name him her co-ruler. Catherine did not consider Paul responsible for the plot, but she did not entirely trust him either.

It was necessary for Paul to marry, but Catherine wanted him to have more liberty in his choice of wife than either she or his father had been given. For prospective brides, she looked for girls rather like herself—German princesses from minor families. Catherine invited a mother who had three daughters close to Peter's age to visit the Russian court. Paul immediately decided on the middle sister, Wilhelmina von Hesse-Darmstadt, not knowing that she had fallen in love with his best friend, Andrei Razumovsky, during the journey from home. Wilhelmina took the Orthodox name Natalya Alekseyevna and married Paul in September of 1773. Three years later, a pregnancy ended in stillbirth, and Natalia died shortly after the delivery. Paul had been deeply in love with his wife, and his grief at the loss

was so extreme that Catherine, having heard rumors that Natalya was having an affair, ordered her desk to be searched. Letters revealing the infidelity were discovered and shown to Paul, whose grief was immediately eaten up by fury. He ceased mourning and remarried a mere five months later. His second wife, Sophie Dorothea von Württemberg, took the Orthodox name Maria.

For a number of years, Paul and Maria were very happy together. They had two sons within the first three years of their marriage. As Elizaveta had done with Paul, Catherine more or less adopted their first son and heir, Alexander, although, unlike Elizaveta, she did not deprive his parents of all access to him. Alexander was her darling and her legacy, and when Paul's declining mental health and erratic behavior began to poison all of his personal relationships, Catherine began planning to cut him out of the line of succession in Alexander's favor. But long before this, Paul had grown terrified of his mother, convinced that she meant to do away with him, as Peter the Great had done away with his son Alexei. Paul was more intelligent, better educated, more self-aware and more politically astute than Peter III had been, but he betrayed some of the emperor's same irrational, high-strung temperament. When Paul and Maria went on a Grand Tour of Europe in 1781, they were both so convinced that Catherine only wanted to get them out of the country so they could be killed in secret that Maria fainted as they prepared for departure. As a guest at the court of Joseph II of Austria, son and co-monarch of Maria Theresa, Paul repudiated Russia's alliance to share the spoils of the crumbling Ottoman empire with Austria. It was the sort of betrayal that a monarch like Peter the Great very well *might* have killed a son for, but Catherine merely gritted her teeth and tried to mend the damage. A merciless giver of nicknames, she began to refer to Paul as "the Heavy Baggage."

## **Catherine's later years**

Catherine had a series of young lovers after she and Potemkin agreed to see other people, and in June of 1784, the most recent of them, Alexander Lanskoj, died of diphtheria at the age of twenty-six. Catherine, now fifty-six, plunged into a severe depression and was confined to her bed for three weeks. Potemkin, who had been administering Russia's latest conquest in Crimea, rushed back to her side. With his help, she eventually regained her strength. "For a year, Catherine had no lover," writes Sebag Montefiore. "When she went to church, young Guardsmen preened in their best uniforms and tightest breeches to catch her attention." When she felt ready to move on, Potemkin obligingly sent young men to visit her that he thought she would like. Potemkin's young female favorites and Catherine's young male favorites were treated like family members, the loving children to Catherine and Potemkin's doting parents.

In January of 1787, Catherine left Tsarskoe Selo, a country residence about 15 miles south of St. Petersburg, and began the journey to Crimea. Her convoy reached the Dnieper in April just as the ice was breaking up, and they made the rest of the way south by water, in a flotilla that rivaled Elizabeth I's fabled Thames flotilla. Emperor Joseph II of Austria met her upon her arrival in Kremenchuk, in what is now Ukraine. Just as Peter the Great had conquered Riga and other Swedish ports in the north, Catherine, through Potemkin, had made Russia a power on the Black Sea. At the beginning of the Romanov dynasty, Russia was a landlocked nation for half the year when its Arctic ports were frozen. Now it had one of the strongest navies on earth.

This provoked the Ottomans, who declared war against Russia in August. Potemkin fought them in Ochakov, but when Swedish forces attacked, bearing down on St. Petersburg, Catherine urgently summoned Potemkin home to defend the city. Prussia and Holland, nervous at Russia's expansive victories, were allying against Catherine, urging the Swedes and the Ottomans not to relent. In 1789, Poland allied with Prussia and began to revolt against Russia. In February of 1790, Joseph II of Austria died, ending Austria's alliance with Russia. Catherine's great victory led directly to the threat of a "triple war". Potemkin and Alexander Suvorov won a devastating victory over the Ottomans and were poised to seize Constantinople—long the dream of the Russian tsars. Only the threat of war with Britain and Prussia deterred them.

In October of 1791, while he was negotiating peace with the Ottomans, Potemkin grew suddenly sick and died. Catherine became so ill when she received the news that her doctors feared she had suffered a stroke. Potemkin was a supremely gifted individual and Catherine had relied on him absolutely. She grieved him as a husband and as a monarch bereft of her strong right hand. There was no one to replace him. She felt tired and old, and she mistrusted the younger men who began vying for attention and prominence in the power vacuum Potemkin left behind. She had reigned for thirty years, and she was almost the only person of her own generation still living, save for Ivan Shuvalov, the man who had once been the empress Elizaveta's lover. He had made her life difficult when she was grand duchess and she had humiliated him when she began to come into her own power. Now he was one of her closest friends.

Sensing that her death was near, Catherine's mind turned to the succession. She wished to appoint her grandson Alexander as her heir, but he was only fifteen, and unmarried. Just as she had done for Paul, Catherine invited German princesses to court so that Alexander could choose a bride. In October of 1793, Alexander married fourteen-year-old Princess Louise of Baden, who had taken the Orthodox

name of Elizabeth. The young couple got along very well, but due in part to their age and partly to the intense pressure they felt to please both the erratic grand duke Paul, and Alexander's grandmother the empress, whom Paul hated, they found it difficult to bond. She became embroiled in a passionate romantic affair with one of her ladies-in-waiting; Alexander approved of the relationship, and did not interfere until he began to suspect that their passion was sexual in nature. The two girls were forbidden to see one another. Alexander and Elizabeth's relationship improved after this, but Alexander was so disgusted by his courtly intrigue that he began to wish that he could be excused from ever having to rule Russia at all.

In Catherine's eyes, Paul was growing every day more like Peter III. He was mad, she believed, "but unfortunately he's not mad enough." She tried to enlist the help of Paul's wife, the grand duchess Maria, to persuade Paul to renounce the throne in Alexander's favor, but Maria refused to cooperate. Alexander, meanwhile, wrote to a friend, explaining why the throne of Russia did not appeal to him: "I'm in no way satisfied with my position, it's much too brilliant for my character. How can a single man manage to govern [Russia] and correct its abuses? This would be impossible not only for a man of ordinary abilities like me but even for a genius... My plan is once I've renounced this scabrous place, I will settle with my wife on the banks of the Rhine." In September of 1796, Catherine approached Alexander directly with a decree she had written but not yet signed which would place him on the throne in his father's stead. She wanted to know what he thought of it; Alexander was evasive. Lacking his explicit approval, she set the decree aside.

Then, in the early morning of November 5, 1796, Catherine suffered a stroke and fell to the floor, where she was discovered three hours later. By nine that evening, she was dead, without having regained speech or consciousness.

When Count Nikolai Zubov, Catherine's master of horse, arrived in Gatchina to bring news of the stroke to Paul and his wife Maria, Paul was terrified; he thought that Catherine had finally ordered his arrest. When he realized his mistake, he set off immediately for the Winter Palace. Catherine was still breathing when he arrived, but he lost no time in beginning his search of Catherine's private papers. In her desk, he found much to interest him. Always, Paul had suspected his mother of having Peter III assassinated; when he found Alexei Orlov's letter describing the manner of Peter's death, he realized that she was innocent. He also found the letter which Alexander had written his grandmother, declining to bypass Paul in the succession.

Paul and Maria ordered dinner to be served just outside the empress's chamber, leaving the grieving Alexander and his wife to stand vigil by Catherine's bed when

she breathed her last. Catherine's will, declaring Alexander her heir, had never been signed; it was destroyed in Paul's presence by a courtier hoping to prove his loyalty.

## **Paul I (1796-1801)**

Paul I was crowned emperor and tsar of all Russia on April 5, 1797. His excitement rivaled that of a child on his way to a birthday party. He was forty-two years old at the time of his accession, older than any previous tsar. He had spent at least three decades chafing under his mother's rule, and now, as though making up for lost time, he intended to have his way in all things. Once Paul had been crowned, with his wife Maria crowned empress consort at his side, he announced what was to be the most enduring legacy of his reign—a succession decree which reinstated male primogeniture. What is particularly striking about the decree is that it was written in 1788, eleven years before Catherine's death and Paul's accession. One can only imagine what resentment he must have felt towards his mother, and the idea of female power in general, to have such a document prepared and waiting more than a decade before he came to the throne.

The new emperor's first order of business was to rid the Russian court of everything that offended him, including all reminders of his mother and the decades of female rule Russia had undergone, as well as anything that so much as hinted at French taste or style. The French revolution and the guillotining of Louis XVI had horrified and outraged Catherine, but it had incensed Paul to the point that a courtier who was seen wearing a frock coat was in danger of having his clothing attacked on the spot with a pair of scissors. Round hats and laces on shoes, and other such French-inspired fashions, were seen as signs that the wearer might be harboring dangerously anti-monarchical sympathies. Paul was obsessed with protocol, discipline, and having his way in general. Loyalty oaths were forced upon any courtier whom Paul construed as having a connection to the coup that ousted his father. Military parades marched through St. Petersburg daily, and woe to any person who did not show proper obeisance. In one tale, recounted by the legendary Russian author Alexander Pushkin, Paul stormed up to Pushkin's nurse while she was pushing him down the street in a baby carriage and demanded to know why she did not remove the child's cap in the emperor's presence. He was obsessed with all forms of protocol and liked to exert his authority wherever possible. Though he claimed he had no interest in bureaucracy, only in the military, in the first year of his reign he issued 2000 decrees, very few of which had anything to do with the army.

The contrast between Paul's era and Catherine's was sudden and sharp. St.

Petersburg, once as sophisticated as any modern European city, began to look, in one observer's opinion, like a German town from the 1500's. Those who had been loyal to Paul at his demi-court in Gatchina (the so-called Ostrogoths, named for their incivility and lack of culture) were rewarded and promoted to generalships and chancellery positions. He was a tedious micromanager, inspiring both fear and ridicule with his heavy-handed, narrow-minded ways; when angry, he was severe, if not brutal, though when his better angels were ascendant he sometimes showed other qualities. He was, in the words of Colonel Nikolai Sablukov, "sincerely pious, really benevolent, generous, a lover of truth and hater of falsehood, ever anxious to promote justice...but these praiseworthy qualities were rendered useless by a total want of moderation, extreme irritability and irrational, impatient expectation of obedience."

The two persons closest to Paul were both curious individuals. The first, Nelidova, was his mistress, though their relationship was not sexual in nature—she was pious, unwilling to commit the sin of fornication even with an emperor. As it happened, Paul himself was also very pious, and he only admired her more for her chastity. She had more influence over the emperor than anyone else, and even the empress had to cultivate Nelidova if she wished to get through to him. Paul's other confidante was his barber, Ivan Kutaisov. A Turk from Georgia, Kutaisov had been captured as a slave by Russian soldiers when he was a boy. Catherine had presented him to Paul as a servant, and Paul had overseen his conversion to the Orthodox faith and sent him to the palace of Versailles to be trained as a valet. He was "the chief arbiter of everything" in Paul's household, and when the emperor had a falling out with both Nelidova and his wife Maria, Kutaisov was quick to offer an alternative.

The sixteen-year-old Anna Lopukhina was a descendant of Eudoxia Lopukhina, the first wife of Peter the Great. When Kutaisov pointed her out to Paul, she was dancing at a ball; Kutaisov claimed that Paul had "turned a head", an invention sure to flatter the vanity of the tsar, who was called "the ugliest man in the empire". Lopukhina was a very pretty girl, with dark hair, dark eyebrows, and a fair complexion, though she looked like a skinny teenager, not like a grown woman. The status of her family meant that if Paul wished to make her his mistress, he would have to approach her parents. They gave their consent, apparently, but when Paul approached Lopukhina herself, she was not receptive. At first, she tried to ignore his attentions; at length, she burst into tears and told him that she was in love with another man, Prince Pavel Gagarin. The emperor liked to think of himself as a chivalrous soul, and when he heard this, he immediately desisted his attentions and personally paved the way for Lopukhina and Gagarin to be married immediately. But Prince Gagarin was not pleased to find himself married to a woman he perceived as being the emperor's cast-off, and he treated her cruelly. Worse still, he began conspiring with Kutaisov to throw the

new Princess Gagarina in the emperor's path. When Paul saw that she was unhappy, he renewed his attentions. Not knowing what else to do, the miserable, mistreated teenage bride let the emperor do as he liked. Paul was elated, and heaped rewards on Gagarina, her husband, her family, and Kutaisov, who had brought the affair about.

In 1799, Paul joined a coalition with Austria, Britain, and eventually Prussia to defend Christian Europe against the spreading influence of the brilliant young general Napoleon Bonaparte, who had attacked Egypt in June of the previous year and seized the isle of Malta. Prince Marshal Suvorov, who had been banished from court for daring to question Paul's sartorial edicts, was recalled and placed in charge of the Russian army. One section would fight alongside the British to challenge the French in Holland; two more would join with the Austrians in Italy and in Switzerland, to fight the French there. Such was Suvorov's brilliance that even when the Austrians abandoned him, he was victorious. When the British proved useless to the Russian expedition in Holland, Paul became furious with the pro-British faction at his court, and started to speak openly of his admiration for Napoleon. In response, a conspiracy began to be hatched between the British ambassador, vice-chancellor Nikita Panin (nephew of the Panin who had served Catherine), governor-general of St. Petersburg Count Peter von der Pahlen, Prince Zubov, his sister Olga Zherebtsova, and others. The emperor was insane, they all agreed. He must be stopped—killed, if necessary. The heir, Alexander, was approached with a proposition to make him his father's regent; not unlike when Catherine had proposed to make him emperor, Alexander was noncommittal.

Alexander's relationship with his father was worsening daily, through no fault of his own. Paul had been intensely paranoid since long before such paranoia was justified. Frightened that Alexander or his brother Constantine would plot against him, Paul kept both grand dukes so busy with trivial military duties that they scarcely had time to visit their families, let alone become embroiled in a conspiracy against him. Furthermore, Paul's tyrannical ways had made him an object of bitter loathing where his daughters-in-law were concerned. Elizabeth, Alexander's wife, wrote to her mother that, "it's painful and frightful to see daily injustices and brutalities. It's all the same to him if he is loved or loathed provided he's feared... He is hated and feared at least by everyone... His humor more changeable than a weathervane." Paul behaved dismissively towards Elizabeth, encouraging Alexander to take up mistresses, though he scarcely had time for such dalliances. When he was not urging him towards infidelity, Paul gave every indication that he saw his son as a dangerous rival.

Count Peter van der Pahlen was one of the officials who most often felt the inconsistency of the emperor's nature. He had been appointed, dismissed, and re-

appointed governor-general of St. Petersburg, after being dismissed from other government offices on Peter's whim. He was convinced that the emperor's changeability and paranoia would be the death of the empire and lead to the deaths of thousands in a purge on Paul's orders. It was Pahlen who had arranged Panin's meeting with Alexander to sound him out on the possibility of a regency. He now approached Alexander personally. After much persuasion, Alexander agreed to rule or be regent, so long as his father's life was spared. Alexander intended to have Paul confined in the new Mikhailovsky Palace, which was being built to the emperor's specifications; he would install a riding school there, so that Paul would be comfortable and entertained for the rest of his life. Pahlen promised Alexander that Paul would not be killed, but this was merely a lie to gain his cooperation. Pahlen knew that Paul could not be allowed to live if the coup was to be success; Alexander's throne would never be secure while his father lived.

Pahlen added additional layers to the conspiracy: he approached the emperor and told him that Alexander, Constantine, and his wife Maria were all plotting against him. Outraged, Paul made plans to punish them; Pahlen then informed Alexander that his father intended to arrest him, though he conveniently neglected to mention why. Paul's paranoia intensified. He began to approach Pahlen at odd moments and demand to see his letters and papers. It was only by chance that he discovered nothing incriminating during these examinations. In early March of 1801, Paul was given a sheet of paper containing the names of Pahlen's cabal of conspirators. He confronted Pahlen, who told him that he had been approached to join the conspiracy, and that he was spying on the cabal on Paul's behalf. Soon, he promised the emperor, he would be poised to strike at them.

Early in the morning, on March 12, 1801, the conspirators, backed by complicit Guards, entered the palace and broke into the emperor's bedchamber, where they found him hiding under his bed. Seizing his bare feet, they dragged him out, and told him that he "had ceased to reign." Alexander was emperor now; they were arresting Paul on his orders, and Paul must abdicate. They warned him that he must not try to escape, or he would be murdered. In reality, they had already arranged for a death squad to pay him a visit. A group of officers rushed into the bedchamber, and Paul began to fight with them. He was struck across the head with a gold snuffbox wielded by Nikolai Zubov, the very man who had ridden to Gatchina to inform him of Catherine's death four years before. The emperor's cheekbone and eye were crushed; he fell to the floor, and a group of soldiers descended on him, beating him and strangling him until he was dead. It was a messy, brutal affair, crueler than perhaps was necessary. But then, every man who had joined in on the plot had some personal reason to loathe Paul as a capricious tyrant.



It is somewhat ironic that Paul considered women, such as his mother, unfit to rule nations because they were ruled by their whims and caprices. If a perception of foreignness had undone Peter III, the doom of Paul I lay in his whims and inconsistencies. As Peter the Great had proven, a tsar might be brutal, even cruel, so long as he was consistently brutal and cruel. Paul I was far more humane than Peter, but his subjects lived in fear because they never knew what to expect from him.

It was left to Nikolai Zubov to inform Alexander what had occurred. Alexander was so anxious that he had gone to bed that night before without undressing. He was still awake when Zubov told him that, "All is over"; his father was dead, and he, Alexander, was now emperor. Alexander was stunned. As of the previous night, he still believed that his father was going to be arrested, not murdered. The rest of Paul's family was equally shocked. Maria, the empress consort, grasped instantly that her husband had been murdered in a treasonous plot. Unaware that Alexander had been part of the conspiracy, she declared that she was now empress, and demanded that the guards unlock the door of her room and swear allegiance to her. They would not let her pass. Alexander, meanwhile, was explaining events to his wife, Elizabeth, who wept on his behalf. She knew her husband well enough to understand that the guilt he felt for his role in Paul's murder would haunt him for the rest of his life.

# Chapter Five: Russia Triumphant

## Alexander I (1801-1825)

After the despotic reign of Paul I came to an end, Alexander I was hailed as a savior. He had liberal tendencies that evoked the enlightenment of Catherine the Great, though like Catherine he preserved the privilege of autocracy. He is remembered chiefly for defeating Napoleon in 1812, but Alexander's relationship with Napoleon was complicated. During his rule, Russia would form and forsake numerous alliances with the French. When he died without children after a reign of twenty-four years, he left Russia in a state of confusion and revolt until he was succeeded by his younger brother, Nicholas.

By the time Alexander came to the throne, Russia was no longer at war with France, and Napoleon had conquered Switzerland and much of Italy. Once Napoleon switched his focus to the German states, however, Russia could no longer afford to remain neutral. In the spring of 1805, Napoleon crowned himself emperor of France and king of Italy; Russia, Britain, and Austria formed a coalition to fight him. Alexander went in person to invite the Prussian king to join the coalition, and afterwards traveled to Austria to meet the Russian army. Napoleon sent an envoy to Austria to negotiate terms with Alexander's general, Kutuzov, said to be the greatest military commander then living. Alexander demanded that Napoleon renounce his conquests in Italy. Confident in the superiority of his army, despite the fact that the Russian-Austrian forces outnumbered his, Napoleon refused and prepared for battle. The fight resulted in a loss of over 28,000 Russian soldiers, as Napoleon circumnavigated an attempted flank maneuver and took the high ground. The Russian defeat was due principally to the fact that Alexander countermanded Kutuzov's decisions on the advice of his Austrian allies. The Russian emperor was forced to retreat to the countryside as the French emperor gloated over his victory. Alexander continued to prosecute the war against Napoleon until he suffered an even more overwhelming defeat at Eylau in January of 1807, at which point he requested a personal meeting with Napoleon to negotiate peace.

The twenty-nine-year-old Alexander and the thirty-eight-year-old Napoleon met in June of 1807 at a rafted pavilion constructed by French and Russian engineers in the middle of the Nieman River. There, in a private conversation that lasted over two hours, Alexander promised to support Napoleon against his bitterest enemies, the British, if Napoleon would cease to hound Prussia. To Napoleon, Alexander expressed sentiments that might have come from the lips of his

grandmother, Catherine the Great; as Sebag-Montefiore writes, he “praised elective republics and criticized hereditary monarchy which he regarded as irrational—except in Russia, where local conditions made it essential.” The two rulers got along very well, adjourning to nearby Tilsit where they dined with the Prussian king Frederick William in the evenings, then went behind his back to have further long private conversations by night. “Had he been a woman,” said Napoleon afterwards, speaking of Alexander, “I would have made him my mistress.” The negotiations concluded without a significant loss of Russian territory. Napoleon’s minister, Talleyrand, even approached Alexander about a possible marriage between Napoleon and Alexander’s beloved younger sister Catherine. Napoleon was still married to Josephine, but as she was childless, he was considering divorcing her. Catherine, however, had her matrimonial sights set on the Holy Roman Emperor, and resolved to avoid marrying Napoleon if she could.

After they had returned to their own countries, Napoleon sent envoys to Alexander’s court; the emperor welcomed them, but his courtiers seethed at the French presence. In 1808, Napoleon invited Alexander to a second meeting, along with other European kings and princes. They continued to find one another excellent company, but privately, Napoleon was becoming frustrated. The French blockade of Britain was doing the Russians no favors, and Alexander used this to negotiate the return of Wallachia and Moldavia. Alexander understood and shared the simmering resentment the Russian people harbored against the French, but having survived at the courts of Catherine the Great and Paul I, he knew how to keep his own counsel and make people believe he liked them when it suited his purposes. His friendship with Napoleon would not last indefinitely.

During the 1808 summit, Napoleon suggested that Alexander seize Finland from Sweden; when Alexander returned to Russia, he did so, making Finland a Russian duchy. But when Napoleon went to war against Francis, emperor of Austria, Alexander did not observe his treaty agreement to back the French, and Napoleon became disillusioned with the Russian alliance. Napoleon had divorced Josephine by this time, and he once again proposed a marriage to one of Alexander’s sisters—this time, his youngest sister Anne, who was only fourteen. When Alexander said that he would not permit her to marry until she was sixteen, Napoleon unceremoniously broke off negotiations and married Marie-Louise, sister of Francis of Austria. The Russians were insulted; the French were furious at what they considered to be Alexander’s duplicity. It was only a matter of time before war broke out between the two countries. Then, in 1810, the queen-consort of Prussia died. Queen Louise was famous throughout Europe for her beauty; early in his reign, when Alexander visited the court of her husband, Frederick William, he had admired her in person, and it was said that he had fallen in love with her. Her fatal illness had supposedly been brought on by Napoleon’s ceaseless attacks

against her country. Now, Alexander swore to avenge her death. His friendship with Napoleon cooled, and Napoleon began to plan his invasion of Russia.

“I will not be the first to draw the sword,” said Alexander in 1811, speaking to one of Napoleon’s envoys, “but I will be the last to put it back in its sheath.” Unlike his grandfather, Peter III, Alexander thought exhaustively through every possible outcome of the looming war before making decisions. He wrote to his sister Catherine that he believed it possible that Moscow and St. Petersburg might both be taken by Napoleon’s forces. In April of 1812, Napoleon began to assemble the largest army the world had ever seen, comprised of 615,000 soldiers from Poland, Spain, Germany, Holland, Italy, Austria, and Egypt, in preparation for his invasion of Russia. In June, they crossed the Niemen River. Alexander had two choices for engaging the enemy: either march out to meet them, or pretend to retreat so that Napoleon’s forces would follow them deep into the heart of Russia, where the French army would be at significant disadvantage. Napoleon, in fact, had no intention of penetrating so far into the Russian interior; he merely wanted to fight until the Russian army was so weak that Alexander would be forced to agree to any terms Napoleon named. But Alexander’s war minister, Barclay, would succeed in drawing them in.

Alexander faced a private humiliation at the war’s outset: his generals and ministers signed a petition begging him not to present himself on the field of battle. As emperor, his word was law, and he could countermand the order of any of his commanders in a single breath. But unlike Napoleon, Alexander was a better politician than a military tactician, and when he overruled his generals, the results were never good. Alexander was crestfallen, but he complied with the wishes of his generals in good grace, thus showing himself to be wiser than some of his successors would prove to be. He returned home to be greeted by huge crowds of cheering people. All of Russia had reached a fever pitch of nationalistic pride over the French invasion.

Russian and French forces clashed at Smolensk. Here, Napoleon expected to meet and defeat the full strength of the Russian army, but they merely engaged him until the city was destroyed, then retreated. Winter was approaching; Napoleon had expected to spend the cold season in Smolensk, but now it was uninhabitable. Though the Russian retreat was planned, it was unpopular with the people, who did not understand the larger strategy. Alexander was forced to appoint Kutuzov, who had been Potemkin’s understudy, to take charge of the war effort and defend Moscow. Napoleon was only a ten-day march away from the city.

Kutuzov and Napoleon met in battle on August 26, 1812, at the village of Borodino, less than a hundred miles from Moscow. The Russians fortified their

position with redoubts—enclosed forts surrounding a large entrenched fortress, where the army could hold their ground and fire from under cover. Russian and French forces were almost equally matched, with 125,000 men on the Russian side and 130,000 on the French. The strategy was simple; Napoleon was famous for his flanking maneuvers, but the strength of the redoubts were that they were made to be flanked. His only option was repeated frontal assaults, pitching Russian and French soldiers in hand-to-hand combat. The result was what has been called “the bloodiest single day in the history of warfare”, a record it held until the twentieth century. Neither side had won. Kutuzov made the strategic decision to march his army to the far side of Moscow and evacuate the civilian population. Napoleon would follow, but he declared that “Moscow is the sponge that will soak him up.” The population, bearing their possession in carts, or on their backs, marched east. Jails were opened and prisoners allowed to join the exodus. The decision was made to burn Moscow to the ground, rather than allow the French to occupy it. When a dismayed Napoleon took up residence in the Kremlin, where he expected to receive notice of surrender from Alexander, the city had been burning for six days. Alexander read reports of these events from safety in St. Petersburg. He was horrified, but he steeled his resolve, declaring that he would rather be a potato-eating peasant than ever negotiate peace with Napoleon.

As winter approached, Napoleon began to realize that no offer of surrender was coming; he began to organize a retreat from Moscow, but to his surprise, the Russians followed. At first, they only harassed the French in sporadic engagements; then two more divisions of the Russian army attacked from the north and the south, forcing the French to a standstill in the dead of the Russian winter and making further retreat impossible. Napoleon, sensing the inevitable, abandoned his men and fled to Paris.

Napoleon was humiliated, but Russian revenge was not yet spent. As the new year of 1813 approached, Alexander, now more confident than he had been at the war's beginning, took personal charge of the army once more and pursued Napoleon into Europe. He was joined by Prussia, and the cost of the enterprise was fielded by Britain. Napoleon was swiftly rebuilding his army. After a number of engagements, Napoleon attended armistice negotiations, but the nations of Europe wanted to see France punished for Napoleon's audacity; Napoleon agreed only to a return to the borders that existed before his invasion of Russia. Austria declared war, and Alexander's forces joined them. The Russian emperor desired nothing less than to avenge Moscow by marching his soldiers through the streets of Paris.

Luck was on his side. Napoleon was avoiding Paris, and the city had few defenses. In March of 1813, Alexander and his allies attacked. Paris surrendered on March

18, after a week of fighting. Some of Alexander's advisors urged him to burn the city in revenge, but Alexander preferred to be seen as Europe's savior rather than France's destroyer. Under Alexander's watchful eye, the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte was ended, and the royal family of Bourbon was restored to the French throne. Napoleon was given the island of Elba to be his domain in exile. Alexander's triumph was complete. He returned to Russia by way of Britain, where he met the prince regent, ruling on behalf of the mad George III. Back in St. Petersburg, the emperor was offered a title by the senate, Alexander the Blessed—perhaps out of respect for his piety, or because it would have been confusing to call him Alexander the Great. In any case, he refused.

In 1820, Alexander visited his beloved brother Nicholas and informed him that he wished to abdicate. He was now forty-three; insurrections and failed government reforms had followed the Napoleonic wars, and he felt that he had already accomplished the mission God had given him as emperor. Alexander had no sons, and his brother Constantine was next in line in the succession, but Constantine did not wish to be emperor either; he had an Orthodox wife whom he wanted to divorce so that he could marry his Polish mistress, an act which would bar him from the throne. Nicholas, nineteen years younger than Alexander, had never expected to be emperor, and the abdication announcement made him cling to his beloved wife Mouffy, daughter of the king of Prussia, and burst into tears. The altered plan of succession was signed by Alexander and Constantine in 1821, but no notice of it was given to the public. In October of 1825, Alexander became ill with chills and a fever, symptoms of typhoid, for which he refused medical treatment. By November 17<sup>th</sup>, he was dead.

## **Nicholas I (1825-1855)**

Immediately after Alexander's death, his brother Constantine was proclaimed as emperor Constantine I. A succession crisis unlike any in the history of the Romanov dynasty followed: Nicholas swore an oath of loyalty to Constantine, while Constantine wrote to him in a panic, reminding his brother that he had renounced the throne. Alexander's former advisors begged Constantine, who was in Warsaw with his new wife, to return to Russia and make a public announcement of his intentions, but Constantine was unwilling to do so. In the confusion, a coup was being organized: the Decembrist revolt, led by Prince Sergei Trubetskoi, involved some 3000 soldiers. Their goal, supposedly, was to institute a constitutional monarchy, though some of the rebels were confused and thought they were supporting a wrongfully deposed Constantine. Nicholas addressed them personally, at the head of 9000 loyal soldiers, but when attempts at parley failed, he ordered a volley to be fired. The rebels fled, and were later apprehended.

Though Nicholas was a far more traditional and militaristic emperor than his elder brother had been, he was dismayed to have shed blood on the first day of his reign. He later regarded it as a religious event, a blood sacrifice sanctifying his reign as tsar. Nicholas was crowned emperor on August 22, 1825.

Nicholas I was something of a micro-manager; unlike Alexander, who condemned monarchy (in other countries, at least) as “irrational”, Nicholas took autocratic privilege for granted. He prized efficiency above all else and despised bureaucracy. More than any other tsar, he preferred to make high-ranking men from the military into ministers of the government, because he perceived them as more willing to take orders and accomplish their duties without argument, the way that soldiers accept the orders of their commanders. In some ways, he resembled Peter the Great, in that he insisted on controlling every aspect of his government, and actually possessed the energy and ability to wield such responsibility. Other emperors, like Paul I, had also insisted on retaining this privilege, but then failed to get anything done. Nicholas I is sometimes remembered as arrogant and domineering, but having assumed complete responsibility for the state, he lived up to the responsibility in a consistent, if heavy-handed way.

In 1831, riots broke out in St. Petersburg after a severe cholera epidemic swept the city. Nicholas addressed the rioters in person, shouting, “You’ve forgotten your duty of obedience to me and I must answer to God for your behavior! Remember that you are not Poles, you are not Frenchmen, you’re Russians!” The chastised crowd dispersed immediately. Only a handful of emperors could have hoped to evoke such a response from a fearful, unhappy crowd.

Nicholas’s marriage to Mouffy, the former Princess Charlotte of Prussia, was happy and peaceful, a rarity in the tally of Romanov marriages. She was not interested in politics, and her domestic tendencies suited Nicholas admirably. To her, he wrote that, “God has bestowed upon you such a happy character that it’s no merit to love you.” Alexander I had pursued a string of mistresses across Europe for thirty years and had a “secret” family with one woman which prompted him to neglect his wife almost until the end of her life. Nicholas, though he also kept mistresses, was happiest in the company of his wife. Nicholas was a fond, doting, attentive father to all seven of his children, particularly his son and heir Alexander, called Sasha by his parents. Physically, Alexander resembled his uncle, the former emperor; in temperament, he brought to mind his great-grandmother, Catherine the Great. Nicholas took pains with Alexander’s education, appointing as his tutor the poet Vasily Zhukovsky, who had taught Mouffy to speak Russian. As a child, Alexander was taught that, because a tsar wielded absolute power, it was essential that he be moral, since no one could overrule him. The young Alexander was sensitive and emotional by nature; military ardor such as his father

possessed did not come naturally to him. Considering Nicholas's authoritarian manner, he was surprisingly balanced when it came to his son's education. One historian has named Alexander, "the best-prepared heir in Romanov history."

When Alexander grew older, however, a weakness in his character was revealed; he was setting out to be a notorious philanderer. When he lost his virginity at age fourteen, the emperor, Nicholas, escorted him to a syphilis hospital, to impress upon him the disastrous consequences of promiscuity. When it came time for Alexander to marry, he became briefly enamored of Victoria, recently crowned queen of England, who was twenty-one at the time. The match was impossible for many reasons; but Alexander had also become enamored of the sixteen-year-old Princess Marie of Hesse-Darmstadt, a more suitable choice. Like so many German princesses before her, she came to Russia and converted to the Orthodox faith, and she and Alexander were married in April of 1841. She suffered from intense anxiety, and was not entirely happy at court as a result, but she contented herself with the domestic role, delivering one child after another to enlarge the dynasty.

The last decade of Nicholas's reign was devoted to waging the Crimean War in defense of Orthodox supremacy over the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, which Napoleon III wished to seize in the name of Roman Catholicism. When the Ottoman sultan chose to support Napoleon's claim, Nicholas threatened to declare war on Constantinople. Instead, the sultan, now backed by France and Britain, declared war on Russia. Nicholas dispatched a fleet to fight the Ottomans in the Black Sea and the English at the isle fortress of Kronstadt, while an army stood ready at the border in case Austria attacked. Far more than the fate of the Holy Sepulcher was at stake. Nicholas had grandiose, unreasonable ambitions to finally bring the Ottoman empire to its knees so that Russia might take possession of Constantinople. The British, however, wished to permanently humble the Russians, whose expansionist militarism was beginning to feel like a threat in Europe. They need not have been concerned, however. Thanks to Nicholas's unreasoning traditionalism, which looked down its nose at all things western, the industrial revolution had almost passed Russia by—Britain and France now enjoyed technological superiority in military matters, where forty years ago during Napoleon's invasion of Russia, all three powers had been evenly matched. One Russian defeat followed another. Nicholas was devastated by these losses, and when his son Alexander visited the front and returned with news that Sebastopol, city of Potemkin, was likely to fall soon, Nicholas was crushed.

Nicholas, now aged fifty-eight, contracted the influenza virus, which by mid-February had turned into pneumonia. On his deathbed, the extraordinary discipline and self-mastery which had characterized most of his life blazed forth. He conscientiously took leave of all his servants and ministers and had them



swear an oath of loyalty to his heir, Alexander, in his presence. At Nicholas's request, Alexander swore that he would abolish serfdom during his reign—a project Nicholas had attempted to accomplish, and failed. Nicholas I breathed his last on February 17, 1855.

# Chapter Six: The End of the Dynasty

## Alexander II (1855-1881)

Alexander II, who would one day be known as Alexander the Liberator, was crowned on August 17, 1856. He ascended the throne on the eve of Russia's defeat in a hastily prosecuted war in Crimea; his first task as the new emperor was to get them out of it. Turning to France, he offered to negotiate a peace; the French demanded that Russia withdraw its ships from the Black Sea. It was the greatest loss the Romanov dynasty had ever known, but Alexander absorbed the blow to his pride. His attention was soon taken up with a more consuming project.

The glory of Alexander II's reign was the freeing of the serfs. Since the days of tsar Alexei, serfs had been no better off than slaves. Nobles could not kill their serfs outright, but they could punish them so severely that death was the inevitable consequence. Serfs could not leave the estates where they were born, nor could they marry or own property. Serfs were themselves property. An emperor who wished to reward one of his nobles would dispense that reward in the form of rubles and "souls"—that is, human beings, serfs. Ninety percent of the Russian population were serfs, and serfs composed almost all of the army. Every emperor since Catherine the Great had looked for a way to free the serfs without destroying the Russian economy or sparking mass riots in the process, and all had abandoned the project while it was incomplete. But Nicholas I had made Alexander promise to do it on his deathbed—a strong motivation for success. The dying emperor had also extracted a promise from Elena Pavlovna, wife of Nicholas's brother Michael, nicknamed "the Family Intellectual", to help Alexander figure out how to do it. The new emperor would need all of her help.

He began on March 30, 1856, when, after informing the upper classes of Moscow that he intended to end serfdom, he instituted the Secret Committee on Peasant Reform. The chief difficulty was the entrenched resistance of the nobility, who were unwilling to relinquish their right to hold the same sway over other human beings that the tsar held over them. The next greatest difficulty centered around land. It was not enough to declare that serfs were free; they must have somewhere to live and a means of making a living. In 1858, Alexander and his empress made a tour of the countryside, visiting nobles who lived at a distance from Moscow and chastising them for not falling into line quickly enough. By 1861, the work was done. Alexander signed his decree in the presence of his brother, the liberal intellectual and reformer Konstantin (called Kostia), and his son and heir Nicholas (Nixa). No one knew what to expect; revolution was a possibility. Cannon were

lined up outside the Winter Palace, just in case. But no uprising came. With the stroke of a pen, Alexander II had given to twenty-two million of his people the right to marry, to buy and own property, to leave the estate they were born on, to seek education. They still cultivated the land, but they could no longer be bought and sold. All the souls of Russia were now free.

Reform was the theme of Alexander II's reign, along with the hope that reform engenders in a rigidly traditional society. Under Alexander I and Nicholas I, any hint of liberalism had been rigidly repressed, for fear that the anti-monarchical spirit that enflamed France during the revolution would spread to Moscow and St. Petersburg and undermine the war effort. Now that the tsar was establishing an independent judiciary and creating representative assemblies at the local government level (a greater degree of agency than any tsar had ever given to the Russian people) a spirit of rebellion was brewing in the so-called Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which was composed of modern-day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, parts of Ukraine, and western Russia. Alexander responded to this rebellion by sending his younger brother Kostia to be viceroy of Poland. A full-scale revolt, known as the January Uprising, broke out when Kostia began conscripting Polish boys into the Russian army. It was quickly suppressed, but Alexander's ministers began to blame the tsar's moderate tendencies for allowing civil unrest to breed. Under Nicholas I, poets, novelists, playwrights, university students and faculty, and other artists and intellectuals had been subject to strict government censorship. Alexander II had lessened these restrictions, and a radical element had arisen as a result. His reforms had given birth to a new element in society, the *intelligentsia*, made up of people who were poor and lower class but well-educated. Alexander punished them for writing radical articles in the newspapers, but they were not the heavy-handed punishments of his predecessors. Many jailed writers continued to write in prison.

The son and heir of Alexander II was Nicholas, called Nixa by his family. Nixa was regarded as the perfect heir, rather as his father had been. He was handsome, intellectual, independent, daring, and a model student for his tutors. As a very young man, he had taken a shine to Princess Dagmar, daughter of the King of Denmark, whom he had never met—it was her photograph that attracted him. In 1864, when he was almost twenty-one, Nixa traveled to Denmark, which had recently been defeated in a war against Prussia and Austria. His fancy for Dagmar, called Minny, turned to love when he met her in person. But shortly after their meeting, Nixa was diagnosed with cerebrospinal meningitis. He died in Nice, surrounded by Minny and his family, who had rushed to Europe to be with him. His twenty-year-old brother Alexander, called Sasha, was now heir to the Russian throne. Sasha had been devoted to Nixa, but he was unlike him in every way. Nixa had been slight; Sasha was huge. Nixa was intelligent and intellectual; Sasha was narrow-minded, traditional, and bad at foreign languages. Courtiers compared

him to a peasant in his coarseness.

If Nixa was among the best-prepared of the Romanov heirs, Sasha was among the least prepared, even by the standards of younger brothers who unexpectedly move up in the line of succession. To give him credit, he was aware of his shortcomings. He worried that he did not have the judgment to tell an honest man from one that was merely ambitious and flattering. A further difficulty soon presented itself. The emperor and empress had become extremely fond of Minny, and it was their wish, as well as the wish of Minny's parents in Copenhagen, that she now marry Sasha. As for Sasha, he had been impressed by Minny and admired her for her outstanding qualities, but he was in love with one of his mother's maids of honor. Alexander II was angered by his stubbornness, and Sasha, who felt unfit for the throne, contemplated renouncing his claim on the succession. Nonetheless, he married Minny on October 28, 1866. After their marriage, he fell in love with her in earnest. Their first child was born on May 6, 1868. Named for his grandfather, he would grow up to become emperor Nicholas II, the last tsar of Russia.

Earlier in 1866, a young radical named Dmitri Karakozov had lain in wait for the emperor near the Summer Garden, where Alexander walked daily in the company of his eighteen-year-old mistress Katya Dolgoruky. There, every afternoon, they paraded in full view of the admiring residents of St. Petersburg. Karakozov had fired his pistol at the emperor as he boarded his carriage, but the shot went astray and Karakozov was arrested. Alexander's reaction to the assassination attempt was to tighten restrictions on the liberals in his ministries, and to strengthen the Third Section, the tsar's secret police. But radical factions only grew in strength and numbers. Then, in 1867, while Alexander was visiting the World Fair in Paris at the invitation of Napoleon III, a young Polish man fired two shots at the emperor while he rode in an open carriage with his sons. Alexander escaped unscathed, and this man too was arrested.

In 1877, Alexander II declared war on the Ottoman empire in support of an Orthodox uprising in Bosnia-Herzegovina, backed by Serbia and Montenegro. The Russian people rallied to the cause of supporting their "brother Serbs" with a nationalistic enthusiasm not seen since Napoleon's invasion in 1812. The Ottomans were slaughtering Orthodox Christians in Bulgaria, but Alexander was forced to respond slowly, because the British were adamantly opposed to Russia regaining any of the Crimean lands it had conceded after the disastrous ending of Nicholas I's war. Russia, however, was backed by the new German empire, which, under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck, had taken advantage of Russia's cooling relations with Austria to unify the German states under Kaiser Wilhelm I and march on Paris.

Despite inept leadership, it seemed possibly by December of 1877 that Russia would take possession of the cherished prize of Constantinople at last. But the British, fearing this outcome above anything, deployed their navy in the Black Sea and threatened to enter the war on the Ottoman side. A stand-off ensued, only ended by a conference between the European powers in Berlin, which, among other things, awarded Russia control of part of Bulgaria. By the time matters had been settled in late 1878, Alexander was exhausted and beginning to feel his advanced middle age.

The revolutionary element in Russia was gaining momentum. In 1878, the governor of St. Petersburg was shot by a woman named Vera Zasulich, in full view of multiple witnesses. A jury trial exonerated her, however, because Zasulich's attack had been motivated by the cruel treatment of political prisoners. Alexander was infuriated, and ordered that she be arrested again, but she escaped Russia before she could be re-apprehended. Her acquittal was a sign of the times.

Assassinations and assassination attempts were carried out against other high ranking officials. In April of 1879, the emperor was nearly shot while out walking—the third assassination attempt he had survived. In 1879, Sofia Perovskaya, one of the leaders of a terrorist group that called itself Land and Freedom, made a fourth attempt on Alexander's life by bombing the train he was traveling in. Then, in February of 1880, a servant at the Winter Palace, Stephen Khalturin, smuggled three hundred pounds of nitroglycerine into the palace, with the goal of bombing the tsar and his whole family as they sat down to dinner. When Khalturin detonated the charge, Alexander and his family were unharmed, but a large number of guards and sentries were killed.

Alexander's response to the bombing of the Winter Palace was extraordinary. The reactionary heir, Sasha, insisted that he form a Supreme Commission, the head of which would be endowed with the powers of a dictator, to root out the terrorist cells. Alexander did so, but the man he placed at the head of the commission, Mikhail Loris-Melikov, was an unusually broadminded thinker. His goal was to root out, not only terrorism, but the causes of terrorism—such as censorship, judicial corruption, and high taxes. He fired the repressive minister of education and limited the powers of the secret police. These measures were partly successful, but the unrest continued.

In May of 1880, the Empress Marie, who had suffered from tuberculosis for many years, died in her sleep. Alexander had long ago promised his mistress, Katya Dolgoruky, that he would marry her if he were ever widowed. They were accordingly married in a private ceremony in July. Katya became Her Most Serene Highness, Princess Yurievskaya, but she was treated coldly by Alexander's family.

In January of 1881, Alexander began working with Loris-Melikov on a series of reforms that would pave the way towards a Russian constitution. He intended to announce it before the public on the same day that Yurievskaya was to be crowned empress, March 4, 1881. But on March 1, on his way home to the palace after reviewing a parade of Guards, Alexander II at last fell victim to an assassination attempt organized by Sofia Perovskaya. A bomb was detonated under the carriage Alexander was riding in. The emperor was unhurt, but several people, including one of his bodyguards, a policeman, and two bystanders, had been wounded. The young man who threw the bomb was arrested immediately. Rather than fleeing the scene, Alexander went to inspect the remains of his carriage, when a second bomber rushed towards him. The explosion mortally wounded the emperor, the bomber, and injured others. Alexander's legs were shattered; he was rushed home to the Winter Palace, where his family, having heard the explosions in the distance, were waiting anxiously.

The deathbed of Alexander II—the most moderate, compassionate ruler of the Romanov dynasty—was unrivaled in the family's history for its tragic quality. The ruined body of the emperor clung to life long enough for last rites to be administered and for his family to witness his departure. His wife, Princess Yurievskaya, clung to his body until her nightgown was soaked with blood. When he drew his final breath, those present in the room saw a change settle over his thirty-six-year-old son, now emperor Alexander III. As heir to the throne, he had been compared to a peasant for his coarse humor and manners. Now, suddenly, he seemed to grow grave, as the burden of the throne came to rest on his shoulders. His entire reign would be a reaction to the brutal assassination of his father.

### **Alexander III (1881-1894)**

When Alexander III came to the throne, the government he had inherited from his father was still in the process of finalizing constitutional reforms. The new emperor, who took advice only from his most conservative ministers, brought these reforms to a sudden halt. Loris-Melikov was dismissed. His policy of routing sedition by addressing the causes of sedition was condemned by his rivals as having emboldened the revolutionaries who carried out the assassination plot. Confusion and terror pervaded Alexander III's first days as emperor; more bombings and attacks were expected at every moment. "The mindless malefactors who killed Your father won't be satisfied by more concessions, they'll become crueler," warned Konstantin Pobedonostev, over-procurator of the Holy Synod. Alexander III was in agreement. His father had leaned toward representative government; Alexander wanted all such liberal tendencies purged. His liberal ministers obliged him by resigning.

Alexander's primary residence was Gatchina, where Paul I had lived with his family before the death of Catherine the Great. Standing at 6'3, he was a notoriously bad dancer who despised social obligations like court balls. His physical strength was legendary; he used to bend pokers in half to entertain his friends. His wife Minny, the former Princess Dagmar of Sweden, was the light of his life; though both flirted with courtiers to pass the time, they were faithful to one another, something that can scarcely be said of any other Romanov marriage. Alexander and Minny had five children: Nicholas, the heir, Georgi, Xenia, Michael, and Olga. Alexander was an attentive father who found his sole source of peace in family life, but his strict authoritarian nature had a negative effect on the development of his sons, who found little room to assert themselves as they matured.

A story recounted by Romanov scholar Simon Sebag Montefiore testifies to the lighter side of Alexander III's nature, an aspect of his personality that was rarely glimpsed outside the family circle:

“Minny loved to spend time with her sister, the princess of Wales. Alexander bought a house where he behaved ‘just like a schoolboy,’ squirting King Christian of Denmark or King Oscar of Sweden with hosepipes, his favorite means of social expression. In a family story that is told today by Prince Philip, the duke of Edinburgh, he loved to walk in the park with his brother-in-law the prince of Wales and other relatives, where they once encountered a lost tourist who obliviously asked the way to the town center and then asked their names so he could thank them. ‘The emperor of Russia, the king of Denmark, the king of Greece and the prince of Wales,’ came the answer. ‘And I’m the Queen of Sheba,’ replied the tourist.”

During the reign of Alexander III, pogroms—organized massacres of Jews in which men were slaughtered and women were raped—became almost commonplace. Alexander, confirmed and supported by Pobedonostev, shared his grandfather Nicholas's unreasoning, entrenched anti-Semitism. None of the conspirators arrested for the assassination of Alexander II had been Jewish, but there was a widespread belief that Jews had been responsible. The mythical “Jewish banker” was also blamed for the economic depression of the 1880s. The emperor neither ordered nor explicitly condoned the pogroms, but he did little or nothing to stop them, and privately expressed the opinion that Jews had no one but themselves to blame for their suffering. In 1882, Alexander signed a decree called the Temporary Regulation on Jews that ordered the pogroms to halt, but it also restricted where Jews were allowed to live. Ironically, the emperor's policy of neglecting the well-being of his loyal Jewish subjects led to a rise in the number of

Jews who began to participate in the revolutionary movement.

Under Alexander II, official government departments tasked with investigating terror cells were inept and badly organized, and made little headway in intelligence-gathering. But after the assassination, the Okhrana, or Security Bureau, was formed; it was a much more sophisticated and efficient counter-intelligence operation, and it succeeded in making a number of important arrests. Not unlike the United States in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the Russian government after the assassination of Alexander II was obsessed with security and terrorism. The emperor found some of the actions of his security officers distasteful, but he was resigned to the necessity of draconian measures. Even after Alexander II had survived five assassination attempts, his personal security, and the security in the Winter Palace, was astonishingly lax. Historically, the palace guards and sentries were set in place to guard the emperor against coups, mobs, and foreign armies. Now the emperor was surrounded by men whose job was to protect him from his own people. This was why Alexander III and his family preferred to live in the palace of Gatchina; it was a country residence, built along the lines of a barracks, according to the tastes of Paul I. Security was less restrictive there.

The last four years of Alexander's reign were dominated by economic and foreign policy concerns. In 1891, a terrible famine, sparked by the economic depression and the selling of grain abroad, killed millions. Alexander realized that times had changed; if Russia was ever to compete globally, it must catch up to its industrialized neighbors. Construction began on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Alexander believed this would lessen Russia's isolation. Meanwhile, Russia's relations with Germany, its old ally and the homeland of most Romanov brides for the last two centuries, were suffering due to the erratic leadership of Kaiser Wilhelm II, who came to the throne in 1888 after the sudden deaths of his grandfather and father. Alexander, like most people who met Wilhelm, despised him. The last two tsars had enjoyed an excellent relationship with the brilliant Bismarck, but Wilhelm dismissed Bismarck shortly into his reign. Alexander's ministers urged him not to renew Russia's treaty with Germany, and to ally with France instead.

One Russian-German relationship was flourishing, however; that of Alexander's heir, Nicholas, called Nicky, and Princess Alexandra of Hesse, called Alix, granddaughter of Britain's Queen Victoria. In 1892, Nicholas was twenty-four years old. Standing a full eight inches shorter than his massive father, Nicholas made a strange impression on observers. The product of a happy, yet insulated upbringing, he was considered immature. In some ways he was clever—he was fluent in French and German, spoke the best English in his family, and possessed



of a good memory. But he was an indifferent, unmotivated student, educated by tutors at home, which meant that he came to maturity without having seen much of the outside world. He was courteous in the extreme, and rigidly self-controlled, a rare quality amongst Romanovs. Perhaps his most marked trait was his inscrutability. People around him rarely knew what he was thinking or feeling. He hardly ever smiled or laughed outside the company of his family.

From his father, Nicholas absorbed the traditional, religious view of the Russian monarchy, as a sacred covenant in which the tsar pledged to guard and protect the peasants as a father would his children. And like his father, Nicholas learned to minimize and disregard the importance of the ministers who actually ran the country. As heir, he did his best to avoid being given any important responsibilities, probably sensing that his father considered him childish and unfit. Nicholas had few friends outside his family; his closest friend was his uncle Sergei, who married Princess Alix's sister Elizabeth in 1884. Alix and Nicky first met at their wedding when she was twelve and he was sixteen.

When they met again a few years later, Nicky became determined to marry Alix. There were difficulties to be overcome, however. Alix was lonely, high strung, anxious, and suffered from health problems, including crippling sciatica. She was not well educated or particularly intelligent, but she was immensely strong-willed and religious. She relied on the guidance of her grandmother, Queen Victoria, who wanted her to marry the duke of Clarence. Victoria did not think that Alix was temperamentally suited to be empress of Russia, an opinion shared by Nicky's parents, who doubted that she would be happy in the Russian court. Nicholas's male relatives, who knew that he was inexperienced with women, decided to push him into taking a mistress—they introduced him to a Polish ballerina, and the twenty-one-year old Nicky found himself surprised that he could love two people at the same time.

When Nicholas declared to his parents that he could not be happy marrying anyone other than Alix, the emperor and empress began to look on the match more favorably, but there was another problem: the pious, Lutheran Alix could not bear the thought of having to convert to the Orthodox faith. Her sister and brother-in-law, Sergei and Elizabeth, acted as go-betweens for Nicky and Alix, while Nicholas attended every royal wedding in Europe in the hopes that Alix would be there as well. Finally, in 1894, Alix decided that she could reconcile herself to a conversion. She informed Nicholas of her change of heart, and both of them burst into tears. Nicholas wrote to his parents with the good news. Minny was delighted and sent Alix presents of jewelry and Fabergé eggs, while Alexander was surprised and impressed that Nicholas had managed to persevere until he was successful. Truthfully, his courtship of Alix had been the most daunting challenge

of the young tsarevitch's life.

After the engagement, Alix went to stay with Queen Victoria at Windsor, where her study of the Russian language was interrupted by bouts of ill-health. Nicholas was invited to join her and meet her English relations. "The more I think of sweet Alicky's marriage the more unhappy I am. Not as to the personality for I like him very much but on account of the country and the awful insecurity to which that poor child will be exposed," wrote Victoria in her diary.

In September of 1894, Alexander III was diagnosed with inflammation of the kidneys. Some claimed that this was a result of injuries sustained in a train crash years earlier, but it was more likely due to immoderate drinking. His decline was rapid and obvious; he was soon forced to take to his bed. In October, sensing that the end was near, he told Nicholas to send for Alix; he wished to meet her in person before his death. When she arrived, Alexander exhausted himself by rising from bed and dressing for the first time in weeks so that she might see him as a tsar and not as an invalid, but he suffered great pain from the exertion.

Alexander III died on October 19, 1894, sitting upright in an armchair with his head leaning on his wife's breast, surrounded by his family. Compared to the deathbed of Alexander II, it was a peaceful passing; there was no wailing and sobbing, only quiet tears. Everyone turned to Nicky, now tsar Nicholas II, the youngest heir to ascend the throne for hundreds of years. He was terrified; he turned to his brother-in-law, Sandro, his sister Xenia's husband, and whispered, "What am I going to do? What's going to happen to me, to you, to Xenia, to Alix, to all of Russia? I'm not ready to be tsar. I never wanted to become one. I've no idea of even how to talk to the ministers." It was, perhaps, a mercy that no one possessed the prophetic powers necessary to answer his question.

## **Nicholas II (1894-1917)**

The day after Alexander III died, Alix underwent her conversion to the Orthodox faith; she was baptized Alexandra Fyodorovna. The new emperor, Nicholas II, was incapable of deciding what must be done about the funeral. Prince Bertie, visiting from England, made all the arrangements. In what would prove to be a forecast of their entire marriage, Alexandra tried to bolster her future husband's resolve: "Be strong," she told him. "Do not let them forget who you are."

Alexander III was buried on November 7, 1894. Nicholas and Alexandra were

married a week later, in the palace cathedral, on November 14<sup>th</sup>. The bride was adorned in jewels that had belonged to Catherine the Great; she had a minor breakdown down before the ceremony, because the dress was so heavy she could barely move.

Like his namesake Nicholas I, the new emperor was something of a micromanager, though he lacked the old emperor's indomitable will. He lived his life by orderly, predictable routines, and it was said that he spent the first ten years of his reign running his kingdom from behind a desk. His chief influences in the early days were his mother, Minny, and his father's four brothers: Vladimir, commander of the Guards, Alexis, general-admiral of the Russian fleet, Sergei, governor-general of Moscow, and Paul. Nicholas's chief consolation was the happiness of his marriage; from the beginning, he and Alexandra were inseparable. Alexandra was likewise devoted to him, but she soon fell prey to the loneliness and unhappiness that her grandmother Victoria had predicted she would suffer at the Russian court. She did not get along well with Nicholas's mother and she found it difficult to make new friends.

Nicholas and Alexandra's first child, Olga, was born in 1895. Four more would follow: Tatiana was born in 1897, Marie in 1899, Anastasia in 1901, and, at last, a son, Alexei, was born in 1904.

The coronation of Nicholas II was held on May 26, 1896. Nicholas wished the event to be one of celebration for his people. At nearby Khodynka Field, hundreds of thousands of people gathered, eager to receive the gifts the tsar had prepared for them: "Every visitor to the field stalls will receive a kerchief containing sweets, gingerbread, sausage, an enamel mug, and a bread roll," it was announced, along with beer and mead. There were almost twice as many attendees as the organizers had counted on, however, and some 3000 people were killed, trampled in the rush. Nicholas and Alexandra considered the tragedy an ill omen for their future.

Nicholas and Alexandra's son Alexei, named for the second tsar, was diagnosed with hemophilia at his birth, when his umbilical cord was cut and the bleeding did not cease for two days. Nicholas and Alexandra were thunderstruck by the news. Hemophilia was the plague of the royal houses of Europe, spread amongst them by the nine children of Queen Victoria, who was a carrier. Alexandra's own brother had died of it as a child, and many sufferers of the disease did not live past thirteen. The emperor and empress chose to keep their son's illness a secret. This would place incredible strain on the family in the years to come, as they struggled to keep Alexei safe from any form of injury. Even a minor bump or bruise could lead to fatal hemorrhaging.

Revolution broke out in 1905; under intense pressure from his ministers, Nicholas reluctantly agreed to the formation of the Duma, a bi-cameral parliamentary body that would ensure civil rights for the Russian people. At first, the Duma was conceived of solely as an advisory committee; later, it was granted legislative powers. Nicholas, feeling that it was his duty as emperor to retain as much autocratic privilege as possible, issued the Fundamental Laws in 1906, which reserved to the emperor the right to appoint ministers, and to dismiss the Duma by calling for new elections. The creation of the Duma was meant to pacify the leaders of the socialist revolution, but it had too much momentum; it only grew stronger over the next twelve years.

In October of 1906, the monk Rasputin paid his first visit to the Alexander Palace. Alexei was two years old and had already been ill numerous times. Rasputin was thirty-seven, a drunken, promiscuous Siberian peasant who had undergone a mystical conversion and claimed the ability to heal the sick through prayer. Nicholas, and especially Alexandra, were vulnerable to faith healers; they had already formed a relationship with a French priest named Phillipe, who promised that he would send another holy man to them in time. In the early 1900's, Nicholas and Alexandra were not remarkable for placing their trust in such people. The fad for spiritualism had begun in the late 1890s, and the upper classes of European society were awash in enthusiasm for séances and other forms of mysticism.

Furthermore, Nicholas, who had once panicked over the prospect of speaking to court ministers, had not grown any more comfortable over the years in the company of the sly, courteous, ambitious people who passed through his court. The rough, sincere, direct, unflattering Rasputin might well have won his trust even if he had not had a sick child. And for whatever reason, it is a fact that Alexei was often better after Rasputin had spent time with him. But the tsar and tsarina's dependence on the unwashed, unsophisticated peasant was inexplicable to the royal court; they did not know that Alexei was sick, so they did not understand why the emperor would have use for a healer, especially once so coarse.

As Alexandra advanced toward middle age, her physical, and especially her mental health, grew worse. She was not a hypochondriac; her complaints were real. But she was obsessed with nursing her various illnesses, to the point that she thought of little else. In photographs, she is frequently pictured in a wheel chair, next to Alexei in his own chair—he was not allowed to run around and play like other children, for fear of a bleed. When she was not ill, all of Alexandra's time and energy was devoted to her son, while her four daughters were treated as a single unit, known by their initials—OTMA. The girls took cold baths, slept on hard camp beds, and dressed in ordinary clothes, never in jewels and silks. Their family

hobby was photography, and between them, the girls, especially Anastasia, left an abundance of candid family photos that documented their pastimes and private lives.

Nicholas and Alexandra were never at ease in St. Petersburg society. They had few friends. More unusually for an emperor and empress, they were similarly ill at ease with their own extended family. Over the centuries, the Romanovs had survived partially because they such a tightly knit clan. But between Alexandra's illnesses and neuroses, Nicholas's discomfort in his role as emperor, and the couples' worry for Alexei and their daughters, there was no room for other people. Emperor and empress relied solely on one another, and on Rasputin, who combined the roles of priest, healer, psychiatrist, and general confidante. The more withdrawn Nicholas and Alexandra grew, the less easily they could be reached by their siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Those relations who were not banned from the palace for speaking ill of Rasputin simply drifted away over the years.

In June of 1914, a Serbian named Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, kickstarting the first World War. Austria responded by declaring war on Russia's historic ally, Serbia. Germany offered support to Austria; meanwhile, France was bound by treaty to back Russia, and Britain was bound by treaty to back France. Nicholas attempted to use his family connection to Wilhelm II to avoid the necessity of mobilizing, but it was in vain. The emperor took supreme command of the Russian forces. He was in no way suited for command, but unlike his predecessor Alexander I, he could not be dissuaded. Meanwhile, Alexandra, Olga, Tatiana, Marie, and Anastasia became nurses, tending wounded soldiers in military hospitals. This was the most useful thing Alexandra managed to do during the war, and she was very good at it; her own frequent illnesses gave her the patience and compassion of a first-rate nurse. Eleven-year-old Alexei was sent to Stavka to join the emperor and learn the business of ruling Russia.

In 1915, Nicholas placed Alexandra in charge of the government. She was so isolated from St. Petersburg society that she did not know who to appoint to ministry positions; she had to rely on Rasputin, who knew everybody, to help her choose candidates. When Nicholas made a surprise appearance in the Duma to announce the appointment of Rasputin's hand-picked prime minister, it triggered an outpouring of disbelief and disgust. The Russian people were losing faith in the tsar's love for them. Rumors spread that Rasputin was the empress's lover, that she obeyed his every command, and that he, not the tsar, now ruled Russia. Considering that Nicholas sent notice of military plans to Alexandra by telegram, and she passed them on to Rasputin, who in turn gave her advice to send back to

Nicholas, there was a grain of truth to the rumor. The elder members of the Romanov family were enraged by Rasputin's access to the heart of government. Between gritted teeth, they murmured of their longing to dispose of Alexandra in the old-fashioned way, by sending her to a convent. Her mother-in-law, Marie, recognized that Alexandra's judgment was impaired; she had lost touch with reality. The Romanovs had not seen such confusion and misery since the reign of Paul I. "Don't you see you will lose your crown? Install a responsible ministry," pleaded Nicholas's great-uncle Nikolai, son of Alexander II. His pleas fell on deaf ears.

Rasputin was murdered on December 16, 1916, by Prince Felix Yusupov, who acted with the advice and approval of other Russian nobles, including his own mother, who had been friends with empress Alexandra until she was banished for speaking critically of Rasputin. Yusupov invited Rasputin to dinner, then fed him arsenic. When that did not kill him instantly, he shot Rasputin through the chest. Rasputin collapsed, then roused himself and began to fight back; he was shot again, this time through the kidneys. Any of these blows would have killed him in a matter of minutes, but the assassins were impatient. At last, he was shot in the forehead. When soldiers came running to investigate the noise, one of the conspirators told them, "I killed Grishka Rasputin, enemy of Russia and the tsar." The soldiers kissed him and congratulated him. Rasputin's corpse was pushed into the Neva river, where it surfaced a few weeks later. His death occasioned celebrations in St. Petersburg, but in fact, Russia had been spared nothing. The problem with the government lay in the characters of the emperor and the empress, not in the peasant whose advice they relied on.

By February of 1917, Russia was in a state of anarchy and collapse. So many men were away fighting that no one was left to tend farms. The price of food soared, which provoked riots. When the police tried to quell the riots, full scale armed revolt broke out. The Preobrazhensky, Semyonovsky, and other Guards regiments mutinied. The emperor ordered the revolution crushed and the Duma dismissed, but the Duma refused to disband, and there was no one left who could make them—the army was away fighting the Germans. The socialist party and the monarchist party formed a Provisional Government under the temporary leadership of Alexander Kerensky, and requested that Nicholas II abdicate his throne in favor of his son, with his brother Michael serving as regent. Nicholas agreed, then changed his mind; he would abdicate on behalf of both himself and Alexei, who was unlikely to survive until he was old enough to rule in any case. The abdication took effect on March 15, 1917, at 3 p.m. That night, Russian soldiers at the front lines of the war against Germany took oath to Michael II, tsar and emperor of all Russia. But the reign of Michael II lasted only a day. On March 16<sup>th</sup>, Alexander Kerensky and other representatives from the Duma arrived at the new emperor's house to ask for his abdication, which he gave them after a brief discussion. In this quiet,

bureaucratic manner, the Romanov dynasty came to an end.

Nicholas Romanov, now no longer emperor, was advised to leave the country as quickly as possible, and for a time, it was thought the family would be given sanctuary in England. In the meantime, they were under arrest on the orders of Alexander Kerensky. But when the Bolsheviks took control of the Duma on October 25, 1917, Kerensky could no longer protect them. The family was moved to Ekaterinburg in the Urals, and their guards, once friendly, became menacing. Lenin, now ensconced in the Kremlin, contemplated the idea of putting Nicholas through a public trial, but there wasn't time. In April of 1918, Nicholas and his family were moved to the home of Nikolai Ipatiev, codenamed by the Soviets "the House of Special Purpose,". There, they were executed by firing squad on July 17, 1918; afterwards, their bodies were burned and dissolved with acid.

The remains of Nicholas, Alexandra, Olga, Tatiana, and Anastasia were discovered at the execution site in Ekaterinburg in 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union; the remains of Marie and Alexei were discovered in 2007. Their identities were confirmed by DNA testing in 2015, and the entire family has since been interred alongside their ancestors in the Peter and Paul Cathedral in St. Petersburg. In 1977, the Ipatiev House was demolished by the Soviets, who were afraid it would become a place of pilgrimage for enemies of Communism. The Cathedral of the Savior of Spilled Blood stands there now. In 1981, Nicholas and his family were canonized as new martyrs by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad; in 2000, they were canonized as passion bearers by the Moscow Patriarchate. The cathedral in Ekaterinburg is their shrine.

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## Further Reading

*The Romanovs*, Simon Sebag Montefiore

*Peter the Great: His Life and World*, Robert K. Massie

*Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman*, Robert K. Massie

*Nicholas and Alexandra*, Robert K. Massie

*Alexander II and the Modernization of Russia*, Werner Eugen Mosse

*Anastasia: The Lost Princess*, by James Blair Lovell